9.2 Monstrous Dreaming: Lauren Beukes and Andrew Pepper (RB)

Transcript

Rebecca Ballard

Hello, and welcome to *Novel Dialogue*, a podcast sponsored by the Society for Novel Studies and produced in partnership with *Public Books*, an online magazine of arts, ideas, and scholarship, and supported by the College of Humanities and Social Sciences at Rowan University. *Novel Dialogue* brings together critics and novelists to talk about how novels work and how we work in relation to novels, how we read, write, translate, and remember them. I'm Rebecca Ballard, one of the hosts of *Novel Dialogue*, and it is a real pleasure for me to get to welcome Lauren Beukes to the podcast today. Lauren is the award-winning author of six novels, a collection of short stories, a pop history about South African women, and *New York Times* best-selling comics. Her work has been translated into 26 languages and won prizes across genres, from the Arthur C. Clarke Award to the Strand Critics Choice Award and the University of Johannesburg Prize. And her novel *The Shining Girls* is now a major Apple TV series with Elizabeth Moss. As both a genre studies scholar and a to-my-core genre nerd, I think of Lauren's work as a dazzling masterclass in genre play. Her six published novels riff off of dystopian cyberpunk futures, limb the boundaries of fantasy and horror, and events an absolutely addictive understanding of noir, thriller, and detective narrative beats. I've been a fan since I encountered your work in a graduate seminar an untold number of years ago, I won't say how many now, [laughter] and it's such a delight to get to be part of this group today. In conversation with Lauren is Andrew Pepper, professor of English at Queen's University Belfast, who has taught, written, and written about crime fiction for 30 years. His works include *Unwilling Executioner: Crime Fiction and the State*, a study that ranges transnationally and across centuries, and a series of detective novels set in mid-19th century London. He's most interested in the politics of crime fiction and the ways that complex social and political concerns are registered through genre changes and mutations. And his current project, which I want to hear more about at some point later, looks at a new not-quite-crime fiction that's emerging as a response to global crisis as an ongoing and irresolvable state. So welcome both of you. Thank you so much for being here today.

Lauren Beukes

Thanks so much. This is going to be such a fun conversation. I'm thrilled.

Andrew Pepper

Yeah. And thanks so much for the introductions there, Rebecca. And Lauren, I'm so delighted to be able to have this conversation. I've been an admirer of your work for such a long time now. I suppose I wanted to start with this question of genre. It's often used in a very derogatory way, perhaps, that so-and-so is just a genre writer. But I think your novels, these dizzying wildly ambitious concoctions of different constitutive parts show us not just how formally, how narratively exciting it can be to fuse horror, science fiction, speculative fiction, crime and the dystopian thriller, but more importantly, how this opens up new ways of seeing the world and new political and ethical possibilities for fiction. So I wanted to begin with this question of genre and think about how hard it is to classify your works in these terms. You said, “I've never set out to write a genre novel,” but here we are talking about genre to start with. So how do you think about this term? How, what do genre categories mean to you? What work is genre doing for you?

LB

It's a frustrating situation. I think my books are basically unshelvable. I had a bookseller in Boston say to me, where do other booksellers put your books? Because I'm never sure. And I'm like, I literally don't know. I think they should just be in the general section with everything else. But I also appreciate that I came up through genre. I read a lot of science fiction and fantasy as a kid. And that was a great identifier, it was a great marker to tell me where to find more books that I liked. But I think the best genre interrogates who we are in the world. It explores the state of humanity and the state of the world through these kinds of wild concepts. And that's what I try to do with my stuff. People have tried to rebrand genre. I think Margaret Atwood came up with, China Miéville had the new weird. Margaret Atwood, I think had speculative fiction. Because sci-fi is still a dirty word and people will still talk at book clubs or in academic circles about, “oh yes, I love that book. And the new Kazuo Ishiguro is amazing, but God, I hate sci-fi.” It's like, what? It's just mind blowing. But yeah, I love combining all those elements, and that came from growing up under the apartheid state, where censorship was really, really strong. And playwrights would have, and theater performers would have to worry about Special Branch, which was our version of the secret police, sitting in the back of the play to make sure that it wasn't political. And the way that artists and writers and playwrights got around it was by using allegory. So I came up through a time of studying drama at a high school level and going to see these amazing plays, which were all allegorical. And they would talk about *The Ugly Noo Noo*, which is the Parktown Prawn, or stories told with puppets. One of our set works in Afrikaans literature was actually about the Irish Revolution. And that was the Afrikaans author's way of writing about the struggle in South Africa. So I've always had this deep baked idea that this is how we write about the big, important issues, is that we put a twist on reality.

