

Interview with Vyvyan Evans @Dawn's Writing Nook (May 25 2023)

Tell us about your latest book, who is the main character(s) and what can we expect when we pick it up?

VE: 'The Babel Apocalypse' is set in the near future when language is no longer learned, but streamed to neural implants in people's head, controlled by powerful bug tech corporations.

There are two main protagonists. The first is Emyr Morgan, a cybercrime detective, charged with investigating who's behind the cyberattack, that is causing the imminent collapse of civilization.

The second is Professor Ebba Black, heiress, linguist and hacker extraordinaire. In a desperate race against time, Emyr and Ebba have to figure out who is behind the outage and how to prevent a war between the great federations.

The book is a genre-blending, sci-fi mystery-thriller that will make you think about language in a whole new way. It will appeal to readers who enjoy speculative fiction or dystopian tales with a touch of romance.

Give us an out of context quote from your book to warm our hearts:

VE: "What sustained the blackness of her sorrow was vengeance. Vengeance past and vengeance yet to be dealt. Ebba nurtured it in the dark palace of her mind—the innermost, most private mental shrine where she kept the one list, the list that was actualized and ritualized. The list of lists."

Who are some authors that you look for inspiration?

VE: There are two authors that stand out for me, in terms of ingeniously exploring the impact of language on how we think and experience (illustrated through the conceit of a protagonist learning an entirely new, and alien, language).

The first by Samuel R. Delany who wrote the novel: Babel-17. The book was first published in 1966 and was joint winner of the Nebula Award for best science-fiction novel in 1967.

The eponymous Babel-17 is a language that alters the perceptions and world-view of any who speak it. This is a conceit that draws upon the principle of linguistic relativity.

Linguistic Relativity holds that divergence in the grammatical organization and lexical structure of the language we speak alters the habitual perception of the world around us, even dramatically changing how we think. As an example, we now know that the brains of Greek speakers perceive certain colours differently from speakers of English because of how Greek labels for colour divide up the colour spectrum. This is an unconscious consequence of speaking Greek versus English.

In the novel, Babel-17 is the language spoken by Invaders, as they wage an interstellar war against the Alliance. The novel's protagonist, Rydra Wong, is a linguist and cryptographer who possesses a rare ability to learn languages. She is recruited by the Alliance to try and decode the language of the invaders, Babel-17, to uncover clues for attack vectors.

Babel-17 is an exemplar of a very high-concept conceit. When Delany was writing the novel, linguistic relativity was still only a hypothesis, first dubbed the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis in 1954.

Delany asks a classic 'what if' question: What if the language we speak fundamentally changes the way we see the world, the way we feel, our belief systems, the way we act? Babel-17 then explores the logical, and extreme consequences of this proposition.

In the novel, as Rydra Wong learns the strange, alien tongue, she starts to see the world, and think as the invaders do. And the consequence is that she starts to become one of them. She ultimately betrays her own command and her government, acting as an agent of the Invaders.

And in this way, Delany shows that in the context of warfare, when the notion of linguistic relativity is taken to its logical extreme, language can serve as the most powerful weapon of all.

The second writer is Ted Chiang author of the novella, 'Story of Your Life, and first published in 1998. This story was subsequently adapted as the major motion picture Arrival.

Again, this story features a linguist as its main protagonist, Dr. Louise Banks. The story involves Banks narrating the events that led to the arrival of her newborn daughter. In so doing, she explains how her work, translating the language of the alien Heptapod species, led her to understanding time in a new way, where she could perceive her past and future simultaneously.

The consequence is that as learning a new (alien) language transforms thought, the novella explores issues relating to linguistic relativity, determinism and freewill.

Fire down below! What's the first object you save?

Not objects, but beings: My two pet cats.

Advice for newly sparking writers in three sentences or less:

Keep practicing your craft. Write what you know, and research the rest. Never give up!

Which of your characters would you want to share a campfire with, and why?

Ebba Black: she'd be great a conversational partner on the mysteries of language, how it works and why language is the hallmark of what it means to be human.

Tell us about what you are reading at the moment or anticipate reading in the future? Any new books you are looking forward to?

The most recent book I read was 'Our Lady of the Artilects' by Andrew Gillsmith. Our Lady of the Artilects is a mind-bending supernatural science fiction novel. That is beautifully written, while posing fundamental questions about metaphysics, experience, faith.

One I'm looking forward to is 'The Book that wouldn't Burn', by Mark Lawrence. It tells the story of a journey on which knowledge erodes certainty and on which, though the pen may be mightier than the sword, blood will be spilled and cities burned.

Can you briefly describe your writing process for us?

Basically, I plan, then start writing, then change my plan! Every revision makes the story richer and the writing better.

What is next on your writerly horizon?

VE: 'The Babel Apocalypse' is the first book in the 'Songs of the Sage' sci-fi book series. There are six projected books which, in increasing turns, examine the role and nature of language, and communication. The thematic premise is that, in the wrong hands, language can serve as a weapon of mass destruction. This overarching motif is explored, across the six books, both from Earth-bound and galaxies-wide bases.

As language involves symbol use and processing, the book series, perhaps naturally, also dwells on other aspects of human imagination and symbolic behaviour, including religious experience and belief systems, themselves made possible by language.

The second book in the series, The Dark Court, is set five years after the events of the great language outage depicted in The Babel Apocalypse. It explores how the language chips in people's heads can themselves be hacked, leading to a global insomnia pandemic. The Dark Court will be published in 2024, as book 2 in the series.

Please share your links for readers to check out your books, social medias, etc. as well.

Book website: <https://www.songs-of-the-sage.com/>

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