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Octavia E. Butler  
*Xenogenesis / Lilith's Brood*

*Dawn*

*Adulthood Rites*

*Imago*

by John Lennard

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# **Octavia E. Butler: *Xenogenesis / Lilith's Brood***

John Lennard

## A Note on the Author

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John Lennard took his B.A. and D.Phil. at Oxford University, and his M.A. at Washington University in St Louis. He has taught in the Universities of London, Cambridge, and Notre Dame, and for the Open University, and is now Professor of British & American Literature at the University of the West Indies—Mona. His publications include *But I Digress: The Exploitation of Parentheses in English Printed Verse* (Clarendon Press, 1991), *The Poetry Handbook* (1996; 2/e, OUP, 2005), with Mary Luckhurst *The Drama Handbook* (OUP, 2002), and the Literature Insights *Hamlet* (2007). He is the general editor of the *Genre Fiction Sightlines* and *Monographs* series, and has written *Sightlines* on works by Reginald Hill, Walter Mosley, Tamora Pierce and Ian McDonald. His critical collection *Of Modern Dragons and other essays on Genre Fiction* (2007), published simultaneously with this e-book, launches the Monographs Series.

*The author wishes especially to thank Roger Luckhurst, an outstanding reader and critic of Science Fiction, for introducing him (many years ago) to **Xenogenesis** and the other remarkable worlds of Octavia Butler. Marvellous.*

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# 1. Notes

## 1.1 Octavia E. Butler

Octavia Estelle Butler was born in Pasadena, California, on 22 June 1947, only child of Laurice & Octavia Butler. Her father, a shoe-shiner, died while she was a baby, and she was raised by her mother and maternal grandmother, who worked as a maid. Butler grew up strictly Baptist in a poor, mixed-race neighbourhood. Shy, later diagnosed as dyslexic, and isolated by height in every age-group (as an adult she was over six feet), she began writing at age 10 to escape what she called “loneliness and boredom”. At 12 she saw a schlock B-movie, *Devil Girl from Mars* (1954), thought she could do better, and began a lifelong interest in reading, watching, & writing SF.



Butler graduated from Pasadena City College in 1968, and took courses at California State University in Los Angeles and via UCLA extension programmes 1968–70. Her major influences, however, came from a spectacular public obsession and two workshops. The obsession was the ‘Space Race’, culminating in the intense excitement of Apollo 11’s first manned moon-landing in July 1969, followed by Apollo 12 (Nov. 1969). After the aborted Apollo 13 mission (April 1970), there were successful landings by Apollos 14–17 (Feb. 1971–Nov. 1972). The first workshop, in 1969–70, was the Screenwriters’ Guild of America, West, Open Door Program, designed to mentor poor Black and Latino writers, where Butler met established SF writer Harlan Ellison (b. 1934). The second, in 1970, was the newly-founded Clarion SF Writers’ Workshop at Michigan State University, where she met Samuel R. Delaney (b. 1942)—the first recognised African-American SF writer, and an acknowledged star of the later 1960s.

Butler’s first publication, ‘Crossover’, appeared in the 1971 Clarion anthology. Ellison bought another story for an anthology that never appeared, but she found it hard to establish herself, partly because overtly racial and gendered concerns in her writing went against perceived SF norms, and her own gender and race made her unusual as an SF writer. Her first novel, *Patternmaster*, completed by 1974, appeared in 1976, followed by four further novels in the same series: *Mind of My Mind* (1977), *Survivor* (1978), *Wild Seed* (1980), & *Clay’s Ark* (1984).

The novel that made her name, especially among African-Americans, interrupted

this series. *Kindred* (1979) has sold more than 250,000 copies but is often rejected as SF; Butler herself called it a “grim fantasy”. A modern African-American Californian time-travels to an ante-Bellum South where she meets her ancestors, a Black slave-woman who was born free and her White owner. Though often shelved and taught as ‘African-American Literature’ without reference to SF, time-travel is outside the ‘mainstream’ realist tradition, and Butler’s SF identity began to be celebrated in 1984, with a Hugo Award for Best Short Story (“Speech Sounds”), and the 1984 Nebula/1985 Hugo Awards for Best Novelette (“Bloodchild”). Her next work was the *Xenogenesis* trilogy—*Dawn* (1987), *Adulthood Rites* (1988), & *Imago* (1989)—followed by the Parable series: *Parable of the Sower* (1993), nominated for Best Novel Nebula, and *Parable of the Talents* (1998), which won the 1999 Nebula. A remarkable, harrowing collection, *Bloodchild and other stories*, appeared in 1995 (enlarged ed. 2006), but though planning *Parable of the Trickster* Butler suffered for nearly a decade from acute writer’s block.

This was perhaps connected to the easing of lifelong poverty by a \$295,000 MacArthur Foundation Award (the ‘Genius Program’) in 1995, which enabled her to buy a house. Medication for high blood-pressure made her drowsy and depressed, and after the death of her mother in 1998 she moved to Seattle. A reclusive non-driver, Butler became an important participant in Clarion Workshops, encouraging other Black SF writers including Steven Barnes (b. 1952), Tananarive Due (b. 1966), and Nalo Hopkinson (b. 1960). Writer’s block eased in 2004, and she completed her last novel, *Fledgling* (2005), radically reimagining with racial and gendered consciousness the vampire tales that are presently so popular.

