

# “THERE ARE NO MONSTERS; IT’S JUST US”: AN INTERVIEW WITH LAUREN BEUKES

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## ABSTRACT

Lauren Beukes is an award-winning, internationally best-selling South African author who has gained a reputation for crossing genres and styles. Born in Johannesburg, Beukes currently lives in Cape Town, where she writes novels, comics, screenplays, TV shows and journalism. Her latest novel, *Broken monsters*, won Best Suspense Novel in the American Library Association’s 2015 Reading List and was recently recommended by George R.R. Martin on a list of nine books to read. Her previous novel, *The shining girls*, has won multiple awards, including the University of Johannesburg Prize and the Exclusive Books Bookseller’s Choice Award. *Zoo City* won the Arthur C. Clarke Award. I first met Beukes in early 2015 when she was doing research for her new novel at the National English Literary Museum in Grahamstown. The discussion in this interview focuses not on the ideas for her next project, but instead on the artistic motifs, philosophical issues and social themes that recur throughout her first four novels. This conversation was recorded on 13 August 2015, and took place at Beukes’s home in Tamboerskloof, Cape Town.

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\* CS: Caitlin Stobie; LB: Lauren Beukes

CS: Artwork comes up a lot in your work, especially in *Moxyland* and in *Broken monsters*. Are there any particular artists who inform your creative process, or who inform those particular artworks, like *Woof & tweet*?

LB: I’ve actually written an art story which is available free online. It’s called “Unathi Battles the black hairballs”, which is of course a riff on *Yoshimi Battles the Pink Robots*. It is about art monsters, and it is Takashi Murakami’s art versus Haruki Murakami. Damien Hirst gets a mention as well.

I was in London a few years ago – I think it was at the time of the Arthur C. Clarke award, actually – and there was a Damien Hirst exhibition on which I went to see. It was stupid. It was a skinned sheep, screaming on the toilet, with a hypodermic needle in its arm. It was a rotting cow’s head and maggots, and they would turn into flies, and then into fly-paper. It was this whole circle-of-life thing. Really?

I’d just seen the *Strandbeests* the day before; Theo Jansen had been demonstrating one live in Trafalgar Square. It was just the most remarkable thing. He talks about it as being an animal that lives on the beaches in the Netherlands, and it evolves. He doesn’t mean it evolves, he means he learns how they work and what he needs to do to adapt to the environment. But they do roam free, and the one sucks up air all the time, and if it hits the water and sucks up water, it changes direction. But it’s completely binary – there’s no brain, there’s no chip. They harvest the wind, and they’re these gigantic things. They’re magnificent and beautiful, and again, just surprising and interesting and say something about life.

James Webb does some very interesting audio installations, which I think I was influenced by. After I wrote *Moxyland*, somebody told me about Ralph Borland’s artwork. He did these beautiful sharks on the foreshore that move in the wind, and they make sound as they move. They’re like skeletal sharks – they’re ghost sharks on the foreshore, because that used to be underwater. It’s such amazing art, kind of reflecting history – and a big theme in my books is how we are haunted by history, so that really spoke to me. I loved the ghost sharks so much.

CS: You’ve said before that your ideas develop like a Polaroid in your mind. Are there any cinematic influences that you think of when you’re writing? Any specific styles or directors that you think of?

LB: I don’t think that I’m trying to do this Christopher Nolan style. I do think very visually because I was in animation, and that caused me to think visually because some poor bastard had to draw the ideas. But I really like Christopher Nolan and I really like Guillermo del Toro, and Alfonso Cuarón. It’s not so much the style, because some directors are only style. I think David Fincher is only style. I don’t think he has a lot of substance, whereas someone like Danny Boyle does darkness but also does heart really well. They are constant storytellers: they really know what they are doing, and they really care about the story: their stories are surprising, and they don’t go where you are expecting them to go. You walk away thinking: “Oh my God, what was that? That was amazing.”

Not Nolan’s *Dark knight* stuff, but *Memento* and *Interstellar* – those were just incredible. Absolutely amazing. And so cool that they’re using pop culture as a way of exploring really big ideas. That was a huge blockbuster hit, but it was examining all these ideas about memory and loss and who we are and what it means to be alone in the world, and that was amazing – looking at those big issues through the most compelling, surprising stories.

CS: I recently came across a website for interactive fiction – basically, a new-age *Choose your own adventure*. What do you think about that kind of genre? Is that the way fiction is heading?

