



Book Discussion Guide:

Fledgling

By Octavia Butler

Summary

Spoiler Alert: The following summary and discussion questions contain detailed plot information that some readers may prefer to encounter as surprises.

Fledgling explores race, sexuality, and human nature in a vampire tale that replaces the supernatural with genetic tinkering. It is the story of Shori Matthews. She resembles a ten- or eleven-year old African-American girl; in reality, she is something else entirely.

As the novel opens, Shori awakens alone in a dark cave: badly wounded, weak, and starving -- with no memories of who (or what) she is. Eventually she ventures into the surrounding woods, capturing and devouring game as her strength and speed increase. At the site of a burned-out village, she feels the dim pull of memories but otherwise, her amnesia remains complete. Wright, a construction worker, spots her wandering alone; thinking she is a lost child, he approaches to help. The panic-stricken girl attacks, biting his neck; an inexplicable surge of sexual pleasure jolts Wright at her bite. Although shaken, he agrees to take her home with him until they discover her identity.

While there, she goes by "Renee." They quickly realize that she must consume human blood regularly to live. To prevent harming Wright, Renee seeks out others (like a neighbor, Theodora) who will also eagerly submit to her intoxicating bite. Realizing she is much older than the child she appears to be, Renee initiates a sexual relationship with Wright and his addiction to her bite increases.

A gunman she later subdues at the charred village reveals there are others like her. She is reunited with her father Iosif, who explains that she is actually fifty-three years old. Like him, she is part of a vampiric race called the "Ina," which has co-evolved in a symbiotic relationship alongside humanity for millennia. Ina age slowly; possess great strength; and live for centuries. They must have human blood (and contact) to survive, and cannot endure sunlight. Each Ina cultivates an intimately bonded group of human "symbionts," who feed them. Symbionts gain a measure of the Ina's youthful longevity and strength, but may weaken and die if separated from their Ina.

With Wright and Theodora, Shori visits Iosif's compound. She learns that her family participated in genetic experiments to mingle Ina and human DNA (specifically, African-American), in hopes of producing an Ina able to withstand sunlight. Born of a black human woman, Shori represents their most successful experiment. Some Ina consider her the most biologically advanced of their kind: the next stage of their evolution. Other Ina regard her as a disgusting mongrel "abomination," tainted by her humanity.

Shori and her symbionts prepare to move to Iosif's compound, but it is torched before she arrives. All the Ina within are killed; Shori rescues two surviving symbionts, Celia and Brook, and binds them to her to keep them alive. They seek shelter with another Ina family, the Gordons. At the Gordon home, Shori experiences how Ina households are traditionally operated, and also learns Ina history, language, and lore. To Wright's displeasure, she gains another male symbiont, Joel. Shori develops an attraction to the Gordon's eldest son, Daniel, with whom it is agreed she will mate when she has matured enough to conceive children.

Their pursuers eventually reach the Gordon farm and set it ablaze, too. Shori captures one, a male human whose racist slurs condemn her *humanity* more than her blackness. This confirms the Gordons' suspicions that her persecutors are the Silks, a notoriously cruel, human-hating Ina family. An Ina Council of Judgment is called to hear Shori's accusations and weigh evidence against the Silks. In hopes of forcing Shori to back out of the trial, a council member sympathetic to the Silks has Theodora murdered. Shori perseveres: after more violence, the dispute is finally resolved; at last, Shori faces her future with full knowledge of her past.

Questions

The following questions and answers should spark discussion of this book, but are not all there is to say. Readers bring differing viewpoints to the story's characters, events, and what it all means; sharing those insights is part of what makes book groups rewarding. Enjoy your discussion -- starting with these ideas!

How do Ina compare to "traditional" vampires?

According to folk legends like those that inspired Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), vampires are born from supernatural evil: for example, an evil person at the moment of their death forfeits their soul in exchange for immortality as an "undead" blood-drinker. Humanity cheers on the death of these unholy monsters, of course. Modern writers, meanwhile, often depict vampirism as disease or illness: its sufferers are humans, whom we may even pity.

