

You're listening to Imaginary Worlds, a show about how we create them and why we suspend our disbelief. I'm Eric Molinsky.

Back in 2016, I did an episode called The Legacy of Octavia Butler. Octavia Butler was one of the great science fiction authors in the late 20th century. And I released that episode on the 10th anniversary of her death.

This year was another milestone. 2022 would have been her 75th birthday. And there were a lot of media stories about how her writing and her vision of the world is more relevant than ever.

There are also now several different TV and movie adaptations in the works for many of her novels. The talent behind these projects includes Issa Rae, Viola Davis, and Ava DuVernay, to name a few.

And the first of these adaptations just came out. It's a new TV series based on Octavia Butler's novel Kindred.

Kindred about a Black woman in modern times who is mysteriously transported to a 19th century slave plantation. And she keeps going back and forth in time.

KEVIN: Dana. Dana. Are you okay?

DANA: I got up to get a glass of water, and I was here, and I was drinking and suddenly I wasn't here. I was somewhere else.

KEVIN: Where?

DANA: I don't know. By a river?

KEVIN: So, you feel asleep.

DANA: No! Am I crazy? I sound crazy! It just happened. It just happened!

I'd like to take part in this commemoration of Octavia Butler by replaying my episode about her. And after the break, we'll hear a reading from one of her novels. But first, here is the episode, "The Legacy of Octavia Butler" from 2016.

When I started this podcast, I had a lot of catching up to do when it came to sci-fi literature. So, for the last few years, I've been trying to read many of the great books that I've missed.

And a lot of them have been great, but I have troubling suspend my disbelief and losing myself in the book. I don't know if it's because I need a visual component. Although one issue I have is the stories sometimes take place so far in the future or in a distant galaxy, the author needs to lay down a ton of backstory to explain how the human race got there, I'm totally lost by the second chapter. For some reason, in a movie I can follow a hero whose main motivation is to traipse the galaxy to obtain a precious gem before the bad guys can get it. But for a novel, it feels empty.

Then I read Octavia Butler.

She doesn't write stories like that. And her writing is so powerful, and so disturbing -- I couldn't sleep at night. I had to keep reminding myself, these are just stories, they're not real.

Just to give you a sense of the stories, without too many spoilers:

I'm lying in the dark thinking about Doro, the spirit in her book, *Wild Seed*, who kills anyone he wants and takes their body. He gets into a century-long abusive relationship with a shape-shifting woman during the American slave trade.

Or I'm thinking about Shori, the vampire-like character in her novel *Fledgling*, who looks 12 but is much older, and has sex with adults -- both men and women -- who become addicted to her body chemistry.

Then there's the novel *Dawn*, where the few remaining people who survive a nuclear war are taken aboard a spaceship. The alien are well meaning, they treat humans as an endangered species, but one with a fatal flaw towards self-destruction. They alter our genes, so humans can only have sex or feel attraction to each other while one of these repulsive aliens is squirming between them.

AJ: Heterosexual males are very nervous around that arrangement at not being on top anymore.

Ayana Jamieson is writing a biography on Octavia Butler.

AJ: She shows over and over again that sometimes the best choice is the one that you may not be able to live with, and a lot of people can't really deal with the ambiguity of some of the things being experienced.

This year marks the tenth anniversary of her passing. There are commemorations happening in California, including a conference that Ayana organized. Clockshop in Los Angeles is hosting a yearlong series of events, panels, and walking tours of Pasadena, where Octavia Butler lived. And they commissioned works from artists like Cauleen Smith, who is making a short film about the novel Kindred.

CS: Ever since I read that novel, I've been haunted by the first and last chapter, basically the lead character.

Kindred is about a black woman in the 1970s who is transported to a slave plantation in the 1800s. When she returns home, the time vortex closes in on her arm, and that scene moment bookends the novel.

CS: She survives this incredible journey of time travelling back and forth and living as a slave – she survives it but not without leaving indelible mark on her, which is the loss of her arm.

Octavia Butler was celebrated in her lifetime, but too often, journalists focused on the fact that she was an African American woman writing science fiction. They would ask her admiringly how she got there. She grew up poor. She was dyslexic. But they wouldn't ask any follow up questions about the content of her work, which still irks her fans.