LB: No. Storytelling is the oldest form of fiction, and it’s the oldest way of being human, and that’s not going to change. The book is never going to die as a form. Ever. Yes, you can interact with storytelling. Videogames at the moment are so rich – much richer than movies, actually. Those stories are fun, and it’s great to see interactive storytelling happening, but it ultimately gets in the way of the story. It gets in the way of you living through someone else’s experience, of inhabiting a story. So it’s fun and gimmicky, and I’m sure there are people who have pulled off magnificent versions of that, but it’s never going to replace the book.

CS: What about another “hybrid form”: creative non-fiction? Books such as Helen Macdonald’s *H is for hawk* or Rebecca Solnit’s *A field guide to getting lost* have received a lot of critical acclaim. As a former journalist, what are your feelings about that?

LB: Again, it’s beautifully crafted storytelling. The fact that it’s real but also surprising is, I think, what carries it. There’s a really amazing book of essays by Leslie Jamison called *The empathy exams*, which is just beautiful. Jonny Steinberg’s work on *The number*, too. They’re remarkable pieces, told narratively, that try to make sense of stories. They explore a lot about who we are, and convey a lot

of big ideas. Storytelling is always sense-making, and good narrative journalism actually gets into that. And I think narrative journalism also makes ideas very personal. It makes these very big, dense issues which we struggle to deal with accessible, because you can see them from a subjective perspective. You can see what that means to a person and to a life.

CS: Recurring from *Zoo city* to *Broken monsters* is the idea of free will.

LB: It’s also in *The shining girls*.

CS: Yes, it comes in there a lot. So, I was thinking about free will, determinism, and other philosophical concepts. And then, you recently retweeted an article saying that David Benatar influenced *True detective* and the character Rust Cohle. I remember speaking with you about *True detective* being released after *The shining girls*, and their uncanny similarities. Did David Benatar inspire you at all? More generally, do you read philosophers and try to bring philosophy into your fiction?

LB: No, it’s coincidental. I don’t actually have a proper university education, although I kind of wish I did. Philosophy is dense reading that I should be doing but that I’m not doing on my own.

When I went back to UCT at 25 and I was studying, it was amazing, but then I got bumped up to the MA in Creative Writing. I also wouldn’t have coped with studying full-time. It’s the one thing I regret. I don’t know if I would be here, where I am now, if I had studied full-time, but I would have loved to study.

I absorb a lot through observation, and through other reading. I study how philosophies shape culture and other writing. I absorb pop-culture philosophemes.

CS: One thing that I noticed throughout all of your novels is that you come back to the ideas of social justice and empathy, and how we treat other beings, regardless of what types of “others” they may be. In *Broken monsters*, you explore the idea of putting oneself imaginatively into another person’s position through Layla when she’s acting. But at the same time, you have a sociopathic serial killer, which can be read as the inverse of that. When writing these characters, how did you imaginatively situate yourself to understand the inverse of empathy?

LB: All of writing is taking a grain or seed of yourself and turning it into a tree. That becomes the character. So, Harper is the cold cynicism. He’s the moment when I was 24, and someone had broken into my car, smashed my back windscreen and stolen my speakers. And then I met a beggar the next day and he said, “Please can I have some money.” And I replied, “No, because my speakers got stolen.”

I was extrapolating and judging, and lumping everyone together, and it was a complete lack of empathy.

Harper is also my dead cynicism. I am idealistic and cynical at the same time. He’s very self-centred and very selfish, and he’s dealing with his compulsion. So writing the novel involved finding that stuff in me – which made it even more repugnant to write – and blowing that up really big.

It also involved doing a lot of research into real serial killers and what they’re actually like. Harper is a real serial killer; Clayton is something else entirely. Harper is empty, as real serial killers are.

I was tweeting about this the other day: about the attack in Kenya, at the university, and how those men are not monsters, they’re pathetic losers. Because they are so afraid – so afraid of women, and so afraid of education. We should laugh at them. Yes, they’re awful. Yes, they do monstrous things. But we should feel sorry for them, because they’re little, pathetic, jerk-offs. That doesn’t make what they do less monstrous, but we have a terrible habit in our culture of revering evil, and putting it on a pedestal, and making it more than human. It’s not. It’s the most basic human instinct. Well, storytelling is the most basic, but it comes right after that. Sex and violence: that’s what we are. Sex and violence and storytelling.