Butler offers readers a more challenging idea: the vampire-like Ina are simply a product of evolutionary biology -- no more, no less. Many species must feed a certain way on a certain food; can only procreate under certain conditions; possess particular strengths, live a certain amount of time; and share universal traits (like light sensitivity) that may not always be helpful, but are not "defects." As Iosif tells Shori, the Ina "have little in common with the vampire creatures Bram Stoker described in *Dracula*" (p. 69); in fact, the Ina inspired the legends of vampires and zombies:

[N]ow and then down through the ages . . . we were tortured and murdered as demons. Sometimes they hacked at us until they thought we were dead, then buried us. When we healed, we came out of our graves confused, mad with hunger . . . perhaps simply mad. Well, that's how in some cultures we became the "walking dead" or the "undead." That's why they learned to burn or behead us. (p. 195)

Even if vampire lore that circulates among humans is inaccurate, the Ina sometimes find it useful. Shori realizes that vampire clichés offer a less frightening way to reveal her true nature to Theodora: "'Invite me in.' At once, she [Theodora] stood aside and said, 'Come in.' This was a bit of vampire theater. I knew it, and I was fairly sure she knew it, too" (pp. 94). Shori tries an ice-breaker that allows Theodora some sense of control, because Theodora is not merely "prey." Unlike traditional vampires, the Ina crave and seek an emotional connection to their human symbionts, and generally have no desire to harm them.

Like traditional vampires, the Ina transform and control those they bite. Ina venom enervates and addicts their "victims" -- a human bitten even once may become highly suggestible. Over time, symbionts become Ina-like: far stronger, healthier, and longer-lived than other humans. Unfortunately, their addiction to biochemical transmitted in the Ina's venom also increases. Breaking that tie is harmful for both, but the Ina is likely to survive; meanwhile, an abandoned symbiont undergoes brutally painful withdrawal at best -- and death, at worst. Like a vampire's victim, a human symbiont becomes tied to the Ina who feeds upon them. Even if Ina don't kill their "victims" (as vampires do), they nonetheless steal the symbionts' lives by making them subject to permanent chemical enslavement (p. 168-9).

What kinds of relationships occur between Ina and their human symbionts?

Ina and symbionts are mutually -- but not equally -- dependent upon one another. Physically stronger than humans, Ina protect their symbionts from many dangers -- just as human symbionts protect their Ina during the day. In addition to its addictive pleasure, Ina venom inoculates symbionts against aging, illness, and infirmity. However, Ina rely on their human symbionts for more than food -- while an Ina *could* feed casually from larger numbers of humans, most prefer the benefits of genuinely intimate emotional and sexual relationships with a select small group.

Shori's first assessment of Theodora is practical: Theodora is older and smells less "enticing" than other options, but is obviously strong enough to feed from regularly. What seems to tip the balance is really Theodora's lonely emotional state: "She didn't smell of other people" (p.30); Shori chooses Theodora because she intuits that it will also be a mutually beneficial emotional relationship. Intimacy and connectedness -- expressed sexually and through touch among the Ina -- are as essential as blood in the human-Ina exchange. As one symbiont tells Shori:

You need to touch your symbionts more You need to touch us and know that we're here for you, ready to help you if you need us And we need to be touched. It pleases us just as it pleases you. We protect and feed you, and you protect and feed us. That's the way an Ina-and-symbiont household . . . should work." (p. 183)

Unfortunately, some Ina view symbionts as "little more than useful domestic animals" -- and have only slightly less contempt for other Ina (p. 263). Shori learns of an Ina who was sexually aroused by violence. He treated his symbionts well, but instructed them to provoke drama among other Ina's symbionts; in one case, two symbionts nearly killed one another. Brook ironically notes that if they hadn't been symbionts, they'd have died of their injuries -- "but then, they never would have been endangered if they *hadn't* been" (emphasis added, p. 137).

