



Library podcast

Clarion West presents Ibi Zoboi

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[00:00:35] Hi, everybody. Hi, I'm Rashida J. Smith. I am an author and a member of the Clarion West Board of Directors when I attended Clarion West in 2005. It was for the world class instruction and craft and storyteller telling from authors and editors like Octavia Butler or Connie Willis, L. Timmel Duchamp, and Gordon Van Gelder. What I never expected and may have had an even greater impact on the course of my life was the friendships I made not only among my classmates but in the Clarion West community at large. For over 35 years, Clarion West has been offering an intensive six week workshop for emerging science fiction, fantasy and horror writers. That's over six hundred writers. In addition, our one day classes workshops at Norwest Con and The Wing Luke Museum and events like this summer reading series expand our community to include even more writers, readers and fans of the speculative fiction genre. When I moved to Seattle in 2007, part of that decision was the lure of being close to the found family of this wonderful community. Plus, once in a while I get to run into Timmi on Capitol Hill and she catches me up with the latest news from Aqueduct while we wait for the walk sign to change. Writing can be a solitary endeavor and I get by with a little help from my friends. So thank you to everyone who has made a donation to Clarion West. You help writers find the kind of community that will still sustain us throughout our careers. I would like to thank the National Endowment for the Arts, King County 4 Culture, the Amazon Literary Partnership, the Seattle Offices of Arts and Culture, the Sherman Family Foundation, Hugo House, the Central Seattle Central Library, and the University Bookstore for supporting our programs and hosting our readings. Also this year we have the following sponsors should thank for our Write-A-Thon. Our biggest fundraiser of the year Bill Speidel's Underground Tour, Dr. Thomas Bridgman, Pegasus Book Exchange. The University Bookstore. Even our fundraisers are designed to support our community in myriad ways.

[00:02:39] The Write-A-Thon is in its fourth week. Woo hoo! It's never too late to join. Gives writers a chance to set and accomplish a writing goal. Whether it's a short story or word, count on a larger project. Revisions or other goals. And with the community to cheer them on and support them through sponsorship. I just crossed the twenty thousand word mark on a sixty five thousand word goal, and I'm telling you, accountability matters. So thank you to the writers who are participating in the Write-A-Thon and to our sponsors and donors who are also part of our community. There are many worthwhile organizations to donate to right now and so many civil rights and social justice issues at stake. Books and stories are a form of resistance and social justice, and the written word has always had a profound impact on society. If you wish to donate to the Write-A-Thon, go to Clarion West dot org or you can pick up. Pick a writer. Pick up a writer or pick a writer. You can sponsor one or multiple. It's cool if you love to read. Support the writers. No donation is too small. And heck, I'll take the change you pull out of your couch cushions and your jacket pockets. Works for me. This fall, we'll be hosting Trivia Night Fund Raiser at Lagunitas Brewery on September 24th and an open mike night at Capitol Hill Cider on October 16th. Mark your calendars. Thanks again to the Central Library for hosting our reading. Just a reminder, next week, reading is at the University Bookstore. I'd like to pass the word to pass this on to the workshop administrator and our poet, Neile Graham, who'll be introducing Ibi.

[00:04:19] Applause I'm not feeling much like a poet right now as I am two poems behind on the Write-A-Thon. I met Ibi in the Clarion West class of 2001. It was my first year helping run Clarion West Summer Workshop, and I'm thrilled to see her back now as a Clarion West instructor and a successful author. I would love to claim that we are solely responsible for Ibi's successes. However, while I can say that the experience may have helped her along the first part of her journey, it's clear that talent and hard work are what brought her so many accolades caused her debut novel, American Street to be a National Book Award finalist and elicited the many, many glowing and starred reviews and awards that her work has received thus far. No one will be shocked to hear that one of Ibi's Clarion West fellow students named her most cerebral in their class. But that's not all she is. The Chicago Tribune called American Street a stunning, richly textured debut novel, and her publishers quite astutely described her second novel, Pride as smart, funny, gorgeous. Her works are important. They explore culture, power and privilege, informed by Ibi's background as a woman born in Haiti who immigrated to the U.S. as a young child and also informed by her own charming honesty, humor and heart. It is not a coincidence that Ibi shares a birthday with Octavia Butler. They got to celebrate their birthdays together. When Octavia was the first week instructor for Ibi's Clarion West class back in 2001. It was delightful to see them surprise and grow, to understand each other. So now, 18 years later, is it with much delight that I welcome Ibi Zobi, back to Clarion West, back to Seattle to read her work about Octavia Butler.

