



Conversations with Octavia Butler

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Octavia Butler (1947-2006) spent the majority of her prolific career as the only major black female author of science fiction. Winner of both the Nebula and Hugo Awards as well as a MacArthur "genius" grant, the first for a science fiction writer, Butler created worlds that challenged notions of race, sex, gender, and humanity. Whether in the postapocalyptic future of the Parable stories, in the human inability to assimilate change and difference in the Xenogenesis books, or in the destructive sense of superiority in the Patternist series, Butler held up a mirror, reflecting what is beautiful, corrupt, worthwhile, and damning about the world we inhabit. In interviews ranging from 1980 until just before her sudden death in 2006, "Conversations with Octavia Butler" reveals a writer very much aware of herself as the "rare bird" of science fiction even as she shows frustration with the constant question, "How does it feel to be the only one?" Whether discussing humanity's biological imperatives or the difference between science fiction and fantasy or the plight of the working poor in America, Butler emerges in these interviews as funny, intelligent, complicated, and intensely original.

Conversations with Octavia Butler Details

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From Reader Review Conversations with Octavia Butler for online ebook

A.E. says

For anyone who is a fan of Butler's writing or simply wants to know more about this wonderful and inspiring writer, this book is a fascinating read. It collects interviews done with her over a span of decades, and each interview is well worth the read.

Naomi says

I purposely took a long time to finish this book. This collection of interviews is like the closest I'll ever get to hearing or seeing Octavia Butler in person, so I dragged it out, not wanting it to end.

My biggest critique is that there is some repetition, and a more narrow focus -- there isn't as much material about the Patternmaster books or Lilith's Brood. Her more popular books, the Parables and Kindred, get most of the attention.

My other critique is really not about the book, but about NPR interviewers. Several of the included pieces originally aired on NPR, and for some reason, I found that experiencing these interviews in print rather than via audio had some grating qualities. There is one particular interview with Juan Williams that was quite annoying as it was clear that he hadn't actually read the books in question, and he was a bit impatient with her and not interested in her more thoughtful speaking style.

All that said, it's quite a good collection of interviews, and it really does give one a glimpse into how Butler worked, and what inspired her and where all the magic & prescience came from. Even the repeated questions would sometimes bring out a speck of interesting new information on how Butler shaped her fictional worlds.

Octavia Butler saw a sliver of our future and wrote us fantastic letters of warning about it. I frequently find myself wondering what she would think of the current state of things. The world is smaller without her vision, but it is much much larger in our hearts because of it.

Jasmin says

I truly recommend this collection of interviews. Conseula Francis has gathered a variety of sources who open up Ms. Butler in different ways from 1980-2006. While I've never had the gift of knowing Ms. Butler, I feel like every page allowed me to spend time with her wisdom in ways that go beyond her books. I am truly grateful for this gift.

X says

Thank you, auntie Octavia. "I don't feel I have any particular literary talent at all. It was what I wanted to do, and I followed what I wanted to do."

Wendy says

Originally posted at The BiblioSanctum

I have to thank my friend Tracie for recommending Octavia E. Butler to me. I started with her Xenogenesis trilogy, and have been slowly building my collection since. Every time I read a book by Ms. Butler, I find myself wishing I could get inside the her mind. Her works are so far from the typical science fiction, dystopian stories and they share the constant theme of forcing us to question our humanity and society and the rules we adhere to and the many, many prejudices that we are never able to leave behind. With Butler's passing in 2006, it seemed I wouldn't have that opportunity, but apparently, Conseula Francis had the same idea and put together this collection of interviews.

Ms. Butler's target readers are classified as Blacks, feminists and science fiction fans – but these are labels that people have stuck on her work. She did not like labels, though she appreciated their value, especially to a publisher, and understood the human need to categorize everything. Her works do fit into these very basic categories, but what fascinates me most about her books is the way they move so far beyond. "Thinking outside the box" does not even begin to cover it! Her books deal with so many issues and often do so in a way that crosses far into our comfort zones as they hold up a mirror to our humanity, warts and all. I recommend her books to many people, but warn not to expect a happy ending. Her books are realistic – perhaps too much so for some readers. I most recently read *Parable of the Talents* – a book some readers consider prophetic, though Ms. Butler stressed it was a cautionary tale – and couldn't help comparing it to the volatile American political and religious situation at the time. Even when her books are dealing with aliens and vampires and mutation, I've found her approach to the subject matter makes it seem as though these things really could come to pass, if they have not already. But it is the honest and often harsh way she presents our humanity to us that is what really can get under your skin. Taboo topics like incest, slavery, racism, sexism, rape, pedophilia, religious fanaticism, addiction, hierarchy, genetic engineering, violence and more are often a part of the protagonists' struggles.

