An Interview with Octavia E. Butler
Author(s): Charles H. Rowell and Octavia E. Butler
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AN INTERVIEW WITH OCTAVIA E. BUTLER

by Charles H. Rowell

This interview was conducted by telephone on January 31, 1997, between Charlottesville, Virginia, and Los Angeles, where Ms. Butler lives.

ROWELL: At the end of your interview with fiction writer Randall Kenan (published in *Callaloo*, Vol. 14.2, Spring 1991), you said, "I don't feel that I have any particular literary talent at all. It [writing] was what I wanted to do, and I followed what I wanted to do, as opposed to getting a job doing something that would make more money . . . it would make me miserable." As I think of the number of books of fiction you have created and the many awards you have received (including a MacArthur Foundation Fellowship) for your work, I begin to wonder, what did Octavia mean when she made that statement to Randall?

BUTLER: It's a problem that I have quite often encountered with would-be writers—and I'm sorry to say especially black would-be writers. So many of these would-be writers are afraid they don't have the talent. And I actually wrote about this in an essay in *Bloodchild and Other Stories* (1995). But what I mean, I guess, is that I had to learn my craft. And I mean I had to learn it, bit by bit, by doing things wrong, and by collecting years and years of rejection slips. But I kept writing because I liked doing it. The quote that you read is a bit condensed from the original. I did have lots of jobs. I worked at all sorts of things. Anyone who has read my novel *Kindred* (1979) can find a number of the kinds of jobs that I had, from blue collar to low grade white collar, clerk typist, that kind of thing. And I did these jobs because I had to live, but always while I was doing them and between jobs I wrote, because it was the only thing I actually cared about doing. All the other jobs were just work to keep a roof over my head and food on the table. I felt like an animal, just living in order to live, just surviving. But as long as I wrote, I felt that I was living in order to do something more, something I actually cared about.

ROWELL: What is it then that you're talking about if it's not talent you have as a writer?

BUTLER: I'm talking about learning your craft. And practicing it, and learning as you practice it, even though it often hurts to be told that you're doing something that doesn't work in your writing. Writing is very personal, and it does hurt sometimes to be told that something is wrong with some work you really love and feel is perfect.

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Your writing is an expression of your inner feelings and thoughts and beliefs and self. One of the reasons it is difficult to learn to write professionally is that that kind of thing is so painful; rejection is so painful. It sounds as though you are personally being rejected, and in a sense you are—no matter how much somebody tells you not to worry, "It's not you; it's just the work." But the work is you; so it hurts. You need to go through that, and you never really stop going through that, even though you've learned to write professionally; you go on learning. If you don't go on learning, then your writing becomes stale, and you do the same thing over and over again.

Now sad to say, doing the same thing over and over can be lucrative for some people. But most often it's just a form of death, literary death. In that essay that I mentioned—it's called "Furor Scribendi" and it's in *Bloodchild and Other Stories*—I talk about the ways in which you gather and train your writing skills. Of course I talk about reading, I talk about writing every day, and I talk about having a schedule, about keeping that writing schedule. Even if you can write only one hour a day, to actually do that writing is very important. To do your reading is also important. You use your reading not only to learn about the mechanics of writing but also to learn how other people have written to gather information that has nothing to do with your writing because everything goes into the well. And when you begin to write, it's surprising what you suddenly find coming out. The things that come out of your writing are often things that you are on friendly terms with, even though you perhaps never intended to write about them. Say a year ago you read a very intricate book about the geology of California. You read it because there was an earthquake and you were curious, and then later you find yourself doing something that relates to the geology of California or geology in general. But you did not read that book so you could write about geology. You read the book for amusement and information, but eventually it does come out. Anything that happens that makes you emotional is almost certain to come out in your writing. I say to students, anything that doesn't dismember or kill you will probably come out in your writing. You go on learning to write for as long as you live and write. If you don't do this, if you're not willing to do this, you might want to *be* a writer, but you don't really want to write.

I think there are many people who want to be writers because they think that it is a good thing to be, that it is important or whatever. But they don't actually want to get down and do the work. So they wind up talking about how they're going to write the great American novel someday. There's so much you can do that will contribute to the writing. One thing, for instance, is to keep a journal. I mentioned how important I emotionally felt experience is. If you keep a journal and let yourself overflow with the things that affect you, the things that make you joyous, the things that make you furious, the things that make you jealous; if you can be honest with your journal and not write about what you had for breakfast or what load of washing you did (nobody's going to care about that ever), but what you felt and what you care about, you will discover that these are things other people feel and care about. It's difficult sometimes I think, especially for men, because they feel that they are revealing themselves in public, and they might feel uncomfortable about that. But it's one of the exercises that I like to give students when I'm teaching a writers' workshop. I want the students to delve into their emotional experiences. Since emotional experiences tend to be

personal, I want my students then to fictionalize an emotional experience with the same emotion. It does not have to deal with the same emotional experience. It just has to deal with the same emotion, which I then ask the student to turn into a story. It's just practice for writing honestly, writing what you feel and what's important to you.

ROWELL: I have no doubt that the established writer and the literary critic understand what you mean when you say, "Learn your craft." But I am not certain that the beginning or developing writer and the general reader understand what you mean. Will you say more about what you mean when you talk about learning one's craft?

BUTLER: First of all, if you're in school you should take writing classes. The great thing about writing classes is not only that the teacher might provide you with information that will help you improve your writing, but that the other students in the class are an audience. So often new authors will argue that they didn't really mean what everybody thinks they meant, that they meant something else altogether. That's when, if they're really going to be writers, they learn to say what they meant and stop arguing about what other people are seeing in their work. That's one of the major difficulties in communication. Sometimes we writers tend to be alone too much, and we write for ourselves. We can't help doing that. But later we discover that we haven't really communicated what we think we communicated. That means that the writing needs to be fixed. Fixing it doesn't mean that you won't be misinterpreted. Inevitably you will be. It just means that people need to work harder to do it. Another kind of exercise that I have students go through is to look at their trouble spots. For instance, if they have difficulty with beginnings—they have wonderful stories to tell but don't know where to begin or how to begin—I have them look at work that they enjoy reading, novels or short-stories—it doesn't matter. I then ask them to copy half a dozen beginnings; I ask them to copy them directly, word for word. It's difficult to say how much to copy, anything from the first couple of paragraphs to the first page. It's just a matter of finding out how each writer gets into the story that the writer is telling. And in this case it's taking those half dozen or so beginnings (more is okay, but fewer is not a good idea) and figuring out what each writer has done in order to begin. They find dialogue beginnings, they find action beginnings, and they find the kind of beginning that gets you immediately into a mystery. They also find descriptive beginnings. Learning what other people have done by way of beginnings helps them to understand what's possible. This is not about imitating someone else's beginnings; that's why I want at least a half a dozen. This is about learning what is possible. One of the big problems we have as writers is that we either know too much or not enough. Sometimes we manage to know both at the same time. We know that there is an ocean of possibilities out there, and we're overwhelmed. And we don't know how to take from that ocean just what we need. Sometimes focusing on what other people have done (not just beginnings, but transitions, descriptions of important characters, for instance, those elements of fiction writing that give people trouble, in general) may help beginning writers. I like my students to go through their own favorite works—not something I pick, but something they actually like—and copy down what the writers have done and figure out why it works. This is something that I have used on

