

Moxyland by Lauren Beukes (Jacana) R148
6 July 2008

The dystopian novel sets out to create a nightmare world that is really only an extension of our own world, taking current social and political trends to their logical and scary implication in some ghastly future.

Thus Orwell, in *1984*, noting the increasing power of the state over the private lives of individuals, invented Big Brother, forever watching over his citizen-subjects; and Aldous Huxley, in *Brave New World*, applied the principles of industrial mass production to human eugenics and social engineering. Nearer in time and nearer home, Eben Venter in his recent *Horrelpoot*, translated as *Trencherman*, imagined a South Africa of the near future, devastated by an escalation of the social and climatic conditions that more hopeful souls try to wish away.

The dystopian novel, then, makes for uncomfortable reading, and Lauren Beukes's contribution to the genre is no exception. She, too, takes a long hard look at present-day South Africa, and then imagines how it might look in the not too distant future (her novel is set in 2018). In her case, the dystopian agent is corporate culture; the citizens are separated, as rigidly as under apartheid, into corporates and civilians. There seems to be no visible government, only rival corporations keeping firm check on their employees; but there is a highly visible national police force, brutally efficient at suppressing any form of public protest. In a witty development of current trends, the cell phone becomes both the key to all products and services, and the ultimate instrument of control. For a minor offence you can get "defused", that is, lightly fried by your cell phone; for a major offence you can get disconnected, which is tantamount to civic death. And if you don't have a phone, the bionic dogs will get you.

Beukes knows that any repressive regime relies for its survival on the support of a privileged elite, and she has fun imagining the kind of privileges *Moxyland* might offer its chosen few: private beaches (Clifton without the crowds), separate carriages on the underway, "seats unmarked by the pocked craters of cigarette burns, no blaring adboards, no gangsters checking you out." Drugs seem to be freely available, though here, as at present, the overclass seems to depend on the underclass for their supplies.

As in any good dystopian novel, there are a few brave souls resisting the brainwashing and techno-bullying, trying to sabotage manifestations of corporate control like the giant electronic billboards bombarding the citizenry with animated displays of consumer objects.

The rebels are a motley crew (amusingly, racial differences have been subsumed into the new apartheid of corporates and civilians): Tendeka and Ashraf, gay partners attempting to provide street children with better opportunities than they themselves had; Toby, in it for the kicks, permanently high on sex and drugs, blogging and bumming for a living; Kendra, an art-school drop-out who has had a chip implanted in her that, in return for eternal youth, enslaves her to a soft drink called Ghost; Lerato, a "corporate bitchmonkey", one of the privileged few, who uses her programming skills to aid and abet the "terrorists".

It's quite a cast, and Beukes moves them around with skill and verve, keeping her convoluted plot spinning and humming. In fact, her characters seem to be having so much fun that one is inclined to think if this is Dystopia, well, then, roll on Dystopia.

But it is of course in the nature of dystopias to present themselves to a significant section of the populace as Utopia; we are told that there are people in Zimbabwe who believe that they are living in the best of all possible worlds. Certainly citizens of present-day South Africa could be forgiven for wondering whether a bit of brainwashing might not be a fair price to pay for a crime-free society and efficient public transport. As one character says: “Compared to living in fear, terrorised by criminals, the hijackings and shootings and the tik junkies ready to kill you, shoot you, stab you, for a watch or a camera, I’ll take those modified dogs and the whaddayacallit, the cellphone electrocutions, any day.”

After all, people have been known to emigrate to Australia

To prevent her readers from taking *Moxyland* as a kind of technologically enhanced Australia, Beukes prepares a climax of some force, leaving us in no doubt as to the viciousness of such a regime – any regime -- when it feels itself under threat from “terrorists”. She doesn’t labour the parallels, but they will readily spring to the mind of any reasonably informed reader.

Moxyland is a great read, fast-paced, witty, sussed and sexy. It snaps and pops with neologisms and geek-speak, and fizzes and buzzes with gadgetry and techno-toys. On the whole, it is perhaps more enjoyable than scary – but hell, there’s enough out there to scare you. Take a break and read *Moxyland*.