

## **Re-Imagining Apartheid: Making Guilt Visible in Lauren Beukes's *Zoo City* (2010)**

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Lauren Beukes,  
b. Johannesburg,  
1976



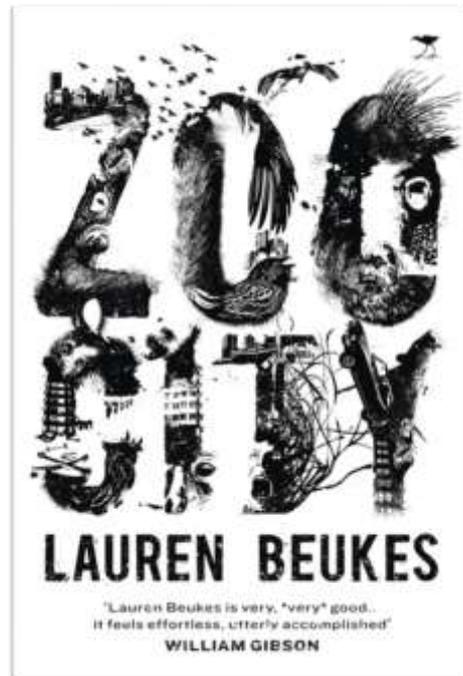
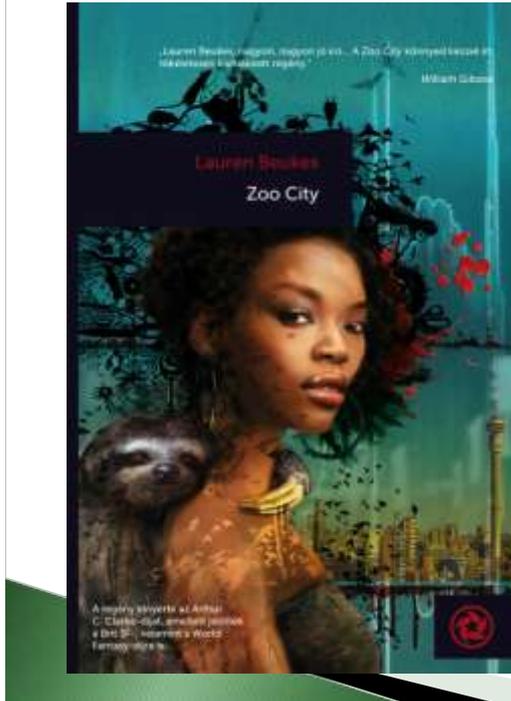
- Award-winning, best-selling novelist.
- Also writes comics, graphic novels, screenplays, TV shows and occasionally journalism.

Author of:

- *Broken Monsters* (2014)
- *The Shining Girls* (2013)
- *Zoo City* (2010)
- *Moxyland* (2008)
  
- *Maverick: Extraordinary Women From South Africa's Past* (2005)

- Lauren Beukes (rhymes with Lucas), a former journalist, is a popular South-African novelist with quite a varied career as a writer.

## First African Arthur C. Clarke winner (2011)



- Although her first novel—the cyberpunk tale *Moxyland*, set in Cape Town—is a much better work, her acclaimed second novel *Zoo City* was the first African winner of the Arthur C. Clarke, the prestigious British award for fantasy and science fiction.
- The award highlights not just the novel itself but Beukes’s spearheading of new trends welcoming fantasy and science-fiction into the diverse African Literatures in English.

## *Zoo City*: the ‘animalled zoos’

- Urban fantasy novel
- Premise: the guilty conscience of criminals can materialize into familiars, provided they accept their guilt (the Undertow is the terrifying alternative, also the ultimate destiny)
- Unclear whether the Zoo Plague or “AAF or Acquired Aposymbiotic Familiarism” (79) is supernatural
- The familiars, real animals that accompany the repentant criminal for life, grant a magical power (reward for processing guilt)
- Discrimination and ghettoization of the ‘animalled zoos’ (recalling Apartheid)
- Beukes: “Both *Moxyland* and *Zoo City* are apartheid allegories”

- *Zoo City* is a quite accomplished urban fantasy novel, based on the premise that the guilty conscience of criminals can materialize into familiars, provided they accept their guilt (a descent into the Undertow, a kind of hell, is the terrifying alternative, and also their ultimate destiny).
- It is unclear whether the Zoo Plague or “AAF or Acquired Aposymbiotic Familiarism” (79) is supernatural.
- The familiars, *real* animals that accompany the repentant criminal for life, are not quite the ordinary creatures they appear to be, as they also grant their host a magical power as a sort of reward for their processing of guilt.
- This externalization of guilt, however, results in the discrimination and ghettoisation of the individuals dubbed ‘animalled zoos’ in a way that inevitably recalls Apartheid.
- The author herself grants that “Both *Moxyland* and *Zoo City* are Apartheid allegories” (*Locus Magazine* interview 2015)