Now, her life story and her work are linked. But I wanted to figure out why her writing digs so deep. Why does it keep me up, while at the same time, I can't get enough of it?

To start learning about Octavia Butler and her work, I called up Nisi Shawl. She and Butler were good friends. They met at a fantasy convention in Seattle.

NISI: I think the first thing I said to her was oh, you are much more beautiful than photographs, it was not premeditated, but she understood knew I wasn't flattering her.

Butler was not traditionally beautiful. She was over six feet tall, with a deep voice that sounded like an opera singer.

AJ: She says in interview she remembers being called ugly for the first time in first grade by the time in middle school people, she thought still believed that she was ugly only now too polite to say it.

Ayana says Octavia Butler had many rich friendships as an adult. But growing up, she was pretty lonely. She was an only child. Her mother had four miscarriages before she was born, including a stillbirth. And she was haunted by the idea of her missing siblings.

AJ: When she first started writing she was very isolated I know person went to high school with her, people knew her mother cleaned houses, so there was this weird class thing, and she writes as a child being worried about being afraid evicted not knowing where mother get money for rent.

When she was a teenager, Butler's mother gave her a \$100 bill as a Christmas present. When she tried to use it at a supermarket:

AJ: They didn't accept the money so didn't allow he to use the bill and they must have called the police by the time she left the store and went to the bus to take her home, because she didn't drive two police officers said we hear you have counterfeit hundred dollar bill and if its real you can have it back. So they were playing good copy, bad copy. She said look, if you were me, what would you feel about people taking their money? They backed down.

She did not suffer fools. And that memory – and her sense of outrage -- became fodder for her fiction.

Butler knew she wanted to be a writer at a young age. Here she is on a panel discussion from 2002.

CLIP: DEVIL GIRL FROM MARS

AJ: But she actually telling herself stories from age 4, write them down at age 8, and by the time she was around 12 sending out her manuscripts to be published.

NS: At the same time she was ambitious, she was humble. She wanted her work to be successful, but she was always surprised when it was.

Nisi is also a fiction writer. I asked her why is Octavia Butler's writing so effective? What exactly is her technique?

NISI: Well, she's certainly good at thing using all your senses, doesn't throw it all in your face, but you can smell the smoke of the burning houses, and she's there with all their sense, and since she's there, you're there. The other thing is she doesn't flinch. Her specialty was to think about the things that people would rather not think about. One of the exercises she gave to a class, which I sat in on, but I remember her asking everyone in the class to write about what they feared because she thought that the emotion of being repelled and in fear would come out strongly in our work herself. And I think she did that a lot in her work. Don't you?

Oh yeah, I feel frankly terrified reading a lot of work. I can tell you the fears I feel reading the work, what are the fears that you see of hers that come out in her work.

NISI: One of the main fears I see is that of loosing control of your body in so many different ways. In blood child, what she called her pregnant man story, it's pretty obvious these huge insectile non-humans who lay their eggs in your body and it's in some way connected to the legacy of slavery, the people who were enslaved had no control over their bodies. And the other fear that comes out in her work, over and over, is the fear of the triumph of hierarchy, the fear of domination being the end story of human kind.

Octavia Butler was also deeply interested in politics. I was happy to learn that she was an avid NPR listener. She was outraged by things like Prop 187 -- the 1994 voter initiative in California that denied rights to immigrants. Sometimes she would op-eds, but she preferred to write in metaphor.

NISI: She thought she could reach more people and she really did want to reach a lot of people. She didn't think people wanted to be lectured to, she thought wanted to be entertained but entertainment should have depth.

It worked on me. I'm a straight white guy, so I've never experienced what it's like to not have those privileges in America. Her protagonists were often black women, so it's not like she wasn't writing about race. But the power imbalance was never black and white, literally or figuratively. Her

writing was so focused on the first person perspective; it's like virtual reality.

Her characters also have a deep yearning for connection. Interestingly, they sometimes feel more compatible with aliens than with other human beings.

I'm not sure what that says about Octavia Butler. She was a deeply private person. No one knows if she had any romantic partners. Some lesbian women have tried to claim her as a role model. But Nisi and another friend of theirs, Nalo Hopkinson, have tried to correct them.

NISI: Nalo and I have been all over the Internet telling people, I'm queer—she wasn't.

