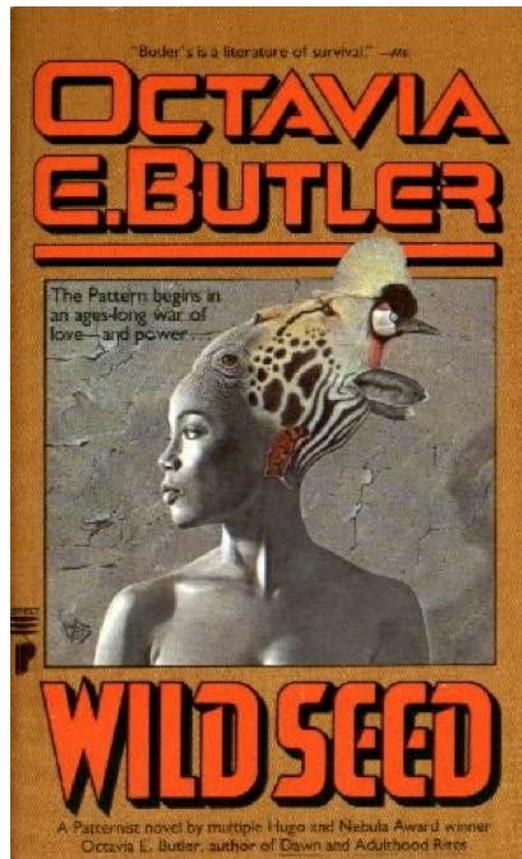


Octavia E. Butler (1947-2006): *Wild Seed* (1980)



*Wild Seed* by Octavia E. Butler is an astounding book for many reasons. For me it was my introduction to African-American science fiction. I liked that it starts in Africa. I liked the premise of a man who cannot die (he can take over someone else's body with a touch) and a woman who is a shapechanger and a healer, also apparently immortal. The power dynamics between them, the tale of how they choose to live and how they negotiate the race, sex, and class structures of the United States (the novel begins in 1690)—well, I find this novel so rich and intriguing that I included it in a syllabus for a literature class.

I distinctly remember the moment when I thought to myself, *yes, this book is going to be good—it's going to surprise me and stretch my mind*. Early in the book, Doro (the one who steals bodies) watches as Anyanwu, the shapechanger, changes her shape from that of an old woman to that of a beautiful young-seeming woman (her shape as she is if she does not alter herself). Here's the line that hooked me (Chapter 1, page 15 in the 1980 Popular Library Edition pictured):

She began molding her body into another shape.

She shifts by physically rubbing and shaping her body! How cool is that? Later, on their transatlantic voyage, she becomes curious about dolphins and shapes a hand into a fin after everyone on the ship has feasted on one (Chapter 5, page 79):

Everyone ate well that night. Anyanwu ate better than anyone, because for her, the flesh of the fish told her all she needed to know about the creature's physical structure—all she needed to know to take its shape and live as it did. Just a small amount of raw flesh told her more than she had words to say. Within each bite, the creature told her its story clearly thousands of times. That night in their cabin, Doro caught her experimentally turning one of her arms into a flipper.

Butler shows how Anyanwu's healing abilities and her shapeshifting are related and combined. She also shows how for Anyanwu, both shapeshifting and healing are analytical skills, not intuitive, or not only intuitive. I love the worldbuilding concept behind how she changes—and I also love the idea of her sitting in her cabin, making her arm a flipper, just for the fun of it.

It's my hope that one day I'll write something that makes a reader widen her eyes, think *that's so cool!*—and settle herself down for a good deep read.