



## One Great Book: Volume II, Episode 3 *Kindred* by Octavia Butler

[Show Notes](#)

One Great Book Volume II, Book 3: *Kindred*

[UPBEAT INTRO MUSIC]

Hey readers, I'm Anne Bogel, and you're listening to One Great Book, the short-form podcast from the team behind *What Should I Read Next*, where each week I pull one stand-out selection off my personal bookshelves and tell you all about it in ten minutes or less.

[MUSIC]

Have you ever had a book on your radar, for a long time, maybe, that you *intend* to read, but you keep putting it off, and putting it off some more? And then finally, you read it, and it blows you away, and you wish you hadn't waited so long?

That happened to me with *These Is My Words*, a book highly recommended by readers with similar taste, but I didn't read it because I didn't like the title. That happened to me with *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, because readers who loved it got so darn sentimental about the whole thing and I just didn't get it. And that happened to me most recently with Octavia Butler's *Kindred*, a book that I knew to be *important*—now *there's* a deadly word for my reading life. I don't want to read a book because it makes me feel noble, or smart, I want to read it because it's perfect for me.

When I finally picked up *Kindred* and turned to the first page I was struck by its immediacy. It begins: "I lost an arm on my last trip home. My left arm. And I lost about a year of my life and much of the comfort and security I had not valued until it was gone." Readers, I don't want you



to postpone a riveting reading experience the way I did, so consider this your invitation to read *Kindred* NOW, because it is One. Great. Book.

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Octavia Butler is remembered as a pioneer in the science fiction genre—in all of literature, really—and rightly so: she was the first prominent Black female science fiction writer, and the first science fiction writer to receive the prestigious MacArthur Foundation “genius” grant. She said she was attracted to science fiction because it was so wide open. In her own words, “I was able to do anything and there were no walls to hem you in and there was no human condition that you were stopped from examining.” She wanted to write sci fi beginning when she was 9 years old: she watched a terrible movie called *Devil Girl from Mars*, and she thought, “somebody got *paid* for writing this, and I could totally do better.”

*Kindred* begins in 1976. Dana is a modern Black woman making her living as a writer. On a June day in 1976, Dana’s 26<sup>th</sup> birthday, she and her husband Kevin are unpacking from their recent move, sorting books into one of the big bookcases. “Fiction only,” Dana tells us, because they “had so many books, [they] had to keep them in some kind of order.” Relatable.

She begins to feel dizzy, and then suddenly, “the house, the books, everything vanished.” She finds herself outdoors, kneeling on the green grass at the riverside, and in the middle of the river



a small child is drowning. Dana's never done CPR, but she'd seen it done, and now was the time to try. She saves the boy's life, in front of his now doubly-terrified mother.

That child is Rufus. He's Dana's ancestor, and he lives in the 1800s. Why Dana has been pulled back to his time soon becomes clear: if she hadn't saved her ancestor from dying, he wouldn't father a child with Alice Greenwood, and Dana wouldn't ever be born. As the chapters unfold, Dana and her husband Kevin puzzle out exactly how Rufus calls her back to early 19<sup>th</sup> century Maryland, and how she can get *back* again to 1976. (If you're thinking this element of the plot sounds a lot like Lisa Grunwald's new summer release *Time After Time*, which I shared with patrons in Bonus Episode 3, you're right.)

This time travel is critical to the story, but it isn't the *point* of the story, and Butler glosses over the mechanics of *how* she goes back. In her words, the time travel is "just a device for getting the character back to confront where she came from."

But where does Dana come from, and why does she need to confront it? When Dana is summoned back to the past, she makes some surprising discoveries about her own heritage, including that her ancestor Rufus Weylin was *white*, and a slaveholder, and that the "Alice Greenwood" whose name she *also* knows from that family Bible, was his family's slave.

As the story progresses, Dana is called back to the past with increasing frequency, and she must figure out how to survive in the face of increasingly dire circumstances. As a Black woman, with no papers, everyone assumes she's a slave—and she quickly learns that the reality of that life is more dangerous and terrifying than she ever could have imagined, based on the history books.

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And that brings us to Butler's inspiration for *Kindred*. Butler had grown frustrated with a popular narrative she says she was hearing at the time: young people, especially young men, she said,



saying that if they had been alive in the time of slavery, they wouldn't have stood for it. In Butler's words, she kept hearing "simple solutions that wouldn't work at all and would probably get them killed. Because they don't really understand how serious it is when the whole society is literally arrayed against you." She feared, centuries later, people knew the facts about slavery, but they didn't understand what it was really like—and so she set out to make the time feel emotionally real to people.

Dana knew her history, yet was unprepared to witness firsthand the horrors of what that world was like. And readers, here's your trigger warning: this book is deeply difficult to read at times, exactly because it is so good; Butler's writing is immediate, it's vivid, it is *designed* to make you uncomfortable. Like many writers, Octavia Butler posted reminders to herself in her workspace. One read: "Tell stories Filled with Facts. Make People Touch and Taste and KNOW. Make People FEEL! FEEL! FEEL!"

Through her difficult research, she realized, "I was not going to be able to come anywhere near presenting slavery as it was. I was going to have to do a somewhat cleaned-up version of slavery, or no one would be willing to read it." When *Kindred* makes you weep, remember: you're reading the sanitized version of history.

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*Kindred* is a riveting story on the page, but also functions as a powerful metaphor for our America today. I love the way Rick Riordan put it in his review: Today, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, "That heritage of slavery, exploitation and racism is an integral part of our national identity, and it is never far below the surface. It can overcome us in an instant. Like Dana, we must be constantly on guard, well-equipped and ready to be yanked out of our supposedly modern and enlightened existence to deal with the ugliest parts of our nature. We are kindred with the Americans of 1815, whether we like it or not."



In 2004, 25 years after *Kindred*'s publication Butler said, "If I had written the book now, it probably wouldn't be very different." Butler died in 2006, so we can't know if she would feel the same way today, but it's easy to see it's concurrence with today's headlines, and that's a potent reason to read it *now*, right now. You'll be wondering why you waited so long.

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In short, if you're looking for a breathtaking, breathless novel that brings history to life, a book that feels every bit as powerful today as it did the minute it was published, and that will have you kicking yourself for waiting so long to pick it up, then *Kindred* may be the next great book you're looking for.

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I'd love to hear what you think about *Kindred* on Twitter or Instagram. You can find me there @AnneBogel that's Anne with an E, B as in books, O-G-E-L. You can also find me on Instagram



@WhatShouldIReadNext. That's the title of my long form podcast, where each week a reader tells me three books they love, one book they don't, and what they're reading now, and I recommend three titles they should read next.

Thanks to Kellen Pechacek for his sound design on today's episode.

Readers, that's it for this episode, thanks so much for listening.

And as Rainer Maria Rilke said, "ah, how good it is to be among people who are reading."

Happy reading, everyone.