



Parable of the Sower

by Octavia E. Butler

Reading Group Guide

Reading Group Questions and Topics for Discussion

1. Lauren Olamina has hyperempathy syndrome, an illness that gives her the delusion that she feels both the pain and pleasure of those around her. Do you think it is significant that this is a congenital disease she contracted because her mother was a drug abuser? How has this illness made Lauren different from those around her? Why was she unable to tell anyone about it? Why do you suppose it is significant to the story that she has this illness?
2. Why does Jo react so negatively to Lauren's concerns about being better prepared as a community and as individuals to face crises? Do you think that Lauren's ideas, including community night watches, learning to fend for themselves in the wild, studying local wild plant life to see if it can be used for food, are excessively paranoid? Lauren's father has pointed out that the community as a whole has trouble thinking far ahead and into such sensitive areas. Do you see ways in which people in today's America are equally unable to think ahead?
3. Earthseed can be described as a "cold" religion since it has such an impersonal god. Is there anything about it that you think could be described as comforting? Or liberating? Do you believe God has a consciousness? Is a thinking being? Or is Earthseed a system of beliefs that appeal to you? What are your feelings about religion?
4. The near future of *Parable of the Sower* reflects an America steeped in chaos with relentless poverty and lawlessness. Education is no longer guaranteed for everyone and violence is rampant. The author has said that she came to this vision of the future by imagining our current woes progressing unchecked to their logical ends. Do you agree or disagree that this is a possible future for America? In terms of government and societal stability as well as future technological advancements, in what ways do you believe America will change by the year 2025? Do you think things will be better or worse than they are now?
5. In the Bible, Mark 4:3-41 tells us the parable of the sower:

Hearken, Behold, there went out a sower to sow: And it came to pass, as he sowed, some fell by the wayside, and the fowls of the air came and devoured it up. And some fell on stony ground, where it had not much earth; and immediately it sprang up, because it had no depth of earth: But when the sun was up, it was scorched; and because it had no root, it withered away. And some fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up, and choked it, and it yielded no fruit. And other fell on good ground, and did yield fruit that sprang up and increased; and brought forth, some thirty, and some sixty, and some a hundred. And he said unto them, He that hath ears to hear, let him hear. And when he was alone, they that were about him with the twelve asked of him the parable. And he said unto them, Unto you it is given to know the mystery of the kingdom of God; but unto them that are without, all these things are done in parables: That seeing they may see, and not perceive; and hearing they may hear, and not understand; lest at any time they should be converted, and their sins should be forgiven them. And he said unto them, Know ye not this parable? And how then will ye know all parables? The sower soweth the word. And these are they by the wayside, where the word is sown; but when they have heard, Satan cometh immediately, and taketh away the word that was sown in their hearts. And these are they likewise which are sown on stony ground; who, when they have heard the word, immediately receive it with gladness; And have no root in themselves, and so endure but for a time: Afterward, when affliction or persecution ariseth for the word's sake, immediately they are offended. And these are they which are sown among thorns; such as hear the word, and the cares of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the lusts of other things entering in,

choke the word, and it becometh unfruitful. And these are they which are sown on good ground; such as hear the word, and receive it, and bring forth fruit, some thirtyfold, some sixty, and some a hundred.

- What relationship do you see between this parable and the novel? Considering that Lauren rejected her father's traditional Baptist teachings before going on to teach Earthseed, it's an interesting twist that the book is titled Parable of the Sower. Why do you think this is?
6. According to Lauren, "The Destiny of Earthseed is to take root among the stars." She feels that we must go "beyond Mars. Other star systems. Living worlds." Are you curious about what's out in space? Do you think we should be exploring other worlds? Do you think we should be trying to live on other planets?
 7. Lauren Olamina says, "That's the ultimate Earthseed aim, and the ultimate human change short of death. It's a destiny we'd better pursue if we hope to be anything other than smooth skinned dinosaurs--here today, gone tomorrow, our bones mixed with the bones and ashes of our cities." What do you think about the possibility of humans becoming extinct? Do you think this is possible, and how do you think it would happen? Do you think this is something we have any control over?
 8. An important issue in this novel is how well people know one another and when and how to trust people. Lauren struggles between her love for Curtis and her concern that he might not understand or accept both her hyperempathy or her Earthseed ideas. She also tells Harry Balter about her hyperempathy, and he worries that he can't trust her because he feels like he doesn't really know her. How do you learn to trust? How much do you have to know about a person in order to trust that person? What sort of lessons about trust do you think this novel holds for us? Do you think that it is easier or harder to trust people in our current social situation?
 9. What lessons do you feel you took away from this novel?