AP

So genre is a way of, at least in that initial formulation, of smuggling political ideas, political messages into works that might not seem to be political to someone reading from the outside.

LB

I wouldn't even say that it's smuggling it, because that would imply that you're trying to trick people into reading it. I think genre allows us to think about these really thorny issues in a way that gets over empathy fatigue. My novel *Zoo City*, which won the Arthur C. Clarke Award, is about criminals with magical animals. And, there is a scene, one of the characters is a refugee from the Congo, the love interest. And I wanted to write about stuff that was happening in South Africa, we had a wave of xenophobic violence. Every dinner party in South Africa is always about the crime, the crime, the crime. And I wanted to find a way of humanizing that, a way of talking about forgiveness and what happens in South Africa, where we had the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, where people had to forgive, but people didn't necessarily have to take—white people didn't have to take accountability, or apologize. And the way that we've been able to be reborn through that. So it felt like a way to get over that issue of fatigue, to use it as a distorting mirror. So it's not a Trojan Horse, it's a way of trying to see things more clearly.

AP

I mean, genres are never fixed, are they? We have this idea that there's a category called the detective novel that has to be one thing. So I read a lot of Lauren Berlant, who has a very brilliant phrase for genre, she says “genres provide an affective experience of watching something unfold.” So genres are both a way of giving shape to a reality that can be quite formless sometimes, but they also allow us to see things that others perhaps haven't seen, that we want to show as well. Thinking about, for example, *The Shining Girls*, here is a novel that uses the serial killer formula, in a sense, but that's just the start of it. And I’m interested in that Trojan Horse reference that you just used, because, what it does, it opens itself out to much bigger questions about how gendered violence works across time, and space as well. These things are not confined to one particular moment, one particular era, they're ongoing, and they're potentially irresolvable.

LB

Absolutely. And the real—Harper, the serial killer in that is a true serial killer. He's a broken, nasty little man. But what inspires him is misogyny. And that's the thread that I'm picking up through the novel. And let's be real, most women are not going to be killed by serial killers, we're going to be killed by the men who say they love us. But writing about domestic violence, writing about misogyny, this was a really fun way of being able to explore these ideas in a way that was compelling and interesting, that I was able to interrogate what that means, to write against the convention, which has changed a lot since then, which I'm very happy to say. I think there was a trend for a while in crime fiction and television, where it was just about pretty dead girls. And the horror was like the terrible things which are terrible and imaginative things which have been done to them. And we had no sense of who they were, we had no sense of their personality or character, what their lives meant to them and to the people around them. And I really wanted to use the novel as a way of writing back against that convention and really exploring the deep personhood of victims and survivors.

RB

To go back to this understanding of genre too, it's not just that it's a structure that we're familiar with, right? It's also about, I mean, this is Berlant's wonderful definition that it's also about the affective manipulation of our expectations, right? And it's about the moments that happen when the genres that we expect, that do codify our frameworks for the world, get tweaked, right? And that was what really struck me reading *The Shining Girls*, was that I had expectations for the serial killer novel, right? And they were about focus and they were about presentism and they were about the singularity of the victim and they were about the exaltation of cruelty. And I could feel those moments when you were creating what I call in my own school, the friction between the genre expectations, right? I'm not going to look at this. I'm not going to zoom in here. And I'm going to use what you expect to remind you to direct your attention differently, not just in this novel, but elsewhere, in your actual world.

LB

I call that Big Fuck You Energy.

AP

Harper is the least interesting figure in the novel.

LB

Exactly. Because serial killers are.

AP

And I think, one of the first novels, one of the early novels to really pursue that line, and I've seen other novels recently, I think Ivy Pochoda's *These Women* is a fantastic example of that. Is it Danya Kukafka, *Notes on an Execution*, again, is the same thing, they're much more interested in trying to show us the lives of these women whose lives and experiences have been torn apart by the violence. And they're trying to trace through the consequences, the effects of that, what it means rather than who the killer is and what motivates him, which is such an uninteresting question.