Again, Cauleen Smith.

CS: Not only do people want to imagine her as gay, they want to want to imagine her as being asexual that she wasn't interested in sex which is impossible conclusion to come to when read her work.

Yeah!

CS: Sex is motivating so much of the characters in every way.

That's another thing that makes her stories so gripping. Her characters are motivated by very basic needs – love, sex, food, safety, and survival.

Butler once wrote about the moment when she first became interested in what makes us sentient beings. Her mother was a maid for a wealthy white family, and she brought young Octavia along.

CS: But she finds herself staring into eyes of family pet, this dog, her aha moment was realizing there were other beings around us besides humans, she was confronted with sentience and self-awareness of dog, they were the same size, laying on floor staring at each other, in the context of mentioning her uncle was the gardener, her aunt did laundry, and her mother worked in the kitchen of home.

Very often in her stories, we are in the place of that dog.

CS: The idea of dominion what humans have assigned themselves over every being on the planet, she flips it and imagines what would it mean if some being imagine superior to us and imagine themselves benevolently caring for us by holding us and determining how we live.

Maybe what disturbs me the most about her work – and I mean disturbing in a good way – is that she doesn't condemn these other worldly beings who can be selfish, arrogant or cruel. Her protagonists don't have the power to overthrow their oppressors – until maybe at the very end. So instead, they try to understand them.

CS: Her level of empathy actually frustrates me as a reader where I'm like I wish her character could be harder, be more cruel, be more self interested.

But that wasn't in her nature.

In 2006, Octavia Butler died of a stroke. She was 58. Besides losing a great friend, Nisi Shawl was devastated because Butler was in the prime of her career. She had just started a new series with Fledgling.

NISI: Now there was a long period where she was unable to write as far as she was concerned, she wrote things and then she destroyed them, she didn't like them, she considered himself blocked between the end of Parable of the Talents and the beginning of when she started Fledgling. But I consider Fledgling powerful and beautiful and completely of a piece with earlier work but even more so, I was really looking forward to rest of those books with Shori as the protagonist. They were great. She was great.

Yeah.

NISI: What made me saddest after she died was that I got the immediate feeling that she lived her entire life so that people would talk about her good when she was gone.

How so?

NISI: Afterwards, I could only say good things about her, to the point where the book I co-edited was sometimes panned because we didn't say enough bad things about Octavia Butler, but I look back now and I see how she approached problems, how she responded to people's requests, she did it because she was leaving behind a reputation and she knew it. She was an atheist, she didn't believe in an afterlife but she did believe in having a reputation and she made sure it was good and that was made me sad.

She knew her reputation knew would be her afterlife to some extent.

NIS: She knew her reputation would be all the afterlife she had and she made sure it was a good one.

And we need her now, more than ever.

Okay, we're back in the present day, where we need Octavia Butler more than ever.

If some of those voices sound familiar, I interviewed Nisi Shawl again in my 2022 episode Postcolonial Worlds. Also I talked with Cauleen Smith in my 2021 episode Music from Saturn, which was about the musician Sun Ra.

Ayana Jamieson has continued to write and talk about Octavia Butler. I have links to her recent work in the show notes.

It's interesting for me to listen back to that episode from six years ago because today I don't feel intimidated by sci-fi literature. I read pretty voraciously. And that journey into speculative fiction really kicked off when I discovered the writings of Octavia Butler.

And after the break, we'll hear what her work sounds like.

BREAK

To give you a sense of Octavia Butler's writing, I asked the actress Aliza Pearl to read from the novel Dawn. Dawn came out in 1987. It was the first of Octavia's Butler's Xenogenesis series. The books are about an uncomfortably close relationship between human beings and aliens in a post-apocalyptic future. It was also the first novel of hers that I read.

So here is Aliza Pearl reading a condensed excerpt of the two chapters of Dawn.

Alive!

Still alive.

Alive...again.

Awakening was hard, as always. The ultimate disappointment. It was a struggle to take in enough air to drive off nightmare sensations of asphyxiation. Lilith

lyapo lay gasping, shaking with the force of her effort. Her heartbeat too fast, too loud. She curled around it, fetal, helpless. Circulation began to return to her arms and legs in flurries of minute, exquisite pains.