[00:06:26] Good evening, everyone. Thank you so much for being here. I am immensely honored to be back in Seattle and back at the Clarion West Science Fiction and Fantasy

Writers Workshop. And I can honestly say that, yes, Clarion has been the foundation and continues to be instrumental in my writing career, because when I was accepted here and when I was 23 years old out of college and it was either Clarion or bust, we used to say it was either full time work or Clarion Writers Workshop that summer. And I decided against full time work to spend six weeks here. And my then fiancée paid for the trip and I married him. And we're still married to this day and he's been supportive in my career. And he reminds me all the time that I need to pay him back. But the idea is that I have a career and a goal and a dream to go after. And I'm not I'm not done yet. I'm still getting started because I had told the students this week that I wrote some things that I love. But it was to get through the door and writing speculative fiction, writing fantasy and science fiction as a woman of color, as a black woman is not easy. We are considered niche. Our stories are only important when it brings up pain. But sometimes it's harder to get the stories about our magic, our innovation, our science, our technology through the door. So in that sense, I'm continuously working at it and being here just for the two days. I'm learning so much from the students I'm inspired. So teaching was not just teaching. Teaching is also learning. So this is my seventh week at Clarion West. If we're six week students, this is actually my seventh week and I'm so grateful for it. And interestingly enough, it's during the time where I'm venturing into science fiction even more. This is my debut middle grade novel, and this was actually inspired by looking into Octavia Butler's imaginative childhood. I'll tell you more about that. But I'm going to read the opening pages of My Life as an Ice Cream Sandwich.

[00:08:55] About a 12 year old girl who was very, very obsessed with all things sci fi as we all are.

[00:09:03] She loved Star Trek because of the stories her father told her. She loved Star Wars and she imagines herself the captain or a cadet on a spaceship. And when she meets the neighborhood kids in Harlem, she's spending the summer with her father. She has a hard time connecting with them. And towards the end of the story, which is not a spoiler. She realizes that early hip hop is rooted in science fiction in the same way her imagination is. So I'm just going to read the first three or four pages.

[00:09:34] My Life as an Ice Cream Sandwich because Oreo is trademarked. Chapter 1.

[00:09:44] These clouds are a concrete wall. The airplane won't push past the gray and blue to reach the endless black called outer space. So I have to take control. I press my back against the seat, push up my glasses, close my eyes and pretend the plane is aiming for the stars and planets and the very edge of our galaxy. The seat back in front of me is the control board and I press a button after button as the plane blast through the cement sky and becomes the mothership Uhura. It's star day 0 6 point 2 3 point 1 9 8 4. And now now E Grace our fleet

space cadet on a mission to rescue the great and wise captain fleet. I'm coming for you, Captain Fleet. I whispered to myself the clouds part as the Uhura achieves Earth's orbit. Then in just a few milliseconds, I calculate the hyperspace jump all the way out to Andromeda. This part sometimes makes me a bit queasy because warp speed forces time and space to squeeze my whole body. Along with this morning's breakfast rolling around in my belly into an opening smaller than the eye of a needle. I've never thrown up while on the mothership Uhura until now. Someone touches my shoulder and I blink right back into the present. Back onto this American Airlines Boeing 727 headed for New York City. Are you all right, honey?

[00:11:11] The stewardess asks. You look a little sick.

[00:11:15] I shake my head because my stomach is a whirling black hole ready to spew out long lost spacecraft and missing astronauts. The stewardess hands me a bag just in time and up comes momma's grits and cheese and ham and eggs. There is nothing more human than throwing up. Suddenly I don't feel like Space Cadet E Grace star fleet anymore. Even in this airplane, that's supposed to be something special in the air. I'm just regular old Ebony Grace Norfleet Freeman rising seventh grader from Huntsville, Alabama. There is nothing out of this world about a too stiff white shirt, ugly pleated skirt, lace trim socks and a greasy press and curl, big old glasses and a tummy that feels like volcanic explosions on the surface of Mars. I lean against a window to look out at the concrete sky so incredibly close to outer space. The white lady across the aisle thinks I don't notice her watching me out of the corner of her eye. She lights a cigarette. Maybe she thinks it will settle my stomach. I take off my glasses, place them on my lap and close my eyes again. When has the brave and powerful captain fleet ever needed saving? Never, ever. Not when the funkazoids threatened to destroy the Uhura with a single meteor. Not when the Sonic King led Captain Fleet on a wild goose chase all over planet boombox. And not even when momma made Granddaddy promise to stop filling her head with crazy stories. Just she'll be in junior high school soon. But now I'm the farthest I've ever been from Captain Fleet in my whole entire life. He has no one to help him when he faces the evil Sonic King he is all alone as I make my way to New York City.

[00:12:59] Of course, the Sonic King took the opportunity to capture the great and wise captain fleet once and for all. I whispered to myself. This is where Granddaddy stories ended before I left for a whole week in New York City. And maybe this is where they end forever since I am becoming a young lady and it is time to do away with comic books and childish stories, as Mama said before I left.

[00:13:23] But Granddaddy doesn't always keep his promises to mama. Promise me I won't be gone for too long. Granddaddy, I had told him before I left. And promise me. E. Grace Starfleet will rescue that old captain fleet from the hands of the evil Sonic King. He'd replied

Granddaddy that he may not always keep his promises to mama, but he we always keep our promises to each other. I'm coming for you, Captain Fleet. I say aloud, I don't even care if the white lady across the aisle looks at me sideways. Now, this has comic book illustrations to kind of.

