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## HUNTINGTON RECEIVES PAPERS OF SCIENCE FICTION WRITER OCTAVIA BUTLER



Octavia Butler (1947-2006).  
Photo: Cheung Ching Ming

SAN MARINO, Calif.—The Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens is the recipient of the papers of writer Octavia Butler, the most prominent African American woman in the field of science fiction. Butler died in 2006 at the age of 58.

The important collection takes a prominent position among The Huntington's holdings representing the careers of other modern literary figures such as Jack London, Christopher Isherwood, and Charles Bukowski.

“Octavia Butler was not only an award-winning science fiction writer, but in a broader context, an important American literary figure, and her papers will be an invaluable resource for scholars,” said David Zeidberg, Avery Director of the Library at The Huntington. Huntington staff are now processing the collection, which will be available to researchers in the coming year.

Sara “Sue” Hodson, curator of literary manuscripts, had asked Butler years ago if she would be interested in placing her papers at The Huntington. Sometime later Butler informed

Hodson that she named The Huntington in her will. “I was over the moon about it,” says Hodson, “but I’m crushed to see it come true so soon. We are so grateful for her gift but so very sorry that she’s gone.”

The collection comprises 39 cartons and eight file cabinet drawers of manuscripts, correspondence, school papers, notebooks, photographs, and other materials.

“She was a towering intellect who took copious notes about everything, and she kept it all,” said Hodson. “She had an amazing system for organizing her subject files. She read voraciously and clipped newspapers, magazines, and journals night and day. The collection is a feast of information and insight into the mind of a writer, and into the writer’s process.”

Butler wrote a dozen novels, winning two Hugo Awards from the World Science Fiction Society, two Nebula Awards from the Science Fiction Writers of America, and a MacArthur “genius grant” in 1995. The MacArthur award marked the first time a science fiction writer had been so honored.

Butler gave lectures periodically at The Huntington and participated in the institution’s contemporary author series in the late 1990s. Among items in the collection are typed drafts of *Kindred*, one of her most beloved novels. It tells the story of a modern-day black woman living in Southern California who gets thrown back in time to early 19th-century Maryland and a working plantation. Note cards accompanying the manuscripts offer her own thoughts on the writing process: “My writing,” she said, “can be a kind of therapy for me, and I’m sure some of their origins extend well back into my childhood. In a way, I didn’t want to write [*Kindred*]. The research promised to be grim at best—slave narratives and histories of the time.”

The *New York Times* obituary about Butler said, “In interviews and in her work itself she left no doubt that her background equipped her spectacularly well to portray life in hostile dystopias where the odds of survival can be almost insurmountable.” Octavia E. Butler was born in Pasadena, Calif., in 1947. Her father shined shoes for a living; he died when she was an infant. Her mother worked as a maid to support the family. Butler said it was a revelation to realize she might actually make a living as a writer; she associated adulthood and getting a job with manual labor. “One day,” she said, “mother watched me scribbling and said, ‘Maybe you’ll be a writer.’” The notion took hold. She was 12 years old.

By age 24 she was publishing short stories. Her first book, *Patternmaster*, was published in 1976, and *Kindred* in 1979. *Kindred* became the most popular of all her books, with 250,000 copies in print.

Correspondence in the collection includes letters to and from editors and publishers as well as friends and fans. One seemingly random letter writer asked her, “As you are a prominent science fiction writer, I would greatly appreciate your opinion concerning the following question: If the human race ever encounters other advanced civilizations, what rules should we follow in dealing with them?”

Butler was an active walker and took notes on daily strolls, documenting the process of developing her characters and plot lines, all the while noting what flowers and trees were in bloom along the way or what groceries she might pick up at the market. Her three-by-five notepads are crammed with research that would help her flesh out her novels, from pages devoted to natural disasters—earthquakes, global warming, and ozone deterioration—to details on specific firearms: “Winchester Bolt action center fire, \$406. Barrel length: 22”. Strong, heavy, accurate, slow.”

Ironically, for a science fiction writer, she had a healthy disdain for computers and always preferred the typewriter. “An electronic system is as vulnerable as cut crystal used as everyday dishes,” she wrote. “Moving and dealing with the computer—whose fragility and complexity horrify me . . . such slender shoulders.”

Butler’s musing about the writing process was as much for others—she lectured often—as it was a form of coaching and prodding for herself. In one cryptic entry she wrote, “I need an end and faster writing.”

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### **About The Huntington**

The Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens is a collections-based research and educational institution serving scholars and the general public. More information about The Huntington can be found online at [www.huntington.org](http://www.huntington.org).

### **Visitor information**

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