Speculative Fiction: Promoting CHANGE with Octavia Butler's "Childfinder"[1]

CORE TEXT	"Childfinder" by Octavia Butler.
POSSIBILITIES TO TEACH FOR CHANGE	This speculative fiction short story features characters with psionic abilities, and in it, Butler explores issues related to racism, discrimination, and abuses of power. Barbara is the "Childfinder," a person with psionic abilities capable of discovering and nurturing the psionic potential within other people. She's been finding and preparing children with psionic powers to fight the "Organization" that she used to work for. Now, she devotes herself to the racialized and marginalized children the Organization originally ignored. When Barbara is confronted by members of the Organization, some of her proteges attack them–using their psionic abilities. Barbara fears her children aren't ready to take on the Organization, though, and is worried that they've revealed their power too soon. The short story ends with Barbara letting herself get captured and intentionally wiping her mind of all the children she'd found and trained–to protect them from the Organization's knowledge–as she hopes that one day they will be powerful enough to defeat the Organization. Students can study this short story to examine the potential of speculative fiction to explore human problems and provide commentary on social issues as it reimagines the past, present, and/or future. In "Childfinder," Butler shows readers a world full of discrimination and conflict, despite people's psionic abilities that allow them to read each others' minds. In the afterword to "Childfinder," Butler wrote, "After a few years of watching the human species make things unnecessarily difficult for itself, I have little hope that it will do anything more than survive and continue its cycle of errors" (2020, p. 93). Students can discuss the issues this story addresses, and they can consider whether they agree with Butler's perspective. In later lessons, students can also write their own speculative fiction stories to provide commentary on social issues important to them to raise awareness and to suggest possible solutions to the problems they include in their stories.

[1] Any teacher may use this lesson plan. Feel free to adjust it as needed. This is an example lesson based on the Teaching ELA for CHANGE Lesson Plan Template.

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LEARNING OBJECTIVE(S)	• Students will list, distinguish, and examine features of speculative fiction in Octavia Butler's "Childfinder." • Students will interpret "Childfinder" and cite evidence to support their interpretations.
ASSESSMENT	Students will complete an interactive reading guide and participate in a structured group discussion.
LEARNING ACTIVITIES & STRATEGIES	1. To introduce the short story and grab students' interest, play a clip from the Netflix Series *Stranger Things*. Discuss psionic powers and telekinesis. 2. Provide notes on Octavia Butler and speculative fiction (see Appendix A). 3. To prepare students for a discussion of the story's themes, read the first paragraph of "Childfinder" with the students: a. Ask students to share their thoughts on the paragraph, making sure to address what psionic ability means, why someone might think that psionic abilities could "bridge age-old divisions," and discuss the tone of the first paragraph. b. Using the think-pair-share strategy, ask students to discuss this question with a classmate: "Based on this paragraph, did psionic ability create a utopia?" 4. Ask students to remain with their think-pair-share partner and to read "Childfinder" together. Give them the interactive reading guide to support their reading (see Appendix B). 5. After students have completed their reading guides, place them in groups of four by merging two sets of partners. Ask them to complete the structured discussion activity (see Appendix C). 6. Once the groups have recorded their main points and consensus, facilitate a brief class discussion of the short story.
LESSON CONCLUSION	Tell students they will write their own speculative fiction short story in another lesson and encourage them to begin brainstorming what societal issues they'd like to explore and what commentary they'd like to offer in their creative writing. As time allows, ask a few students to share their initial ideas.

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References & Resources

- Appendices A–C appear below, starting on page 4.
- Butler, O. E. (2020). *Unexpected stories*. Subterranean Press.
- "Childfinder" was published posthumously in the collection *Unexpected Stories*, which is difficult to find. Perhaps your school or local library has a copy. You can listen to the story read by LeVar Burton on the podcast, LeVar Burton Reads.
- For more information on speculative fiction, visit the Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature entry on speculative fiction.

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Appendix A: Octavia Butler and Speculative Fiction Notes[2]

- **Octavia Butler (Power 1):**
  - Octavia E. Butler (1947-2006) is one of the most influential science fiction authors of the 20th and 21st centuries (Power 2)
  - According to blogger and scholar Briana Whiteside (2016), Butler's works "address race, black [*sic*] feminism, slavery, and social inequality" (p. 244). (Power 2)
  - Because Butler began publishing in the 1970s, professor and science fiction scholar Hoda M. Zaki (1990) stated that Butler was influenced by second-wave feminism, which began to use science fiction to "explore issues from a feminist perspective" (p. 239). (Power 2)
    - Second-wave feminism has been criticized for focusing on the concerns of White, straight women while ignoring those of women of color and members of LGBTQIA+ communities. (Power 3)
    - As a Black feminist author, Butler used her science fiction to explore Black feminist issues. (Power 3)
  - Zaki states that Butler "believes that human nature is fundamentally violent and therefore flawed" (p. 241). (Power 2)
    - Zaki also notes that in Butler's work readers see "a pervasive human need to alienate from oneself those who appear to be different–i.e., to create Others" (p. 241). (Power 3)
    - In her article, Zaki quotes a response Butler gave during a 1986 interview: Butler said, "I've actually never projected an ideal society. I don't believe that imperfect humans can form a perfect society" (as cited in Zaki, p. 239). (Power 3)
  - While Butler's work has remained influential for decades, Whiteside (2016) notes that with the rising interest in Afrofuturism, Butler's works are gaining renewed attention. (Power 2)
    - Interdisciplinary scholar, Dr. Michelle Grue, who focuses on Black feminism and critical race/anti-racist education theories, defined and discussed the potentials of using Afrofuturism in undergraduate college courses (Grue, 2020). (Power 3)
    - As Grue explained, Afrofuturism is "a storytelling genre that appears in multiple media types, including books, films, television, comics, music, and art. Drawing from genres such as science-fiction, fantasy, horror, magical realism, and other speculative genres, Afrofuturism re-envisions the past, present, and future in order to show what the Black community does and can look like in imaginative and yet intensely real ways" (p. 33). (Power 3)
- **Speculative Fiction Definition:** A subgenre (or "super category") of fiction that can include elements of the fantasy and science fiction subgenres and that intentionally resists mimesis (i.e., the imitation of reality in fiction) as it considers alternate

