

Book Review: "Genesis" by Bernard Beckett

Contributed by Octavia
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Taking its cue from Plato's Republic, and with more than a hint of George Orwell, Genesis outlines a world where society is split by genetic identity. In the future resulting from climate change, terrorism, the rise of religious fundamentalism and the onset of World War Three, New Zealand cuts itself off from the rest of the world. In the resulting closed society, a leader called Plato sets out the rules for the new community, rules that will prevent the chaos of the outside world from destroying NZ as it has destroyed the outside world – at least, that is what the reader is led to think. It's never made quite plain as to the state of life outside NZ – initially, refugees try to enter NZ waters and are blown up by the army. (Anyone familiar with the state of the NZ military today knows that we are now solidly in the realm of science fiction.) After a while, there are less and less attempts. Does this mean that the need grows less, or that the refugees do? This is never made clear, and is a clever way of increasing the claustrophobic tone of the book.

In the early days of the Republic, gene testing divides the population into four groups: labourers, soldiers, technicians, and philosophers. As can be expected, however, the odd individual arises who doesn't fit into their assigned class as well as he or she might.

One of the main characters, Adam Forde, is such an individual. Adam's life is presented by a young student philosopher called Anaximander, who is preparing for entrance into the Academy: the highest echelon of academia, and the group with the responsibility of running the Republic – a Republic that has drastically changed since Adam's day.

Genesis is structured around Anaximander's oral presentation to her three examiners. The story of Adam's life has reached legendary status in the centuries since his death, but Anaximander has a new interpretation of it, and him. Originally an extremely capable philosopher himself, Adam was demoted from the philosopher to the soldier class as a result of his inability to conform as expected to social and intellectual norms. It is not long before Adam disgraces himself in his new position as well, murdering fellow soldiers in order to avoid shooting a refugee girl.

Adam escapes the death penalty by being assigned to an experiment in identity: the philosopher William has created a new android, Art. Given that William's previous efforts had ripped nearby children to shreds, it is decided that Art needs a more disposable test subject to interact with. In fact, by forced interaction with Art Adam is helping to programme the android, and to build its identity into a functioning individual. The science fiction staple of androids as living creatures is used effectively here, especially as Art avoids the by now too-common milquetoast innocence commonly given to androids in his situation. Art, in fact, is a nuisance brat with an annoyingly steep learning curve, and naturally this doesn't help Adam, who is locked into his own mindset of seeing Art as a subhuman piece of machinery. Beckett manages the two perspectives (and their inherent chauvinisms, for Art is as pro-android as Adam is pro-human) well, although his sympathy initially seems to be with the android, who does tend to get the best lines:

Quote: 'Ugly's still ugly, no matter how you see it.'
'An interesting assertion. Justify it.'
'You bring twenty people in here,' Adam told him, 'and they'll all say the same thing. They'll all say you're ugly.'
'Bring in twenty of me,' Art spat back, 'and we'd all say your arse is prettier than your face.'
'There aren't twenty of you.'
'No, you're right. I'm unique. So I can safely say that all androids find you ugly. Not all humans find me ugly. So technically, I'm better looking than you, using objective criteria.' (Art isn't your normal android. For one, he looks like an orang-utan. Why a roboticist should make an android in the shape of an orang-utan I've no earthly idea, unless it is to somehow reinforce its inferiority from a human-chauvinist point of view.)

But while Adam is fulfilling his role of extending Art's programming, his input extends far beyond what anyone expects – especially Art. The secret of what happened in the final moments between the two, in their attempts to escape the testing facility, has, Anaximander believes, been lost. And when she finds that the Academy have not only still got the missing archive footage, but are actively keeping it from the public and philosophers both in a ruthless indoctrination programme of their own, her growing proximity to the secret, and how she eventually reacts to it, endangers far more than her standing in the academic community.

Quote: Examiner: You have become less careful in your answers.

Anaximander: I have.

Examiner: Are you sure that is wise?

Anaximander: I am sure it isn't. The realisation of the extent of the conspiracy within the Academy – a conspiracy that even involves Anaximander's tutor Pericles, who has prepared her for the Academy examination for years – is pretty shocking. It was the twist I didn't see coming (there's another that most readers

should get), and both involve identity: how it is formed, how it is kept… and how it is undermined. While it is true that the Republic of Anaximander's day has reached almost utopian status, with the class divisions and civil unrest of Adam's day long in the past, the price of maintaining that status has required the Academy to institute distinctly unsavoury measures. What price peace against the life and intellectual freedom of the individual? The totalitarian nature of the Republic has been based from the beginning on control over outside influences; firstly those from outside the borders of the country; and eventually those from within the minds of its citizens, influences in the form of ideas that spread throughout the population like a virus. Unsurprisingly, it is this viral, replicating influence that has the greatest effect. It's also what dooms the main characters of Genesis – particularly Adam, Art, and Anaximander, but also the Academy in general – a fate that is arguably irrespective of who lives and dies.