"Devil Girl From Mars":
Why I Write Science Fiction

by Octavia Butler

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[Butler delivered these remarks at MIT on February 19, 1998 as the introduction to a discussion about science fiction and modern culture. A transcript of that conversation is also available. Butler is the author of Kindred, Bloodchild and Other Stories, Parable of the Sower, and Dawn.]

Since "The Media in Transition" is the title of what this is all about, I'm going to talk a little bit about the effects of the media on me and on my work. It's impossible to begin to talk about myself and the media without going back to how I wound up writing science fiction and that is by watching a terrible movie. (Laughter) The movie was called, "Devil Girl from Mars," and I saw it when I was about 12 years old, and it changed my life. (Laughter) It was one of those old 1950s movies in which the beautiful Martian woman arrives on earth to announce that all the Martian men have died off and there are a bunch of man-hungry women up there. And the earth-men don't want to go. As I was watching this film, I had a series of revelations. The first was that "Geez, I can write a better story than that." And then I thought, "Gee, anybody can write a better story than that." (Laughter/Applause) And my third thought was the clincher: "Somebody got paid for writing that awful story." (Applause) So I was off and writing, and a year later I was busy submitting terrible pieces of fiction to innocent magazines.

Another thing that got me going, really, was that the media pushed very hard in directions that I could be reached in, the space race. I was very lucky to be born just in time for the space race to build public support for education. All of a sudden there was plenty of money for education. All of a sudden there were plenty of supplies, for instance, for science education. I was speaking at a university last year--I think it was University of California--and a young woman said that she was going to be a science teacher. She was already teaching, actually, and they had one microscope for the whole science class. And I can remember being in a science class where everybody had a microscope, and it was because the Russians were coming. And we had to do something about it. We had to prepare this generation coming up to do something about those evil Russians. Sometimes, I guess, good things happen for bad reasons, but the good thing really was that I found
out a lot about science that I might not otherwise have found out about.

There were plenty of films--I don't mean science fiction, but the kinds of films they used to show in school--and they were available all of a sudden to make me aware of worlds that I might not otherwise have been aware of. And we had heroes who were astronauts; you know, all these guys who were flying through space and it was OK. It wasn't stupid or crazy or that science-fiction garbage because prior to this, there had been the idea that comic books and science fiction could rot your brains.

Anyway, all of a sudden science fiction was OK. And, I wrote and wrote and sent things out and collected rejection slips until I realized that collecting rejection slips was masochistic. And I took the drawer and threw them all out. And then when I was 23 and attending Clarion Science Fiction Writers Workshop, I wrote a story called, "Child Finder." In "Child Finder," I had a lot of telepaths fighting like crazy with one another. If you wonder where this story is and why you haven't seen it, this is a kind of lesson in writing that I got early. This story was never published. It was paid for but the anthology was never published.

Anyway, this was about a bunch of telepaths who were fighting because they knew one another far too well. They were fighting because they understood each other. You know, we always feel that if we could just understand each other, we'd be fine. But the problem here was they couldn't conceal their disagreements and animosities and contempt, and they were killing each other.

Years later I wrote a story called, "Speech Sounds," in which everyone on earth was suddenly afflicted by something like a small, very specific stroke. Everyone acquired some kind of communications deficit: They couldn't read or write or whatever. And they had to deal with it, and a lot of them died, of course. A lot of them were no longer able to function. A lot of them no longer wanted to function. And I look at these two stories as the borders of where humanity is. Most of us communicate pretty well and, in fact, our methods of communication have improved dramatically. All of a sudden, we can know what's going on on the other side of the world in no time; we have all sorts of wonderful ways of finding things out. We have not only the Internet but the usual broadcast media. We have cable, newspapers, magazines--all hot on the trail of something or other. For an example, all hot on the trail of the Monica Lewinsky story, which means they're all hot on the trail of gossip, innuendo, and hypothesis. I mean, they're all hot on the trail of, what? I think of it as kind of media GIGO, garbage in, garbage out. This made me think that our media is in transition. But does it matter?
(Laughter/Applause) Have we already reached the point of diminishing returns?