## Daemons and patronuses: a positive alliance

- Daemon: Soul in animal shape linked for ever to their human companion (Lyra Belacqua in Philip Pullman's trilogy, *His Dark Materials*)
- Patronus: protective totemic animal from a hard-to-master spell (J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series)



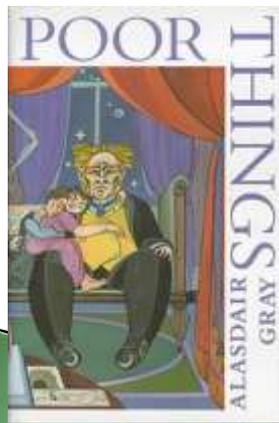
- Beukes's premise also connects with the presence of daemons and patronuses in British fantasy fiction.
- Beukes refers specifically in *Zoo City* to Philip Pullman's trilogy *His Dark Materials*, in which human souls take the shape of animals whose qualities are similar to their own.
- Likewise, in *Harry Potter* advanced magic allows wizards and witches to cast the spell which generates a patronus, a totemic magic animal which materializes for their protection.

## A constant reminder of guilt

- ▶ Impossible to conceal one's own animal: crime cannot really be atoned for.
- ▶ Hosts ghettoized into Zoo City.
- ▶ The 'animalled zoos' form a whole sub-class.
- ▶ "A personalized scarlet letter": Morality replaces race as the grounds for social Apartheid (need for scapegoating the 'other').
- ▶ The 'animalling' of criminals affects the whole world: first publicized case Afghanistan warlord, 2001?; first actual case Australian bank robber, 1986.
- ▶ Animalling includes white people: the main villain is a rich white man, hiding his monstrous animal other.

- In Beukes's novel, though, the presence of the familiar animal is far less positive.
- It is impossible to conceal one's own animal, and hence guilt, as separation is painful for both human and familiar.
- Crime, actually, cannot be really atoned for as the animals stay on with their human host seemingly for life, even after prison sentences have been served.
- The visibility of guilt pushes the hosts to lead ghettoized lives in Zoo City, where the 'animalled zoos' form a whole social sub-class.
- This produces a 'Scarlet letter effect': Morality replaces race as the grounds for social Apartheid (the need for scapegoating the 'other' is given a most potent, visible excuse).
- Allow me to clarify that the 'animalling' of criminals affects the whole world. The first widely publicized case is a Taliban warlord in Afghanistan, around the year 2000 (the novel is set in 2011). The earliest recorded case is that of an Australian bank robber in 1986.
- Animalling includes white people and, indeed, Beukes's main villain is a rich white man, hiding his monstrous animal other in his mansion.

- I'll turn now to a consideration of Beukes's use of the city of Johannesburg as a background for her fantasy novel.

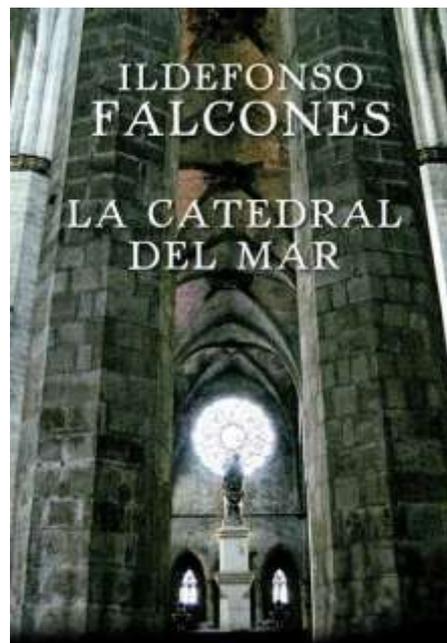
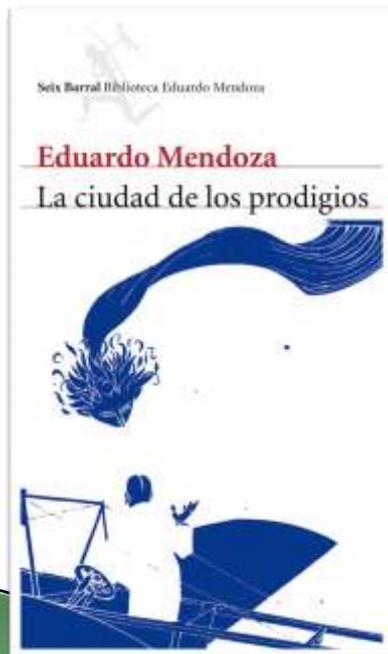


