

The Register-Guard

Opinion

In My Opinion: Lessons from Butler's dystopia

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2020 is almost here. I have covered a variety of topics in 2019: the future of public education, water and environmental justice efforts around the world, how to face grief and fear these days, what is the meaning of justice, nationwide Black Studies initiatives, how to tap into our creativity to avoid surrendering to despair.

I close the Gregorian calendar year by encouraging us all, in these dark, cold, winter days, to return to Octavia Butler's fantastic science fiction novels. They unavoidably prompt us to reflect on what the next decade brings, and what we can imagine and create with each other if we do not let fear of change stop us.

These novels could not be a better choice for these times. In the 1990s, Butler dared to imagine our lives in the 2020s. As I revisit her novel "Parable of the Sower" with my students, we are all shocked by the fact that its representation of the future approximates our present. In "Parable of the Sower," those who can afford it live in gated communities trying to protect their own at a time when the gap between the wealthy and the poor is ever expanding. Water scarcity incites conflict, violence and war, leading to large-scale migrations from southern California to northern California and Oregon. Gun violence is a norm. People are willing to kill one another for a small amount of food, a seemingly safe refuge or just to prevent being killed themselves. Government fosters a climate of fear that implicitly sanctions individuals who use violent means to homogenize the U.S. and impose their worldviews on others.

Yes, it can be a hard read, to face all this violence. And yet my students keep asking me to keep it. It is remarkably empowering.

In the midst of it all, a young black woman decides to build community with others. They empower one another, embrace change as the only constant truth and encourage everyone to re-learn how to live in reciprocal relationships with land, water, one another and other living beings. Friendship and kinship are at the core of the book. The loving relationships and hard conversations about power and violence that Butler imagines among people of different social backgrounds remind us of our capacity to create together as the world changes around us.

The sequel "Parable of the Talents" takes us deeper into our near-future. The communal project built by the protagonist Olamina and her companions comes under attack. Her daughter must figure out how to survive another wave of violence and keep alive the spirit of what was built before her time.

I will not tell you more to not spoil it.

This December with Butler, I reflect on what kind of world I wish to sow and what talents I can offer the community around me.

I do hope that Butler opens up a pathway for your own creative imagination about how we face unavoidable change and build a better world for all, one where we honor each other, our plant and animal relatives, the land that feeds us, the water that keeps us alive, the air we breathe.

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