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Black writers crossing the final frontier

The first 'Black to the Future' festival celebrates sci-fi authors who are African American.
[HOME EDITION]

Los Angeles Times - Los Angeles, Calif.
 Author: Lynell George
 Date: Jun 22, 2004
 Start Page: E.1
 Section: Calendar; Part E; Calendar Desk
 Document Types: Feature
 Text Word Count: 1837

Document Text

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When novelist Octavia E. Butler set out in the early '70s to step off into the murky territories of science fiction, the consensus was that as a black writer, if you weren't writing about race -- or racism -- you were, frankly, wasting your time.

"There were lots of [stories with] big-bellied sheriffs," Butler recalled, in her burnished, down-deep basement voice, holding court before an on-the-edge-of-their-seats crowd on a recent Friday night at the Seattle Center complex. "That just got tiresome."

So Butler went her own way, but it was like traversing an inhospitable alternate universe -- one in which black writers and readers felt like strangers in a strange land. Inevitably came the rebuff: "But, I don't read science fiction ... because we're not there."

Now Butler is known far beyond the borders of her genre. Her books have garnered Nebula and Hugo awards. She's won a MacArthur "genius" grant. And her milestone novel, "Kindred," the story of an African American woman who slips back and forth between a thin membrane separating the 20th century and the antebellum South, is often cited as one of most original, thought-provoking works examining race and identity.

Which is why she's been invited tonight, standing on the dais to kick off the inaugural "Black to the Future: A Black Science Fiction Festival." Butler, dubbed the event's "first lady," stares down at hundreds of eager writers, readers, artists, fans -- most of whom are African American. She's been transported light-years away from those early days of being sometimes the only black person at sci-fi conventions or festivals or writers' retreats or workshops.

For many black fans, the world of "speculative" fiction (the umbrella term for sci-fi, horror and fantasy) has long been a closet obsession. Though delving into these genres would often marginalize black writers and readers alike, the surreal backdrops and dreamlike characters provided a fresh canvas to contemplate a history burdened by slavery, racism, segregation and lynching or to experiment with social taboos.

But for many it's been an isolating, sometimes thankless endeavor. "Black to the Future," a multidisciplinary forum, offered a corrective.

"Think about it," said program organizer Denee McCloud. "You're taken from your homeland. You go through the Middle Passage. You're put in the hold of a ship for months. You're separated from your family. You're robbed of your language. What does that sound like if not science fiction? Black life already feels like science fiction. But the thing is, that's not science fiction. It's real."

For black writers, speculative fiction has been a way to break down old walls of perception, a tool to push readers beyond societal limits and expand their imaginations. It was a way to merge history with speculative content -- African folklore with space travel for example, or contemplating re-imagined racial hierarchies -- a way to explore "blackness" in a more expansive way.

So along with the usual fare of robots and androids, spaceships and swampy netherworlds, black writers have meditated on a universe of what ifs: an alternate universe where Africans colonize the Americas (like Steven Barnes' "Lion's Blood"); slave narratives that also serve as time-traveling tales ("Kindred"); or space tales in which black people populate Mars (Nikki Giovanni's "Quilting the Black-Eyed Pea").

This wave of artistic expression -- books, short stories, poems, librettos, films -- ignited emancipating thought. They all began by simply asking:

What if?

If only?

If this goes on ...

In the glass-encased lobby of the Seattle Center's Leo Kreielsheimer Theatre, a curtain rises on an alternate future as the "Black to the Future" festival gets underway.

"What shocks me," said Denise Jacobs with one eyebrow arched, still slightly reeling as she surveys the crowd, "is all the black people! I don't think I've seen as many black people in Seattle in one place since I moved here. Where have they all been?"

To be sure, "science fiction" doesn't conjure up images of black America either. Jacobs, who is African American and teaches Web design at Seattle Central Community College, didn't expect to find too many compatriots -- despite the festival's label. She hadn't in the past. But she was hoping she might not be the only one.

She got her wish -- and then some.

Instead of rubber ears or light-sticks, the festival was a swirl with kente and mudcloth, women in colorful head-wraps, men with cascading dreadlocks and

throwback brass ankhs. Presented by the Seattle-based Central District Forum for Arts and Ideas, the three-day festival was keyed to the organization's larger goal: to confront historical and contemporary assumptions about African Americans in contemporary society.

The idea, said Stephanie Ellis-Smith, the forum's founder, was to spotlight the contributions of black writers who have worked in the esoteric worlds of speculative fiction and connect them to a community of artists -- from musicians Sun Ra and Parliament-Funkadelic to filmmaker John Ridley -- who've used speculative realities as a creative jumping-off point.

The aim, said Ellis-Smith, was to assemble a provocative mix of voices "that challenged those assumptions about what black people don't do."