## Imagining the city for its people

- Alasdair Gray (1937–), Glasgow writer and artist
- Fantasy novel *Lanark* (1981): “if a city hasn't been used by an artist, not even the inhabitants live there imaginatively.”
- Gray imagined and drew Glasgow into its being in the late 20th century

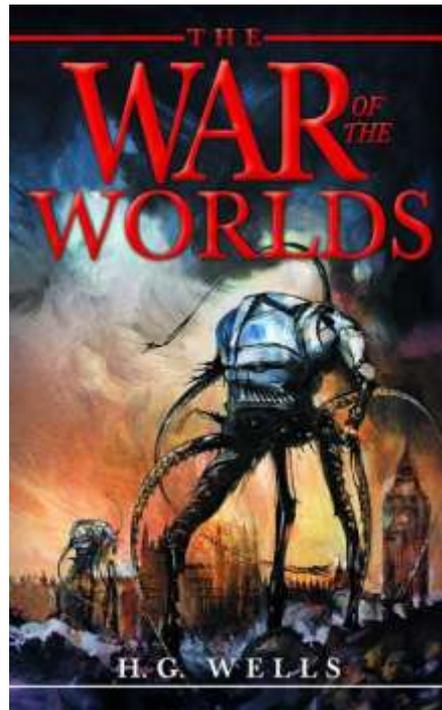
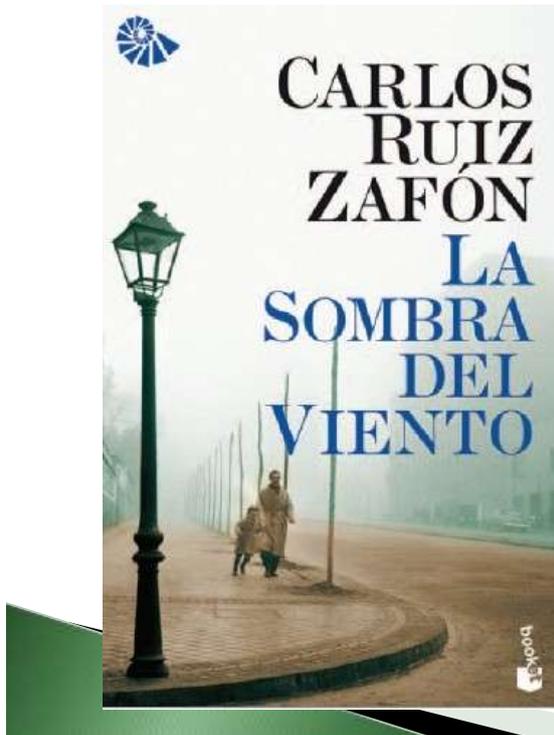
- Glaswegian writer and artist Alasdair Gray famously wrote in his fantasy novel *Lanark* (1981) that “if a city hasn't been used by an artist, not even the inhabitants live there imaginatively”.
- Gray himself is responsible for imagining and drawing Glasgow into being in the late 20th century.
- Incidentally, I know this first-hand, since his pseudo-Frankenstein tale *Poor Things* (1991) took me to the very Glaswegian neighbourhood where the events happen. Telling the author about this was one of the strangest moments in my biography as a reader.
- My point is that local writers face the very complicated task of, paradoxically, making the city they fantasize about ‘real’ for its inhabitants. Also for the visitors.

## Imagining Barcelona, for us and for visitors



- Thus, Barcelona became real for me thanks to Eduardo Mendoza's wonderful *La ciudad de los prodigios* (*City of prodigies*, published in 1986).
- And I have lost count of how often I have heard tourists refer to the gothic church of Santa María del Mar as 'the cathedral of the Sea' because of Ildefonso Falcones' eponymous best-selling novel, published in 2006.
- These are both historical novels, the former covering the period between the 1880s and the 1920s, the latter the 14th century—which in a sense is also a form of urban fantasy, for we cannot check what the city was really like.

## The hardest trick to pull



- Yet, the hardest trick to pull is turning your own city into the location for a credible fantasy story.
- Carlos Ruiz Zafón did this for Barcelona with his gothic novel *La sombra del viento* (*Shadow of the Wind*), published in 2001.
- One of the pioneers, of course, is H.G. Wells who managed to narrate a convincing alien invasion of London back in 1898.