LB

It is completely. And I've had readers say, reviewers say like, “oh, well, we never found out why the killer's like that.” I'm like, who cares? Who cares? It's not interesting, and he's just broken, and he's—it doesn't matter. That's not the important part here.

RB

Yeah, like, is there an answer that would satisfy you? Right?

LB

No, completely. Well, no, they want his family to be eaten by cannibals in the forest with the Russian wolves, which is, I think, Hannibal Lecter's backstory, and they want him to be diabolical and interesting.

AP

So Lauren, what inspired *The Shining Girls*, what led you to create this novel in the first place?

LB

Well, partly it was because I really wanted to defy the convention. I was really sick of the way we were seeing serial killers and people represented—living in a country, in South Africa; I live in London now, but only for the last three years. So I spent most of my life in South Africa, we're the fifth highest in the world for gender-based violence. And that came home to us in a really horrible way, where my domestic workers, my once a week cleaning lady, her 22 year old daughter was murdered by her boyfriend. But it was a murder which took four months, because he—this is going to be very upsetting, so this is a major trigger warning for people who have sensitivities. Um, he stabbed her in the back and the backs of her legs and he poured boiling water over her head. And then he locked her in his shack and he walked away. And after three days, the neighbors, disturbed by the moaning and the smell broke—called the police who broke down the door, and they recovered her. And then it took her three months to die from her third degree burns. Um, and her mom would call me at like one o'clock in the morning and say, I just need taxi money to try and get her to Red Cross Children's Hospital again. And it was just, it was absolutely horrifying. In the meantime, the mom caught the guy. She saw him on the station and she knew who the boyfriend was and she grabbed him and she called the other taxi drivers and they came around and they dragged him away. And I felt—she was so proud of herself. She was like, today I'm Detective Gertie. And, um, yeah. And the police just let him go because there wasn't enough evidence. And then eventually she died and they put it down as natural causes, at 22. Right. And it's definitely not. Um, and I went with her sister, Violet, to the magistrate's court in Cape Town, in Athlone. And I was sitting there next to her and this guy came in, Sonwabo with his new young girlfriend holding her hand. And Violet was like, that's the guy. And I remember feeling just so much like righteous rage and fury that this man was going to go to jail for what he did. Um, and then the prosecutor called us into his office and he said, I can't try this case because the entire investigation is this one single sheet of paper. They only interviewed her at the time. They didn't do any follow-up. Um, so it's her word against his and she's dead. So he can stand up in court and he can say whatever he wants, and the magistrate's—he's going to throw it out. And I burst into tears in the middle of this lawyer's office because very naively, up until that moment—and this was like, I don't know, 20–?, *Zoo City* had just come out, so I think it was 2010, 2011—up until that moment, I had fundamentally believed in the fairy tale of justice, that it works, that our system works, and that people go to jail, and they don't. And I

got the case reopened because I'm a white South African and I grew up with all the privilege and I have a voice and I know how to use it. And I got it into all the major papers and the *Sunday Times*. And I think it was part of an ongoing investigation at the time into how the Khayelitsha Police Department was failing the residents so badly. And the family eventually phoned me and they said, we need you to let this go because we don't want to exhume her body, we don't want to talk about it anymore, we're just, we're just done. And it was so awful because, it just, nothing happened. And people talked to me, they were like, “oh, don't worry.” Like, “karma will get him.” And I'm like, that's not a guarantee. It's not a guarantee. Like, yes, violent men often die violent deaths, but it's not—you can't—and that's also not justice. So *The Shining Girls* came from this place of very deep personal pain and feeling so helpless and in agony about the failure of the systems, like, my own personal failures. I mean, I don't know what I could have done. But at least in novels, I get to have justice, I get to make sure the bad guy gets punished properly, and that the survivors actually do get to go forward.

AP

But it's interesting that you were enticed back into this serial killer form, for your next novel, *Broken Monsters*, where we have another figure, Clayton Broom, who is subject to these troubling dreams that manifest themselves in extreme violence. I mean, I think this is a fantastically interesting novel in terms of what it's saying about art, the marketplace, politics, and violence—how the commodified artwork expresses hidden desires, murderous rages that emerge out of the social itself. So the art is both something that is safe in a sense, it's commodified, it's produced, it's linked to the neoliberal desire to, to regenerate Detroit, where the novel's based. But art is also something that is dangerous. It's something that is linked to violence, linked to crime. It's unruly. It's something that can't be managed in a sense. It can't be turned into something safe. So that's a really interesting way of thinking about what, what the novel can do in a sense, in a more general sense.

