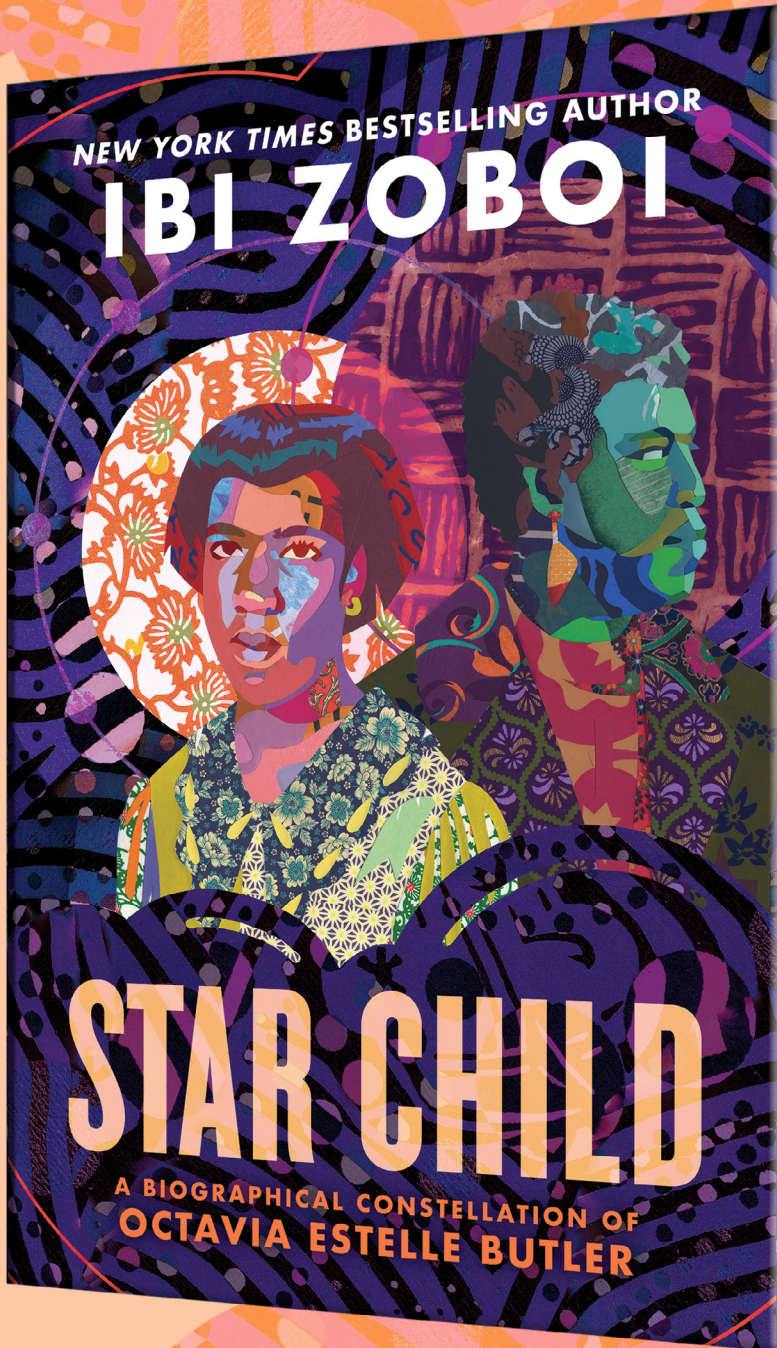


# A DISCUSSION GUIDE TO



## ABOUT THE BOOK

From the *New York Times* bestselling author and National Book Award finalist, a biography in verse and prose of science fiction visionary Octavia E. Butler, author of *Parable of the Sower* and *Kindred*.

Acclaimed novelist Ibi Zoboi illuminates the young life of the visionary storyteller Octavia E. Butler in poems and prose. Born into the Space Race, the Red Scare, and the dawning Civil Rights Movement, Butler experienced an American childhood that shaped her into the groundbreaking science-fiction storyteller whose novels continue to challenge and delight readers fifteen years after her death.

★ “Zoboi has created a necessary addition to school and public library collections through this memorable look at how writers incorporate their lives into their work.”

