

# Lauren Beukes discusses *Afterland* (2020)

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Set in 2023, Lauren Beukes's *Afterland* captures the devastating effects of a global viral pandemic. About three years prior, a highly contagious virus, called the human culgoa virus (HCV), induced terminal prostate cancer and killed around four billion men. Steeped in grief after the abrupt loss of fathers, husbands, brothers, and sons, coupled with the gaping holes left behind in previously male-dominated industries, the remaining female population have not recovered from the blow. Society is in a state of disrepair, and with no cure in sight, women are barred from further procreation. The few males who have proven immune against HCV have become hot commodities for various agendas, so the odds are stacked against Cole in her bid to return home to Johannesburg with her young son, Miles.

Cole has also lost her husband, leaving them stranded in America with no support system. They are forced into a quarantine facility so that the government can conduct experiments on Miles (who possesses the HCV-resistant gene). Cole is relieved when her sister, Billie, shows up to help them break out. But, ever duplicitous, Billie has been enticed by the value of black-market sperm, and the escape soon turns into a nail-biting cross-country manhunt. Enduring the worst of familial bonds with Billie, who puts a bounty on the head of her sister's son, Cole must do everything to protect her one remaining source of love: her child. Following this duo, readers are taken on a wild American road trip, carried along by their wish to return to South Africa where, it is rumoured, the population fared much better in the wake of this global disaster.

Where were you when it happened? Where were you when you were first exposed? But how do you draw a line in the sand between Before and After? The problem with sand, Cole thinks, is that it shifts. It gets muddy. (Beukes 2020, 28)

## **How does it feel to have written this novel now that COVID-19 is here?**

Well, I'm trying to type this while my fidgety eleven-year-old stuck in lockdown with me is leaning on my head and reciting vine memes at me ("OMG, I think I found my berrries"), which is *not* something I anticipated when I imagined what living through an unprecedented pandemic would look like. Although, of course, the novel is all about

motherhood and the relationship between the protagonist Cole and her son, Miles, as they weather some heavy days. It's something that feels very close to home for me, right now, as I'm sure it does even for non-parents. How do we look after our loved ones?

How does it feel? Like I spent five years imagining the worst-case scenario, only to look up from my laptop and the rewrites and the edits and the proofs and find myself living it. I'm scared, and I'm overwhelmed and I'm very lucky to be able to afford to look after myself and my family. I'm so inspired by how people are trying to help others with community action groups and food drives and fundraisers.

The book isn't about the pandemic, but the aftermath, and how Cole and Miles navigate this radically changed world in which boys are suddenly precious commodities. But it's not a dystopia, it's not a total apocalypse, and that's something I'm hopeful about for us in the real world, living through this time: that when we emerge on the other side, we will be able to build differently and build something better.

What's the worst part of acting like it's the end of the world as we know it? Inability to imagine that it might not be. (Beukes 2020, 36)

**The novel speaks so immediately—presciently—into the near future, and the mundane erosion that you depict is eerily relatable. It's as if the world falls apart, but the centre still holds because power rearranges itself so quickly. In some ways, the novel opposes our dramatic ideas of an apocalypse and, more importantly, what it might achieve in terms of greater social gains in the future. Do you care to comment on this narrative choice, especially since people's responses to COVID-19 seem to mirror this desire for a dramatic socioeconomic and political overhaul?**

Ah, I seem to have got ahead of the question with the answer above. I did want to model a society that still functions. In the world of *Afterland*, most of the male population have died (leaving only 35–50 million men, boys, and people with prostates alive on the whole planet) and it was challenging and hella fun to explore what sectors would be hardest hit, especially in what the novel calls PMdI (Previously Male-dominated Industries)—such as satellite technicians, undersea cable maintenance divers, truckers, pilots, engineers, mine workers, and mechanics—and what measures the women in charge would have taken to manage that. It mainly comes down to a whole lot of upskilling, but there are also some political shenanigans in the book: the US, for example, offers lucrative immigration deals to citizens from Egypt, Qatar, and India, where they have more women software engineers. The president of Colombia shuts down coffee exports until America legalises drugs, because women don't want to lose another single person to the violent narco trade.

There are religious groups that believe this is God's punishment, and terrorist groups setting oil fields alight or trying to kill the last remaining men to bring about the true end times, and some governments are running reunification programmes to try to bring families back together. But that's all mostly background.