Like our real-life relationships, human-Ina relationships pose emotional risks and offer great rewards; both are magnified by biological characteristics of the Ina. Ina frequently enjoy having sex with human partners, but can only procreate with other Ina. For this reason, Ina do not intermarry with humans. Human symbionts must accept that their Ina lover *will* marry an Ina partner -- and *will* mate with several others. Human symbionts that believe sexual and romantic fidelity cannot be separated are left angry, hurt, confused, and bereft.

The addictive properties of Ina venom further complicate Ina-human relationships, creating an unequal balance of power:

"[Ina] take over our lives," Brook said. "They don't even think about it, they just do it as though it were their right. And we let them because they give us so much. . . pure pleasure." Wright grunted. "We let them because we have no choice. By the time we realize what's happened to us, it's too late." (pp. 167-168)

Brook's Ina, Iosif, asked if she wanted to say with him *before* her addiction left her unable to choose. Not all Ina are so self-aware and thoughtful, of course. When Wright finds Shori, the issues are even murkier because she doesn't even know her name -- much less her nature. Neither of them understands what is really happening, until long after he has become fully addicted to her venom; Wright understands this, yet can't help but resent that he never even got a chance to choose. He is furious both when Shori meets male Ina as potential marriage and mating partners -- and even more so when she acquires other male symbionts. The presence of his biochemical addiction just reinforces what all lovers fear: that their lover will abandon them suddenly for another.

How does the novel portray racism among humans?

In the aftermath of her confused awakening, Shori herself only notices her dark skin once Wright remarks about it: "I had been about to protest that I was brown, not black, but before I could speak, I understood what he meant" (p. 37). Wright is aware of how *others* might judge Shori racially, and acknowledges racial appearance as a difference between them. He later speculates that racists may have been behind the attacks on Shori's family; he distinguishes between *Ina* racists that hate her "blackness" as an indicator that she is part *human*, and human racists that hate "blackness" itself (p.154).

Unlike the Ina, human characters in this novel do not embrace racism of their own free will. One of Shori's human attackers, Victor, is horrified himself when he spews insults at her during questioning:

"Dirty little nigger bitch," he said reflexively. "Goddamn mongrel cub." Then he gasped and clutched his head between his hands. After a moment, he put his head down on the table and groaned. It was clear that he was in pain. His face had suddenly gone a deep red. "Didn't mean to say that," he whispered. "Didn't mean to call you that." He looked at me. "Sorry. Didn't mean it." (p. 179)

Under the mental hold of racist Ina, Victor unwillingly mouths the hate-speech implanted in his mind. As he confesses later: "My sister, she married a Dominican guy. Her kids are darker than you, and they're my blood, too. I would kick the crap out of anyone who called them what I called you" (p. 180).

Nonetheless, Wright is obviously provoked when Shori takes Joel -- a young black man -- as her newest symbiont. Rather unwisely, Shori leaves the two men's first meeting to chance; Wright essentially just bumps into Joel around the house one day -- Wright rages to Brook: "I met him in the upstairs hall. He had the nerve to ask me which bedrooms were empty," and "You know [Shori] never even told me he was black." When Brook reminds him that Ina "don't care about white or black," Wright concedes: "I know. I even know she needs the guy -- or at least, she needs a few more people. But I hate the bastard" (p. 168). Wright's hatred springs from fear that Joel, by sharing Shori's skin color, gives her a type of intimacy that Wright cannot.

How do Ina conceive of "race" differently than humans do?

For the Ina, "race" is about purity of their *Ina* nature. It has little or nothing to do with skin color. In fact, her

darker skin has a desirable practical advantage: Ina, her melatonin-rich coloring makes her less susceptible to the "sun allergy" that afflicts all others of her kind (p. 72). To other Ina, Shori is "mixed race" because she is *both* human *and* Ina -- and not because her lineage includes different skin colors.

The Silks, however, notably express blatant racism in some of the same terms that humans do. It is their influence that prompts the human symbiont Victor to spew racial epithets at Shori. But the racism the Silks express is a prejudice against dark-skinned people conflated by their anger at mixing Ina blood with human. Shori asks Victor if the Silks hate her because she is dark-skinned; he answers, "And human" (p. 179).