—*Booklist*, starred review

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



**IBI ZOBOI** was born in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, and holds an MFA in writing for children and young adults from Vermont College of Fine Arts. Her YA novel *American Street* was a National Book Award finalist and her debut middle grade novel, *My Life as an Ice Cream Sandwich*, was a *New York Times* bestseller. She is the author of *Pride*, a contemporary YA remix of Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*, and editor of the anthology *Black Enough: Stories of Being Young & Black in America*. Her most recent bestseller, *Punching the Air*, is a YA novel in verse, co-authored by prison reform activist Yusef Salaam of the Exonerated Five and her latest book is *Star Child: A Biographical Constellation of Octavia Estelle Butler*. Raised in New York City, Ibi now lives in New Jersey with her husband and their three children.

This guide was written by **JULIA E. TORRES**, a nationally recognized veteran language arts teacher-librarian in Denver, Colorado. Julia facilitates teacher development workshops rooted in the areas of antiracist education, equity and access in literacy and librarianship, and education as a practice of liberation. Julia’s work has been featured on NPR, Al Jazeera The Stream, PBS Education, KQED’s MindShift, Rethinking Schools, Learning for Justice Magazine, and many more. Her forthcoming co-authored title *Liven Up Your Library* will be published in 2022 by ISTE Publications. She is a current Amelia Elizabeth Walden Book Award committee member, a member of both the Book Love Foundation and ALAN boards of directors, an Educolor Steering committee member, and The Educator Collaborative Book Ambassador.

## ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

- How can the imagination be harnessed to create new and better versions of reality?
- How do authors use metaphor and symbolism to expand the meaning of ordinary objects for readers?
- What steps do writers take to become masters of their craft?
- How do science fiction, fantasy, and afro-futurism work as tools of liberation?

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

I.

- Take a look at the dedication. Why does poetry make readers slow down and pay more attention? Has this been your experience?
- Are you named for anyone? If so, do you share any characteristics with your namesake? If not, what is the origin of your name?
- How does the poem “Zeitgeist” capture the experience of many people belonging to the generation labeled baby boomers? What is a Zeitgeist? What specific shared experiences from world history and individual life histories can you identify?
- What was miraculous about Octavia’s birth?
- How was Octavia different from other children her age? Consider both her appearance and the way she was perceived by others. What impact might these physical differences have had on her as she grew from a girl into a young woman?
- How was Octavia’s upbringing in California different from that of Black people in other parts of the United States? How might that have impacted her view of herself and of her people? Of their place in the world?
- What traumatic experience played a pivotal part in Octavia’s memories of her childhood? Have you or anyone you know had a similar experience? If so, how did it shape you/them?
- What did Octavia’s mother do for a living? What were Octavia’s feelings about her mother’s occupation? Make a prediction about how this might have shaped her future career choices.
- What did Octavia think about the role of religion in the world and in her life? How did her religious upbringing have shaped her views of herself? Make a prediction about how these views might manifest in her writings.

# I. CONTINUED

- What two types of stories did Octavia enjoy reading most? How were these similar to and different from the Bible and the Dick and Jane Basal readers that formed the beginning of her experience with reading?
- What challenges did Octavia face when becoming a reader? How did she overcome them? Do you have a similar experience? If so, what have you done to work through it? If not, what was your first experience with finding reading enjoyable?
- What was Octavia's first recorded story called? What was it about? What do you remember as your first piece of writing? What was it about and what does the writing reveal about you and your life at the time you wrote it?
- How did writing help Octavia escape some of the more negative aspects of her existence?

# II.

- Consider the poem "Space Race." How and why are Space and Race juxtaposed? What does space symbolize or for Octavia E. Butler and [in her writings] all of humanity? Look to the other poems for clues.
- How did Octavia feel, what did she think about the space race and space exploration in general?
- What led Octavia to start considering space and other planets as possible settings for her stories?
- What parallels can you see between the Red Scare and the fear of an alien attack that arose around *War of the Worlds* and other such early science fiction stories?
- Read one or more of the short stories listed in the poem "Amazing Stories." What has changed about science fiction since the time these stories were written? If you are unfamiliar with reading science fiction, how do they compare to TV shows you've seen or heard about? What aspects of social commentary can you identify?
- How and why did Octavia depart from the other science fiction tropes of her day? What innovative writing decisions did she make that were a departure from what was available to readers of her time?
- What do you suppose gave Octavia the determination to pursue her goals and dreams despite her isolation from others, unique physical attributes, and imaginative internal life?