## The merit of *District 9* (2009), Neil Blomkamp



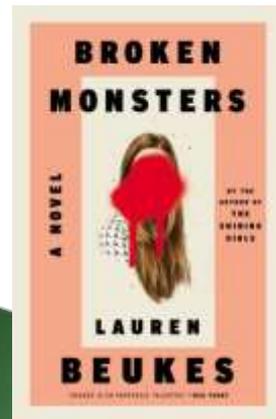
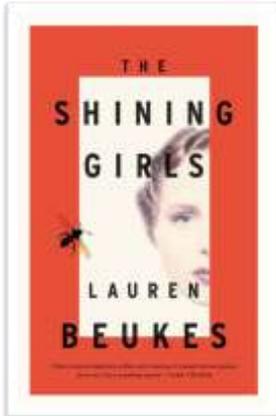
- The merit of Neil Blomkamp's extremely popular movie *District 9* is, thus, that it managed to convince world-wide audiences that the setting for science-fiction need not be limited to Anglo-American areas.
- His use of Johannesburg also showed that local concerns, like the arrival of thousands of migrants and refugees in the city and the memory of Apartheid, can shape fantasy in relevant, original ways.

## The 'failure' of *Chappie* (2015)



- Blomkamp's most recent film, *Chappie* (2015), which narrates how a police robot becomes a conscious, sentient being, fails, however, to integrate both fantasies in the same urban landscape.
- It would have been quite a nice touch to have Chappie and his pals deployed in the district to which the poor refugee alien 'prawns' are moved at the end of the previous film.
- The important point here is that as Blomkamp's *District 9* and Beukes's *Zoo City* show, fantasy is renewed and revitalized when authors use local settings.

## An error?: The globalized novel



“I’m always secretly writing about Johannesburg. The Detroit of *Broken Monsters* is really Hillbrow MI. Chicago in *The Shining Girls* is really Johannesburg IL. But these things are universal. Hillbrow as a neighbourhood is held up as an example of everything wrong with South Africa: the poverty and boarded-up buildings and refugees and crime. People say the same things about Detroit. It is a symbol of ‘everything wrong with this country.’”

- This is why Beukes’s decision to set her two more recent novels in Chicago and Detroit, respectively, seems to me a serious mistake.
- She claims that: “I’m always secretly writing about Johannesburg. The Detroit of *Broken Monsters* is really Hillbrow. Chicago in *The Shining Girls* is really Johannesburg. But these things are universal. Hillbrow as a neighbourhood is held up as an example of everything wrong with South Africa: the poverty and boarded-up buildings and refugees and crime. People say the same things about Detroit. It is a symbol of ‘everything wrong with this country’”. (*Locus* interview, 2015)
- Yet, surely, Chicago and Detroit have been portrayed in very many novels and films, whereas Johannesburg has not accrued world-wide the presence that these two American cities already have.
- Am I saying that the novelist must be *enslaved* to his or her local environment? No, what I am saying is that a) it is NOT TRUE that there is a universal pattern that makes Johannesburg and Detroit identical; b) yes, arguably the writer has a certain obligation, as Alasdair Gray

suggested, to give visibility to his or her own land, for this is no task for an outsider. You even run the risk of losing your own territory—think what Mel Gibson’s *Braveheart* has done to Scotland...

- Let me return to the plot of *Zoo City* before I resume the matter of its location. After all, the animalling of the protagonist gives Beukes the excuse to write about her neighbourhood.

## *Zoo City.* White author, black protagonist

- ▶ Zinzi December: 35, black, ex-journalist (lifestyle) and ex-addict; ex-middle class
- ▶ ‘Animalled’ for indirectly causing the death of her brother (killed by drug dealer)
- ▶ Convergence of blackness and guilt in the often unsympathetic protagonist: A scam artist (specialises in 419 fraud emails), heavily indebted to her drug dealer
- ▶ Plot: A magical finder of lost objects, Zinzi is commissioned by white music producer, Odi Huron, to find a missing black girl, half of a very popular pop music duo with her brother (ritual to get rid of his own familiar)

- Zinzi December is a 35-year-old black woman, a former journalist specializing in lifestyle and, above all, an ex-addict; you might call her, as she calls herself, ex-middle class.
- She is ‘animalled’ and imprisoned as an accessory to the death of her brother, killed by a drug dealer.
- As, once free, she gets heavily indebted to a new drug dealer, Zinzi works for him as a scam artist. She uses her writing skills to write 419 fraud emails, the kind in which a person in need asks for your help in exchange for a great opportunity to make money...

