



READING GROUP GUIDE

# BROKEN MONSTERS

by

## LAUREN BEUKES

An online version of this reading group guide is available at [littlebrown.com](http://littlebrown.com).

## A CONVERSATION WITH LAUREN BEUKES

*Who, or what, are the broken monsters in your new book? Can you describe the essence of the novel and what it means to you?*

It's about twisted art and disturbing tableaux of half-human, half-animal bodies turning up in abandoned places in Detroit. It's a procedural about fear and ambition and pride and being seen or trying to be forgotten, art and social media and new journalism, haunted cities, haunted people, the things that rise from the dark.

We're all broken monsters. We all have little broken pieces inside. We've all experienced bad things in our lives, on a scale, of course, but it's how we live with them that determines who we are. But it's also a statement that even the monsters don't work. We talk about a notorious killer as a "monster," like apartheid torture camp operator Eugene de Kock, for example, who was recently up for parole. But it's much worse than that. He's human. There are no monsters. There's only us and everything we are capable of, good and bad. We have to be able to face that—the monstrousness within, whether it's cruelty or ambition or pride or powerlessness.

*The voices in Broken Monsters sound completely authentic, from the demented murderer Clayton Broom to the cops searching for a brutal killer to the teenage protagonists Cassandra and Layla. How do you enter the different spaces that make this possible?*

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I don't know. Magic? Madness? Practice probably. Listening to people mainly. I interviewed Detroit homicide detectives and artists and teenage theater geeks for this book. Also photographers in Eastern Market. I worked in a soup kitchen for a day, just talking to people and listening to their stories and their perspectives. I recorded conversations, nicked expressions, asked people to tell me about their dreams.

*Speaking of dreams, are they (as well as fantasy and art) major themes of the book?*

I was interested in the subconscious, in what emerges from the depths, in art, in social media, in ourselves. There's a great quote from an anime called *Paprika* (which I haven't seen, but I found the animated stills of the scene) about how the Internet is like dreaming—the place the subconscious mind vents. It's a major theme in the book. And of course it's about thwarted creativity and ambition, about the desperate human need to be recognized, acknowledged, which is at the heart of Facebook "likes" and Instagram "favorites" and graffiti "tags." We all want to be seen and to be known and understood.

*Is Detroit as crazy as this? Or is this your take on it all?*

It's this crazy. The craziest stuff in the book—like the bit about the séance for the dead young artist on a Ouija board tattooed on somebody's chest—is a real story. If you want to see how curious and amazing Detroit is, you should watch his YouTube videos on kayaking the Rouge River. A lot of it is based on my own experiences of the city with a lot of artistic license.

*The visceral quality of the writing, especially as Clayton goes about his special brand of taxidermy, is like watching a movie. Is this something you do consciously?*

I used to work as a scriptwriter and director in kids' animation, and I've written a few comics. Both of these teach you to write very visually, very clearly, and to cut to the chase, because some poor bastard is going to have to draw it.

*Can you tell us a little about your research and how you transform it into the writing?*

With Clayton's scenes, I wanted to push the nightmare imagery. I went back and looked at old dream journals I kept in my twenties and lifted imagery and those strange transitions and tried to put myself in Clayton's head, to distill the dream logic. But I think that only works if it's anchored by the real. You need the story to be credible to push the incredible. I visited Detroit twice, once at the beginning of the book and again when I'd finished the first draft to be able to fill in the gaps. There's a difference between looking up photographs and scrolling through Google Maps and actually standing in an abandoned theater with rotting curtains and a chair pulled from its row like a broken tooth. Or black squirrels in the weeds. Or feeling the deep, cool peace you get in cathedrals and admiring the way the sunlight leaks through the holes in the roof in crazy slants swirling with dust motes. The detail anchors it, and going there helped me get under the skin of Detroit, past the easy clichés, such as using Detroit as a go-to metaphor for the death of the American Dream.

*I'm wondering if we are increasingly entering the territory of "child victim." Is anything taboo these days in literature?*

Women, children, dogs are easy go-to's because there's a vulnerability and an innocence, and we immediately feel for them. It's easy-to-serve sympathy on a stick and it can be a lazy fallback. I tried to avoid those pitfalls. Daveyton is the only kid killed in the novel, and actually what I tried to do with this novel was create sympathy for the killer, who (unlike the loathsome scumbag Harper in *The Shining Girls*)

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struggles terribly with this. I tried to give him a broken humanity, which I think makes him scarier and sadder.