LB

Absolutely. And I think, it's really interesting because it's also—the dream is this—I played on every variation of the word, the dream, so it's about the American Dream, and it's about the dreams we have for our children, and it's the dreams we have at night, and it's the artistic dream, and the dream of revolution. And I'm looking at it, I'm working on an adaptation of *Broken Monsters* at the moment as a TV show, which meant I revisited Detroit actually in October. And the most horrifying thing I saw at the time there was a 42-foot naked statue of Donald Trump, which they'd put up in protest of him coming to speak there, which was pretty intense. But it just made me realize how much that idea of the dream is the idea of narrative and it's who controls the story. And that's Clayton's whole thing is if he can make something extreme enough that it can cut through all the rest of what is out there in the art world, he will capture everyone's eyeballs and he'll capture the attention and that dream can become manifest reality. And it feels so much, I was saying to my producers, I was like, I don't know if I can set this now because it's just so on the nose. Because it's also about social media and the horror of social media and the stories that spread and, and how those stories can take hold and root. And

what's happening right now is just so very related to that. We do have this monstrous dreaming, which has reshaped reality. But yes, I think novels give us a way of thinking, a way of thinking about things.

RB

I might follow up on that and just ask you to say more about social media and your fiction and about these kinds of media ecologies and the strange technology that permeates everything we do. Right. And I have a bunch of questions about that. I don't want to step on any of Andrew's questions to come, but I mean, part of me wonders, I think one of the most urgent ones for me is like, how do you think about representing or writing with these kinds of social media, like personal tech, and this kind of ecosystem? Because I've talked to a number of writers who really struggle to integrate the really banal ways that this technology structures our lives into their fiction. I'm wondering how you think about writing that.

LB

I just write the world as I experience it. So, when I was doing my MA in Creative Writing at UCT, University of Cape Town, one of our lecturers said, be careful about name-dropping stuff because it just dates the book. And I was like, what, like *American Psycho* or *Great Expectations*? It's fine. It's fine to be rooted in an era or even a very particular year or a particular day, for God's sake. But yeah, I think it's just—what has been interesting is audiobook versions because I used to try and replicate stuff very directly. And we were doing the *Moxyland* audiobook recently where we got to actually have a South African cast, which was great. And I was directing. But, the police reports and the social media stuff. And if you're having to read everything out loud, like HTTP and the protocol, and then recapping the previous conversation, it doesn't work. So I think there are ways to be more playful in fiction to be able to incorporate that. And I do think that branding can root you in too much to a certain moment. I think the Snapchat references in *Bridge* are probably already—oh, sorry, in *Afterland* are probably already very dated, but I do think that it's so much of how we experience the world. And again, I'm sorry, I'm being very political right now, but I think we have to be. Um, I was reading this—

RB

No one ever has to apologize for being political on *Novel Dialogue*, I promise you.

LB

Okay, thank god. [laughter] But there was an interesting piece on Bluesky the other day—which of course, Twitter was a wonderful space for me for many years—about how it seems that what is happening in America right now in the early days of the new Trump presidency is so very, very much a chronically online revolution, and a coup. And only people who have been chronically online can really understand that. And I feel like I have been so chronically online and that people are like, “oh, it's not real life. It's the internet,” but it's like, that is also real life. And so I

really want to capture that in the novels as well, because I think that does shape so much of our own experiences, the people we connect with, the things which can happen, from the Arab Spring through to the rise of QAnon and Steve Bannon.

AP

Can we talk a little bit about your creative process, about how you build these wildly original novels, from initial ideas. So I thought maybe we'd spend a bit of time on your most recent novel, *Bridge*, which is a fantastic exploration into the multiverse. So, maybe you could tell us a little bit about the original idea for the novel, where it comes from and how, from that idea, you start to try and build the narrative, because any narrative that deals with the multiverse obviously has to deal with competing narratives. And, once you're, as a novelist, starting to get into competing narratives, it becomes very difficult to keep control of them. They sprawl in every direction. So, it presents incredible difficulties and challenges and opportunities for you as writer. So just, a lot of questions there, but maybe to start off with where was the original kernel of the idea here and how did you develop that?