- The convergence of blackness and guilt in the often unsympathetic protagonist is complicated, and, certainly, many readers fail to connect with her.
- The bizarre plot narrates how, since she is a magical finder of lost objects, Zinzi is commissioned by white music producer Odi Huron to find a missing black girl, half of a very popular pop music duo with her brother. Odi not only keeps the black siblings practically enslaved but also needs them for a bloody *muti* (magic) ritual that will allow him to get rid of his own secret familiar animal. As it turns out, he had killed another of his singers years ago but was never tried.

## Silenced race issues

- ▶ Constant mention of refugees from conflictive areas of Africa, such as Congo (boyfriend Benoît)
- ▶ Comments on race missing:
  - characters described with no reference to their skin colour (this has to be inferred, same problem in *Moxyland*)
  - ‘racist’ used meaning ‘anti-animalled’
- ▶ Silence around race in the novel



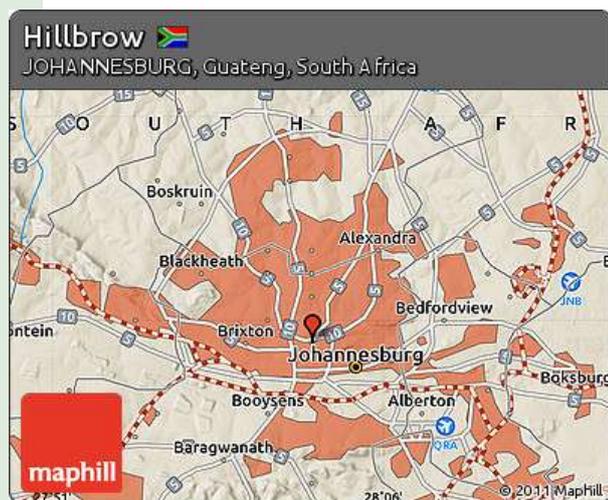
Zinzi and her sloth

- Beukes makes constant mention of the refugees from conflictive areas of Africa, such as Congo, even characterizing Zinzi’s patient boyfriend Benoît as one of them.
- Yet, she makes no specific comments on race and tends to describe her characters with no reference to their skin colour. This has to be inferred.
- South-African readers may recognize the clues afforded by characters’ names but to readers elsewhere ‘Zinzi December’ need not connote blackness...

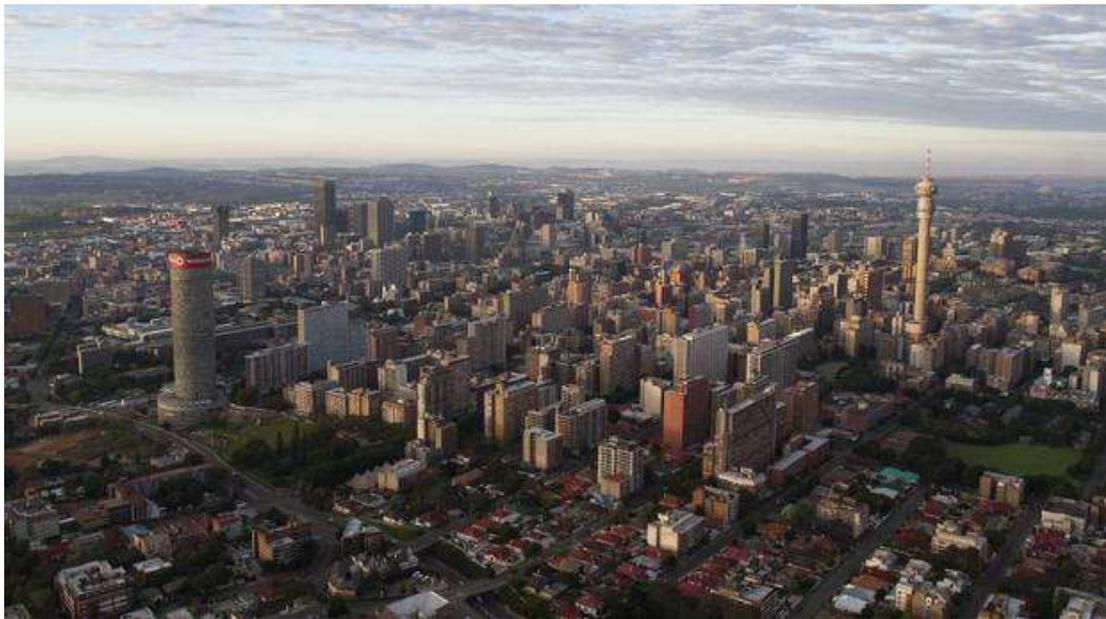
- Without the illustration on the book cover, readers may take a while to understand that Zinzi is black. Beukes does offer details about her clothes but not about her physical appearance.
- Likewise, the word ‘racist’ is used only once in the novel, when Zinzi warns a female police officer that her remarks might be “construed as racist” (35) though she actually means prejudiced against the animalled zoos like herself.
- There is, then, a strange silence around race in the novel, though, arguably, not so much silence about class.