CS: Would you say it’s possible to empathise with a sociopath – or, rather, that we should try to?

LB: Well, there was a moment when I felt sorry for Harper, when he realised that he was trapped in a circle and that he couldn’t break out of it. He was trying to break out of it, and I did feel a bit sorry for him then. But, you know, that is the nature of serial killers: they are stuck in their compulsions, and it is an addictive behaviour, because they’re so broken. I do feel empathy for broken masculinity and broken men, which is what Clayton and Jonno are.

CS: Jonno is interesting, because he’s like the online everyman. I think he’s the scariest example of the three, because one can relate so easily to his feeling of wanting to be liked.

LB: Oh, absolutely. He is very interesting, and he possesses empathy, and then he slides. Harper is a classic serial killer, and I don’t want to compare him to Clayton and Jonno – but Clayton and Jonno both want to be seen. I read an interesting article recently about a prison counsellor, who was talking about every time he or she has seen where violence comes from. They said it comes from humiliation. I think that is obviously the broadest possible definition, but there is a sense

of powerlessness, which is where serial killers come from. I think that is why we see a lot of anti-feminist rhetoric on the whole, because men are feeling threatened. Well, some men. Not all men.

CS: Hashtag.

LB: [Laughs] Those men possess fractured masculinity. Jonno and Clayton both have that, and they also desperately want to be seen. And that’s also something we all have in common. We want to be seen; we want to be recognised as human. Social media offers us that affirmation through the likes; it’s all about the eyeballs. It’s about who is seen and who isn’t, whose art is elevated and whose isn’t, how you play the game – you know, the talent doesn’t necessarily matter. And, of course, Layla has that to a certain extent as well, but in a different way.

Empathy is central to my work, and compassion, and kindness. But also, those qualities come from imagination. That’s why I think it’s so critically important that we do write the other – that we write each other, I should say. I think “the other” is a weird construct.

CS: How so?

LB: It’s immediately alienating. “The other”. You know, I think “each other” is a different thing. What’s weird is that people have no problem writing a serial killer, but if you write outside your race, in particular, people are frightened to do it. That’s probably because of outrage culture, but also people get it horribly wrong – like male science fiction or fantasy writers who write terrible female characters. And not even within a genre; you do find male writers who can’t imagine a woman. That’s a failure of the imagination, and that’s why fiction is so important. *Broken monsters* is about the doors in our heads, and fiction is a door into other people’s heads.

CS: There are configurations of the animal throughout all your texts: how they interact with the human, how they are valued in comparison to the human. For example, in *Broken monsters* there is the assumption that the first murder is racially motivated, because of the gluing together of a black body and an animal, and that level of degradation. How can an author use animals in order to comment on the human condition, or human prejudices?

LB: I didn’t think about until I interviewed a Detroit homicide detective and asked if I could walk him through the case. It was amazing; it was really cool. So I said,

“Listen, this is the first body.” And then he said, “I’m going to look at whether it’s racially motivated.” I hadn’t thought of that, but it was an obvious motive. Obviously!

We reduce people to animals, when we say things like, “Oh, criminals are such animals.” And I think that that is exactly where *Zoo City* came from. I was having those dinner party conversations where we all end up talking about crime, and how “Those animals broke in, and they did this, and they did that.” That becomes racist rhetoric as well.

CS: And a lack of empathy, again.

LB: Exactly. All these ways of removing humanity (through making people animals or monsters) – we’re not any of those things. We’re absolutely human. I’m sure you picked up as well on looking into Nietzsche’s abyss. The worst thing that we’re going to find looking back is us, and everything we’re capable of in the world. The good and the evil. There are no monsters; it’s just us. And we have to live with that. And that’s even worse. It would be lovely if there were nasty supernatural monsters who possessed people, and the devil did make you do it. But it’s not. It’s a failure of society.

That’s not to say some people are not more broken than others, or have psychoses. I’m very interested in epigenetics, of which I only have a layperson’s understanding. (I’m sure that would irritate real geneticists.) So, I arrived at the idea that some genes can be turned on and off through experience. If they starved pregnant mice, for example, their offspring would be more likely to be obese, because starving the mothers literally turns on the “gorge” gene. (Completely, completely layman.) They talk about this in terms of cycles of poverty and violence. If you don’t receive affection as a child, the ability to be affectionate is not turned on. That leads to circles, and is how we can have circles of poverty and circles of violence, abuse and abandonment.