Before this ends up as a "Why You Should Read Octavia E. Butler's Books," let me try to focus on this book, specifically. *Conversations with Octavia Butler* is a collection of interviews with the prize-winning author. There is a reasonable and expected amount of repetition from interview to interview, but some interviewers are more insightful and involved than others. Ms. Butler's responses to some interviewers could be brief or even impatient in one case where the interviewer perhaps did not do his homework, but in others, she eloquently detailed various topics. I particularly enjoyed the interview with Charles Rowell where her responses to each question could go on for a page or more as she passionately spoke about writing, advice for writers, her inspirations and more.

Her words revealed her enthusiasm for writing and what she wrote revealed her passion for all sorts of topics. Her explanation of her writing process – which involved reading and listening to everything! – was fascinating. I respected how adamantly she defined science fiction and researched her own works accordingly. Simply put, she believed science fiction stories ought to involve actual science. A reader during a radio interview noted that Ms. Butler's works touch on so many different forms of "science," from biological, to technological to social to political science, but even when they involve fantastical elements, there is always a grounding that is a reflection of the research she put in.

Being, at the time, the only Black female author in the science fiction genre, writing about Black female characters in a genre that usually featured 30 year old White men, racism and sexism unsurprisingly came up with some of the interviews. Ms. Butler did address the topics, but it becomes clear that she never wrote with an agenda with the specific intent to deal with prejudice. She stressed that she simply wanted to write and initially, she did write about those 30 year old White guys until she realized those early writings were “garbage” and instead started writing herself for herself. The main characters are Black females because that’s what she was. From there, the personalities of the characters grew from her own feelings on certain issues or a desire to explore other issues.

This is something that I really love about Butler’s work. I can’t help but be pleased to find stories that I can relate to with characters that more accurately reflect my own multicultural environment and upbringing. I loved that none of the characters’ race or gender existed out of context or were a case of tokenism. Certainly there was prejudice against characters because of their race or gender, but the characters weren’t simply created Black and/or female specifically to address the topic of racism and/or sexism. Not even in *Kindred*, where a Black woman is transported to the past where she must deal with the reality of slavery and save her White slavemaster. This could be overlooked as simply “another book about slavery,” but it was fascinating to find out what inspired her to write *Kindred*. It’s one of the many tidbits I learned about Butler and her work by reading *Conversations*.

Most of the interviews in *Conversations* were one on one with Ms. Butler, but the MIT Cultural Studies Project was a highlight, as it featured several other prominent authors and covered some very interesting and still relevant thoughts within the topic of literacy and more.

My only disappointment is that the majority of the interviews focused on *Kindred* and *Parable of the Sower*, with some *Xenogenesis* and *Patternmaster* in the mix. I would have liked to learn more about *Parable of the Talents* and *Fledgling*. I also learned from this book that she had been working on a third part in the *Parable* series, *Parable of the Trickster*, which would have dealt with the Earthseed colonists struggling to survive their destiny in space. In one of the final interviews, Ms. Butler explained that she intended the colonists’ struggle to be with themselves, not with aliens or galactic conflict. In other words, no matter where humanity goes, the best and worst of us does not change.

I still have a few more of Ms. Butler’s books to read and this book certainly inspires me to get on with that. Reading this satisfied my desire to know more about Octavia E. Butler’s captivating mind, but, especially now that I know about *Parable of the Trickster*, it saddens me to know that there won’t be anymore conversations.

Cardyn Brooks says

This compilation of interviews with Octavia Butler from the 1990s through just before her death in 2006 reminded me of her overall brilliance. Her remarks about the environment, sociobiology, entrenched hierarchies and catastrophic one-upsmanship are eerily relevant today.