- 1970s Apartheid-designated “whites only” area
- Soon became a “grey area” (mixed)
- Cosmopolitan, politically progressive (one of first gay and lesbian-friendly areas)
- Poor planning: could not cope with rapid population growth
- Lack of investment: 1980s middle-class exodus
- Decay of major buildings > urban slum 1990s
- Today: most residents migrants (townships, rural areas, rest of Africa) many living in abject poverty

## Zoo City = Hillbrow

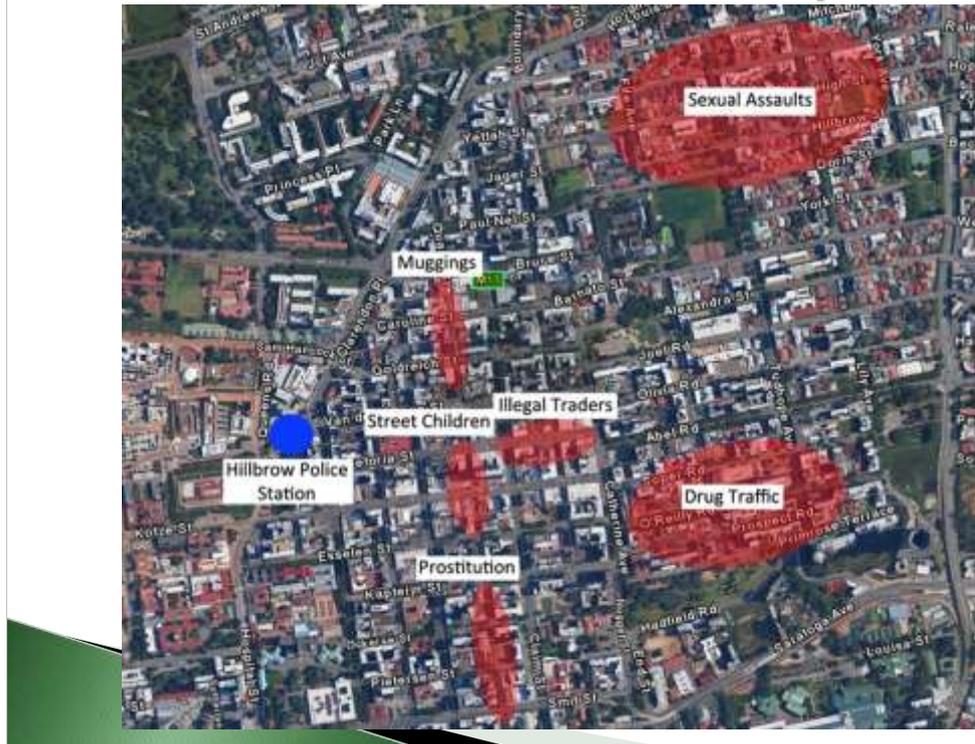


- This absence of comment on race is even stranger if we consider that the neighbourhood nicknamed ‘Zoo City’ in the novel is actually inner-city Hillbrow (within Johannesburg).
- Hillbrow was in the 1970s an Apartheid-designated “whites only” area but it soon became a mixed “grey area”, even a cosmopolitan, politically progressive place, one of first gay and lesbian-friendly areas.



- Poor planning did not allow Hillbrow, though, to cope with its rapid population growth and, together with the lack of investment, this provoked the 1980s middle-class exodus.

## Hillbrow's crime map



- Major buildings decayed and by 1990s Hillbrow was an urban slum, with the reputation for being an extremely dangerous place.
- Today most residents are migrants (from townships, rural areas, the rest of Africa) many living in abject poverty.

## The bad guys' lair in *Chappie*: Ponte City Tower



- Hillbrow also appears in Blomkamp's film *Chappie*, in which its main landmark, the abandoned Ponte City Tower, is the villains' lair.
- This, again, helps to consolidate the idea that Johannesburg's urban landscape and in particular Hillbrow is generating an alternative fantasy vision of the city which overlaps with it or, rather, which underlies it.
- This is also the inspiration behind Sarah Britten's atmospheric lipstick paintings, suggested by *Zoo City*.