It took nearly two years (and funding from such diverse sources as Microsoft Corp., the National Endowment for the Arts and the Seattle Mayor's Office of Arts and Cultural Affairs) to pull it all together. Ellis-Smith and program director Denee McCloud aimed for the stars, so to speak. Author Tananarive Due, who dabbles mostly in the supernatural, signed on first. Authors Butler, Walter Mosley, Charles Johnson and Due's husband, Steven Barnes, followed; the only conspicuous absence was Samuel R. Delany -- though his literary influence and legacy was frequently acknowledged over the festival's three days.

For all the political and weighty sociological discourse, there was a bit of a family reunion feel to the proceedings: A family, however, who had never before met face to face. Grown women crowing over the "Dune" books, men graying at the temples professing their love for Ursula K. Le Guin. Debates flaring up over Avery Brooks' character in "Deep Space 9" -- "Killed off!" "Transcended!" "Whatever!"

Attendees traveled from as far away as Holland to connect and collect stories. Producer and artist Michael Davis, creator of the Emmy Award-winning animated series "Static Shock," came to share Hollywood war stories in a session titled "Why Black Superheroes Don't Fly."

Ezra Hyland, who teaches Butler in a college course, traveled from Minneapolis in hopes of gathering more insights. Same for Salina Gray, who teaches elementary school in Watts. Gray signed up because she uses speculative fiction in her classroom to press her students to think about their lives more imaginatively, to place themselves in spaces they've never been.

"You finally get this sense that we are no longer absent from the helm," said Due in her Saturday morning session, "Writers Voice." Due, the daughter of two civil rights activists, grew up in an integrated suburb of Miami. "I was a black kid from the suburbs who was then bussed back to the inner city" -- a mystery on both sides of town, said Due. "I looked for myself in a lot of different places."

Reading and writing became her salvation. But in the beginning, she found that "most of my characters were white. If I made a conscious decision to write about black people, it would be the 'hood.

"But that wasn't my experience or upbringing either. Every time if I wanted to write about something closer to my own experience, the characters' suddenly became white. It was completely unconscious, and I needed to examine it."

What helped unlock it was looking at speculative and supernatural texts in which all the rules and walls came down and she could see her characters outside the contexts of time and expectations. Her book "The Between," a speculative thriller peopled by black characters, gave her space to examine the issues that affected her black middle-class life, which was often invisible in books.

"So in that sense it was a political act. For so long, black people have been working in someone else's universe," Due said.

There is an old Richard Pryor saw that's telling. So much so that it was told and retold -- embellished or flubbed -- over the course of the weekend:

"They had a movie of the future called 'Logan's Run,'" he once said. "Ain't no [black people] in it. I said, well, white folks ain't planning for us to be here. That's why we gotta make movies. Then we'll be in the pictures."

But it wasn't just "Logan's Run." It was the first "Star Wars." It was shelf upon shelf of sci-fi books. It was the Tomorrowland posters at Disneyland. It was publishers' rendering black characters white on book covers fearing loss of sales. The not-so-hidden implication, many have begun to understand: That's why we've got to write the books. Then we'll be in the picture.

"Science fiction opened a door for me," said novelist Walter Mosley, best known for his crime novels but who has also written in the sci-fi genre ("Blue Light" and "Futureland"). "It's a very powerful tool. The world as we know it is so out of control. It's about using your imagination. It's about play. I can use any words I want to. I could talk about 'cerulean light' and not be told 'a black person wouldn't speak like that!'"

But it's been a struggle because of a nasty precedent of offensive, racist depictions in fantasy and sci-fi classics by Edgar Rice Burroughs, Robert Heinlein and others. "The problem is, you have to be inspired by it," observed Due, "and, frankly, even still, not many black people are."

It's very clear that's changing.

By Sunday there's just been a world of soul searching and charged conversation and networking. At open mike, half a dozen writers stand at the dais to read from journals and single pages: meditations on the dangers of "little girls with padlocked minds"; re-imaginings of Yoruba tales and spells; one young man's "mythology of my own design."

Steven Barnes, perhaps the most visible black sci-fi writer currently and the first African American to pen one of the "Star Wars" novelizations ("The Hive"), wraps up the weekend sessions with a talk that is more motivational than writer's how-to.

Barnes had a hardscrabble life. "I grew with a mother and sister, and they loved me. But they couldn't teach me how to be a man. Without my dad here, fiction talked to me about who I was. It was important for me to see myself as heroic ... and powerful."

Stories, said Barnes, "created us. Not the other way around. You have to ask yourself: What will my future be? You have to build a bridge."

[Illustration]

Caption: PHOTO: KEYNOTER: Award-winning novelist Octavia E. Butler addresses the opening session of "Black to the Future.;" PHOTOGRAPHER: Photographs by Ron Wurzer For The Times; PHOTO: OWN WORLDS: "We are no longer absent from the helm," says Tananarive Due, with husband and fellow author Steven Barnes.

Credit: Times Staff Writer

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