When her body calmed and became reconciled to reanimation, she looked around. The room seemed dimly lit, though she had never Awakened to dimness before. She sat up, swayed dizzily, then turned to look at the rest of the room.

The bed was what it had always been: a solid platform that gave slightly to the touch and that seemed to grow from the floor. There was, across the room, a doorway that probably led to a bathroom. She was usually given a bathroom. Twice she had not been, and in her windowless, doorless cubicle, she had been forced simply to choose a corner.

What else did she have?

Very little. There was another platform perhaps a foot higher than the bed. And there were things on it. She saw the food first. It was the usual lumpy cereal or stew, of no recognizable flavor, contained in an edible bowl that would disintegrate if she emptied it and did not eat it.

And there was something beside the bowl. Unable to see it clearly, she touched it.

Cloth! A folded mound of clothing. She snatched it up, dropped it in her eagerness, picked it up again and began putting it on. A light-colored, thigh-length jacket and a pair of long, loose pants both made of some cool, exquisitely soft material that made her think of silk, though for no reason she could have stated, she did not think this was silk. The jacket adhered to itself and stayed closed when she closed it but opened readily enough when she pulled the two front panels apart. The way they came apart reminded her of Velcro, though there was none to be seen. She had pleaded for it, but her captors had ignored her. Dressed now, she felt more secure than she had at any other time in her captivity. It was a false security she knew, but she had learned to savor any pleasure, any supplement to her self-esteem that she could glean.

Opening and closing her jacket, her hand touched the long scar across her abdomen. She had acquired it somehow between her second and third Awakenings, had examined it fearfully, wondering what had been done to her. What had she lost or gained, and why? And what else might be done?

She did not own herself any longer. Even her flesh could be cut and stitched without her consent or knowledge.

It enraged her during later Awakenings that there had been moments when she actually felt grateful to her mutilators for letting her sleep through whatever they had done to her—and for doing it well enough to spare her pain or disability later.

She rubbed the scar, tracing its outline. Finally, she sat on the bed and ate her bland meal, finishing the bowl as well, more for a change of texture than to satisfy any residual hunger. Then she began the oldest and most futile of her activities: a search for some crack, some sound of hollowness, some indication of a way out of her prison.

She had done this at every Awakening. At her first Awakening, she had called out during her search. Receiving no answer, she had shouted, then cried, then cursed until her voice was gone.

There had not been a whisper of response. Her captors spoke when they were ready and not before. They did not show themselves at all. She remained sealed in her cubicle and their voices came to her from above like the light. She imagined herself to be in a large box, like a rat in a cage.

Why?

There was no answer. They had refused to tell her. They had asked her questions. Simple ones at first.

How old was she?

Twenty-six, she thought silently. Was she still only twenty-six? How long had they held her captive? They would not say.

Had she been married?

Yes, but he was gone, long gone.

Had she had children?

Oh god. One child, long gone with his father. If there were an afterworld, what a crowded place it must be now.

What work had she done?

None. Her son and her husband had been her work for a few brief years. After the auto accident that killed them, she had gone back to college, there to decide what else she might do with her life.

Did she remember the war?

Insane question. Could anyone who had lived through the war forget it? A handful of people tried to commit humanicide. They had nearly succeeded. She had, through sheer luck, managed to survive — only to be captured by heaven knew who and imprisoned.

She sat on the bed, dressed, waiting, tired in a deep, emptied way that had nothing to do with physical weariness. Sooner or later, someone would speak to her.

She had a long wait. She had lain down and was almost asleep when a voice spoke her name.

"Lilith?" The usual, quiet, androgynous voice.

She drew a deep, weary breath. "What?" she asked. But as she spoke, she realized the voice had not come from above as it always had before. She sat up quickly and looked around. In one corner she found the shadowy figure of a man, thin and long-haired.

"I'm not here to hurt you," he said.

"No. Of course, you're not."

"I'm here to take you outside."

Now she stood up, staring hard at him, wishing for more light. Was he making a joke? Laughing at her?

"Outside to what?"

She took a step closer to him, then stopped. He scared her somehow. She could not make herself approach him. "Something is wrong," she said. "Who are you?"

He moved slightly. "And what am I?"

She jumped because that was what she had almost said.

"I'm not a man," he said. "I'm not a human being."