## Sarah Britten's lipstick art: *Zoo City* series



Sara Martín Alegre, Re-Imagining Apartheid: Making Guilt Visible in Lauren Beukes's *Zoo City* (2010)

- *Zoo City*, then, I am arguing, is particularly valuable for its *strong sense of place*. Beukes even describes Zinzi’s literal descent into the city’s underbelly, the sewer, the place where she tends to locate the lost objects she is commissioned to find.

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## A sense of place

I walk up on Empire though Parktown past the old Johannesburg College of Education, attracting a few aggressive hoots from passing cars. I give them the finger. Not my fault if they’re so cloistered in **suburbia that they don’t get to see ‘zoos’**. (19)

Villain Odi Huron lives in a **gated community**:

There used to be shortcuts you could take through the suburbs, but they've closed them off, illegally: gated communities fortified like privatised citadels. Not so much keeping the world out as keeping the **festering middle-class paranoia in**. (105)

- Let me read from the novel. This is Zinzi speaking, she’s carrying her sloth in her arms: “I walk up on Empire though Parktown past the old Johannesburg College of Education, attracting a few aggressive hoots from passing cars. I give them the finger. Not my fault if they’re so cloistered in suburbia that they don’t get to see zoos”. (19)
- The rich white villain Odi Huron lives in a gated community. Also in Zinzi’s words: “There used to be shortcuts you could take through the suburbs, but they've closed them off, illegally: gated communities fortified like privatised citadels. Not so much keeping the world out as keeping the festering middle-class paranoia in”. (105)

**Zoo City:** There was big talk about comebacks and gentrification a few years ago, which led to months of eviction raids by the Red Ants, with their red helmets and sledgehammers and bullhorns, and bright-eyed landlords buoyed up on the property boom bricking up the lower storeys of buildings. But the squatters always found a way back in. We're an enterprising bunch. And it helps to have a certain reputation. (55)



- The author, herself middle-class, seemingly sides with Hillbrow, or Zoo City, using Zinzi's journalistic voice: "There was big talk about comebacks and gentrification a few years ago, which led to months of eviction raids by the Red Ants, with their red helmets and sledgehammers and bullhorns, and bright-eyed landlords buoyed up on the property boom bricking up the lower storeys of buildings. But the squatters always found a way back in. *We're* an enterprising bunch. And it helps to have a certain reputation". (55, emphasis added)

**Zoo City at night:** (...) that's precisely when Zoo City is at its most sociable. From 6 pm, when the day-jobbers start getting back from whatever work they've been able to pick up, apartment doors are flung open. Kids chase each other down the corridors. People take their animals out for fresh air or a friendly sniff of each other's bums. The smell of cooking—mostly food, but also meth, temporarily drowns out the stench of rot, the urine in the stairwells. (141)



- And this is Zoo City at night with its animalled neighbours: “that's precisely when Zoo City is at its most sociable. From 6 pm, when the day-jobbers start getting back from whatever work they've been able to pick up, apartment doors are flung open. Kids chase each other down the corridors. People take their animals out for fresh air or a friendly sniff of each other's bums. The smell of cooking—mostly food, but also meth, temporarily drowns out the stench of rot, the urine in the stairwells”. (141)

And even here, there's that Zoo City hustle going on. Maybe it's not peculiar to Hillbrow. Maybe it's South Africa. You do what it takes, you take the opportunities. Vendors walk up and down the line of cars selling warm cold-drinks and chips, single skyfs or packs of Remington Gold. Two girls in short skirts and dusty high heels lean in the window of a 4x4 flirtatiously. It's a 24-hour border post. People have 24-hour needs. (363)



- Beukes clearly names Hillbrow as Zoo City's actual location: "And even here, there's that Zoo City hustle going on. Maybe it's not peculiar to Hillbrow. Maybe it's South Africa. You do what it takes, you take the opportunities. Vendors walk up and down the line of cars selling warm cold-drinks and chips, single skyfs or packs of Remington Gold. Two girls in short skirts and dusty high heels lean in the window of a 4x4 flirtatiously. It's a 24-hour border post. People have 24-hour needs". (363)
- Why, then, in view of her potent portrait of actual Hillbrow life, does Beukes feel the need to 'fantasize' it as Zoo City?