[2] These notes are formatted as "Power Notes." I learned about Power Notes from the AdLit.org webpage (click here for more details about Power Notes).

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pasts, presents, and/or futures; unlike some strictly science fiction pieces, speculative fiction usually focuses on human problems rather than "technological ones," even if it takes place in the future (Oziewicz, 2017, para. 1). (Power 1):

- **Some Features of Speculative Fiction:** (Power 2)
  - Past events connected to the present and future (Power 3)
    - Authors use these connected events to discuss social issues and provide social commentary (Power 4)
  - Characters with supernatural powers or abilities (Power 3)
    - Characters with these supernatural abilities learn how to use them and can increase in power and skill (Power 4)
  - A future that is still relatable while being different (Power 3)
    - The future setting is used to explore philosophical questions and make social commentary. (Power 4)
  - Real-life issues explored in the piece (e.g., power, politics, social issues, racism) (Power 3)

References:

Grue, M. N. P. (2020). An Afrofuturistic vehicle for literacy instruction. *Journal of College Reading and Learning, 50*(1), 33–44.

Oziewicz, M. (2017, March 29). Speculative Fiction. *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature.* Retrieved 9 Nov. 2025, from https://oxfordre.com/literature/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.001.0001/acrefore-9780190201098-e-78

Whiteside, B. (2016). Blogging about Octavia Butler. *College Language Association Journal, 59*(3), 242–250.

Zaki, H. M. (1990). Utopia, dystopia, and ideology in the science fiction of Octavia Butler. *Science Fiction Studies, 17*(2), 239–251.

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Appendix B: "Childfinder" Interactive Reading Guide

Directions: Work with a partner to read the short story and answer the questions/prompts below. Talk with each other before recording your responses.

1. After reading the first page, pause to **make a prediction**: The narrator wants to be "as far away" as they could get from the "organization." What do you think will happen in the story?
2. Pause before reading beyond the word "Saturday" to **answer these questions**: Based on the description, where do you think the narrator lives? What year would you guess this story takes place in? What feature of speculative fiction do you see in the first page and a half of the story?
3. After reading about Valerie's visit and conversation with the narrator, which ends when Valerie's older brother tells her to come wash the dishes, **reread these pages to list the narrator's psionic abilities.**
4. Before reading further, **answer this question**: what is the narrator trying to accomplish by sharing books with and using her abilities on Valerie?
5. As Valerie leaves, a woman from the "Organization" named Eve visits the narrator. Read their conversation–up to when Eve walks out of the narrator's house. **Reread these pages to answer the following questions:**
    a. What conflicts exist in these pages (hint: think about conflicts among characters as well as larger societal conflicts)?
    b. What might the Organization want with the children Barbara–by now, we've learned the narrator's name–finds?
    c. What does Barbara hope to accomplish with the children she finds?
    d. These pages show us another of Barbara's psionic abilities–what is it? How/why does she use it?
    e. What does Eve try to do (using psionic powers) that Barabra is able to block?
6. After Eve leaves Barbara's house, she returns with three men. As all four try to attack Barbara, they fall to the ground unconscious. Barbara realizes that one of the children she found is responsible for knocking them out using his psionic abilities. She then has a telepathic conversation with several of the children she's been training. **As you finish reading the story, answer the following questions:**
    a. Why isn't Barbara relieved when Jordan knocked out these people from the Organization?
    b. What do the children want Barbara to do now?
    c. What action does Barbara decide on?
    d. What does Barabra hope "her kids" will accomplish someday?
    e. Do you think this story ends with hope or despair? Explain.

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Appendix C: "Childfinder" Structured Discussion Activity

Directions: Assign numbers to yourselves (1–4). Your number will determine the tasks you should complete during the group discussion:

- **All**: Compare your responses to the "Childfinder" Interactive Reading Guide (IRG).
    - **Students 1 and 2**: Record key similarities and differences in responses on the IRB handout.
    - **Students 3 and 4**: Ask the group if anyone has any lingering questions or moments of confusion. Work together to address these.
- **Students 1 and 2**: Citing evidence from the text, discuss your answers to these questions: "What social commentary does Butler offer in 'Childfinder'? How does this commentary compare to your own views?"
    - **Students 3 and 4:** Record notes of their discussion on a T-Chart, documenting key points on the left and supporting evidence from the short story on the right.
- **Student 3**: Use the T-Chart to summarize the discussion and ask for clarification, while **Student 4** continues to record notes on the chart.
- **Students 3 and 4:** Citing evidence from the text, discuss your answers to these questions: "What social commentary does Butler offer in 'Childfinder'? How does this commentary compare to your own views?"
    - **Students 1 and 2**: Record any new ideas and textual evidence on the T-Chart.
- **All:** synthesize the discussion and prepare to present the group's main points and consensus to the class.

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