any number of problems, and in fact it's something that I am using right now on a problem that I'm having.

ROWELL: Could you share that writing problem?

BUTLER: [*Laughter.*] Maybe later.

ROWELL: Okay. Two elements of your background fascinate me: your family background and your formal, higher education. I would like to begin first by talking about your family background. Like many African-American writers and scholars of our generation, you come from a working-class family, one whose roots are in Louisiana, where you never lived, of course. Your mother was a domestic, in California, where you've lived all of your life. Has that working-class background, as far as you can tell, contributed in any way to your work as a fiction writer? One can probably say, on a superficial level, that you used Louisiana—that is to say, 19th-century Louisiana—as a setting in *Wild Seed* (1980).

BUTLER: Yes, for part of *Wild Seed.* I don't know enough about Louisiana to talk about it knowledgeably. I did some research to use it as a background for *Wild Seed.* My mother's life and my grandmother's life and the little bit I know of her ancestors' lives were very hard and very terrible. These were not lives that I would have wanted to live. I mean the reason my mother did domestic work was not only that she was black, but because she was the oldest daughter. This meant that after only three years of education, she was pulled out of school and put to work. The oldest son, who was a couple of years older than she, got a chance to go to school. But as the daughter she was the one that was kind of sacrificed, I guess you would say, and sent off to work. She never really got back into education.

She was born in 1914, so she was a child quite a long time ago. Her mother chopped sugar cane, and she also did the family laundry, not just her own family but the white family for whom they worked. She washed clothes in the big iron pots with paddles and all that. That was hard, physical labor. It's no wonder she died at fifty-nine, after having a lot of children and working her life away. This is the kind of life that she had no choice but to live. The reason I mention the place is that there was no school in that area—no school for black children, and racial segregation was very rigid in those days. There was no integrated schooling in that part of Louisiana. My grandmother and grandfather moved to a more urban area to get the kids into school. My mother was already about seven or eight years old. Because she was big, and obviously not a kindergartner from appearance, they put her in the third grade, which meant that she was suddenly confronted with concepts she knew nothing about. To the end of her life, she felt that she was stupid and couldn't learn, because she was presented with all these concepts that other kids had been taught early on and that she had never been confronted with at all. She really learned quite a lot, but she felt inferior. She was physically courageous, willing to take on whatever came. But emotionally, intellectually, she felt that she was inferior, and she always kind of, figuratively, ducked her head when it came to anything requiring intellectual competence. I used to try to talk

to her about that, but I think it was something so ingrained that it was something she was never able to get away from.

Her big dream for me was that I should get a job as a secretary and be able to sit down when I worked. My big dream was never to be a secretary in my life. I mean, it just seemed such an appallingly servile job, and it turned out to be in a lot of ways. I can remember watching television, which is something, of course, that my mother as a child never had access to, and seeing secretaries on television rushing to do their bosses' bidding and feeling the whole thing to be really kind of humiliating. I was occasionally taken to work with my mother and made to sit in the car all day, because I wasn't really welcome inside, of course. Sometimes, I was able to go inside and hear people talk about or to my mother in ways that were obviously disrespectful. As a child I did not blame them for their disgusting behavior, but I blamed my mother for taking it. I didn't really understand. This is something I carried with me for quite a while, as she entered back doors, and as she went deaf at appropriate times. If she had heard more, she would have had to react to it, you know. The usual. And as I got older I realized that this is what kept me fed, and this is what kept a roof over my head. This is when I started to pay attention to what my mother and even more my grandmother and my poor great-grandmother, who died as a very young woman giving birth to my grandmother, what they all went through.

When I got into college, Pasadena City College, the black nationalist movement, the Black Power Movement, was really underway with the young people, and I heard some remarks from a young man who was the same age I was but who had apparently never made the connection with what his parents did to keep him alive. He was still blaming them for their humility and their acceptance of disgusting behavior on the part of employers and other people. He said, "I'd like to kill all these old people who have been holding us back for so long. But I can't because I'd have to start with my own parents." When he said *us* he meant black people, and when he said *old people* he meant older black people. That was actually the germ of the idea for *Kindred* (1979). I've carried that comment with me for thirty years. He felt so strongly ashamed of what the older generation had to do, without really putting it into the context of being necessary for not only their lives but his as well.

I wanted to take a character, when I did *Kindred*, back in time to some of the things that our ancestors had to go through, and see if that character survived so very well with the knowledge of the present in her head. Actually, I began with a man as main character, but I couldn't go on using the male main character, because I couldn't realistically keep him alive. So many things that he did would have been likely to get him killed. He wouldn't even have time to learn the rules—the rules of submission, I guess you could call them—before he was killed for not knowing them because he would be perceived as dangerous. The female main character, who might be equally dangerous, would not be perceived so. She might be beaten, she might be abused, but she probably wouldn't be killed and that's the way I wrote it. She was beaten and abused, but she was not killed. That sexism, in a sense, worked in her favor. Although if you could take the character and give her life and ask her if she thought she had been favored, it would be likely that she wouldn't think so, because of what she suffered. But, anyway, that's a long-winded answer. And that's how I came to write *Kindred*.

ROWELL: You have referred to yourself as growing up as "an out kid." Did you read a lot? What did you read as a child? What do you mean when you said you were "an out kid"?