[00:14:03] Represent my character's imagination, location, and this is also about the oral tradition. How her grandfather passes on the stories that he makes up for her and her his outer space stories are not based on just Star Trek. They're also based on his love of Parliament Funkadelic and Sun Ra. And this is my way of introducing young readers to Afrofuturism, not Afrofuturism, as we understand it now, but the history of Afrofuturism. Because if you know Sun Ra, Sun Ra had us put out an album called Space Jazz in 1957. And Octavia Butler was just 10 years old and the space race was just getting started. But here was this black man from the south.

[00:14:52] Thinking about space and imagining himself as a space man, as a captain of a spaceship. So this is rendered in the same way that the Star Wars scroll ending credits are. And this is granddaddy's stories to Ebony Grace. And this is why she thinks she has to go save him, because that's part of the oral mythology, the origin myth that he passes on to her.

[00:15:19] And this is me trying to be George Clinton from Parliament Funkadelic. Granddaddy's bedtime stories have always been about spaceships and aliens and planets and galaxies. Even though Mama kept saying, Pop, there's only one thing out there and it's our Heavenly Father. Granddaddy would lean in and whisper. That's the name of a spaceship. Heavenly Father. I didn't do a good job of hiding my laugh from momma that night. It was time to check up on Uhura granddaddy always started the mission with Uhura to Captain E. Grace, Starfleet, you who runs a Captain E Grace Starfleet. And I always responded. Beam me up, Captain Fleet. Then Granddaddy started his story, a brand new one filled with new words and new worlds. Star Fleet. Let me tell you about Planet Boombox. The Evil Sonic King and his funkazoids.

[00:16:24] Just yesterday, in a galaxy far, far away, a cadet and her captain zoom through the long, wide black sky in the funkier mothership on this side of creation. Mother, Uhura The mother ship parted the black sky like Moses, his Red Sea. You ever seen a thing so black in your life make you feel like you belong to it, that you come straight from it like it's your own momma's belly? That's the source of all things Starfleet. The long, wide black sky. It belongs to you and you belong to it. Those same stars are what make up your bones, your pearly whites and that twinkle in your eye at night. So music pumped throughout all the mothership. Good music, soul music, funk music. Until mother Uhura got swallowed up by a big old wormhole and the cadet and her captain went spinning like a vinyl record on a turntable. Round and

round and round the wormhole turned that mother out. The cadet and her captain ended up way on the other side of a whole new galaxy, and they stumbled onto a new planet that bounced and dipped and spinned and flipped and landed in a James Brown split ha!

[00:17:48] Have you ever seen a planet that boogies on down a whole world that booms and bits and baps and clicks and rat a tat tats?

[00:17:59] And standing right there on top of it all at the very tip of a radio tower, like a long, lean antenna, was the Sonic King with his stereo speaker ears and radio tower crown.

[00:18:11] If boom bip bap click and rat a tat tat were aliens, they'd be amplified, magnified, sanctified and funkdefied. Ha! Now let me hear you say funky. Now, let me hear you say funky, so the funkazoids gathered around the Sonic King as his royal court and at the end of the Sonic King's giant golden scepter was the loudest, the baddest. The mind control is sonic boom in the entire galaxy. The sonic boom will seal your doom with only a flick of his wrist. The giant wave and bubble full of booms and bips and baps and rat a tat tat will tear the roof off the mother. So cover your ears and seal your mind before the sonic boom makes you shake your behind.

[00:19:02] Hopefully you'll see the illustrations. This is the origin story for early hip hop. According to Granddaddy and I'll stop it right here. Now, this is a work of progress. Work in progress. This publishes My Life as an Ice Cream Sandwich, publishes in or is released in August on August twenty seventh next month, Star Child hopefully comes out next year. But it is a very hard work in progress. I am looking into Octavia Butler's life and I've been researching at the Huntington Library in California where her papers are housed, and this is a biography told in verse and non-fiction is nonfiction, but it's poetry and nonfiction and this is the first time I'm sharing it with the public.

[00:20:07] I'm the kind of person who looks for now. Oh, the title is Star Child. How Octavia Estelle Butler Jumped at the Moon. And this is a biography for young readers. I'm the kind of person who looks for a complex way to say something. Poetry simplifies it. When I started to write poetry, I was forced to pay attention.

[00:20:30] Word by word, line by line. Octavia Estelle Butler. Star dust.

[00:20:39] What if all babies in the entire universe came from sparkling star dust like a quiet storm of tiny shimmering flakes, babies would settle on the tree, leaves on the rooftops, on the windshields, on the shiny work shoes, and may be glide through open windows to settle on hardwood floors. Maybe on June 22nd, 1947, there was a storm of star dust. And this was how Laurice Butler, a shoeshine man, and Octavia M. Butler, a maid, gave birth to a baby girl named Octavia Estelle Butler.