LB

So, I had the idea years and years and years and years and years ago before *Rick and Morty*, before *Into the Spider-Verse*—it's very frustrating that I wasn't able to do it sooner. And especially before *Everything, Everywhere, All at Once*, which is the perfect mother-daughter multiverse story. And I think mine's a close second. [laughter] But, I just had this idea of like, in an alternate reality, there's a version of you who already has everything you've ever wanted, and then the nasty little question, don't you deserve it more. And of course that's not quite the novel that I've written—there are elements of that in there. But what would you do if you could seize this other alternate reality version's life? What would you do, if you've lost someone you love or the other person has your dream career, or they didn't, you know, accidentally cut themselves while washing the dishes and lose the ability to use their hands. It just—it felt like just such a close tie to the constant question we're asking about sliding doors and these other—"The Road Not Taken" and the branches untaken. And I think, in hindsight, because I got my ADHD diagnosis about two months after I'd finished the edits, I was like, oh, that's what was going on. Um, so it is, just like *Everything, Everywhere, All At Once* is an ADHD allegory, so is this. And I think what's interesting about *Bridge* compared to all my other protagonists is that she's not—yeah, she's got a little bit of, like, spike. But she's not like Kirby or Zinzi. She's not feisty and fiery and, um, she's paralyzed. She's absolutely paralyzed and she doesn't know who she's supposed to be or what she wants to be. And I think that is also speaking to the ADHD experience and why I didn't write the novel, like 10 years before when I'd actually had the idea. But then actually playing that out and playing out the reality, or, the multiple realities, and kind of letting the novel take me where it wants to go, not in some mystical sense, but the subconscious magic of process, is what makes writing for me so exciting and so interesting where my brain is putting things together in weird ways that I—you know, might have a grand plan or a platonic ideal of the novel in my head, and it never, ever, ever comes out that way. And that's much more interesting to me because you can, you can follow the threads, and this—my little AI rant is that

AI doesn't do this. AI doesn't process. It doesn't process lived experience. It doesn't process the conversation I'm having with you today, or somebody I run into in the streets, or something which happened 20 years ago, or a story someone tells me. Our humanity, we're filtering and sifting through all of that. And a novel comes through that. And I think that's, again, so very, very human and so delightful and amazing as a reflection of who we are, and expressing ourselves and, and putting the world together in this incredibly unique way. I guess my actual process is probably despair and cortisol.

AP

These make it difficult for you narratively as well, don't they? To keep on top of the multiple narrative possibilities. And it did remind me again of the *The Shining Girls* here in terms of moving back and forth across time where Harper, the killer, revisits, or visits and revisits the girls that he's targeting, these girls of promise. And so, when you're reading it, you're seeing things happening for the first time that you as novelists know, have other iterations further down the line. So I'm thinking from a creative point of view, how do you keep on top of all of this? I mean, I've seen a picture of your murder wall from *The Shining Girls*. And I wonder if there was an even more complicated one for *Bridge* in terms of the different narrative possibilities of the multiverse.

LB

No, absolutely. So I always—I normally have a board of some kind; I use Scrivener, which has its own built-in board, but I also like to handwrite stuff and put it up on a wall in front of me. And it'll be color-coded, and with *Bridge* in particular, I'd have different names for the universes. So it'd be, like, the ZC universe, which is a little tiny Easter egg just for me, which, ZC is obviously *Zoo City*. And SG is *The Shining Girls*. So all the universes which are actually relevant are the ones which are kind of, um, my novels. But then I'd also have them color-coded and it allows me to visually see where there's an imbalance. So if we haven't seen a particular character for a while, but also very visually kind of track things. And it's not—it wasn't—I know you're picturing this beautiful, like, three-dimensional space and I had to turn a garage or a spare room into this jungle gym room strung with strings that I could walk through, but it really—it was actually much simpler because I wasn't having to jump backwards and forwards in time. It was really—so, there was that linear straightforward narrative, which was great. So everything was happening in real time in the other worlds. And that was okay, um, to deal with, but yeah, it's very important to me to have that visual reference, because I want to make sure that there aren't dumb plot holes, like we can debate the ethics or get into the neuroscience or whatever, and that's great. And I'd like to do that, but like, if there's a dumb plot hole because you're like, “oh, well, you said she did this”—I never want to run into that problem. I don't want to do a—what's the—is it *Doctor Who*, the hand-wavy, timey-wimey.