BUTLER: I was not an out kid because of my reading or writing, at least not at first. I was an out kid because, as an only child, I never really learned to be part of a group. At first it didn't matter. When you are four years old in preschool, kids tended to play by themselves anyway. I was like most of the kids. You know, the kids talked together, but they didn't exactly play together. Later on, I really knew more about being around adults than I knew about being around other kids. This made me very awkward and strange around kids, and, unfortunately, children have a pecking order and it was very much in effect. If you're pecked and you don't peck back, then you'll go on being pecked. If you're a little chicken, you die of it, but if you're a little kid, you only want to die of it. I spent a lot of time getting hit and kicked and not really knowing what to do about it, because if you're most of the time around adults and they hit you and you hit them back, it's definitely not a good idea, especially black southern adults of that day. So it took me awhile to learn to hit back. It was strange for awhile because I was bigger than most kids my age. That meant, by the way, that I was originally being bothered by kids who were older than I. The ones my own age pretty much left me alone, but the older ones saw me as a marvelous target. Later, when I realized that I could fight back, I discovered that I was a lot stronger than I had thought. I hurt people by accident. I had a lot of empathy, and hurting somebody really bothered me. So I found that I was hesitant to hurt them for those reasons. That was just elementary school. Elementary school is very physical for kids. Later there are fewer fights because, after all, fights are more dangerous as you get older; you could really do damage. So later I had few fights, but a lot more social ostracism.

By the time I was ten I was writing, and I carried a big notebook around so that whenever I had some time I could write in it. That way, I didn't have to be lonely. I usually had very few friends, and I was lonely. But when I wrote I wasn't, which was probably a good reason for my continuing to write as a young kid. I read a lot also, for the same reasons. I discovered the library back in kindergarten, I guess. We didn't have a library at the school, but we were not that far from the main city library in Pasadena. The teachers would have us join hands and walk down to the library together. There we would sit, and someone would tell us—or read us—a story. Someone would also talk to us about how to use the library. When I was six and was finally given books to read in school, I found them incredibly dull; they were Dick and Jane books. I asked my mother for a library card. I remember the surprised look on her face. She looked surprised and happy. She immediately took me to the library. She had been taking me home, but now she immediately took me to the library and got me a card. From then on the library was my second home. In a way, reading and writing helped me not to be lonely, but in another way they permitted me to go on being an oddball as far as other kids were concerned. So reading and writing both helped and, I suppose in some ways, hindered.

I often wonder what kind of person I would have been if my brothers had lived. I had four older brothers. My mother had difficulty carrying a child to term. And she

lost them all, either at birth or before they should have been born. I wonder what kind of person I would have been if they had lived and if I had had more of the society of kids when I was a kid. But, anyway, since I didn't have that, I made my own society in the books and in the stories that I told myself. I began telling myself stories at four. I can recall the specific time when I began doing that. I couldn't go out and play when I was being punished. I saw other kids having a good time. I lived near some of my cousins at that point, and it was less than a year that we were living there. It was sort of fun, for that little period, having them nearby.

You also asked me about TV and film. That's interesting, because I think my first strong influence was radio. Not because I'm so terribly old—although I guess to some people I might seem so—but because at first we didn't have a television. There were still radio dramas on. I was introduced, for instance, to characters like Superman and the Shadow by way of the radio. The Whistler and Johnny Dollar, "My True Story," and other programs. Radio was fun; it has been called theater of the mind, and it really is. As a young child, you have no idea what the adults mean when they say a lot of different things, and you imagine all sorts of things. For instance, I was a small child during the McCarthy era, when we finally got television. There was a program on television called "I Led Three Lives." It was supposed to be the story of an American who was a double agent pretending to be a communist, but actually working for the FBI. A wonderful fellow, yes. Anyway, every now and then during this program he would talk about someone having been "liquidated." You can just imagine a little kid sitting there wondering what "liquidated" means and imagining them being dissolved in a mixing bowl or something. Everything was theater for the mind at that point for me because I had no idea what most things meant.

Movies didn't play a big part in my life because my mother felt that movies were sinful. We didn't go. Then we did go when I was about seven, because my stepfather would take us to the movies. My father died when I was a toddler, almost a baby, and I really don't have any strong memory of him. When I was about seven, my mother thought she might marry again. My potential stepfather would take us to the movies. My mother would go because it was someplace she could take me along, too, and she didn't have to pay for a baby-sitter. I got to see, for instance, "Invasion from Mars." This ridiculous movie—and I think they've done a remake of it—is about a little boy who sees a flying saucer land, and the flying saucer people are turning everybody into them, by doing something to the backs of their heads. They finally grab his parents and do it to them, and then the whole thing turns out to be a dream. That gave me nightmares. I, by the way, enjoyed my nightmares. I had wonderful fun with my nightmares. Some of them really scared me to death, but they were all so much fun. They were like movies that scared me to death on television. When movies came on television, they, in the eyes of my mother, were somehow not evil—or at least she did not say they were. I was smart enough never to question this, but it did occur to me. It also occurred to me to shut up. So I did watch movies on television. I could watch over and over again. I think they were the ones that caught my attention and held it. There was something called Channel 9 Movie Theater back when there were RKO stations. Channel 9 was an RKO station. You could watch the same movie every night for a week and twice on Sundays or something like that. It's been a long time, so I don't

really recall. Some were science fiction movies, and some were Fred Astaire dancing along. I think those movies that I had the chance to watch over and over were the ones more likely to have the greatest effect on me—not so much those that I only saw once. The television, once we got one, was a great friend to me; I spent a lot of time with it.

ROWELL: Will you say more about what you were viewing and reading—how, for example, radio, television and books might have helped to shape you as a writer? You mentioned seeing science fiction movies—for example, "Invasion from Mars."