[00:21:23] Daughter of star dust.

[00:21:27] We are dust Laurice. The clouds that rise up from the stiff black leather shoes is like us. We are dust. Octavia The clouds that rise up from the cool, hard wooden floors is like us clinging persistent. We are beaten with swabs of pure white cotton. Remember the ones your mother's mothers and your fathers fathers held in their hands while the round sun beat against their sweaty backs backs rubbed and scrubbed, scuffed and scooped quick before the dust settles again. Or else the harsh words will fly into the air, morphing into spittle, crashing into dust, and all will be as it was in the beginning, like rhythm. The shush and swoosh brush rub scrubbed, scuffed and scooped the clinging of coins in a metal bucket for the newly shined shoes. Is the music to our dust Laurice? The pitter patter of baby feet on newly shined floors is the dance to our dust. Octavia make leather shine. We don't want to cling to shoes invisible except when they look down. Make the wood clean, Octavia. We don't want to cling to floors invisible except when they look down. Swiss swish free us from this work. Let us rise up into the wide empty air and when the rhythm ends, we will land where we please.

[00:23:10] Octavia Estelle Butler's father, Laurice Butler, worked as a shoeshine man. Her mother, Octavia M. Guy Butler, worked as a maid and she was born in Louisiana in 1914 and lived on a sugar cane plantation before migrating to Southern California with her mother and siblings.

[00:23:34] Shoeshine man.

[00:23:37] Laurice Butler was not a soldier, but he heard the booms and pows and bangs as the shoes and boots marched and stomped and shuffled towards the tall chair and the small stool and with the swish swish of his white cotton fabric. He waged war against the dust.

[00:24:03] Zeitgeist.

[00:24:05] Is a German word, meaning spirit of the times. Octavia Estelle Butler, born in June. On June 22nd, 1947, two years after the end of World War Two. Some of the major events during the war were the bombings of Pearl Harbor off the coast of Oahu, Hawaii in 1940, 41, and the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In August of 1945, two years before Octavia Butler was born on July of nineteen forty seven. While Octavia was just a few days old, an unidentified flying object UFO crashed in Roswell, New Mexico.

[00:24:53] Zeitgeist.

[00:24:56] Hiroshima, Nagasaki. Baby boom, baby boom. War parade. Hand grenade. Toy soldier. Army Brigade.

[00:25:03] Left. Left. Left. Right. Left. Brooklyn Dodgers.

[00:25:08] Pearl Harbor. Baby Boom. Baby Boom. Israel. United Nations. Federal Bureau of Investigation.

[00:25:15] Left. Left. Left. Right. Left.

[00:25:19] Nuclear Spectacular. Baby Boom. Baby Boom. World War. Cold War. Indo. Pakistani War.

[00:25:26] Left. Left. Left. Right. Left. Jackie.

[00:25:31] Jackie. Zora. Satchmo. Baby boom. Baby Boom. W E.B. Booker t. New Negro philosophy.

[00:25:39] Left. Left. Left. Right. Left.

[00:25:43] Lynch Mob. Atomic Bomb. Baby boom. Baby Boom. Hollywood UFO. Roswell, New Mexico.

[00:25:50] Left. Left. Left. Right. Left. Pakistan. Palestine.

[00:25:56] Baby boom. Baby boom.

[00:25:58] Communism. Pacifism. Racism. Nationalism. Left.

[00:26:03] Left. Left. Right, left.

[00:26:06] Movie Stars. Life on Mars. Baby Boom. Baby Boom.

[00:26:10] Harry Truman. Alien Civil Rights for every man. Left.

[00:26:15] Left, left. Right. Left.

[00:26:19] From 1942 to 1946, the top secret Manhattan Project took place in a number of U.S. cities, including Los Alamos, New Mexico, where scientists experimented with nuclear weapons. World War 2 ended in 1945 when the Germans surrendered and the United Nations was founded in 1948, when Octavia was just a year old, astronomers and physicists formulated the Big Bang Theory explaining the scientific origins of the universe. The Brooklyn Dodgers, a Major League Baseball team, signed its very first African-American player, Jackie Robinson, who also went to the same high school as Octavia. Years before he attended. Although the Harlem Renaissance had reached its peak in the mid 1930s, many of its art forms and philosophy still lingered throughout the 1940s. Writers like Zora Neale Hurston and Langston Hughes were published and musicians like Louis Armstrong. Armstrong Satchmo were popular while Octavia was still a baby. However, racism and violence against African-Americans still prevailed in the South and in other parts of the country as the beginnings of the civil rights movements began to develop. President Harry S. Truman, who served from 1945 to 1953 and was a civil rights advocate, signed an executive order in 1948 to end racial segregation in the armed forces after soldiers returned from the war. Lots of babies were conceived, born and created what was called a baby boom. 1947, World War 2 was over and the world was like a scraped knee, a bruised chin, a sore elbow after falling from a bike ride down a steep hill. Or maybe it was like after a playground fight. When all the kids gather and pick sides and root for their favorites. But then the teachers and the principals marched through with their angry faces and their loud voices and their pointing fingers, and the students walked back with their heads held down in shame to their math and science and history. Looking behind them and above them.