AP

These are things that can ruin crime narratives on TV when you see them and you think, oh yeah, this wouldn't happen, why did so-and-so do this? And you said, actually thinking about the connection between *Zoo City* and *Bridge*, you said at the end of *Zoo City*, making the fantastic seem credible is hard work.

LB

I think I am known for the weird, high concept. And it is this big what-if, but it's a what-if that is trying to get at some reality and truth about who we are, and putting my characters through that. And I know there's the E.L. Doctorow quote about “writing is like taking a road trip at night.” So that's very much my process of writing, and genre, of course, people talk about plotters and pantsers and now they've added headlighters, which is, I think the E.L. Doctorow reference. And plotters sit there and they meticulously work out every single detail of the plot. And then they just write from that roadmap, and pantsers fly by the seat of their pants. And I'm definitely in some kind of combination. Like I know ultimately where I'm going. I know this is the character I'm following. I know this is ultimately what's going to happen to her. Um, and then the rest of the time, I might blunder into the ditch or take a really interesting detour, which actually turns out to be way more interesting. I'll still end up at the ultimate destination, but it is that subconscious magic. It is that process of letting the novel breathe and letting my brain play and see where it goes.

AP

You talked about high concepts, and “high concept” is sometimes used by the marketeers as a way of selling books. Perhaps your understanding of “high concept” is different to theirs. And I wonder, are your books challenges for publishers, or do they really respond to the innovations that you give them? I mean, is there a sense of “yes, this is exactly what we want. We want the high concept.” Or is it, “this is difficult and we don't know where to put you”?

LB

I think more and more it's the latter. I think obviously I'm never going to be that kind of novelist, but I think it has affected my career. And I had a journalist from *Le Monde* in Brussels once say to me, he's like, “oh, your books are very smart.” And I was like, “oh, thank you so much.” He's like, “you don't want to be a bestseller, do you?” And I think that *The Shining Girls* is only the only one which has achieved bestseller status. *Bridge* has not done terribly well. I think it's one of my best books and I'm devastated about it, but it is—the market is kind of—they want things to be simplified. They want things to be very simple. They want it to be marketable. They want to be able to know exactly which slot to put you in. Ideally you should have the same recurring detective character. Ideally you should have, like, can we have another serial killer novel, please? Can we just keep this simple? And I don't think I'm ever going to be able to do that. So yeah, I want to be super optimistic and positive and just be like, yes, we should write whatever we want to write. And like, that's exactly where we should be going. But I think the market forces are very, very different. We want to believe that we have an infinite capacity for art and culture

and connection, but the reality is that most people don't care about what's on TV or what they're reading. And that is a generalization, but I think it's true. With TV, I think most people want a dumb action movie, with one of the Chrises, in the background while they're on their phone. And Netflix sent out a message to producers a few months ago where they said, can you please add a line of dialogue about what the character is doing because people are on their phones and they're not looking. So maybe she could say, “I'm going to stab you now” and then stab him. Um, which is what I’d like to do to that Netflix exec, obviously.

AP

I mean, I suspect now that the editorial decisions that would have been taken by editors ten years ago are now being taken by sales directors. And in the future, maybe will be taken by AI amalgams of these things as well. And that has potentially very significant consequences for what gets written and what gets published.

RB

I mean, and it feels like such a disastrous underselling of the desire for complexity that so many readers and consumers still have. Right. I mean, this is just me like revealing parts of me, but I am part of the absolutely unhinged subreddits dedicated to decoding—that's talking about Apple TV and the wonderful complicated work that comes on there, *Severance*. Right. And like, there are still readers who take great pleasure and watchers take great pleasure in the complexity that your work does. Something that's always really fascinated me about your work, which is the complicated relationship you have to dystopia and utopia. And those are oversimplifying poles. Right. But I think about, for instance, hearing you talk actually about *Bridge* did concretize something for me about my relationship to that novel, which is that one of the things I really appreciate about it is that it is deeply, but also beautifully, indirectly critical of a certain utopian impulse that has to do with, like, capitalist maximization and privatization and the self. Right. It's critical of that like, “what if I could find the best version and what if I could mine it for me?” Right. But I'm wondering if there's a way that you could talk about what your relationship is to the kind of dystopian-utopian poles, or how you see yourself fitting into both a literary landscape and a political moment that's grappling with how to think about the politics of critique and hope.

