

Southfield Public Library

Kindred by Octavia Butler

Discussion Questions used at SPL -- October 2012

1. Was this your first time reading this book? Have you read any of this author's works? Did you enjoy them?
2. What did you think you were in for with that prologue? Were you surprised where it took you?
3. How would you classify this book? Is it science fiction? Mystery? Fantasy? Plain old fiction?
4. What were your feelings towards Dana? Was she a likable character? How would you describe her?
5. What did you think of Kevin?
6. Did you understand their attraction to each other? Were they good for each other? There was an interesting interchange between them, p 109, about typing. What did that tell you about the two of them? Why wouldn't she type the papers? Why did he get angry when she finally refused? How did that foreshadow events farther along in the book? Would the story have been different if he were black?
7. One of the "rules" of time travel is that you shouldn't try to change history. . . yet, by stepping in and saving Rufus' life time after time, was Dana changing history? Or was that the history it was supposed to be? How much did the time travel hurt your brain?
8. Why do you think Rufus and some of the slaves accept Dana's appearing and disappearing so suddenly? Was it because it was "a simpler time"?
9. Were the portrayals of slaves in this book different from others you've read about? How so? How were they the same? Did she help break stereotypes? Did anyone resist going into those roles forced upon them? Did you see a difference between the actions of the men and women who were slaves? And between the members of the owner's family? Between Kevin and Dana?
10. What was Dana's place in the slave household? What role did she slip into? What was her attitude towards her place there?

11. "The ease. Us. The Children. . .I never realized how easily people could be trained to accept slavery." Does that statement make sense to you? Are we still being trained today?
12. One question I found on line talked about how Butler confronts us with issues of differences. . . Can you relate some examples? What was she trying to teach us? On the flip side, how did she confront us with issues of similarities? Could you find any?
13. Did Dana accomplish her hope of "civilizing" Rufus? Did she make a difference in his life and in the life of the slaves?
14. Was Rufus any better than his father?
15. What was the slaves attitude towards him? Do you agree with Dana's view that "they seemed to like him, hold him in contempt and fear him at the same time"? (p 229) Why would they feel that way?
16. Was there much difference between Dana's temporary jobs in the present and her work in the past? Was she ever valued?
17. Why was it so hard for Kevin, especially, to acclimate back to the present? How did that affect their relationship? And why do you think Kevin stayed there for 5 years, as opposed to Dana's year.
18. Who do you think had their world changed the most – Dana or Kevin – by their time in the past? Who was more naïve about the dangers? Or were they both?
19. What do you think the title means? Who were Kindred?
20. Rufus and Dana had a very complicated relationship. Why was Dana so patient with him? How did their relationship change over the years? Was Kevin jealous of it or just fearful of Dana's safety?
21. What was the relationship between Dana and Alice, her great great great great grandmother? How were they alike? Different?
22. How did Rufus' parents affect him? Did he love either of them? Did they love him?
23. How do you think the rest of Dana and Kevin's life will be? Will they stay together?
24. Were the dates of Dana's time travel significant. . . her birthday, June 9 July 4 for her last. . .

25. Why did she lose her arm? What did that represent?
26. Did you like that the book was written in the first person, through Dana's voice? Do you think it would have been better as a third person voice, overseeing all the events?
27. How would you compare attitudes towards abuse between the two times. . .Did anyone care about the wounds Dana received in the 20th century? In the 19th?
28. Another question from online. . .more of an essay question, but still interesting. . .What are the benefits of learning about our individual and our collective pasts? Is it important to know? What difference can it make in our lives today?
29. People owed each other a lot in this world - is that a good thing or a bad thing?
30. Would you read more of her books? Would you recommend this one?

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General Discussion Questions

- For the person who chose the book – What made you want to read it? What made you pick it for the book club? Did it live up to your expectations?
 - How is the book structured? First person? Third person? Flashbacks? Narrative devices? Do you think the author did a good job with it?
 - How would you describe the author’s writing style? Concise? Flowery? How is language used in this book? Read aloud a passage that really struck you. How does that passage relate to the book as a whole?
 - How effective is the author’s use of plot twists? Were you able to predict certain things before they happened? Did the author keep you guessing until the end?
 - Did the book hold your interest?
 - How important is the setting to the story? Did you feel like you were somewhere else? Did the time setting make a difference in the story? Did the author provide enough background information for you to understand the setting and time placement?
 - Which is stronger in the book – the characters or the plots?
 - Would you recommend this book to someone else? Why? And to whom?
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Kindred

Discussion questions from Reading Group Guide

http://www.readinggroupguides.com/guides_k/kindred1.asp

- 1.** Both Kevin and Dana know that they can't change history: "We're in the middle of history. We surely can't change it." (page 100); and "It's over . . . There's nothing you can do to change any of it now." (page 264). What, then, are the purposes of Dana's travels back to the antebellum South? Why must you, the reader, experience this journey with Dana?
- 2.** How would the story have been different with a third person narrator?
- 3.** Many of the characters within *Kindred* resist classification. In what ways does Dana explode the slave stereotypes of the "house-nigger, the handkerchief-head, and the female Uncle Tom" (page 145). In what ways does she transcend them?
- 4.** Despite Dana's conscious effort to refuse the 'mammy' role in the Weylin household, she finds herself caught within it: "I felt like Sarah, cautioning." (page 156), and others see her as the mammy: "You sound just like Sarah" (page 159). How, if at all, does Dana reconcile this behavior? How would you reconcile it?
- 5.** "The ease. Us, the children . . . I never realized how easily people could be trained to accept slavery." This is said by Dana to Kevin when they have returned to the present and are discussing their experience in the antebellum South. To what extent, if any, do you believe racial oppression exists today?
- 6.** How do you think Butler confronts us with issues of difference in *Kindred*? How does she challenge us to consider boundaries of black/white, master/slave, husband/wife, past/present? What other differences does she convolute? Do you think such dichotomies are flexible? Artificial? Useful?
- 7.** Compare Tom Weylin and Rufus Weylin. Is Rufus an improvement or simply an alteration of his father? Where, if any, is there evidence of Dana's influence on the young Rufus in his adult character?
- 8.** Of the slaves' attitude toward Rufus, Dana observes "Strangely, they seemed to like him, hold him in contempt, and fear him at the same time." (page 229) How is it they can feel these contradictory emotions? How would you feel toward Rufus if you were in their situation?

9. Compare Dana's 'professional' life (i.e. her work as temporary help) in the present with her life as a slave.

10. When Dana and Kevin return from the past *together*, she thinks to herself: "I felt as though I were losing my place here in my own time. Rufus's time was a sharper, stronger reality." (page 191) Why would the twentieth century seem less vivid to Dana than the past?

11. Dana loses her left arm as she emerges—for the last time in the novel—from the past. Why is this significant?

12. Kevin is stranded in the past five years, while Dana is there for almost one. Is there a reason why Butler felt Kevin needed to stay in the past so much longer? How have their experiences affected their relationship to each other and to the world around them?

13. A common trend in the time-travels of science fiction assumes that one should not tamper with the past, lest s/he disrupt the present. Butler's characters obviously ignore this theory and continue to invade each other's lives. How does this influence the movement of the narrative? How does this convolute the idea of 'cause and effect'?