[00:28:57] Watching their enemies. I'm going to skip to Octavia's teenhood or childhood. Oh, I'll pay homage to the place that she was born in Pasadena, California.

[00:29:14] Pasadena is where mud and soiled hands meet in the earth, digging for gold and footprints of the Hahamog'na and the Tongva. Trace the journeys of the ancients across this sacred land. Pasadena is where the outstretched skies hold the weight of stifled tears for Hollywood, dreams deferred. And the clouds linger, provoke and mock out thirst. What mock our thirst for quenching rain. Pasadena is where the laughing devil rafts through the turbulent waters of Arroyo Seco, blocking the gates to the City of Angels, where winged dreams glide along gusting Santa Ana winds is where the lust for fortune and fame is the magic pull to our orbit around this blazing sun God to whom we bow our heads and pray. Is where the black touches the white spilling over drop by drop, luggage by luggage, shoe by worn out, walked out and over and under miles of unpaved dirt road and within the steamy bellies of iron horses. Back breaking migration across state borders shoe. Octavia was born and raised in Pasadena, California, in a racially mixed neighborhood. Although segregation existed in other parts of the country, Pasadena did not have any of the Jim Crow laws that were so prevalent in the South. At the time, there were no whites only or colored only signs. Octavia never attended a racially segregated school. The Hahamog'na and the Tongva were the original inhabitants of the area around what is now Pasadena. The Arroyo Seco River runs through Pasadena and a rock formation along the shores of the river was named Devil's Gate because of its resemblance to a devil's profile. The dam was built in the Arroyo Seco River in 1920 and was given the same name. Many of the African-Americans who lived in Pasadena in the 1930s and 1940s moved there during the Great Migration, mostly from Louisiana and Texas. Octavius family was from southern Louisiana.

[00:31:44] Bible stories.

[00:31:47] Octavia was urged to read the Bible every day as a child. The Bible informed her love of stories and fueled her curiosity about the world. Octavia had lots of questions about the stories in the Bible, and she read them mostly as entertainment. She considered them to be suspenseful storytelling.

[00:32:09] What if.

[00:32:11] A simple utterance created the universe. Was it a quiet whisper weighed down by a water balloon and from a tiny opening pricked by a needle, released a single drop that would

become our sun? Or was it the shushing of a teacher to her garden of fledgling galaxies to bring them to order for circle time and a dizzying ring game called Solar System? Or was it an angry shout, a guttural wail that gave way to a catastrophic explosion where a man named Adam and a woman named Eve surfed along the blazing firestorms to land that the shores of a sleepy beach town called Eden? Or was it a deep grieving moan that lasted for seven whole days? And with each trip teardrop and on each day came the heavens, the earth, man, woman, plants and animals was God. A strict teacher or an angry father, or a dotting granddad. Our very existence rested on what was lodged deep in the back of his throat.

[00:33:27] He should have been a writer. We would have been stick figures dancing along the chiseled edges of the red cave walls in Mars.

[00:33:39] Octavia.

[00:33:41] Had a moment with a dog named Baba, and she describes this as a moment where she understood humanity.

[00:33:50] And it's is a part of her childhood that she references a lot of times in her interviews.

[00:33:57] And this was when she was 2 or 3 years old. Windows.

[00:34:03] She sees you down there on all fours. You can watch the world pass you by how they must take you for a fool, silly dog as you lay there, panting, sleeping, eating, watching them.

[00:34:18] You are not like the others. How they see her with blank eyes, how they look past her as if she is nothing more than a shadow. Same breath. Let her see into those dark round spaces like mirrors. They reflect back. This star dust particle that you are hidden behind those clear watery window eyes is a world where your thoughts may be our enemies. How you must wish your words to be shaped into sound. What would be your first request? Would you make us crawl and beg for our food with just one yelp? Would you keep us caged and seek vended vengeance? When will you forgive her? Your friend dog shadow and girl shadow. Eye to eye. Window to window. Mirroring parallel universes down there on all fours. You can watch the world pass you by how they must must take you for fools.

[00:35:33] I'm skipping around Octavia Butler carried around a pink notebook as a child. And there she started to write her first story about magical horses. And she did so at the age of 10. And it was about 50 to 80 loose leaf pages stuck together.

[00:35:54] And I got to see that actual book. And it's housed at the Huntington Library. I have pictures of it at the age of 10. She was writing about the intricate. Emotional relationships of horses and they had names and family ties and emotions.

[00:36:18] And she was a lonely child. And this is one of those poems that I called Rogue Planet.