BUTLER: It almost had to be defined as science fiction, if Mars was somewhere in it. Actually, it wasn't "Invasion from Mars" that mattered. It was just a movie that I described. The movie that got me writing science fiction was "Devil Girl from Mars." That was just one of the old sub-genre of science fiction movies that talked about how the people of some other world have used up all men. So this beautiful, gorgeous, Martian woman has come to Earth to get some more men. The men, of course, don't want to go to Mars, a planet full of man-hungry women; the men, they want desperately to stay here. It was a silly movie, although it wasn't as bad as I make it sound. I watched it as a kid, and it seemed a silly movie to me, so I turned it off and I began writing. My idea was, gee, I can write a better story than that. And since the story that I had seen was supposed to be science fiction, I began writing science fiction as I thought of it then, even though I didn't know much in the way of science. What I had already discovered was that I liked science documentaries, whether they were television movies or the kind of films that teachers showed at school. I was probably one of the few who really liked those films. They tended to be rather preachy and dull. But, quite often, they gave me something to think about, taught me something that I didn't know about before. I got my first notions of astronomy and geology from those little films. I guess I was interested enough in astronomy to learn more because the second book I ever bought new was a book about the stars; I bought it to learn more. I knew that what I was writing was completely imaginary because I didn't know anything about Mars or anyplace else out there in space. I wanted to know more, so that's when I went and bought the book about the stars.

ROWELL: When was that?

BUTLER: I was twelve then. Before that, I had bought a book about horses because, when I was ten, I was crazy over horses, even though I had no contact at all with them. I bought a book about the different breeds of horses, and I was writing a kind of—I guess in a way you could call it—either part of a novel or a long soap opera about a marvelous, magical wild horse. And it couldn't end because then what would I do? So I just wrote on and on and on about this marvelous, magical wild horse in number two pencil in a notebook. After a while you couldn't read most of the pages, because they were so smudged. Anyway, that was some of my early writing.

I went on writing science fiction because I enjoyed it. I enjoyed reading and hearing about science. I enjoyed finding out what was real, or at least what everybody

assumed was real then and what wasn't. I enjoyed trying to understand how the universe worked. I think if you're going to write something like science fiction, you do need that basic interest in science and not just a desire to write about spectacular things that you know nothing about. I can remember a young man who sat next to me on a bus. I like to talk to people on buses, since I write them all the time. Sometimes people are interesting. But this young man didn't make conversation, and he said, "Oh, science fiction. I've always wanted to write science fiction, about creatures from other galaxies." I said, "Why do they have to be from another galaxy?" And we talked a bit, and I realized he didn't know what a galaxy was. It was just something he had heard. And this was a young man in college. To him a galaxy and the solar system were pretty much the same thing. And I realized that there probably are people who want to write science fiction and who might be good at it, but who have the wrong idea of it. They've gotten their idea from television or movies. And they think science fiction is anything weird that they choose to write. That is not what science fiction is. If you are interested in science fiction, I hope you are also interested in science. Or you just might want to call what you're writing fantasy. Fantasy has totally different rules from those in science fiction.

ROWELL: What are some of the elements or characteristics that distinguish science fiction from fantasy and other related forms of prose fiction? Then there is also speculative writing. There are also horror stories.

BUTLER: Science fiction uses science, extrapolates from science as we know it to science as it might be to technology as it might be. A science fiction story must have internal consistency and science. Fantasy can make do with internal consistency. Speculative fiction means anything odd at all. Sounds nice though. Labels tend to be marketing devices. All too often, they mean anything, and thus nothing.

You can make an easy division—science fiction and fantasy. Obviously they both have a tendency to be fantastical, but science fiction basically uses science, and uses it accurately up to a point. It extrapolates from sciences. Fantasy goes where it likes. All that is required of fantasy is that it remains internally consistent. You can be comic the way *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* is comic. But you have to be careful about the kind of science fiction that gets to be called science fiction on television and sometimes in movies. That kind of stuff would not be considered science fiction if you were trying to publish it in a magazine or as a book with a publisher.

ROWELL: You and many other writers usually recommend to other writers that they should read if they want to become writers. You've already done so in this interview. I find myself telling developing writers the same. What do you really intend to convey to them when you tell them to read? How does the practice of reading, as you view it, contribute to a writer's development? Now, I, of course, assume you're recommending that they read the best writing.

BUTLER: Not at all.

ROWELL: I am appalled sometimes when I meet some young poets, for example, and they tell me that they've been reading certain poets who are very bad writers. Some of these young writers have never heard of the work of people like Rita Dove, Jay Wright, or Robert Hayden, for example.

BUTLER: I hope they'll read a little of everything. I am alarmed by adults who say to little children, "Oh, my God, I don't want my children reading comic books," "I don't want my children reading the Goosebumps series," or "I want them only to read enlightened literature," which bores the crap out of kids. Understandably, it wasn't written for them. I recommend anything that gets them into reading. When they're older, when they're in high school, when they're in college, even then a little junk food for the mind won't hurt, as long as that's not all they read. I can remember a science fiction writing teacher telling me most young would-be science fiction writers read too much science fiction. I didn't really understand what he meant at the time. I thought if you were going to write science fiction, you should read it, which is, of course, true. But if it's all you read, then you just wind up reproducing what someone else has done.

I have to be careful what I say to younger people, because every now and then someone will come up to me and say—"Oh, this touches on reading, but is not just reading." "What should I major in at college to become a writer?" I have to stop myself from saying that it's not so much what you major in at college or even that you go to college. It's that you read. I'm more likely to say, "What you should major in is something like history. Maybe you should take a good look at psychology and anthropology and sociology. Learn about people. Learn about different people. When I say history, I don't mean to tell you just to study the kings and queens and generals and wars. Learn how people live and learn the kinds of things that motivate people. Learn the kinds of things that we unfortunate human beings do over and over again. We don't really learn from history, because from one generation to the next we do tend to reproduce our errors. There are cycles in history. Even look into things like evolutionary biology; that goes back further, for instance, than history, further back than cultural anthropology would go. Learn all you can about the way we work, the way we tick.

Read all kinds of fiction. In school you're going to be assigned to read classics, and that's good, that's useful. A lot of it is good writing and will help you with your writing. But a lot of it is archaic good writing that won't necessarily help you with what you are doing now. So read the current best sellers; read something that is maybe going to spark a new interest in you.

I used to, and I still do this every now and then when I am between projects. I'll go to the library and do what I call "grazing," which means that I'll wander through some department in some place that I can't ever recall having been before and just browse the titles until something catches my attention. Then I'll build into something that I know nothing about. Sometimes it's something that interests me a lot. Sometimes it's something that after a few pages bores me. I was just at the library about a week ago, and I had this big load of books and tapes, audio tapes. And I said to the library clerk who checked out my books, "I'm starting a new project, and I really don't know what

I'm doing, so naturally I have to get a lot of books." If you know what you're after, a few books will do it. But if you have no idea, you've got get this big mountain of books.