I have a verse here that I want to read to you from my novel, *Parable of the Talents*, which I'm just finishing. I should be at home finishing it right now. And the Monica Lewinsky story is why I brought this verse. Here it is:

Beware! All too often, we say what we hear others say. We see what we are permitted to see. Much worse, we see what we're told that we see. Repetition and pride are the keys to this. To hear or to see even an obvious lie again and again and again, is to say it, almost by reflex, and then to defend it because we have said it, and to embrace what we've defended. Thus without thought or intent, we make mere echoes of ourselves and we say what we hear others say.

Now, that's pretty basic stuff. But sadly true. And probably has been true since there have been people. It is so very easy. I mean, much easier than actually finding out what's going on; that can be almost impossible. The problem is we're liable to be looking into a future in which we do a lot more of this.

Several years ago when I was publicizing *Parable of the Sower*, I heard on National Public Radio that the population of America could be considered about 46% semi-literate. Now that's scary. This doesn't mean that 46% of people can't read--although there must be a percentage of that semi-literate group who can't read--but that 46% have difficulty reading or, at least, some of that 46% have real difficulty reading. Probably they don't read for fun, and probably they don't read for information as often as they should, so more than anybody recently in history they must be people who are saying what they hear others say, which is kind of scary.

And that was also kind of an introduction to my talking about *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents*, mainly because *Parable of the Sower* is in my mind right now. I'm so close to the end of it. It's a novel that I've written over and over and over again in one part or another, and I've been unable to finish it, and I'm finally finishing it. So I want to talk a little bit about it and about *Parable of the Talents*, and I do this because these novels kind of grew out of my being a news-junkie.
Probably this goes all the way back to when I was watching the space race and paying attention to what was going on then. I just absolutely fell in love with the idea of knowing, or at least believing, that I knew what was going on. This is an illusion, I think, but I supposed that I knew.

By the way, one of the things I found out when I began working on *Parable of the Sower* was that some people had given up completely on paying attention to the news. They no longer read it. They no longer watched it. They no longer heard it because they felt it to be depressing, and they felt that they could do nothing about it. And if they were people who paid a lot of attention to television news -- we all know what's happened to television news. A few weeks ago in Los Angeles, the whole television local news for two solid hours was a car chase. There were helicopters out there; there was instant communication. We knew where that car was every minute, and I kept tuning in to see if I could find something else, and they stayed on with the car chase for two hours.

So I can't entirely blame my friends who have given up on, at least, that aspect of the news, but I haven't. I don't seem to be able to. So I wrote *Parable of the Sower* and continued it with *Parable of the Talents*.

*Parable of the Sower* is the story of a young woman in a very grim near-future who has assembled a new belief system, a new religion, and who believes that this is the answer. It's a future in which the United States has sort of gone in the direction of the Soviet Union. It hasn't been defeated by outside enemies; it's just sort of gotten very weary and collapsed. Funny, nobody ever thought that could happen to the Soviet Union until it did. That's kind of the framework for the story.

My rule for writing the novel was that I couldn't write about anything that couldn't actually happen. So my character couldn't have any special powers. Oddly enough because my character has a kind of delusion of empathy that is brought on by her mother's drug use--she has a particular syndrome that is supposed to be the result of her mother's drug use--some people have thought that this was a power, an extra-sensory power that she had. What my character has is--she calls it "hyper-empathy syndrome"--the inability to observe someone in pain without feeling pain. So she really does feel your pain.

And I remember talking to some people who thought
this would be the perfect affliction to make us a better people because it's a kind of biological conscience, and you wouldn't be able to hurt people without feeling it. And I immediately began to think about ways in which that wouldn't be true and ways in which that would be disastrous.

Ways in which it wouldn't be true, for example: If you had money, you could pay some other people to take the pain, you know. Go out and hurt this person and OK, it's going to hurt you, but what the heck; you're going to be a lot richer when it's over. Or little boys discovering that they can be macho by being able to take more pain as they give it than other little boys. It would happen.

And the worst is who would want to be a health-care professional if hyper-empathy syndrome were real. Imagine being a dentist. (Laughter).

Anyway, I give my character this affliction, not power but affliction, and force her to respond then to the misery that she sees around her. And one of the responses that she comes up with is this religion of hers.