[00:36:24] Shyness is like an undiscovered planet out there by her lonesome in all her brilliance. Miracles are hidden behind the tall walls of loneliness, where volcanoes erupt and spew hot red lava with no microscopic organism to chase away. No spontaneous reproductions giving birth to intelligence because thought has not found a listening ear or a questioning reader. But the brightest stars blur the vision and require sunglasses with their eyes cast down, kicking pebbles and biting nails and mother muttering deep, profound wisdom beneath quiet breaths. Why, while all the world is hushed to a deafening deafening silence, waiting for shyness and loneliness to save us all from this crowded, noisy chaos called the Big Bang.

[00:37:28] Now, a lot of this work is me contextualizing Octavia's imagination. She who was she described herself as a pessimist. But in order to understand that worldview, you'd have to understand the world that she came grew up in. And this is was this world was simultaneously the civil rights movement and the space race. And there was a New York Times article that came out just this week about how the space race failed African-Americans during the civil rights movement. While there was a lot of money going into trying to get the first man on the moon, a lot of resources were taken out of the poorest communities in our country.

[00:38:15] So I like to play around with this word or this phrase, space race. And this is these are all the things that Octavia was thinking about and writing about. And it's evident in her journals. And I have seen when she's written about her frustrations with, let's say, the civil rights movement. There is an entry where she wrote about Dr. Martin Luther King's murder. And it was, you know, you have a diary entry for that day. She was frustrated with how the Black Panthers were moving and she was frustrated with the world in general.

[00:38:51] And she had some real fears about alien invasion because that was part of the zeitgeist of the time.

[00:38:59] So here's. This is my second to last one. This is one poem called Space Race, but they're two poems that go down simultaneously.

[00:39:09] If you could visualize it space.

[00:39:13] Bombs in the sky. If only we could build wide and tall metal walls around this piece so they cannot reach over or down or up or around and steal our freedom bombs in the sky. Even the very ocean waters can turn on us with their submarines floating up to the surface like whales, like blood thirsty sharks inching toward our shores, hanging there like strange fruit and taking a giant bite out of our hard won precious land. Bombs in the sky, the firestorms would swallow our children whole and our future would wither away like ashes covering our homes, the ones built by our forefathers and our reverent flag with its stars and stripes sewn together by our foremothers would be tainted with soot bombs in the sky.

[00:40:13] We are trapped by the heavens. We've been saved by the heavens, the oceans, the mountains and valleys. If only the torpedoes would change course and aim for the stars or Mars, and we would know for sure that there'd be a hiding place or a new home beyond the clouds. That would be our ultimate impenetrable bomb shelter shielding us from each other.

[00:40:43] Bombs on the ground.

[00:40:46] If only we could build wide and tall metal walls between us and them so they cannot reach over or down or up or around and disturb our freedom. Bombs on the ground, even the very trees in our backyard threaten to gather their limbs and wage war against our bodies, the oceans, the mountains like wilted leaves falling on our hard worked precious land bombs on the ground. The fires storms have swallowed our children whole, and our future withers away into ashes covering our churches, the ones built by our forefathers and our reverent quilts with its patch works of maps and secrets sewn together by our foremothers would be tainted with soot. Bombs on the ground. If only Jim Crow would have a change of heart and stand beside us on our marches, braving hoses and dogs, and we would know for sure that there'd be a safe place in our homes, in our skin that would be our ultimate impenetrable bomb shelter shielding us from each other.

[00:42:15] Now, this is the last one, and this is my homage to science fiction, mainly because Octavia read science fiction as a child by the time she was 12. Octavia developed a love for science fiction magazines. She mostly purchased used magazines, but when she could afford them, she bought some of the more popular or well-known magazines at the time. Most of them had otherworldly illustrations of planets, aliens and spaceships, and their titles and subtitles were just as otherworldly and outrageous. The content in the stories reflected America's fear of the spread of communism, which was known as the Second Red Scare. Alien invasions were symbolic of the fear of a Russian invasion. Science fiction magazines captured American paranoia in the form of exaggerated, fear inducing tall tales. Octavia was fascinated by stories about telepathy and Mars and when she discovered a story she loved. She followed the author's work and tried to read everything they wrote. All the authors were white men, but Octavia was so fascinated by science fiction that she imagined herself a little black girl as the hero in all these stories.

[00:43:36] Amazing stories.