I love audio tapes. I'm a bit dyslexic and I read very slowly. I've taken speed reading classes, but they don't really help. I have to read slowly enough to hear what I'm reading with my mind's ear. I find it delightful. I learn much, much more and better if I hear tapes. I can recall when I was a very little girl being read to by my mother. Even though she was doing the domestic work that I talked about, she would, during my very early years, read to me at night. And I loved it. It was, again, theater for the mind. As a matter of fact, I think anybody who has children couldn't go wrong by reading to those children at night just as the kids are falling asleep. I love the tapes now, possibly going back to that memory but also because I happen to learn things better by hearing them than I do by reading. I had book tapes and I had books, and I brought them home and started "grazing."

ROWELL: What are the books that are still important to you today that you've been reading? I mean, Octavia Butler, the writer. And what are some books that you return to, probably return to ever so often, not just merely for enjoyment, but for form or language or character development? Are there such books that you go back to from time to time?

BUTLER: There is a book that was recommended to me when I was a student; it's called *The Art of Dramatic Writing* by Lajos Egri. This is a book that I go back to when I get into writing trouble, and it helps sometimes. It's old. If you haven't read Ibsen, it might mystify you a bit. The way Egri teaches in this book has been very effective for me. I often recommend it to students. He's very clear in what he's saying. Sometimes writers writing books about writing aren't. They assume that you know perhaps more than you do, but Egri doesn't. He just tells you without being condescending; it's very basic, but it's also complex and very clear somehow. He's done a very good job in that book. As for novels that I like, they're not classics for the most part. They're novels that took me someplace that I'd never been. For instance, one of my favorite books—and I emphasize the word book here because I'm not talking about the movie—is *The Godfather*, because that book took me to another world—not necessarily a real world, but it did make good guys of some rather unpleasant people. It did take me to another world. Oh, yes, a book like *Shogun*. *Dune* is one of my favorite science fiction novels. There are just any number of favorite science fiction novels. Those are a few. I don't know what kind of list you are looking for here, but those are a few.

I love specialized dictionaries and encyclopedias—these are usually one or two volume encyclopedias. For instance, *The Oxford Companion to Medicine* is sitting here right next to my knee. It's something that I have to be careful with, because it has British spellings and some things that surprise me still. I have dozens and dozens of specialized dictionaries covering everything from geography to anthropology to psychiatry to religion. I've got a two volume set about religion in America and about ancient Egypt. You name it, and I've probably got a specialized dictionary that touches on it. I use them for more than just looking up things. If that's all they were

for, I would suppose that a regular encyclopedia would do it. To whet my appetite when I am shopping for ideas, to just find things—that's another reason I use them; it's another form of grazing. I find things that I perhaps wouldn't have thought of before and maybe wouldn't want to read a long article on. Just going through and finding something in, for instance, the American Medical Association's *Encyclopedia of Medicine* would be useful, or discovering some animal or something in my dictionary of land animals really has managed to surprise me. Or finding something in my encyclopedia on invertebrates. That one is really good for science fiction, because some of the invertebrates seem so other-worldly. It has all sorts of things. As I said, you name the subject, and I'll probably go to a specialized dictionary or encyclopedia that touches on it.

ROWELL: What do you mean when you say "shopping for ideas"? I like that.

BUTLER: When I'm "shopping for ideas," I'm just looking for something that catches my attention and that evokes or provokes an emotional response from me. For example, I have a book about animals without backbones. I also have a particular aversion to some invertebrates, really a phobia. I ran across one, a picture of one that made me drop the book. The thing is something like maybe an inch long and utterly harmless and doesn't even exist in my part of the country, I'm happy to say. It is a revolting little creature, and I'm really glad it's not bigger. I wound up using part of its appearance to create the alien characters in my Xenogenesis books, *Adulthood Rites* (1988) and *Imago* (1989). Every now and then there's something that's made a big impression. Some things make small impressions. I was wandering through a book about guns awhile back and hadn't thought about using the information I was finding at all until I wrote a book called *Clay's Ark* (1984). Then I realized I had to go back and find that book and use some of that information about guns. Again, I had to use it in *Parable of the Sower* (1993). Reading fills the well. Reading fills the well of your imagination. You can return to the well and draw the water that you've put in there. You can also think of it as a bank. You can go back and take out that intellectual money that you've put away. If you don't read and your bank account goes down to nothing, you can't really go to it to take anything out. So your writing is going to be pretty impoverished. It's going to be totally confined to things that you somehow have learned without reading, which means that you might be a one-book writer, if you're a writer at all.

ROWELL: Your formal education is for me a study in itself. That is, you graduated from Pasadena City College, a two-year college, and you attended but did not graduate from California State. But you later took creative writing classes at UCLA at different periods.

BUTLER: I took writing courses wherever I could find them. If somebody said "writing course" and "free" in the same sentence, I was probably there. Later when I was earning a little bit more money at the horrible little jobs I mentioned, I was able to go and take classes at UCLA. As a matter of fact, I sold my first novel while I was

taking the class from Theodore Sturgeon at UCLA. It was the novel I had sent away before I got into the class, of course, but I got the very, very conditional acceptance while I was taking his course. I remember it, because I took the acceptance letter to Sturgeon. Sturgeon, by the way, is a very well-known science fiction writer. He's dead now, but he was a very well-known writer. I liked his work because he was such a good craftsman. Sometimes science fiction writers were more pulp writers than they had to be because they didn't bother to learn. I'm talking about the old-time science fiction writers now, the ones who were more concerned with the wonderful machine than with the people who were supposed to be having something to do with the machine. They didn't characterize very well. Their women characters in particular were stick people, puppets, and Sturgeon, even though he was easily old enough to be my father, didn't write that way, and a few others didn't write that way. I especially paid attention to their writings. And when I had this chance to take a class from Sturgeon, I grabbed it.

This was an interesting sort of class. It taught me something about writers. By the way, I don't believe that Sturgeon ever graduated from high school. He made a comment when he was teaching the class, an extension course: he said probably America is the only country where a man who never graduated from high school can teach at college. He might have had a point. I don't think that writing is something you have to go to a university to learn, although education of any kind helps. *Writing is something that you're going to teach yourself, no matter how many classes you go to.* The classes, as I said, are audiences, and they help you to correct the obvious problems.