*Another dark place is child sexual exploitation, as Layla and Cas lay themselves open as they browse the Internet. As Layla's cop-mom, Gabi, says, "This is America. Sex is worse than violence." Can you comment on this parallel thread?*

Sex is part of the deep id and it's also part of what we're so afraid of online—sexual predators, online pedophiles—when actually it's friends and neighbors and high school friends who commit sexual assault and rape. I'm interested in teenage girls' sexuality. How it's about being sexy, rather than sexual, about putting on a show. It's the theatrics of social media and how your past will haunt you. The age of privacy is over. We have to find a way to live with it, but it's really scary.

*And of course everything plays out online. Jonno's obsession to find fame gives us the advantage or thrill of the voyeur—we're in on the action of the story, but we also see it through the world's eyes, online. I found this fascinating. Will any story ever be able to be written without including the Internet?*

"May you live in interesting times." We do, with the whole world accessible via a slim block in our hands, and with killer robot drones in the sky. If you're writing a story about now and you don't include the way technology shapes our everyday interactions, I think you're missing something. Unless it's set in an Amish community or a survivalist cult in Papua New Guinea.

*Now to ask you a little about yourself: Do you see yourself as a sort of cross-cultural creature? Do you feel torn between two cultures, two countries?*

Nope. I've traveled extensively. I've lived in Chicago and New York and London, and now I live and work in South Africa. I write with a South African sensibility, but I'm not going to restrict my subject matter to my current geography. I'm going to write about wherever the story takes me, whatever the story demands.

*With this in mind, the Detroit setting makes this book ideal for an American readership. Is this something you've had to consider, since the South African market is limited?*

The South African market is very limited. There are only a million people out of a population of fifty-four million or so who actually buy books. The average print run is two to three thousand copies, and if you sell more than that, you've got a bestseller. You can't make a living writing only for the South African market. I broke out internationally with a distinctly South African story, *Zoo City*, set in Johannesburg. I'll take future novels to whatever places grab my interest, where the location is as much a character as the people.

*As you've progressed, from *Moxyland* to *Zoo City* to *The Shining Girls*, what lessons have you've learned as a writer? Perhaps you can share the most important lesson for you.*

That some readers and critics might want you to be representative of something. Say, a movement or an antimovement, a death knell or a level-up, and that's not your problem. You write the books you want to write, that you can write, and shouldn't feel constrained by the labels other people apply, whether that's genre or gender or geography.

My worst pressures are internal. My harshest critic is me. The person I have to impress, to push my storytelling harder and further, is me. The person I write for is me. At the end of the day you are alone in the room with a keyboard and *the work*, and you have to get it down on the page and you have to try to make it good. That's the only thing that counts.

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Oh yeah, and finish stuff. I spent four years mucking about with *Moxyland*, second-guessing myself and rewriting the first three chapters over and over. You only know what you have when you've written it. Only then can you see the shape and the flaws and how to fix them.

*The question of being “boxed” by genre: Zoo City won the Arthur C. Clarke Award, which was not only big news on the South African literary scene but also worldwide, as the award is one of science fiction’s most prestigious honors. Yet with Broken Monsters, you move into the thriller with a more traditional, if one can call it that, police procedural overtone. Can you comment on this?*

*Zoo City* was super hard-boiled in the style of Raymond Chandler and Philip K. Dick, only I combined the troublesome dame and the cynical detective into one and added lashings of black magic. This is kind of similar, but perhaps more in the vein of *The Wire*'s crime story with multiple characters or *Silence of the Lambs*'s feminist detective territory than Dick or Chandler. But, hey, all my novels are radically different from each other, from near-future neo-apartheid thriller to black-magic noir to time-traveling serial killer and whatever *Broken Monsters* is (I've heard the word "hybrid" thrown around a lot). The next one probably will be as different again. I want to keep challenging myself and write the kind of stories I like to read.

The original version of this essay appeared in *The Big Thrill*, the online publication of the International Thriller Writers. The interview was conducted by Joanne Hitchens, author of *Divine Justice* and *Sweet Paradise* (coming August 2015).

## QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. How did you feel about the depiction of Detroit in *Broken Monsters*? Did you find it to be accurate? Did it make you examine more deeply how it is portrayed in the media?
2. Social media plays a pivotal role in the lives of the protagonists in *Broken Monsters*. What does the book say about social media in our modern world?
3. What does the title *Broken Monsters* mean to you? Who are the broken monsters in the story?
4. What is the relationship between Detroit’s “ruin” and art and creativity in the book?
5. How would you describe Clayton’s relationship with The Dream? How does it affect the way he sees the world? What is he trying to achieve?
6. How do Jonno’s and Clayton’s experiences mirror each other’s?
7. What is Gabi and Layla’s relationship like? Does it remind you of a relationship that you have in your own life?

8. Lauren Beukes both incorporates and explodes many tropes of the horror, thriller, and crime genres in her work. Where did you see this at play in *Broken Monsters*?