[00:43:40] Read all about it. Today's fiction is tomorrow's science. A spacecraft crashes into Venus and the debris falls into the Mississippi River. President Eisenhower attends a top secret conference at an undisclosed location with green men from Mars, Green men from Mars. Sources tell us that our government is trying to negotiate with those outsiders so they don't make us all into slaves. Slaves. Read all about it today. Science is tomorrow's fiction. Brave men battle machines in outer space. Aliens stretch their slimy tentacles around our moon and our block our sun with their gigantic one eyed heads. And we all will be left in the dark forever for ever. Read all about it. Today's fiction is tomorrow's fact. A mutant race of telepathic human plans to take over the government and control our minds. Control our minds. Look around. Some of them are in our police departments, the armed forces, and even in the school systems teaching our children. We've got to take them out one by one. Question your neighbors. Be wary of strangers and lock your doors. Lock your doors. Read all about it today. Science is tomorrow's doom. A giant 30 foot tarantula has been spotted scaling the sides of the Empire State Building. Radioactive man sized cockroaches crawl out of the New York City sewer system. An angry 50 foot woman ravages through a golf course and attacks a group of well respected businessmen, well respected businessman. Read all about it. An unusual tale by Isaac Asimov. A Brand New Story by Arthur C. Clarke. Interview with the Great Robert. A Highland exclusive profile of John W. Campbell. Ray Bradbury returns with an amazing story. Readers Letters Answered by Frank Herbert Philip K. Dick's Mystery Spaceship, The Intriguing Mind of Theodore Sturgeon. Read all about these amazing and startling stories in Outstanding and it's in us astounding science fiction for just 35 cents.

[00:46:04] Be mesmerized by these weird tales, planet stories and thrilling stories, transport to a whole other galaxy and other worlds with fantasy and science fiction. The end. That's a little bit. Thank you.

[00:46:25] As we have a few minutes for questions. Yes. Hi.

[00:46:34] How have the access to Octavia Butler's journeys journals changed or informed my work? Well, this book came out of that. I needed to write about a quirky, lonely child with a huge imagination.

[00:46:50] And I didn't get a lot from her writing about her childhood. But I got the gist. That boy, she had a mind at some point, you know, in her career she got the MacArthur Genius Award.

[00:47:04] And the Genius Award is aptly named for geniuses. And you can tell just by what she was thinking about as a child that she was not like everyone else at all. And I wondered how she made friends when she was a child. What kind of small talk did she have or did she have small talk at all? And you could just tell by at that the age of 10, you know, that the world is on fire. Right.

[00:47:32] But here's this little black girl in Pasadena, California, writing about magical horses. And I have a poem in here called Devil Girl from Mars. And she names that movie as a movie that inspired her to write her own science fiction. And and I'm also writing about the Red Scare. I'm also writing about the Red Planet and this idea of Martians. And she was thinking about all those things. And I needed to write about a little girl who finds science fiction, who loves science fiction, who wants to go to outer space.

[00:48:08] But the people around her are just not into that. And it kind of it really, really forced me to just be not forced, but inspired me to be way more imaginative and take more creative risks in my work, because it took a while for people to recognize her for who she who she is. And she has a whole she has fan pages. You know, there's so many things happening in her name. But this wasn't happening when she first started writing.

[00:48:40] Thank you for that question. Yeah, hi less.

[00:48:45] So I don't know if she struggled with the space race. This is I'm painting a picture of her life and this biographical approach is contextualizing her life with American history. I don't think we are creating in isolation at all. So for her, too, she watched Devil Girls from Mars because there was an atmosphere of being afraid of women and Martians and invasion because Devil Girls from Mars is like a tall she's a tall woman from Mars. She wears black leather. Right. And she comes to Scotland. And just like, you know, finds men. And she's like, you. Men come with me. Right. But that's not written from the perspective of a woman. That was respect written from the perspective of a man. And she's kind of this Amazonian figure. So in that sense, Octavia Butler saw it and was like, what the heck is this? But she saw that movie because it was created because it was a response to the thinking and the ideas of that time. So I'm putting that in context. There was a space race. There was the Red Scare and communism. And there was this idea of alien invasion, that invasion that was so pervasive in our psyche. Thank you for that question. Let's see you have a question.

[00:50:11] Yes.

[00:50:13] She drew pictures of horses when she was 10 years old.

[00:50:18] This is in her adult life. No, I don't. I.

[00:50:21] I'm looking into her like 18 college because her work as a writer, I'm focusing on children and I'm fascinated by her imagination and the foundations of that. So for me to do her whole life, there's not much there because she was cerebral. She was it was in her creative mind. But there's a lot of intellectual fodder there for her childhood.

[00:50:52] Thank you.

[00:50:53] And you got to look at it. It's it's a draft.

[00:50:57] Any other questions? Yes, hi.

[00:51:01] My next young adult novel is called Nigeria Jones, and it's the name of a character, and I'm playing on this idea that this is an African-American girl whose father is a radical, the

leader of a radical separatist movement. And I was just told telling a one of the Clarion West students that it's some I'm borrowing from Tara Westover's Educated.

[00:51:26] If you've read that recently, this idea of people who kind of want to, you know, pull away from society for a number of reasons, and that idea is coming from parable of the sower and parable of the talent. But there is a 16 year old girl who just wants to live a normal life. But something about the school that she's going to pulls her back. She's summoned to the region of West Africa to inhabit the body of her ancestor who's on the brink of being sold into slavery.

[00:52:00] So you have the Parable series, Kindred and Wild Seed in one. And the Wild Seed idea is body hopping.