### III.

- Respond in writing, or discuss your thoughts in answer to the question “What good is science fiction to Black people?” –Octavia E. Butler
- Often, there is a misconception that writers simply write, then are published. What were some of the stages Octavia went through or steps she followed in order to be published?
- How was Octavia E. Butler a scientist, an anthropologist, an astronomer, a biologist, a mathematician, and a psychologist? From your perspective, how might it benefit a writer to be a “jack of all trades”?
- What were some of Octavia’s firsts as a Black woman? Do you believe her accomplishments changed the way society saw what was possible within the realm of writing, writing by Black women and science fiction? If so, how? What were other Black women writers of her time writing?
- What did Octavia E. Butler imagine for Black people and more specifically Black women as part of her afro-futurist storytelling?
- What do you think about the idea that we can create futures better and more liberatory than the reality we currently inhabit simply through the power of our imaginations?

## ACTIVITIES

1. Consider the origin story of Octavia E. Butler’s beginning. Interview your caregiver(s) to get their versions of events leading up to your birth. What was the weather like? Where were they geographically? What were the names of the people who first embraced you? Write your version of the story using as much detail as you can. Consider including elements of figurative language such as imagery, symbolism, sensory detail, metaphor, and simile.
2. Research the Great Migration using resources and databases available to you. If you have a family that relocated during the Great Migration, draw the pattern of their migration on a map and write a short narrative of where they went and where they migrated from. Consider reasons a family might migrate to a specific region of the United States. In your research, look for information about what social, economic, and political conditions might have been for Black people in the North, West, Midwest, or East Coast of the United States. If your family did not migrate during the Great Migration, consider telling another story of migration if you are familiar with it. Did your ancestors migrate from another country? If so, when? What, if any family customs or traditions remain from their places of origin?

## ACTIVITIES CONTINUED

3. Take any of the poems from the book and use TPF<sub>AST</sub> to analyze them. Then, write an analysis of the poem explaining what you think it reveals about Octavia E. Butler's life, experiences, and character. Finally, write a poem of your own choosing a similar theme, symbol, or connected idea. Remember that as Ibi Zoboi says, "Poems can serve as different planets, and galaxies, and gateways with their many structures, and rhythms, and wordplay." (109)

TPFAST	EXPLANATION IN MY OWN WORDS	QUOTES FROM THE POEM TO SUPPORT WHAT I THINK
<b>T</b> (Title - First interpretation of the title)		
<b>P</b> (Paraphrase - After reading the poem, what do you think it means?)		
<b>F</b> (Figurative Language - What examples of symbols, imagery, sensory detail, similes or metaphors can you find?)		
<b>A</b> (Attitude - What is the speaker's attitude toward the subject?)		
<b>S</b> (Shift - Is there a point where the subject or syntax of the poem changes?)		
<b>T</b> (Title x2 - What is your interpretation of the title now that you've read the poem a second time?)		

**THE CENTRAL IDEA OF THIS POEM IS:**

**THE CONNECTED THEME, IDEA, OR SYMBOL I WILL USE IS:**

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

[How to Write a Poem in 5 Easy Steps - 2021 - MasterClass](#)

[This is Octavia E. Butler's best writing advice. < Literary Hub](#)

1. On Page 38, Octavia says, “I’ve known since I was barely three, sitting on the stairs with Baba, that it is better—much more interesting—to get to know others and to discover who and what they are. It is better to look into their eyes with open curiosity and learn once more about someone else.”

Write the story of your life in simple sentences covering four stages, 1)Your birth 2) Your early infancy/childhood 3)School-age years 4)The present time. Consider using no more than two or three sentences for each stage. Then, trade with a partner and have them read the story of your life using the first person pronoun “I.” Ex: I, Octavia, was born in...As a baby/small child, I was...