For Victor and the Silks any blend of human and Ina ("Ina mixed with some human or maybe human mixed with a little Ina") is just *not* supposed to happen. Not ever," and -- once it has -- Shori must be prevented from "breeding" with "pure Ina" at all costs "(p. 179). The Silks and Katherine Dahlman express fears of miscegenation: that Ina will become interbred with humans. Conflating racism against dark-skinned people with disdain for humans, Russell Silk invokes calls her a "Murdering black mongrel bitch" and jibing at her as a mere animal: "What will she give us all? Fur? Tails?" (p. 306).

Katherine refers more directly to Shori's skin color, even using human racism to justify excluding Shori from Ina society. She rebukes Preston Gordon for the thought that he'd allow his sons to "mate" with Shori: "You want them to get black, human children from her. Here in the United States, even most humans will look down on them. When I came to this country, such people were kept as property, as slaves" (p. 278). Ultimately, the Ina decide that humanity's propensity for racial hatred is not something to be emulated -- "It isn't a weed we need growing among us" -- and Katherine is removed from the council. (p. 280).

How does sexuality differ among humans and Ina?

Ina use sex for both aesthetic and biological reasons. Despite their love of sexual pleasure, Ina's sexual relationships with one another are strictly governed by biology. Ina arrange marriages for their family members, typically between a group of brothers and a group of sisters when they reach sexual maturity. The scent of an unmated Ina woman is violently arousing to Ina men, which makes it necessary to partner sexually mature women quickly. Moreover, male Ina are too "sexually territorial" to live with females. Isif tells that she's "a little too old to be sharing territory with the adult males of your family -- with any adult Ina male since you're too young to mate We are not human, child. Male and female Ina adults don't live together. We can't" (p. 185)

Shori experiences the effects of scent on sexual attraction when she meets the Gordon brothers: "I had noticed that a couple of the unmated sons were already beginning to fidget as my scent worked on them." She too is compelled by Ina biology: "I liked [Daniel's] looks as well as his scent" (p. 155). Moreover, Ina become addicted to the venom of their partners, and cannot procreate with anyone else once they are mated -- one of the reasons choosing a proper mate is crucial. Female Ina seem to hold the advantage, since their venom is more potent than that of Ina males: "[L]ong ago, groups of sisters competed to capture groups of brothers, and the competition was chemical. . . . Ina men are sort of like us, like symbionts. . . . Once they're addicted [to a particular Ina female's venom], they aren't fertile with other females." (p. 115)

While humans prioritize heterosexual monogamous partnerships -- which is the arrangement most familiar to many of the human symbionts -- Ina engage in polyamorous, multi-partner, same-sex *and* heterosexual

relationships. Human symbionts confront new sexual mores when they join an Ina community. Wright, for example is extremely jealous of Shori when he realizes that she must have relationships with several other human symbionts and Ina mates. Wright complains: "I didn't know then that I was agreeing to be part of a harem. You left that little bit out" (p. 89). Wright is shocked and disgusted by Iosif's arrangement of suitable marriage and mating partners for her: "He'll hook you up . . . with a group of Ina brothers. My God, a group of brothers" (p. 93).

Although concerned for Wright's feelings, Shori recognizes he must adjust to the Ina way of life -- as she plans to do: "My mothers had lived together in the same community, shared a mate, and worked things out somehow. It could be done. It was the Ina way" (p 93). Shori also grasps that it is only fair -- as well as loving -- that she also respect her human symbionts interests in having a human mate and raising their own family -- or just the pleasure of sex with someone of their own choosing (p. 253). These multiple polyamorous bonds mean that relationships between human symbionts are common as well. Celia describes life with her former Ina, Stephan, as "about the closest thing I've seen to a workable group marriage" (p. 153).