The truth is *Zoo City* came about because an illustrator friend Simon Villet was commissioned by the notoriously limited edition South African design magazine *ijusi* to design an “imaginary book cover”. He approached me to come up with the wordy bits and I wrote a synopsis for an idea that was already lurking in the back of my head—a phantasmagorical noir about a girl with a sloth on her back who crosses a magician gang-lord in the slums of inner city Johannesburg.



- Here’s Beukes’s own (somewhat trite) explanation: “The truth is *Zoo City* came about because an illustrator friend Simon Villet was commissioned by the notoriously limited edition South African design magazine *ijusi* to design an ‘imaginary book cover’. He approached me to come up with the wordy bits and I wrote a synopsis for an idea that was already lurking in the back of my head—a phantasmagorical *noir* about a girl with a sloth on her back who crosses a magician gang-lord in the slums of inner city Johannesburg” (in Ellis 2011)

From Sarah Britten's *Zoo City* series



Odi Huron's familiar animal,  
a symbol of hidden white power:  
"An *albino* crocodile,  
six metres long." (342)

- The magician is not quite a gang-lord but a lone wolf who, as I have noted, is white and operates from a gated community, trapped with his monstrous animal in his decaying, Usher-like mansion.
- There is a weak political metaphor somewhere in Zinzi's confrontation with Odi's gigantic albino alligator, hidden in the underground of Johannesburg's wealthy community, but the episode of the magical *muti* ritual is in the end quite bizarre and even a bit also ridiculous.



Pieter Willem Botha (1916–2006), known as P.W. and Die Groot Krokodil (Afrikaans for the Big Crocodile for his belligerence and temper), South Africa's Prime Minister 1978–1984, first executive State President 1984–1989

- Despite its political allusions...



The story is about **carrying your past with you on your back at all times** and trying to make a life nonetheless, even daring to use the very unwanted gifts that that past has left you with to help others and as a way of **survival and redemption.**

(Nene Ormes and Karin Waller,  
Science Fiction Bokhandeln in Malmö, Sweden)

- This is, then, an imperfect novel. I'm not sure whether it is sublime in its attempt at producing solid urban fantasy—or sublimely silly. Yet, it has an undeniable charm.
- I find it in its sense of place, others in Zinzi's path to redemption, which leads her eventually to Congo to fetch her boyfriend's Benoît's lost family to atone for the harm he suffers in helping her.
- This is why Nene Ormes and Karin Waller claim that "The story is about carrying your past with you on your back at all times and trying to make a life nonetheless, even daring to use the very unwanted gifts that that past has left you with to help others and as a way of survival and redemption". (in Anders 2015)



## 100% South African

- Carrying your past on your back at all times
- Survival
- Redemption: “That’s what *Zoo City* was trying to work out: how do you forgive, and can you reconcile?”

- Zinzi’s skin colour: a justified choice?
  - Middle-class ‘visitor/refugee’ in Hillbrow
  - Unlike Hester Prynne
    - Drug habit
    - Criminal life

■ Indeed, can there be a more truly South-African mixture of topics?:

- Carrying your past on your back at all times
- Survival
- Redemption

■ Yet, I am still concerned about Zinzi’s skin colour and her status as a middle-class refugee in Hillbrow/Zoo City. Concerned because Beukes’s Hester Prynne cannot carry her head high, as she is, no doubt about it, a criminal. She may have been initially just prey to the drug dealers but, once ‘animalled’ and free to re-build her life, she does become a quite despicable person as she chooses to live off crime.



- Richard Morgan, a white English writer author of a potent science-fiction novel with a black protagonist, *Black Man*, told me in an interview that it is about time not only that white authors write about black characters freely but also that we accept more variety in the characterization of black protagonists: “Thing is, there’s still an intense pressure related to race in, for want of a better word, western fiction, in that a black character is almost never allowed to be just another character who happens to be black; there are all sorts of implicit politically correct and emotive barriers and bargains involved—major black characters still tend to be overly nice, model citizens, sexually restrained, in other words beyond reproach (or they’re criminals!). But that is, of course, another subtle form of racism” (in Martín 2015).
- Beukes, in short, is perfectly entitled to making Zinzi December black and unsympathetic yet there is perhaps implicit racism as well in her characterization of this woman as a criminal.
- Morgan told me he had received many complaints from white liberals, not from black readers for daring to focus on a black protagonist. I am not aware that Beukes’s novel has attracted

- similar complaints, yet I wonder whether the atmosphere is right yet in South Africa for white writers to 'use' black protagonists. I find no fault in this but, then, I am in no position to judge competently.
- I will praise, then, Beukes for her fantastic transformation of Hillbrow into Zoo City in her urban fantasy, pun intended.
- Thanks!

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