Then, reflect on or discuss the following questions: How does the experience of reading someone else’s lived experience shape your feelings about them? What impact might this exercise have toward developing empathy for someone else’s lived experience?

2. Why do you suppose Octavia’s aunt would tell her, “Negroes can’t be writers”? Has that changed? Think of some Black writers you know of today, research their life stories. What or who got them to pursue their passions? Prepare a visual presentation using Jamboard, Google Drawings, ThingLink, or any other tool to create a timeline or annotated image with details from their life. Include key quotes from some of their most famous works. Be sure to also include how and when they were first published and any details you can discover about who or what inspired them to keep writing.
3. As you read, keep a tracker of words that repeat throughout the poems. Look for words that appear in the titles of books by Octavia E. Butler, and chapters within those books. As you read and become more knowledgeable about Octavia E. Butler’s body of work, look for parallels between poems in this collection and her longer works like *Parable of the Sower*, *Dawn*, *Kindred*, *Wild Seed*, *Blood Child*, *Imago* etc. Then choose specific poems from this collection to pair with specific passages or quotes from one or more of the longer works you have read. Create a presentation for those in your learning community to share your findings, or a visual display for those in your classroom, learning community, or library that will entice them to read more of her works. Consider using some of the imagery from the poems in this collection, like universes, stars, galaxies, constellations, or any other celestial objects.
4. Write your own letter, poem, or manifesto of what you’d like to manifest in life. If you choose to write a manifesto, begin your statements as though they are the present, as Octavia does in hers. Consider your biggest dreams and highest hopes. Shoot for the stars.

# JOURNAL PROMPTS

1. What is your favorite science fiction, fantasy, or imagined story? What do you like about it? What lessons about humanity are embedded within it?
2. What was the first book you read by a Black writer? How was it different from or similar to other books you've read? Did you see yourself reflected in it? If so, how did that make you feel? If not, could you still relate to its messages?
3. Do you think humanity's ideas of space and current knowledge are accurate? If so, why? If not, why not? What do you think lies beyond the furthest reaches of what we have detected?
4. Research one Black historical figure, writer, inventor, or visionary who perhaps isn't as well known as they should be. Find a quote from them that you find to be inspiring. What do their words teach you about life or the human condition? Why do you suppose their story isn't well known?
5. What is unique about your life story? In other words, identify one aspect of your personality or life experience that makes you different from others. How might that become your superpower? Ex: Octavia's shyness isolated her from others but resulted in her creating a rich imaginative inner world from which she developed stories that inspired countless people.
6. Create a journal entry with small pictures or a short flipbook with each letter of the alphabet or write an [acrostic poem](#). Connect each letter to a word from Star Child, then expand with examples from your life. Ex: C = "Constellation" I am part of the constellation of people in my friend family, each a star in their own right.

## ADDITIONAL READINGS AND RESOURCES:

[The Pioneering Sci-Fi Writer Octavia E. Butler Joins a Pantheon of Celebrated Futurists](#)

[Octavia Butler has finally made the New York Times Best Seller list.](#)

[Octavia E. Butler Wrote The Story Of Her Success Years Before It Happened](#)

[Octavia's Parables Podcast](#)

[Why should you read sci-fi superstar Octavia E. Butler? - Ayana Jamieson and Moya Bailey](#)

[Octavia Butler: Visionary Fiction \(2021\) : Throughline : NPR](#)

[My Life as an Ice Cream Sandwich by Ibi Zoboi](#)

[Emergent Strategy by Adrienne Maree Brown](#)



# STANDARDS

## **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.1**

Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

## **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.2**

Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze in detail its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text.

## **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.4**

Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the cumulative impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone (e.g., how the language evokes a sense of time and place; how it sets a formal or informal tone).

## **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.5**

Analyze how an author's choices concerning how to structure a text, order events within it (e.g., parallel plots), and manipulate time (e.g., pacing, flashbacks) create such effects as mystery, tension, or surprise.

## **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3**

Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.

## **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3.D**

Use precise words and phrases, telling details, and sensory language to convey a vivid picture of the experiences, events, setting, and/or characters.

## **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.7**

Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects to answer a question (including a self-generated question) or solve a problem; narrow or broaden the inquiry when appropriate; synthesize multiple sources on the subject, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.