One of my problems, when I took my first college writing class, was that I punctuated by instinct. I had no strong idea of punctuation, and my spelling was horrible. I don't think I had ever heard the word dyslexic. I had done something about my vocabulary—this goes back to when I was twelve. I may have been younger than twelve, but back when Kennedy was running against Nixon. My family was all for Kennedy, and nobody liked Nixon. We were Californians, and we'd seen a bit too much of him. I wanted to find out more about Kennedy, because everybody seemed to like him so much. And I would tune in on television and get the news and hear Kennedy talking. I couldn't understand half of what he was saying. At twelve years old, you know, and it never occurred to me that some of this might have been deliberate. I didn't know about politicians in those days, but not understanding him devastated me really. I felt so depressed, because I realized that I was even more ignorant than I thought. I wanted to learn more words; I wanted to understand better what people were saying, especially people that I thought of as being important, you know, people who went on television and said things. That pushed me to read things that were perhaps a little bit more difficult than what I had been reading. It also pushed me into non-fiction. It made me pay more attention to English teachers who recommended things that I might not otherwise have paid any attention to. I had learned early on that often I couldn't finish a book if it was assigned for me to read. I read too slowly, so I learned to scan, but scan is the wrong word. I learned to kind of read in summary. You know, the beginning, the end, and a little bit of the middle, and I could usually fake it pretty well. My grades weren't that bad, but I started paying closer attention. I started to try to write in what I thought of as more sophisticated

English, which meant my writing became stilted and strange and just exactly what you would expect from a kid who was trying to pretend to be older than she was. I don't know whether I mentioned it, but I started sending things out, submitting things for publication when I was thirteen. So this meant that some editors were getting the most awful garbage from me, but the writing helped me to go on learning more about the way English is used.

I was working while I was going to Pasadena City College, so I took three years to get through two years of college. And the last year and the last semester was in 1968, which was very strange, because we had assassinations for midterm and finals. Very, very bad. Martin Luther King and Robert F. Kennedy. PCC had its first black lit class in 1968—its very first—and it was a night class, which was a good thing, because I was working full time then. A professor, a marvelous black woman, came over from California State at Los Angeles. I'm sorry to say that I can't remember her name at this moment; it's been awhile now since that course. But I really liked her, because she challenged us. I couldn't get through all the books, although I think I did a pretty decent job faking it. I always loved essay tests, because they allowed me to show off, and she gave all essay tests. You know, you can show off pretty well if you've read part of the book. She introduced me to writers I'd never heard of and to a literature I knew almost nothing about and to words I'd never heard before. She would deliberately use them. If we looked mystified, she would define them in context, and I could see her doing it, but I wasn't offended by it. She was that good. And I'd never had a teacher like her before. If I am ever going to say that a teacher was inspiring, she definitely was. I had a few others who were, but she was one of the last. That's why I remember her. I wish I could think of her name. That's odd because I can recall the names of all of my elementary school teachers, most of my junior high teachers, but after that they kind of blur.

ROWELL: Let's imagine that today you were commissioned to write a book on what one calls "the writing life." What would be the first thing you'd say about it? You know, a lot of people have called it solitary.

BUTLER: Well, I've already talked a lot of the reading and the writing on an everyday schedule. I've also talked about keeping a journal and taking classes. One of the most important things you must do to be a writer is that you have to find your own way. I mentioned earlier using models from published writing—that is, copying down half a dozen beginnings or transitions or endings or character descriptions or whatever. You might also look at the lives of a half dozen writers to see what they do. That doesn't mean that you'll do what any of them do, but what you'll learn from what they do is that they have felt their ways. They have found out what works for them. For instance, I get up between three or four o'clock in the morning, because that's my best writing time. I found this out by accident, because back when I used to work for other people I didn't have time to write during the day. I did physical work, mostly hard physical work, so I was too tired when I came in at night. I was also too full of other people. I found that I couldn't work very well after spending a lot of time with other people. I had to have some sleep between the time that I spent with other people and

the time that I did the writing, so I would get up early in the morning. I generally would get up around two o'clock in the morning, which was really very much too early. But I was ambitious, and I would write until I had to get ready to go to work. Then I would go off to work, and I'd be sleepy and grumpy all day. It's a good thing that my mother was a nice Baptist lady who taught me not to cuss. I learned to cuss later, but I also learned that I could put a sock in it when I had to, because I generally felt so bad while I was working that I would have been happy to cuss most people out when they said anything to me. Fortunately, I had enough control not to do that. I learned that I really liked the early morning hours before it got to be light, when I'd had some sleep and it was still dark out. That's one of the reasons I like the long nights of winter best. I think the other reason I like winter best is I live in southern California, where winter means occasional rains. I love writing while it's raining.

ROWELL: Will you allow me to enter the privacy of your writing space and stand over your shoulder while you're working and observe the process while you work? Let's say now you're creating "Bloodchild" or "The Evening and the Morning and the Night," short narratives.

BUTLER: Well, it's sort of hard to do that. It's hard because I'm not watching myself write. I realize that most of the time people would think that I wasn't working at all, because maybe I'm just sitting here. Maybe I've got some music on the radio—not so much the radio, but a tape or a CD in the stereo. For instance, when I was working on *Parable of the Sower*, I had a lot of ecological audio tapes. I can't watch television while I'm actually doing the original work. I can watch television if I have to rewrite something, but I can't watch television while doing original work, because I do tend to watch it. But I can have anything on the tape recorder or whatever, and I had tapes of Nova and other programs that I had taped—books as well—about ecological problems, because those play a big part in *Parable of the Sower*. The ecology, especially global warming, is almost a character in *Parable of the Sower*. So I had a lot of those tapes on, and you can imagine my having them on over and over again. I don't think anyone else could stand it. I've heard other writers say this, too. I don't have a family living here with me, so I'm not annoying other people. But I've heard other writers say they had to write with headphones, because they played the same piece of music or the same whatever over and over again.

This goes back to what kind of habits writers should establish. Whatever works for you, as long as it isn't physically detrimental. I mean, I don't really recommend that you go and have a drink. I don't think your writing is going to be improved by it. And, for the sake of your health, don't sit there with a cigarette; it's probably not going to help you either. Do anything that helps you. For instance, some people, like me, need to be in a certain location, at a certain time of day. Maybe they have clothes that they like to write in. I have a friend who writes in the nude. He just shuts the door and goes to it. Whatever works for you. I remember a kind of paraphrase, a quote from Maya Angelou; I don't recall the exact words, but paraphrased it kind of goes like this: if you have to hang by your feet and smear honey on your legs to get yourself writing, then do it. You know whatever works.