I think we’re at such an interesting point of history right now, where it feels like history’s ghosts have come back: from Rhodes Must Fall to Ferguson to the immigrants in Calais. You can’t gloss it over, and it’s not ancient history, because those wounds are still here.

CS: I’m so glad you mentioned Rhodes Must Fall. As a former student of UCT, what are your thoughts on the current discussions about decolonisation and transformation?

LB: What is ridiculous to me is the people who have never cared about Rhodes up until today – who didn't walk under the statue and feel warmth in their hearts for this great man who did such great things. He has literally meant nothing to them until now, and now they're suddenly concerned about, "Oh no, but it's our culture." It wasn't yesterday. They didn't even notice that statue. Would they have even been able to identify it? And people cling onto this thing, like they want to protect this culture that they've never actually had a care for until now, but for the people on the other side, it is a wound. It is a living wound which still exists today. If you go to the Cape Flats, if you go anywhere, that wound is raw.

Those people are saying that their non-existent (until yesterday) sentimental attachment to a statue is more important than recognising the horror of history, and the reality of history, and what it meant. It's crazy. It's so blinkered and so short-sighted. So I think that we absolutely need to pull down the statues.

Not that I wish to forget history entirely. I do think we need to recognise our heroes – like Ruth First. There are wonderful people who did fundamentally good things. This also ties into this whole Women's Month awfulness. As Helen Moffett said, it's become the worst mash-up between Valentine's Day and Mother's Day. It's pink and it's fluffy. It was fundamentally about incredibly strong, powerful women who took a stand, but women are notoriously side-lined by history, especially in activist roles.

When I was doing research on my book *Maverick*, which is being re-released in October or November [2015], I was doing research on Helen Joseph and Lilian Ngoyi. Helen Joseph wrote three books and lots of articles. Lilian Ngoyi was known as the Roaring Lioness, and she gave many speeches, but no one ever wrote them down. I got hold of the ANC Women's League. They put me in touch with her daughter, whose name was Memory Ngoyi, which I thought was very promising, but it was very difficult to get information out of her. It's lost, our history is lost.

It was amazing doing research on *The shining girls*, because I read a lot of stuff by Studs Terkel, which is still around. He did all these interviews back in the thirties and the forties with ordinary people, like shop assistants and women working on the shipyards. There's so much documentation. And ordinary people's voices. We don't have that here. We have lost so much of that material. All that I want us to have is a *This American life*, you know, *This South African life*, to have ordinary stories and real people and to document that stuff, because it's gone. We have a generation of activists dying out, and it's just terrifying.



CS: It’s interesting that you mention Women’s Day after Rhodes Must Fall. A lot of women felt oppressed by the kind of rhetoric that was being used in RMF, and the way that people were treating the space. It affected queer people, too; now there’s been a branch-off from the Rhodes Must Fall movement called the Queer Revolution. It’s interesting how something that should be very intersectional is perceived not to be. I get the sense from your novels that you are very much a proponent of intersectional feminism. Could you define your feminism?

LB: I think it is about being a decent human being. It is about the freedom of choice – we all should have freedom of choice in our lives. If you want to get a boob job, that’s fine; if you want to wear a burkha, that’s fine. It’s your choice. We have no right to tell other women what to do. We can point out to them that you wear high heels because of historical reasons, and there are these medical effects, but it’s still their choice – or my choice, because I do wear heels.

None of my characters get into fistfights. None of them are kicking ass and punching bad guys. Zinzi gets threatened with a screwdriver and runs away. Zora does punch Harper and break his jaw, but it’s not unrealistic. She doesn’t overpower him. I specifically try to avoid that, and I think my women are interesting for who they are, as opposed to what they can do, or how much ass they can kick in high heels and leather.

All the different ways of being a feminist are bullshit. It fundamentally comes down to choice, freedom of choice. And that’s completely across the board with everyone.

CS: It goes back to that idea of free will, again.

LB: Absolutely. Of course, philosophers tell me free will does not exist. I did it in first-year philosophy when I was 25 at UCT, and I was explaining to my partner at the time. I said, “Okay, these are the seven reasons why we don’t have free will.” He responded, “Oh, yeah, those all make sense. So tell me why we do have free will.” And I said, “Well, there’s this reason, but it’s kind of all an illusion.” *[Laughs]* But I feel like I do have free will, which is obviously an illusion, but I also don’t – it might be a deep part of the programming, but how else do you explain life choices?