Cole and Miles do run into an anarchist community in Salt Lake City who are mobilising—hacking hotel cards to give people access to housing, for example—and it’s been fascinating, and again, inspiring, to see South Africa’s own community action networks (CANs) reaching out across our huge divides to partner with under-resourced neighbourhoods. I’m looking forward to the hotel key hack next.

I interviewed a lot of experts: I spoke to my friend Scott Hanselman about female coders, economist Hannes Grassegger about what this new imagined economy might look like, and scientist friends such as Janine Scholfield explained viruses and keyholes and x-linked genetic variances to me. I asked Cape Town metro police officers on the ride-alongs I did a few years ago: “What would happen to the drugs and gangs if all the men disappeared? Would they grind to a halt?” “Are you kidding?” they said. They maintained it would continue in much the same way, maybe worse: “The most ruthless leader of the Americans was Mama American because she had more to prove.” As Billie says in the novel, “Power is a fickle slut.” And yeah, absolutely, many of the old power structures are going to hold. Even in a world where 99% of the male population is dead, patriarchy is still a very comfortable pair of shoes and very easy to slip into.

It’s inspiring to see people talking about how we’re all going to reinvent the world post-COVID, go full socialism, bring in universal basic income, healthcare for all, proper minimum wage, income protection, continued bonds of support and care between wealthy neighbourhoods and disadvantaged ones. But capitalism is an old god, and it’s going to be very difficult to overthrow completely.

Also there will be backlashes; epidemics are often terrible for women’s rights. Look at where women are the primary caregivers at the cost of their careers, and vulnerable to violent partners. Plus they don’t go back to work and girls don’t go back to school in nearly the same numbers as do men and boys.

I hope this has already been such a system shock that we will have no choice but to make significant changes to the way the world works now. But I’m so devastated and afraid of what the cost to us is going to be.

**Can you tell us about the moment, or the series of moments perhaps, when the story coalesced in your mind?**

I started trying to write more of a *Cloud Atlas*-type nested novel (Mitchell 2004) following multiple storylines across history, inspired by the cultural significance of Eve (as in Adam &). The final piece was going to be about a world where all the men had died, and I found that the story of Miles and Cole had become more urgent, more compelling than all the others.

**Which feminist post-apocalypse novels inspired your depiction of your gender-imbalanced world? The neon nuns are a riot! Are they a playful allusion to Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985)?**

I try not to read anything similar to what I'm writing at the time, in case I accidentally crib from it. There are certainly going to be comparisons to Vaughan and Guerra's *Y: The Last Man* (2002–2008), which focuses on the titular character, but I only ever read the first graphic novel to make sure I wasn't in similar territory.

The neon nuns are a ready parallel to Gilead, I guess, although they're a fringe group inspired as much by Gwyneth Paltrow's Goop as Christian fundamentalists, and their robes are a riff on Amber Rose's slut dress from a few years ago, printed with the word "sorry" rather than "slut" in neon colours. My book is more of a call-and-response to *Handmaid*, which is all about women's reproductive rights. In *Afterland*, it's a reversal, where Miles's agency and bodily autonomy are under threat. I wanted to flip the narrative.

**At the same time, I can see that you steered away from a radical feminist novel in order to tell a story about the best version of familial love. From this angle, the novel seems to converse with Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006), where father and son travel through post-apocalyptic South-East America to get to the coast. In *Afterland*, Cole and Miles also travel in more or less the same region, but their journey has a more optimistic spin. Were you attempting to rework this "great American novel" in some way?**

It depends on what you mean by radical. I didn't want to tell a story that was all about the world, or the characters changing it, à la Harry Potter or *Children of Men* (James 1992), but rather about the ordinary people caught up in that world. *The Road* was definitely a reference point, and again, something I was writing in conversation with (like *The Handmaid's Tale*). I hated the ending of *The Road*. (Spoilers!) As a parent, I would never, ever let my kid go out on their own into a world full of cannibals and rapists. What kind of hope is that? It was blind luck that the next people he stumbled across were good. In a previous draft of *Afterland*, Cole and her husband Devon have a conversation about *The Road*, and how they wouldn't let that happen to Miles: planning for the most desperate and terrible circumstances in the most desperate and terrible version of the world imaginable. But I think that got lost along with the other 50 000 words that landed on the cutting-room floor.