[00:52:08] So as you can see, you like my my next books are more speculative, more and more speculative in nature. So, yes, that was definitely inspired by Octavia Butler's ideas. And I was telling someone earlier, Kindred is still taught in high school, but there hasn't been any updated version of this idea of travelling back in time to deal with some of the traumas that our ancestors have dealt with. And these are these are ideas that I get from reading speculative fiction.

[00:52:38] Thank you. Yes, hi.

[00:52:42] Yeah, I studied with her. I had met her before I came the Clarion.

[00:52:47] It's funny story. She was doing a reading at a bookstore in Brooklyn. And I kind of because I was such a fan, I hung around. Toward the end, you know, I hung around until everybody left. And she was there with her editor, I think, or a friend. And she was, you know, and I was just like, doo doo doo doo doo. You know, like pretending to look around. And I noticed that she was like they were calling a cab for her. And I had a car. And I quickly got into my car and drove around to the front of the bookstore while they were waiting for a cab.

[00:53:19] And I was like, oh, Epps to need a ride? And she's like, yeah, you know, she's like, but she's going to Manhattan. She has to go back to her hotel. I'm like, I'm going that way. I was not going that way. So I just needed I just needed her mind, like really close to my like

[00:53:37] Well, like, whatever that wisdom is to rub off on me. So there. I had Octavia Butler in the passenger seat of my car and her editor in the back seat.

[00:53:48] And I was just like, you know.

[00:53:53] And she was cracking jokes the whole time.

[00:53:56] I don't remember what she was saying, but she was just telling stories the whole time. And that was the year that was right before I applied for Clarion West. And then when I came, she had remembered that moment.

[00:54:11] That's me being a nerdy fan at like 22.

[00:54:16] And yes, hi. Thank you. Thank you for that.

[00:54:20] Just speaking into the idea of being somebody who's interested in speculative fiction, but starting off with contemporary in my writing career. And I shared that with my Clarion students. I needed to get in through the door. I needed to make a living. And it was I had to pare I wanted to pare down now that I wanted. I felt pressure to pare down some of the speculative elements in my story in order to tell a compelling story or a more commercial story. I have a Pride and Prejudice retelling that is a little bit off brand for me. I love telling the story. But at the same time, it was I needed to write something very quickly and get it out the door so I could focus on my passions. There's a very real thing about the writing business, the publishing business where most people don't get into it for money. But if I'm going to spend a lot of time with them on a book, writing it and revising it and working a full time job and raising three children, I don't think I would have been this far. Writing speculative fiction. Some of the well-known authors that you may know, Nalo Hopkinson or Nnedi Okorafor

[00:55:42] N.K. Jemison. Many of them held full time jobs while writing. And Nora doesn't have any children. And Nnedi has one child. I have three children and I had to make some artistic choices in order to make a living from writing. And this was very important for Octavia as well, because she had a lot of journey. Journal entries where she was thinking about how many stories she would have to sell within a month in order to make rent. She was thinking about what money she would want to be paid. Be making by a certain time if she wrote a certain amount of stories. She I saw a journal entry where she wasn't aspiring to be like another black woman writer. She named three white male authors as her goals. Right. And Stephen King

was one of them. And so she had those huge aspirations in one of the things that she was thinking about is money, not wanting to work these mundane jobs and make a living off her writing. And that's a very real thing.

[00:56:59] Thank you. I think we could stop now or one more question. Yes.

[00:57:06] Now, there there was some things online that was listing. Octavia Butler as a lesbian writer, as a queer writer, and I personally did not see anything.


[00:57:18] And there is there. I think one or two friends who have outwardly said online that she never came out or she never described herself as being queer. But in one of her journal entries, not but not. But in it's true, she never came out. You know, there were other women coming out at the time.

[00:57:39] Audre Lorde was a gay poet, and there were there were others.

[00:57:46] And considering the type of work that she was writing. You know, I don't see any reason why she would not come out at the same time. I took a picture of it.

[00:57:55] It's documented that she wrote to herself that one of her goals was to marry. And as a second line, she said, a man or woman. That's the only indication that there is that maybe she was, you know, thinking of progressive ideas. But that does not mean that she came out as a queer woman. And I'm careful about that because of how she looks and how she presented as a tall black woman, dark skinned black woman. People would assume that she's not feminine or she did not. She's asexual or, you know, there's all these ideas that would she would others would attribute to her because of how she looked. And one of the things that I noticed that she was concerned about as being thought as having a low IQ. She didn't like to use the word stupid or dumb. She just didn't like when people assume that she had a low IQ. So this idea of an IQ was a, you know, was a thing back then. So she that was one thing that was like clear and repetitive that they think these were doing these mundane jobs, whoever in the service jobs or her co-workers would assume that she's dumb. Meanwhile, she's at home creating these brilliant worlds. So that was one thing that was not surprising, but just informative.

[00:59:27] Thank you, everyone. Thank you so much.



[00:59:37] This podcast was presented by the Seattle Public Library and Foundation and made possible by your contributions to the Seattle Public Library Foundation. Thanks for listening.