That goes back to how do you get into the writing life. Well, you get into the writing life by finding out what works for you and then doing it. The best way to find out is by seeing what other people do and usually rejecting it. By the way, one of ways I get ideas is to look through books of quotations. I'm bound to find in the book of quotations—the longer the better—something with which I violently disagree. Once I've done that, then I have to think about what I really think, what I really believe, and why and how to support it. It's no good to just say, "Oh, that guy's an idiot." I mean it's a matter of having actually to think about things. One of the nice things writing does for you is to make you think about things, think of other people's lives, think about what other people might believe, for instance, other people's religions, which fascinate me. Anything that isn't what you're familiar with.

One of the problems I had at school was that I was already into looking at things from a lot of points of view. This is junior high school, especially when people are incredibly rigid, because they've gone to the trouble of learning something and it's got to be the one and only true way. You remember how that goes in junior high. Even in high school you could get laughed at by possessing a different opinion or doing something that the group didn't know about and therefore didn't approve of. For me though it was always fascinating to find out what else there was—what's out there that I don't know about, what's out there that I've never even thought of. If something out there grabbed my attention to read more about, I'd go to the library and find out something else.

ROWELL: In your interview with Randall Kenan, you said that "the wall next to my desk is covered with signs and maps." Why are they there? I hope that question is not too personal.

BUTLER: That's not particularly personal. At the moment they're not there because I'm beginning something. But by the time I'm half way through this project, the wall will be covered again. I like maps. When I was writing *Parable of the Sower*, I had maps of the areas that my characters were traveling through. I went to the map store and spent a lot of money buying detailed copies of maps of different parts of California, going up to and over the Oregon border because I wasn't quite sure where my characters were going to stop. But once I realized they were going to stop in Humbolt County, which is one county south of Oregon, I got a nice big detailed map of Humbolt County, and hung it on the wall so that I would understand where they were and what kind of terrain they were in. Aside from the map, I also had vocabulary lists filled with words that I habitually misspell or words that are specific to this story that I've never used otherwise. They were reminders of what story this particular book is telling, what story this particular chapter is telling. I also had character lists. I guess you could call them cast lists. In *Parable of the Sower* I had a number of families, a fairly sizable community in the first part of the book, and in order to keep people straight I had to make lists of the families—for instance, who was in what family. Actually I never even used most of those people. They got mentioned occasionally—some of them did—but most of them never showed up on-stage except as part of a crowd. But it was necessary that I knew who they were and where they lived and how they related to my

character—what she thought of the family. This family was crazy and this family was really super-dependable. You know the kind everybody went to if they had a problem. This family was a little odd because the old lady snooped. This family was weird because there was this guy who was really kind of a snitch. If he could find something bad about you and spread it around, he'd love to do that; and when my character's parents had problems with the police, he was the one who went to them and threw suspicion in their direction, in secret of course. There were all these people who were doing all these things, and I had to know about them even if they never personally stepped on-stage. So that was up there as part of the wallpaper, you might say, and almost anything that was giving me trouble was up there. The reminder. I was not only writing in the first person but in journal form, which made it very difficult to foreshadow anything. If my character couldn't know what was coming, then I had to arrange for her not to know—but still to be the intelligent woman I was writing her as. Had she been a fool, it would have been easier. But she was not a fool. So I had to let people see what was coming without necessarily having her see it as clearly as the readers did. And she did see, to some degree, what was coming; but, when it came, it was worse then she could have foreseen. So I had notes with regard to foreshadowing future trouble, and I also had notes about religion, because she sort of forms her own religion. I had to do research; I looked into a number of different religions. I put what I discovered up there on the wall, if it at all related to the book. Sometimes it got so awful that I had to take things down because there were notes on top of notes and notes hanging from notes. It looked like a hodgepodge; it was. My office usually looks like a tornado blew through. No other room in the house looks like that, but my office seems inevitably to be a total wreck.

ROWELL: What were you trying to do in the *Patternmaster* saga?

BUTLER: I was trying to tell a good story about a strange community of people. I find myself doing that over and over again. That's not all I was trying to do. In each book, I was trying to do something a little different. But overall to gather these people and start this community that didn't work very well, if you noticed. There are people who think that they've won, so everything's fine. But they were really not very nice, the Patternists. When you get to Patternmaster, you'll see that. Really they were pretty awful. You wouldn't want to live in that society. And why were they so awful? Well, they were so awful because they had, shall we say, a bad teacher. And it didn't really occur to me until I had been working on the series for awhile that I might have been making some comment on Black America. Once the thought came to me, I realized that I probably was commenting on Black America. Then I had to ask myself how I felt about that—that I was perhaps making a comment on learning the wrong thing from one's teachers. I realized that maybe it was something that I needed to think about and maybe it was something that I needed to say, so I certainly wasn't going to stop saying it or deny having said it.

ROWELL: You, Samuel Delany, Steve Barnes, and Charles Sanders (he lives in

Canada) are our only science fiction writers. That makes you different from other African-American writers.

BUTLER: Well, there seem to be more coming around now. But they're mainly fantasy and horror writers. There is Jewelle Gomez who wrote *The Gilder Stories*, a story about a black lesbian vampire. Winston A. Howlett and Juanita Nesbitt—both black—have also written novels: *Allegience* and *The Long Hunt*. They write together. Howlett has also written with a white writer named Jean Lorrah. Tananarive Due has two novels, *The Between* and *My Soul to Keep*. HarperCollins is her publisher. Her second book is not out yet, but will be soon. There are other black science fiction writers out there. Unfortunately, they have not achieved prominence, but they're out there writing.

ROWELL: Will you talk about what it was like for you in the early days, as opposed to present times—you a black woman writing science fiction?