Conversations With Octavia Butler is a powerful tool for becoming acquainted with the individual and her writing. I was fortunate enough to have seen her at the 2004 BEA in Chicago and reading this book makes me wish I’d overcome my shyness and actually engaged her in conversation.

Michael Dipietro says

Love reading OEB in her own voice. Lots of repetition here, but some interesting gems. More of a research volume than something to read start to finish, honestly.

Vi says

pretty solid interview collection.

Dan'l Danehy-oakes says

A good look into the life-history and creative processes of a major SF writer, through a collection of interviews with various newspapers, magazines, websites, and radio shows, over a 26-year period.

By the very nature of the book, there is some repetition. Interviewers ask the same, or similar, questions and get the same, or similar answers. (There is one vignette, about the genesis of *Kindred*, that reappears with very little variation, at least ten times.

It is a good vignette, though.) But every interview has some new nugget, right down to the final interview taken shortly before Butler's untimely and unfortunate death. The (or at least one) original, base intention/inspiration of all her major works is discussed, and she is very forthcoming.

She was an articulate interviewee, and seems to have been equally comfortable with academics, fans, local newspapers, and NPR hosts.

This book makes me sad for all the books Butler never got to write.

Adisa says

I enjoyed all of these interviews for the most part. However, since clusters of these interviews were done during the same time period-the interviews often are redundant. So if you read one around the time of *kindred*-you basically read all the interviews from that time period. Otherwise, glad to have it around. Her work certainly showcases her brilliance as do these interviews. Long live Octavia Butler!

Amanda says

I am always happy to read more by and about Butler. These interviews were a treat to read. I especially liked the interview with Charles Rowell, 1997. The interview with Juan Williams (NPR, 2000) was painfully awkward to read. He clearly did not know a lot about her works and even got one of her book titles wrong, ouch!

Frances says

I was pretty sad finishing this book, because it's the last of the books I could find by or about Octavia Butler.

I'm glad I saved this book for last--having read all of her other books (besides *Survivor*, which seems impossible to find), it was nice to close this reading chapter of my life with a collection of interviews that explore the themes of her work.

As the introduction states, if you read the collection as a whole, it gets pretty repetitive pretty quickly. You also sympathize with her and other minority writers who are constantly asked the same questions, especially: How does being different influence your writing? While I appreciate the question and her answers (she definitely has a unique experience, and it's worth hearing), you can tell she finds it tedious, and after following her in many interviews, you begin to understand why. There seems to be an undercurrent of disbelief: how can you exist? that overshadows her actual work.

My favorite essay was "Radio Imagination" in which she describes the difference between reading and passively watching a screen. I have always said that the difference between reading and watching a screen is how much work you have to put into it. When you're reading, your mind has to work to imagine what's being described to you. You are a part of the creative process. And while film, television, and other entertainment can certainly stimulate the imagination, especially in terms of framing (what's outside the frame?), generally screen-time is a one-way relationship, an almost parasitic relationship (I say this as someone who loves TV and who would watch it for hours and hours and hours each day if life allowed it).

What is missing most, I think, from this collection is a look at how gender and sexual orientation play a role in her books. The fact that pretty much no one asked her anything related to these topics blows my mind. I would have loved to explore how she thought of the ooloi, if she were influenced by the gender questions of the day. I would have loved to hear what she thought about the AIDS epidemic, the treatment of which was greatly influenced by who it affected. I would love to hear what she thought about the gay civil rights movement. A truly lost opportunity.

Nick says

Extended reading for Butler completists. Reprints of every interview or public group discussion Butler had. A fair amount of redundancy due the common set of questions asked. The best were the group discussions whether more general themes were explored .

Naori says

Happy Birthday Octavia! Thank you for forever changing our imaginations and paving the way for women in speculative fiction! p.s. check out the google header for today :)

Michelle says

Octavia Butler is a fascinating woman. From the short article on Wikipedia on her and her lovely and intriguing bio at the back of every book she's written there's been a shortage of information on one of America's greatest writers. This book is the closest we'll ever get to knowing the genius, playfulness, knowledge, and pain that compose Octavia Butler. If you're a writer, the book is full of encouraging advice from Butler. A must have for all Octavia Butler fans.