Some of the news stories that I was responding to when I wrote the novel were things like slavery. Every now and then you hear-- and I'm not talking about ante-bellum slavery but modern-day slavery--every now and then you hear about some group of homeless people or illegal aliens or other people who have been held in slavery and I sort of combined slavery and throw-away workers and prison problems because in Parable of the Sower there is slavery and it is entirely legal because it isn't called "slavery." Nice technological ways have been found to make prisoners very productive workers without doing them great injury or living in danger of their running off or doing someone else injury. So they're very useful and, therefore, of course, you want more of them.

As I said, I kind of look around and see what's going on and take it a few steps further. So throw-away workers are more popular now in this country than they used to be, sad to say. By "throw-away workers," I mean people who are simply made use of without benefits, without any hope of bettering themselves until they can't work any longer. And then they are let go. I don't know whether this is a nation-wide thing, but in California there have been some court decisions that say, "It's OK to let the older workers go when they're in their 50s if you can prove that what you're doing is economic effort as opposed to mere prejudice against older people." So
if you can prove that by letting the 50-year old go and hiring the 25-year old, you're just making an economic move, that's OK. And, besides, the 50-year old was about to get his pension, maybe. Maybe he's been there for 25 years or 30 years and he's about due for his pension, and if you can just get rid of him in time, you won't have that drain on your economy. So throw-away workers, that's becoming a lot more popular.

When I first began talking about throw-away workers, I think I had to explain a lot more about what they were, but I think we're becoming more and more aware of just what they are and how sometimes we become them.

Prisons have become big in the economy these days. There's Prison Corporation of America. There are these private prisons that are very useful apparently; they give lots of jobs—guards and things. Little towns vie for prisons. One of the things I did when I was working on *Parable of the Sower*, to keep my mind on some of these things, was to put editorial cartoons up on my wall so that they would remind me that I should include this kind of thing in *Parable of the Talents*.

One of my favorite editorial cartoons was about a homeless person who is standing on the street with a big sign that says "Will Work For Food."—you've probably all seen these signs—and people are walking past, ignoring him completely. And he sits there for several panels and then finally he gets an idea. He takes the sign down and he changes it. He puts up a new sign: "Will Work To Build Prisons." And suddenly it's raining money. So, I wanted to keep little things like that in mind.

I mentioned my character's drug-addicted mother. She is not actually alive during the story, so you don't get to meet her, but she's left her mark on the character. And the reason she existed and the reason I give my character this difficulty is because another of the stories that I was paying attention to was the effects of drugs on the children of drug addicts. When I was working on this novel, the "L.A. Times" came out with a story about the children of drug addicts, not how they're abused and all that, but how they have learning and behavioral difficulties because their mothers took drugs while they were pregnant.

So I thought about that and included that in my novel.

A character in the novel is Global-Warming. This is something that I really wanted to pay attention to, and it's odd how it went in and out of fashion while I was
working on the novel. It would be very big and everyone was talking about it and then it would just kind of die, and then all of a sudden it would be big again. And I wonder about that. It seems to me that a thing as important as global-warming should get a lot more attention than it does. So I portray a world in which global-warming is doing things like creating a lot of erratic weather and severe storms and drought in California, and other things like that.

This was not a book about prophecy; this was an if-this-goes-on story. This was a cautionary tale, although people have told me it was prophecy. All I have to say to that is "I certainly hope not."

Sometime ago I read some place that Robert A. Heinlein had these three categories of science-fiction stories: The what-if category; the if-only category; and the if-this-goes-on category. And I liked the idea. So this is definitely an if-this-goes-on story. And if it's true, if it's anywhere near true, we're all in trouble.

I want to finish up by reading you one more editorial cartoon about the truth because I think it's kind of the way we're encouraged to look at the truth when the truth is unpleasant. This is a Jules Pfeiffer cartoon. It's one of those talking-head cartoons, and this very ordinary-looking man is making the following comments:

I was taught as a boy the truth shall make you free. So I ventured to seek the truth. And I found it. And did it make me free? Hell, no. Did it make me frightened, defensive and insecure? You bet it did. So now I know the truth about the truth. Avoid it at all costs. Make up your own truth and stick to it, no matter how little sense it makes. And sooner or later, you'll have converts. Trust me.

(Laughter/Applause)