

Notes for Podcast: “The Book of Martha,” by Octavia Butler

Octavia Butler was a science fiction writer. When she was writing, it was rare to find an African-American science fiction writer (Samuel R. Delany is the only one I can think of) and it used to be that female science fiction writers were rare too.

In my science fiction course I often teach Butler’s *Wild Seed*, which is about an immortal African woman, Anyanwu, who is also a shapeshifter, who encounters another immortal, Doro, who can move his consciousness from one body to another, killing the one he leaves. He is trying to breed humans to have various special abilities, such as telepathy, telekinesis, teleportation, etc. The world and the characters of the novel gives her lots of ways to explore slavery, racism, sexism, and other issues we struggle with.

This story asks a timeless question. If you could do one thing that would improve the world we live in, what would it be?

And it asks another timeless question: What is the nature of God? And in doing so it explores some of the paradoxes of omniscience, timelessness, and purpose that we associate with that question.

Apparently omniscience is boring, so God doesn’t practice it anymore.

In this story, a writer, very similar to Butler herself, is suddenly faced with God, who asks her to borrow some of his/her power and “arrange it so that people will treat one another better and treat their environment more sensibly” (228). She doesn’t really have a choice. She has to do it because if she doesn’t, God points out that there are millions of people who would like to try. She could easily think of the kinds of things some people would do.

She works through various solutions with God, finding that he/she has already tried many of them. Others, she finds, would have too many unintended consequences.

The solution she chooses is interesting:

Read 236-37.

Does this sound like reading fiction? Watching movies? Playing video games? In all of these activities we might get the feeling of real accomplishment through identifying with heroes and protagonists, but not really accomplishing anything ourselves.

Martha decides to go home. Her plan will put her out of work because people will create their own fantasies in dreams. She also decides that she does not want to remember talking to God.

So, the questions.

God asks her to think about the stories in the Bible about Jonah, Job, and Noah. Why those three?

The story was published in 2003, yet climate change is one of the issues that God is concerned about. Is Butler ahead of her time?

God appears to Martha as an old man in flowing robes, as a black man, as a black woman, and finally as a woman who looks almost like Martha. God does not seem to know how he/she appears to her. What is going on?

Martha is very similar to Butler herself. Is it the second dream of a novelist to change the world with fiction?

Do you think that Martha's solution would work? If you were in her situation, what would you propose?