From the feminist perspective, there were two ideas I wanted to play with: flipping the narrative, where suddenly Miles's bodily autonomy and agency are under threat because people are treating him as a commodity, a reproductive resource, a sex object, a matter of "future security". And exploring the idea of how a world of women is not necessarily going to be a kinder, gentler, friendship-bracelet and communal gardens kinda place,

where we can all go walking at night on our own and Banyana Banyana get to play the huge stadiums.

I'm not big on the binary idea of masculine vs feminine, and I wanted to interrogate that. A world of women is a world of people, still, with full human capacity for good and evil. Because women are just as capable of being power-hungry, violent, self-interested, abusive, and evil as men can be, especially when we're still living in the same society, but maybe in different ways.

Likewise, men are just as capable of being compassionate, nurturing, primary caregivers and making friendship bracelets.

**Cole, Miles, and Billie are South Africans. Why did you feel the need to add this dimension to them? How did it assist you in telling the story in a particular way?**

It felt true, more intimate, more personal, and at the time I was writing it, I wanted to comment on some of the terrible things happening in America—having interviewed friends with mixed-race kids for example, talking about how scary it is to have a brown son in a country of police violence and shootings, and also the horror of migrant children separated from their families, locked in cages.

I wanted to play with the idea of home, how it's an accident of birth, but also a choice you make. Plus I needed to isolate Cole so she wouldn't have friends to turn to when she's forced to go on the run. South Africa is the more hopeful destination in this case, not just because it's home, but also because women already know how to run things here, with so many female-headed households and single mothers who hold our economy together. (Many of these women are suffering the most now, in the real world. I hope everyone reading this is committed to paying their domestic workers their full salaries for the duration.)

**The journeys traversed in the novel are so vast. You must have taken many road trips yourself. Can you tell us more about these recce tours?**

It's my favourite part of writing books. Ask me about my least favourite part. Writing. My least favourite part is the actual writing, because it's hard and it's lonely and you have to hold an entire universe in your head and it never, ever comes out exactly the way you imagined.

I recreated (pre-created?) a lot of Cole and Miles's journey, driving from San Francisco to Miami, although I cheated and took some flights in-between. It's the greatest joy, connecting with people in a place who can show you around, and show you *their* city. I had an ex-Mormon drive me around Salt Lake City and introduce me to the anarchist community that inspired the thinly veiled Kasproing House. In Atlanta, I hired my Uber driver from the airport, Ania, to show me around and she talked our way in to one of the local mega-churches (after I had failed utterly) for an exclusive tour. She came with

me to the retired strippers' strip club, the Clermont, which inspired the venue Barbarella's in my novel. I had several guides around and through Miami, who helped me identify the perfect location for the neon nuns' Temple of Joy: a brutalist parking lot in Miami Beach with a schmancy restaurant at the top. And I also just drove, for miles, through California and Utah and Colorado, jetlagged to hell and doing many hours a day, which helped get me into Cole's headspace. Although I wouldn't recommend this as a writing practice.

**You're excellent at writing suspense, and in *Afterland* you cut between narratives with a filmmaker's ease. How difficult or easy was the process of plotting this novel?**

Thank you. Actually, that's part of why the damn thing took so long. I kept going back to flesh out what happened during the pandemic, what it was like being held hostage in quarantine on a military base while they did endless tests on Miles (and Cole, because the genetic variance is x-linked), or the community at the luxury bunker facility and the therapy sessions and the other boys and men they were being kept with, and what Cole and Devon and Miles's life was like before the pandemic—and it took away from the story. It was all backstory and not *the* story, so I had to cull some 50 000 words. And for a long time, I was caught in this self-built trap where I was trying to make the antagonist a man—either the baby-daddy or Cole's lunkhead brother who also has the gene. But I couldn't make it work and it was only when I leaned into the idea of exploring women's capacity for selfishness and self-delusion and doing terrible things that it suddenly came together.

So it was a long process, and it was incredibly difficult. My editor Helen Moffett laughs because she says readers are going to say "It's clear Lauren had so much *fun* writing this", when the truth is that it was a huge and difficult undertaking to make it seem that way.

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