

Parable of The Sower by Octavia Butler

MHC 2025 Common Read

MHC Common Reads Over the Years

The annual Common Read is designed to give students new to Mount Holyoke College their first intellectual dialogue based on a shared text. These students start to explore the selected text during Orientation and continue the discussion into their fall classes and throughout the year.

Open to the entire College community to read and discuss — staff on campus and alumnae groups across the country discuss the book, for instance — the Common Read sets the tone for the community. It helps collectively frame discussions for the upcoming academic year.

According to Dana Williams in a recent NYTimes Book Review, reviewing a new biography on Octavia Butler called *Positive Obsession* by Susana Morris, Butler was a tall, painfully shy Black woman who wrote science fiction, a genre dominated by white men, Butler was "a luminary in the genre, meaningfully attuned to the struggles of many."

Author: Octavia Butler

Butler turned to writing science fiction "When I began writing science fiction, when I began reading, heck, I wasn't in any of this stuff I read," Butler told The New York Times in a 2000 interview. "The only black people you found were occasional characters or characters who were so feeble-witted that they couldn't manage anything, anyway. I wrote myself in, since I'm me and I'm here and I'm writing."

Absence of Black Characters in Science Fiction

1947-2006 Raised in California (which is the setting of the book) into a strict Baptist family, Her dad died when she was seven. She was raised by her mom and grandmother. She received an Associates Degree from Pasadena City College in 1968, and continued her studies over the years at Cal State and UCLA.

Butler's Education

Her 1979 novel *Kindred*, still her best-selling book, told the story of a modern Black woman who meets both her ancestors and her oppressors on trips back through time to a 19th-century slave plantation.

Kindred by Octavia Butler



- Butler was the first Black woman to achieve national recognition in the science fiction genre.
- Her work, known for challenging racial and gender stereotypes, explored themes of power, inequality, and humanity.
- She won many prestigious awards, including the *MacArthur Genius Award*, when she was 48, for her writing & her vision.

Butler: An Accomplished Writer and Visionary

FUTURE

Science Fiction

Science fiction is a genre of speculative fiction that explores imaginative and futuristic concepts, often based on science and technology. It uses imagined elements like advanced technology, space travel, time travel, and extraterrestrial life to explore their potential impact on society and individuals. This genre is distinct from fantasy because science fiction typically grounds its imaginative elements in scientifically plausible or postulated laws of nature, even if the science is speculative.

- **Common themes:** Space exploration, time travel, advanced technology (like robots and cyborgs), parallel universes, and alien life.
- **Key difference from fantasy:** Science fiction is generally based on scientific principles, whereas fantasy relies on magic and supernatural elements that have no basis in science.
- **Purpose:** It often serves to comment on present-day society, ethics, and the human condition by examining the consequences of scientific and technological advancements.
- **Examples:** Classic works like Mary Shelley's [Frankenstein](#) (1818) and more modern examples like [Dune](#) by Frank Herbert or the film [2001: A Space Odyssey](#).

Distinguishing Science Fiction from Fantasy

A short, simple story that teaches a moral or spiritual lesson, using familiar everyday situations and human characters. Unlike a fable, a parable does not use animals or inanimate objects as characters, and instead, relies on relatable human scenarios to convey a deeper, often indirect message. The story is a type of comparison, inviting the reader to consider how the story applies to his or her own life.

A Parable defined

Parable of the Sower centers on a young woman living in 2024, Lauren Olamina, whose life in the dystopian world described above is eventually completely overturned, leading her to found her own religion, "Earthseed."

It is California in the mid-2020s. Years of environmental degradation and drought have made the physical landscape a source of danger and destruction; in fact, wildfires are just one of many threats to humans. A pandemic has wrecked much of the world's economy. Gun violence and drug use are at all-time highs. The political scene in a fragmented society is dominated by the rise of a populist strongman who promises to restore the nation to its former glory and "make America great again."

Published in 1993, but set in 2024, *Parable of the Sower* presciently predicted a future California ravaged by climate crisis, economic inequality that leaves the poor more vulnerable than ever and social instability made worse by a polarizing political figure who is as ruinous as he is alluring. Sound familiar?

Plot & Main Character

<https://youtu.be/6iVGuMyKFGA?si=hAbFU9TvAI5lt5Pf>

Dystopian means a society that is the opposite of a perfect utopia, characterized by being extremely unpleasant, fearful, and dehumanizing. It's often depicted as a future world with oppressive control through propaganda and surveillance, a loss of individuality, and a facade of a perfect society that hides a terrible reality.

Is this truly a **dystopian novel**? I think so, but John Greene sees some hopefulness in the ending.

Hyper-Empathy: Lauren's Sensitivity- What's the purpose?

Hyperempathy, or hyper-empathy syndrome, is a state of extreme sensitivity and responsiveness to the emotions of others, often to the point of emotional distress and self-neglect.

Notable Quotes:

Participants: Please add your own

"We all look out for one another" (76).

"This is no world to be alone in."

"It is better to teach people than to scare them" (65).

"We might be able to grow our food, grow ourselves into something new" (224)

The Earthseed Community:

Members are to learn to shape G-d with forethought, care and work; to educate and benefit their community, their families, and themselves; and to contribute to the fulfillment of Destiny. (261)

Do you fear the future will look
like Lauren's world?

Does Earthseed give you hope?

Consider the climate change, gun violence,
social & economic inequality of today...

Octavia Butler's Purpose:

“I hope people who read *Parable of the Sower* will think about where we seem to be heading—we the United States, even we the human species. Where are we going? What sort of future are we creating? Is it the kind of future you want to live in? If it isn't, what can we do to create a better future? Individually, and in groups, what can we do?” (347)

All that you touch
You Change.

All that you Change
Changes You.

The only lasting truth
Is Change.

G-d

Is Change.

Earthseed: The First Book of Living

Evaluate this book as a Common Read for MHC

Compare with past reads we have read together.
Thanks so much for being part of this discussion.

