

REVIEW OF *KINDRED*

Very good, although heart-wrenching to read: many of the characters in this novel, like countless victims of slavery in the real world, are subjected to a litany of humiliations and torments designed to impress upon them that in the eyes of white people, they fundamentally do not matter—that their pains, desires, loves, and dreams are meaningless, and their utter desolation is a small price to pay for satisfying the egos of the masters. Black children are taken from their mothers and sold when the masters want money, or just want to make a point; Black husbands are brutalized and sold into exile for trying to prevent their Black wives being raped by white men.

One of the grim questions running through the story is to what extent one can or should make peace with an abuser who can neither be escaped nor brought to justice. Rufus does monstrous things: he brutalizes and sells Alice’s husband, makes her a slave, and rapes her repeatedly. Yet he has enough human tenderness in him that Alice realizes she could, conceivably, convince herself to accept life with him, to find some form of happiness playing the role he has chosen for her of loving mistress. The fear of betraying herself in that way is what ultimately drives her to make a disastrous escape attempt. Chillingly, the lesson Rufus learns from this is *not* that attempting to force affection is misguided, but that it’s a strategy worth trying again with Dana:

“You never hated me, did you?” he asked.

“Never for long. I don’t know why. You worked hard to earn my hatred, Rufe.”

“She hated me. From the first time I forced her.”

“I don’t blame her.”

“Until just before she ran. She had stopped hating me. I wonder how long it will take you.”

“What?”

“To stop hating.”¹

Something that I was surprised didn’t come up again: Kevin had the chance to go back to the past with his wife Dana a second time, but he stood back and left her to go alone. Should we read this as him abandoning her in a moment of fear; or wisely avoiding a confrontation with the Weylins that would have been dangerous for everyone; or simply respecting Dana’s wishes? In his position, I think I’d have a hard time living with that decision unless it was the result of a very thorough discussion beforehand.

I appreciated the thick drawling accents Kim Staunton uses for the 19th-century characters in the audiobook.

¹Octavia E. Butler, *Kindred* (Beacon Press, 2004), 289–90.