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Thursday, June 01, 2023

Evans, Babel Apocalypse (2023)

Vyvyan Evans, *The Babel Apocalypse: Songs of the Sage*, book 1. Nephilim Publishing, 2023. Pp. 388. ISBN 978-1-7399962-2-2. \$13.99.

Reviewed by Don Riggs

Vyvyan Evans is a professional linguist with an extensive interest in online technology and publishes in academic journals as well as magazines such as *Psychology Today* and *The New Republic*, so his credentials in the real-world fields of linguistics and computer tech are impressive. The *Babel Apocalypse*, however, is not like Neal Stephenson's *Snowcrash*, although it has a somewhat similar sinister plot to gain world domination through manipulating people's minds via language. For one thing, there is a definitely Western European cast to the characters and setting: Emyr Morgan, the protagonist, is English, though with his home in Wales, and is a James Bond-007-type of secret agent, a commander in Europol, who has relationships with various highly placed women, in which he is not always completely in control. His house is in the Netherlands, in a fishing village called Scheveningen, the name of which was used as a Shibboleth to detect Germans impersonating Dutch nationals at the beginning of World War II. This is not mentioned in the novel, although it might be a very esoteric Easter Egg.



Set about a century in the future, *Babel* depicts a period in which everyone (almost) has an implanted chip that gives them the ability to speak a variety of languages, although the range of languages and dialects we enjoy today is severely reduced. The organization that "rules" language use, Unilanguage, has stopped supporting "King's English" so that in London only "North American Standard" is in use—possibly a dig at the current British linguistic sensibility. People without these linguistic chip implants are called "ferals," which seems both a class marker and an indication that these people can not only not speak or understand language, but also cannot utilize the mechanical devices that sell people things in grocery stores, gas stations, and even get on subway lines. A passage of what one such feral says is an example of a slang riff: "Rah! Wagwan? Dem man dun grunt. Man knew it was sus" (25). No interlinear or facing-page translation is given for those of us without chip implants, which gives us a good indication of what it is/will be like to be offline in this uni-language future.

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There are a number of terms used frequently that are not glossed, even when the narrator is using them, and their ubiquity gives a real sense of how different the future will be, and the future of language is part of that. Brian Aldiss experimented with this literary device in some of his stories, but we are relieved of the necessity of slogging through vast stretches of future speak by virtue of the narrator's reliance on North American Standard. The real problem comes when these chips, connected in one world-spanning linguistic collective consciousness, are suddenly subject to a collapse of the system connecting language users in a "language outage."

Except for Emyr Morgan and, later, Ebba Black, who is the head of an organization abstaining from the unilanguage network, most of the characters are two-dimensional at best. Aapo Torni, a Finnish enforcement officer, is a supporting character whose sole trait is cruelty, and whose function in the plot peaks in the fast-moving highly described fight scene with Morgan. This simplification of characters is also characteristic of Asimov's *Foundation*, where many characters are generated to move the plot; as Donald Palumbo has pointed out, the main character of that novel is psychohistory, in which all of the characters are necessarily just momentary players. This is also the case here. For example, one minor character is introduced simply to give a demonstration of a technique of neural torture—as with the box of pain in the test of the *gom jabbar* in *Dune*, no physical damage is done while information is being extracted from the victim, but the narrator goes into sadistic detail in enumerating the types of pain induced on the way to finding out what the questioners want.

The pace of the events is rapid, with occasional slow-motion passages in which some setting is explored, such as the list of conventional weapons stored in the basement of Ebba Black's safe house. It is like the catalogue of ships early in the *Iliad*; the nonspecialist will not know what most of the handguns, machine guns, automatic weapons, grenade launchers etc. are, but the mere mention of their names and attributes is enough to impress the reader that here is a true stockpile of defensive arms. Should they be needed. This is partially the point; the fortress mentality that the central characters have at this point give the reader a heightened sense of threat from the dominant powers.

I had forgotten that *The Babel Apocalypse* was book one of a series by the time I reached the end, so the conclusion pulled the rug out from under me. I tried to figure out how the protagonist was going to extricate himself from a truly mind-shattering imprisonment. I remembered two brief mentions of a figure from the future who had requested that Emyr Morgan be used in an operation, indicating that things were going to work out, but I was devastated at the end of the novel. Obviously, the book gripped me over the course of the plot's development, and I was fully engaged to the point where the seemingly hopeless end made me wonder about—hope for—possible sequels.

Posted by [Djibril](#) at [08:23](#) 

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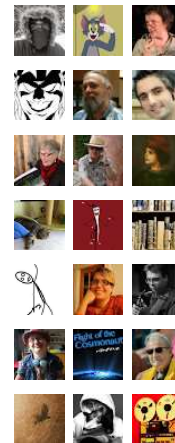
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