LB

I hadn't actually thought of *Bridge* doing that. I'm like, that's fascinating. And again, I love it when the book's smarter than the writer. And it's so nice when I'm like, “Oh, I didn't realize that, but yes, absolutely.” It just resonates on a very, very deep level. I was at the Gothenburg Bookfest Fair two years ago and we had this really beautiful, amazing panel discussion with Nnedi Okorafor, and there was a Norwegian academic interviewing us and she kept talking about the dystopia I'd written in Johannesburg, and this dystopic vision, and I'm like, what? No, I added magical animals, but apart from that, that is Johannesburg. Like, what are you talking about? And it is this idea of the developing world. And again, both *Zoo City* and *Broken Monsters* do that. It's interrogating this idea of this broken city, and this dystopian city, and this place, which is

so blighted and depressing and awful and, crime and violence and, you know, gray skies, and I don't know, pollution and dirt on the street. And it's just—yeah, yes. Those things exist. But I think this very idea of the dystopian comes from the developed world, it's like, “oh my God, can you imagine this kind of hell hole?” Like, uh, yes. Kind of live there. And again, as a facet of new colonialism, neo-colonialism, you know, Trump wanting to seize Canada, and only offering help to Ukraine if they give him all the precious minerals. I'm like, yeah, again, I know this playbook. I understand this. This is exactly what was done to us. And yeah, so I think there is absolutely a moment to interrogate that in a really, really important way. And to look at these fictions, which are coming out from other countries, which are not in that typical kind of, you know, UK, US, Canada, idea. And I think people don't realize the razor edge between this ideal society we live in and how close dystopia can be. And I think certainly with climate change, we're all on that razor edge all the time, with what's been happening in Detroit and the California wildfires and fires in Spain two years ago—we're right on that edge right now. And I think maybe fiction is a way for us to try and grapple with that, but maybe it's also a way for us to grieve.

RB

Brings us almost back to the beginning, right? Which is that you use genre because it allegorizes, because it distances, because it's the distorting mirror, but it also, I think is in some ways like the only way to actually capture the world as it is. Right.

LB

Absolutely. And it'll also allow us to feel that because if I start writing, I mean—I'm like, everyone's going through anxiety attacks, but just the world is so horrifying right now. I want to avert my eyes. And fiction is a safe place. And I think that's also, I think, why especially women love true crime so much, and why I love horrors, because it is a safe place to feel a macrocosm of the microcosm I live with every day, or the opposite.

AP

Yeah, and what happens to those genres when they tackle these subjects that are impossible, or irresolvable, that can't be—you can't make them safe. You can't make them right. You know, so the move from crime into horror is a way of perhaps, kind of analogizing that, what is unrepresentable, what is irresolvable, what's impossible; crime stories always want to give us answers in a sense. The answers may be provisional, they may be unsatisfactory, but they are answers nonetheless. So that shift away from that framework and that move towards something else, whatever that else is—and horror is a brilliant other space here—means that we're not left with anything to reassure us in a sense, which feels like a very important move in our contemporary.

LB

Yeah, absolutely. And I've been thinking about this a lot more, and I have talked about in the past, but it's come up again for me, which is that the great thing about apartheid was we had an enemy. That was the bad guy. There was this evil totalitarian government and that was the bad guy. And I think Rebecca Solnit also talks about this in *Hope in the Dark*, is that we're very good at crises, or very good at disasters, we're not good at long-term crises. So maybe there is some hope there coming back to just being political in the now, right now, is that we do now actually have an identifiable enemy. And the reason I use genre is because we don't necessarily, exactly what you were saying, like, how do you figure out where the problem is in the world? And how do you write about this big issue? You can only fragment it, or put it into a different form, and use a high concept or a genre as a way of exploring it. But in the now that we're living in right now, I think there is a very clear enemy. And I think that means that we can take direct action against it, which is quite exciting.