She moved back against the bed but did not sit down. "Tell me what you are."

"I'm here to tell you...and show you. Will you look at me now?"

"All right," she said. "Show me."

The lights brightened as she had supposed they would, and what had seemed to be a tall, slender man was still humanoid, but it had no nose — no bulge, no nostrils — just flat, gray skin. It was gray all over — pale gray skin, darker gray hair on its head that grew down around its eyes and ears and at its throat. There was so much hair across the eyes that she wondered how the creature could see. The long, profuse ear hair seemed to grow out of the ears as well as around them. The island of throat hair seemed to move slightly, and it occurred to her that that might be where the creature breathed.

"You should notice," he said, "that what you probably see as hair isn't hair at all. Come closer and look."

She did not want to be any closer to him. She had not known what held her back before. Now she was certain it was his alienness, his difference, his literal unearthliness.

She frowned, strained to see, to understand. Then, abruptly, she did understand. She backed away, scrambled around the bed and to the far wall. When she could go no farther, she stood against the wall, staring at him.

Medusa.

Some of the "hair" writhed independently, a nest of snakes startled, driven in all directions.

Revolted, she turned her face to the wall.

"They're not separate animals," he said. "My sensory organs aren't dangerous to you. You'll have to get used to them."

"No!"

The tentacles were elastic. At her shout, some of them lengthened, stretching toward her. She imagined big, slowly writhing, dying night crawlers stretched

along the sidewalk after a rain. She imagined small, tentacled sea slugs — nudibranchs — grown impossibly to human size and shape, and, obscenely, sounding more like a human being than some humans. Yet she needed to hear him speak. Silent, he was utterly alien.

"How many other humans do you have here? And where's here?"

"This is my home. You would call it a ship — a vast one compared to the ones your people have built. What it truly is doesn't translate. As for how many humans are here: all of you who survived your war. We collected as many as we could. The ones we didn't find in time died of injury, disease, hunger, radiation, cold.... We found them later."

"Is there anything left on Earth?" she whispered. "Anything alive, I mean."

"Oh, yes. Time and our efforts have been restoring it."

"Restoring it? Why?"

"For use. You'll go back there eventually."

"You'll send me back? And the other humans?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

His tentacles rippled. "I can only say that your people have something we value. You may begin to know how much we value it when I tell you that by your way of measuring time, it has been several million years since we dared to interfere in another people's act of self-destruction. Many of us disputed the wisdom of doing it this time. We thought...that there had been a consensus among you, that you had agreed to die."

"Do you understand now what happened to us?"

"I'm aware of what happened. It's...alien to me. Frighteningly alien. Some of the people we picked up had been hiding deep underground. They had created much of the destruction."

"And they're still alive?"

"Some of them are."

"And you plan to send them back to Earth?"

"No."

"What?"

"The ones still alive are very old now. We've used them slowly, learned biology, language, culture from them. We Awakened them a few at a time and let them live their lives here in different parts of the ship while you slept."

"Slept... how long have I slept?"

He walked across the room to the table platform, put one many-fingered hand on it, and boosted himself up. Legs drawn against his body, he walked easily on his hands to the center of the platform. The whole series of movements was so fluid and natural, yet so alien that it fascinated her. He had folded himself compactly into an uncomfortable-looking seated position.

"I don't understand why I'm so . . . afraid of you," she whispered. "Of the way you look, I mean. You're not that different. There are — or were — life forms on Earth that looked a little like you."

He said nothing.

She looked at him sharply, fearing he had fallen into one of his long silences. "Is it something you're doing?" she demanded, "something I don't know about?"

"I'm here to teach you to be comfortable with us," he said. "You're doing very well."

She did not feel she was doing well at all.

"You never told me how long you kept me asleep."

"About...two hundred and fifty of your years."

This was more than she could assimilate at once. She said nothing for so long that he broke the silence.

"Something went wrong when you were first Awakened. I heard about it from several people. Someone handled you badly — underestimated you. You are like us in some ways, but you were thought to be like your military people hidden underground. They refused to talk to us too. At first. You were left asleep for about fifty years after that first mistake. This is your last isolation room. When you're ready, I'll take you outside."

That's it for this week, thank you for listening. And I hope you have a very happy and healthy New Year.

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