I did a really interesting genetic test called 23 and Me. You can’t do it in this country, but I did it when I was in the States. You spit into a test tube for 15 minutes – bubbles don’t count, you’ve got to fill it up to the line – and then you send it off to a lab for testing. They give you pages and pages and pages of results. I’m 0.4 percent Neanderthal, which is freaking rad, four percent East

Asian, which must be Malay, 90-odd percent European, and 0.5 percent African. It also tells you your disease profile. I'm at a slightly lower chance of getting breast cancer; the norm is eight percent and I'm six percent. I'm more likely to be a heroin addict, if I smoke I'm more likely to be a heavier smoker. And then there are other traits: I'm very lucky to have blue eyes, I'm 20 percent likely to have blonde hair (so mine isn't entirely blonde).

They also then linked the studies, and there was one which said that you are genetically more likely to repeat the same mistakes. And I said, "What? No!" It was based on a sample study of about 24 people, which is not a good study. A good study is 3000. So I thought, "Screw that, that's not free will, and I'm not going to make the same mistakes again."

CS: Break the cycle!

LB: Exactly.

CS: We were talking about labels earlier, such as feminism. With regard to science fiction, some have shifted away from this label, and preferred to go with Margaret Atwood's "speculative fiction", since science fiction is seen as googly-eyed green men.

LB: Although I think she's since come around on that.

CS: Yes, but the label has stuck. Yet when I encounter articles about you – whether academic or journalistic – the term "science fiction" is used.

LB: That's because I won a major science fiction award, so it will define me forever – even though I won a major literary award and a major horror award and a major mystery award since then. Then people ask me why my stuff isn't that "science-fiction-y", or say *Zoo City* was actually urban fantasy, and how dare it win the award. I'm so tired of that.

CS: What do you think of the distinction between hard science fiction and soft science fiction?

LB: I don't care. I write what I like – very Steve Biko of me, I know. People can tell me what they are afterwards. People have told me *Broken monsters* is horror, and I can see how they could see that, but I really don't care. I care is when genre definitions limit my readers. I've had at least 10 people say to me, "I'm so proud of you with your successes, it's so amazing, but I'm never going to read your book because I don't read sci-fi." It's not like that!

The problem is that it is the label, and I understand what Margaret Atwood was trying to do, which was to try and broaden readership. That’s what you want as a writer: you want readers. The fact that *The shining girls* did so well is because it’s crime. Crime fiction is the biggest market. It’s not really crime, and I’m not really a crime writer – I’m a “whatever” writer.

My French publicist once teased me because I use the word “kinda” a lot. And she said, “Yeah, that is exactly your books. They’re *kinda*.”

People think of science fiction as *Dune*, but if you point out to them that Kurt Vonnegut is science fiction ... I was lucky, I grew up with my dad reading quite heavy science fiction. So he introduced me to Philip K. Dick and Ursula le Guin (although I never actually read her) and Larry Niven and all these really interesting books. But people don’t see it that way. Haruki Murakami’s stuff, and David Mitchell – all of these people basically write science fiction, but we can’t call it that because science fiction is for losers and nerds, and has googly-eyed space men. Meanwhile, we’re completely tolerant of it in other pop culture. People think *Interstellar* is amazing, and *Superhero* is amazing, but God forbid you should write a novel like that.

I think it’s reductive and I think it limits the audience, so I try to avoid labels as much as possible, because I want to have the broadest possible audience. I do think my work operates on a level where it can be read by anyone. I don’t want to be limited; I don’t want people to tell me what I am. Especially as a woman, you are told what you should be all the time. Men get it as well, and that’s where a lot of broken masculinity comes from.

I think some words are overused and immediately stop the debate; they’re like sledgehammers, like “toxic masculinity” or “the patriarchy”. So I try not to use those words, because people are immediately turned off, the same way people are turned off by “science fiction”. You can still talk about those issues, but you can use more neutral words which still mean the same thing, but don’t make people glaze over. It’s really important to be able to do that, to make ideas more accessible.

CS: Which is what being a writer is about, I suppose: finding new ways of –

LB: Conveying the same idea, and sneaking around people. Using their words to get past their defences.