Ina have sexual relationships with their symbionts who are both male and female; similarly human symbionts may find themselves attracted to Ina regardless of gender or sexual preference. However, their preferences -- when expressed -- are generally respected. Joel, for example, asks to join Shori's family because he is uncomfortable with the idea of being a male Ina's symbiont: "There's too much sexual feeling involved when you guys feed. I wanted that from a woman" (p. 164).

About the Author

Octavia E. Butler was born June 22, 1947 in Pasadena, California. After watching *Devil Girl from Mars* (an especially lurid 1950's science fiction B-movie), then-12-year-old Octavia decided to go writer her own fantasy and science-fiction tinged stories. Undeterred by dyslexia, Butler studied writing at California State University and UCLA. Mentored by respected science fiction author Harlan Ellison, Butler published her first novel, *Patternmaster*, in 1976. In 1995, she became the first science fiction writer to win the MacArthur Foundation's "Genius" Grant and later earned PEN American Center's lifetime achievement award.

Influenced by her perspectives as both a woman and an African America, Butler's science fiction and fantasy works often explore racial inequality and gender. Her most popular novel, *Kindred* (1979), depicts a modern African-American woman who is sporadically cast back in time to the lives of her ancestors' in the antebellum south.

Butler garnered multiple Hugo and Nebula awards and iconic status among modern SF fans before her death in 2006. Her final novel, *Fledgling*, was published in 2005. She was posthumously inducted into the Science Fiction Writer's Hall of Fame in 2010.

Further Reading

[Blood colony](#) By: [Tananarive Due](#)

Like *Fledgling*, this book is speculative fiction with a powerful female protagonist. A new street drug "Glow" -- derived from the blood of immortals is helping to wipe out AIDS. But a violent sect of Vatican assassins is on the hunt for distributors -- and those with immortal blood, like psychic teen Fana Wolde.

Never let me go By: Kazuo Ishiguro

Childhood friends grow up in a not-so-distant future where human clones are created and raised to donate their vital organs. Though the tone and content differ from *Fledgling*, both are speculative fiction novels that use unconventional settings to explore intricacies of relationships, and the reliability (or unreliability) of memory.

Let me in By: John Ajvide Lindqvist

This novel uses classic vampire legends to tell the story of 12-year-old Oskar, a victim of bullying who befriends the girl next door. Although more straight-up horror than *Fledgling*, it also focuses on personal relationships and social problems that will intrigue Butler's fans.

The historian By: Elizabeth Kostova

Very different than Butler's novel, *The Historian* explores traditional vampire legends surrounding the historical figure, Vlad the Impaler. Its protagonist is an American teen in Amsterdam, who discovers fascinating letters among her father's papers in a blank book labelled Drakulya. When he disappears, she's left to search out chilling truths that span continents and generations.

Mona Lisa awakening By: Sunny

Both share common themes: a long-lived humanoid race that has the power to heal rapidly; a being who is a mixture of human and the other race; erotic relationships that provide support for the non-human race. There are significant differences in the stories, but those who enjoyed *Fledgling* might want to investigate *Mona Lisa Awakening*.

The country of Ice Cream Star By: Sandra Newman

Like *Fledgling*, this is ambitious, unusual science fiction novel spotlights a fierce, African-American female protagonist. In a dystopian near-future, America's population is decimated by a plague that kills everyone by the age of twenty. Led by older teens, a few tribes still survive by plundering abandoned homes and hunting. Fifteen-year-old Ice Cream Star (like Shori) is crucial to her tribe's survival.

Dark matter: a century of speculative fiction from the African diaspora By: Sheree R. Thomas

Science fiction/fantasy fans intrigued by *Fledgling*'s explorations of race and identity may also enjoy this anthology of speculative short fiction by leading black authors in the genre, including Butler herself. Many offer poignant explorations of humanity, identity, and loss.

This NoveList Book Discussion Guide was developed by Kaitlyn Moore. Kaitlyn Moore is a graduate of Guilford College, a teacher of English as a second language, and an itinerant expert on South East Asian cuisine. Revised in 2015 by Kimberly S. Burton, NoveList Adult Readers Advisory Specialist.