Octavia Butler died on 24th February, 2006, outside her Seattle house, either from a stroke or from falling and striking her head on a cobbled walkway. Her premature loss is widely lamented, and the Carl Brandon Society, an SF organisation concerned with writing by and representations of “people of color”, has established an annual Memorial Scholarship in her name to enable a young writer “of color” to attend one of the Clarion Workshops where Butler got her own start.

## 1.2 The *Xenogenesis* Trilogy

### 1.2.1 Name and Background

The novels of the trilogy appeared individually—*Dawn* in 1987, *Adulthood Rites* in 1988, and *Imago* in 1989. From 1989–2000 they were boxed as *Xenogenesis*, a

coinage from Greek *xenos*, ‘a stranger’ (cf. xenophobia) + *genesis*, ‘beginning’, to mean ‘the initial evolution of an alien race’. The prefix *xeno-* is used in SF in terms like *xenobiology*, study of alien life, or *xenology*, study of alien cultures, so while unfamiliar the term was intriguing rather than off-putting to SF readers. In 2000 the umbrella-title was changed to *Lilith’s Brood* for the omnibus edition, religious rather than scientific, and the trilogy remains available under that name and as individual volumes. The significance of the change is considered in the Essay.

The world in the mid-1980s was very different from the world in which we now live. Global politics was dominated by the Cold-War standoff between USA & USSR (Soviet Russia) mediated through ‘Mutually Assured Destruction’ (MAD)—the certainty that no ‘first strike’ nuclear attack could avoid reciprocal destruction. Imagination of a post-nuclear-holocaust world was a major theme in SF and Western culture at large from the later 1940s, disseminating ideas of ‘nuclear winter’ and mutation. If threats of nuclear catastrophe have receded, there is a close equivalent in fears of eco-catastrophe through runaway Global Warming, pollution, and destruction of the environment (all of which feature in Butler’s *Parable* series).

The double-helix structure of human DNA had been discovered by Crick & Watson in the 1950s (see Note 1.6), but ‘genetic engineering’ was still in its infancy, little known to the public. Home computers had taken off as a market-sector in the later 1970s, and developed mightily in the 1980s, but the Web was before 1991 a limited construct to which only a handful of scientists had access. AIDS was beginning to be recognised as a global threat, and was still a death sentence even for the rich who could afford palliative care. Cancers were also far less treatable, though genetic bases of predisposition to cancer were beginning to be understood.

Feminist and racial awareness (see Notes 1.3–4) were dominant cultural themes, but while Civil Rights and Affirmative Action in the USA secured some changes, sexism and bigotry in the workplace were even worse than they remain today. Awareness of how grim the situation remained was slowly disseminating among men and majority populations. The racial and sexual themes of *Xenogenesis* were therefore somewhat more surprising and radical in the late 1980s than they may on first reading now seem, especially to younger readers.

### *1.2.2 Structure*

The aliens Butler created to rescue human survivors of nuclear holocaust, the Oankali, have three sexes—male, female, and the neuter, gene-manipulating *ooloi*—

and her trilogy is structured to match. *Dawn* deals with Lilith Iyapo, an African-American woman who chooses (in so far as she has any choice) to accept what Oankali offer. *Adulthood Rites* deals with her son Akin, the first male Human-Oankali ‘construct’ (or miscegenate offspring). *Imago* deals with another child, Jodahs, the first *ooloi* ‘construct’.

Each novel is divided into books whose titles provide an additional map:

*Dawn*    Womb    Family    Nursery    The Training Floor

*Adulthood Rites*    Lo    Phoenix    Chkahichdahk    Home

*Imago*    Metamorphosis    Exile    Imago

The books of *Dawn* follow Lilith’s rebirth in partnership with Oankali. Those of *Adulthood Rites* name places (for the Oankali living things) that contrast human names and ideas (Phoenix, Home) with Oankali ones (Lo, Chkahichdahk). The first and third books of *Imago* invoke insect development: an imago (plural ‘imagos’ or ‘imagines’ [im-á-gin-és]) is an adult insect after metamorphosis (for example, a butterfly that has already been a caterpillar and a pupa). The second book posits ‘Exile’ in contrasts to ‘Home’.

The trilogy as a whole drives from foetal development to post-metamorphic adulthood, and from that which is wholly human to the greatest possible state of human-alien miscegenation (Latin *miscēre*, ‘to mix’ + *genus*, ‘race’): the genesis of a post-Human race, *Homo oankali*, from *H. sapiens*.

## 1.3 (Black) SF and Race

### 1.3.1 *The Colour of Aliens*

Arguably, at least, *all* SF that encounters alien life is in some measure concerned with human race relations. By mapping intra-human relations onto inter-species relations in an SF narrative, both typically fearful human reactions to whatever is different and general or individual assumptions about our own and others’ rights are interrogatively foregrounded. At the same time, vulnerability of space-ships and astronauts (or exploring parties) in hostile environments, or some terrible threat from aliens to all humankind, provide a necessity for human unity that for most readers transcends (in the name of survival) whatever racial, cultural, sexual, and religious