

Interview with author Vyvyan Evans (on Elaine P' Cantrell's blogspot) May 8th 2023

1. Did you always want to be an author?

VE: I first knew I wanted to be an author at the age of nine—when I won a children's poetry competition in a local newspaper celebrating the UNESCO International Year of the Child. I had always devoured books as a child, from the Roald Dahl books C.S. Lewis' Chronicles of Narnia series, weaving enchanting tales of talking animals reached through a surprisingly large wardrobe.

And since then, that is what I set out to via a somewhat circuitous route. I found myself, in my early twenties, Paris, France, with qualifications as a teacher of English to adult of other languages. By a twist of fate, I ended up in Florida, and later in Washington D.C., at Georgetown University where I completed a PhD. This led to a research and teaching career in universities where I was able to combine my insatiable curiosity about communication and others interact, with my desire to communicate through writing.

My first books were technical in nature, written for other academics, before I branched out in textbooks for students before authoring popular science books on language and communication for lay readers.

But it was the non-fiction books in popular science, that led me to write *The Babel Apocalypse*. This is work of science fiction exploring the nature and future of language, in the face of humanity's increasing reliance on AI and technology.

The Babel Apocalypse represents a natural evolution, in my authorial life, as I continue to explore the power and significance of language, and how it is the hallmark of what it means to be human.

2. Tell us about the publication of your first book.

VE: '*The Babel Apocalypse*' is the first in a new series of science fiction novels: *Songs of the Sage*. *The Babel Apocalypse* is a genre-blending dystopian, sci-fi mystery-thriller that will make you think about language in a whole new way.

It describes a near-future Earth, where language is no longer learned, but streamed to neural implants from internet-in-space low Earth satellites systems. When a cyberterrorist attack damages the servers in space, this leads to a global language outage. With much of the world's population no longer able to communicate, catastrophe looms.

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3. Besides yourself, who is your favorite author in the genre you write in?

VE: I have too many favorites to mention. But the one book, and consequently author, that inspired me to write science fiction about language is Samuel R. Delany.

'Babel-17' is by Samuel R. Delany. It was first published in 1966 and was joint winner of the Nebula Award for best novel in 1967. It ingeniously explores 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 eponymous Babel-17 is a language that alters the perceptions and worldview 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.

4. What's the best part of being an author? The worst?

VE: The worst part: the rejections. The best part: the acceptances.

5.What are you working on now?

There are six projected books in the Songs of the Sage series 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.