BUTLER: When I first started with my writing, I guess people didn't think I looked like a writer. I don't look like what people think a writer is. I have difficulty just conveying the idea that I write for a living—conveying it in person I mean. Somebody would ask, "What do you do?" And I would answer, "I'm a writer." I learned to say I write for a living, although even that didn't penetrate sometimes, and usually their comment would be, "Oh how nice. Maybe someday you'll sell something." That was bad enough, but there were also those people who, when I said I'm a writer, went on to talk about other things. Later they said, "Well, what do you do for a living?" In one case, at a party, I actually said to a woman, "Well, what did you think I meant when I said I was a writer?" She said, "I thought you were talking about your hobby." I can understand what she meant, because here in Los Angeles everybody is a writer. Everybody is going to write that wonderful book someday, or they've got that wonderful book in their bottom drawer, but the publishers are so small-minded and can't see how wonderful it is. Someday they're going to self-publish it. Actually one of the Los Angeles TV stations several years ago did a person-on-the-street interview, in which a journalist would walk up to people walking on the street, and ask, "How's your screenplay?" Nine out of ten people talked about the screenplay they either had written or were writing. In this area there are so many people who call themselves writers, and either don't write at all or who write to the bottom drawer or who are crazy. There are so many odd things going on that it is not easy to get through to people that you are a writer. After so many times of telling people that I write for a living and after hearing them tell me, maybe someday you'll sell something, I started to say, "Wait a moment. I just told you I write for a living. I did not tell you that I'm independently wealthy. I told you I write for a living." At that point, from the tone of my voice, they figured that they better change the subject.

As far as being a black science fiction writer here, my early isolation helped me. On one level, I was aware that there was only one other black science fiction writer that I knew of—and that was [Samuel] "Chip" Delany. I was aware of him because he was one of my teachers at Clarion. Before that I'd seen his work, but I didn't know he was

black. Harlan Ellison was one of my teachers with the Screen Writers Guild of America, West's free classes. As I said earlier, when anyone said free and writing classes in the same sentence, I was there. So that's how I ended up in these classes learning screen writing which I don't like at all. Harlan mentioned the Clarion science fiction writers workshop and asked me if I was interested. I think the first question I asked him after what Clarion was, was this: Are there going to be any other black people there? You see, it was going to be held in a little tiny town in the hills of Pennsylvania. He said, Chip will be there. That was the first time I knew Samuel R. Delany was black. He was the only black science fiction writer I knew about.

I remember my first science fiction convention. I went to that while I was at Clarion. A group of us was going to go down to Pittsburgh to a science fiction convention that was run annually there. It was called Phlange. I didn't know what it was about, but other students gave me the idea that it was fun, so I went along. One girl had a van, and we all piled in, 14 or 15 people in one van. That was in 1970. We went down to Phlange, and I was totally out of my element. I didn't have a clue as to what was going on. I wandered about and saw one black guy in the whole place. I walked up to him, and said, "Are you a writer?" He said, "No. Are you a writer?" I had no confidence, so I said, "No." I wasn't a published writer. We wandered off in different directions to find more important people to talk to. It wasn't a matter of anyone coming and saying you can't come in here, it's all white. It was just a matter of my not really knowing socially how to get in. I would just show up at these things, and, since nobody would throw me out, eventually I learned my way around a little bit. I never was very social; that's sort of a carryover from my childhood. Some science fiction writers are extremely social. Harlan certainly is. And then there are some of us that are practically reclusive. We barely get out of the house, and that's me more than it should be, I suppose.

Being found by other black writers was interesting, too. I was not known as a black writer, not because I was being ignored but because I have never liked the picture that was taken of me. I suppose I really look like that, and there's nothing I can do about that. I guess always I hope I'll look better or something. I've never allowed a picture on the back of any of my books. Black writers did not know I was black, but a couple of experiences helped that. I was asked by the *Washington Post* to review two books: one was Claudia Tate's *Black Women Writers at Work*, a book of interviews, and the other one was *Confirmation*, a huge anthology of black women writers edited by Amina and Amiri Baraka. After I went through the two books, I wondered why I was not in them. Then I thought, "I'm not in here because nobody knows about me." I had been in *Essence*, but apparently it hadn't reached anybody. One of the editors at Doubleday—her name is Veronica Mixon—did an article on me for *Essence* Magazine, but it didn't attract any particular attention. At any rate, I reviewed those two books. Then I went to a gathering of black writers here. I also attended a gathering of black women of the Diaspora writers at Michigan State University. I think that's when people began to realize, "Oh, she's black." There I was surrounded by other people who had maybe read my stuff, because I write with black characters. Suddenly these people discovered that I am black. So I guess that's when I began to be known. The little bit I did in *Essence* Magazine helped. Another writer, Sherley Anne Williams, did

an article about me in *Ms.* Magazine—back when *Ms.* was more commercial. I guess the more exposure I got, the more people realized, "Oh, yeah, she's black." I began hearing from people who were interested in me because I am a black writer as well as people who were interested in me because I write science fiction or because I am female.

I always try to convince my publishers that I have these three specific audiences for all my work—and occasionally another audience. For instance, I tried to push the idea that a New Age audience would be interested in *Parable of the Sower*, but I was never able to get it over with the publishers. They tend to think that you're going to appeal to one audience, and for most of my career it's been the science fiction audience. I was kind of confined there. I got another letter from another writer who asked whether she should worry about being put into this kind of category, the horror category or the science fiction category or whatever. I said, as long as your publisher doesn't put you there, it's fine. If your publisher won't advertise you to anybody but to one very small community, then you're in trouble. I know because I've been in that kind of trouble. I was in it for a long time. Some of them wouldn't advertise me at all. And none of them would send me out on tour until I got to this very small publishing company that was originally called Four Walls, Eight Windows. My editor, Dan Simon, did see that it might be possible to send me out on tour, and he did do that. No one else had. Dan's new publishing company is Seven Stories Press. Before that I had only gone out speaking when I was invited. Someone else paid for the travel because I wasn't making much money.

ROWELL: What was the response of your white readers who did not know that you are black?

BUTLER: By the time I went out on the tour that Dan sent me on, I was pretty much known, because my face had shown up quite a few places. There was a book called *Faces of Science Fiction*, and I was in that. I was also in some of the science fiction reference books—like encyclopedias or guides. I had attended conventions. So I don't think I shocked anybody in particular, except for some British people who came over here and asked if I would come and be interviewed for their television program. The man told me afterward that he hadn't heard that I was black, but he didn't seem to have a problem with it. He just didn't know. By the time I went out on tour, I was pretty much known.