RB

So this has been such a lovely conversation. And one of the perks of hosting this podcast is that hosts get to jump in at the end with the very last question of the episode. Each season of *Novel Dialogue* has one signature question that we ask of every novelist. Although of course, we invite our critics to weigh in too. And this season, our question is, Lauren, if you could spend a year anywhere, where, when, and how would you spend it? A question that's extra wonderful to ask somebody who's just finished a multiverse novel.

LB

I think I'd like to go back to the Haitian revolution. Cause you said when I could have any "when?"

RB

You could have any "when."

LB

Brilliant. I think it's probably very, very, very relevant right now. And it was—I understand why I didn't learn about it, because I grew up under apartheid, and it wasn't taught in schools, but I think it's not taught a lot. But I think it's one of the most significant revolutions in history where a slave nation overthrew three of the major colonial powers. And I'm not going to glamorize the revolution. I think it was awful and painful and people died. And, it's not—it's easy to have power fantasies about stuff, but I think as a period of history and this idea of solidarity and egalitarianism extending to all people and this hugely foundational, formational understanding of race and culture and slavery and who should have rights. The fact that women were very central to the revolution as well is just, I think it's just an incredibly beautiful time. And it'd be obviously also very difficult and very gruesome, but I'd love to be able to experience that.

RB

I think that going back to these scenes of revolution that aren't enfolded into the dominant narrative of history—I mean, cause I will say, we also didn't get taught about the Haitian Revolution in U.S. education. And there's a really clear reason for that, which is it would embarrass the hell out of the stories we tell about the American Revolution.

LB

Absolutely. Totally. And, in the French revolution, there was an amazing book by—I reviewed for the *New York Times*, um—A.K. Blakemore, *The Glutton*. And it's about this character, it's based on a real historical character during the French revolution, but actually—and it's very powerful and very smart and beautifully written by a poet. And yeah, just this peasant boy who may or may not have a head injury, his understanding of this freedom that they speak of and this egalitarianism doesn't really seem to extend to people like him or the sex workers that he's hanging out with and this weird little troop of people. And it's just, it's really fiery and fierce on that level. It's fascinating.

RB

Thank you. Andrew, where would you go? Where and when and how?

AP

Oh, I don't know. I'm toying with trying to write something set in New York in the 1840s. So, aside, if I lived there for a year, I'd probably die of smallpox.

LB

Wait, can you take your vaccines back with you? Can we go back as who we are right now?

AP

There we go. But, all the sectarianism that was imported from Britain and Ireland at the time, how that comes into New York and, it mixes with racial politics. And this is a moment before the Civil War, before realignments and kind of, national priorities, a place where capitalism is starting to find its feet, but hasn't perhaps become the dominant force that it became in the Gilded Age and Reconstruction era. So, a period of flux and lots of things happening. So I think it'd be an interesting place to try and write about, but—you know, so could do some good research there.

RB

That's what I was going to say. I feel like both of you basically just said, like, I would go be the most dedicated researcher is what I would do.

LB

Yeah, absolutely. Totally. But then like, do you have any hero power fantasies of being able to disrupt capitalism in that period, Andrew?

AP

The idea of this individual going in to dismantle systems, it goes against everything that I have in terms of my research, which is all against the all powerful individual. It's about how we become inculcated into systems and what we can do in much smaller ways to make differences. So, no, I've never been an advocate of the individual hero. And I find that a problematic element to all kinds of books that I read anyway.

LB

Yeah. It's interesting. Because I—of course, I never do that in my books. It's never about the character, like, thing, but I was just like—and I think Dom has that thing in *Bridge* where they're, they are thinking about, like, can we change things? Can we use this power to actually change the world? But I mean, for one, my French sucks. [laughter] And yeah, but I think as a researcher, it'd be really, really interesting.

RB

As always, we are grateful to the Society for Novel Studies for its sponsorship, to *Public Books* for its partnership, and to the College of Humanities and Social Sciences at Rowan University for its support. Beck Daly is our production intern and Connor Hibbard is our sound engineer. Check out past episodes featuring Lauren Groff, Charles Yu, Jennifer Egan, and many more. And if you liked what you heard, please subscribe on Apple, Stitcher, Spotify, or wherever you get your podcasts. From all of us at *Novel Dialogue*, thanks so much for tuning in. Keep listening and keep reading.