Review of *Babel, Or the Necessity of Violence: An Arcane History of the Oxford Translators Revolution*

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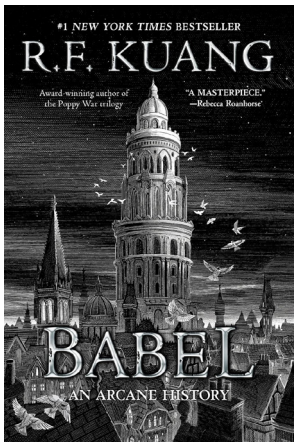
Kuang, R.F. *Babel, Or the Necessity of Violence: An Arcane History of the Oxford Translators Revolution* HarperCollins, 2022.



Most readers of *SFRA Review* have surely formed their own opinions about *Babel* since its publication in 2022. The same is likely true for a much larger readership; on the day that I started this review, 409 people were in the queue at the Portland, Oregon public library for its several electronic, audio, or paper versions. The popularity is easy to understand. *Babel* is fast paced, has compelling characters, and, at least for American readers, offers the enticement of an Oxford setting. It also has familiar plot lines: an orphan slowly taking control of his life, a group of misfits who band together at school, and a political thriller in which a secret society tries to undermine imperial Britain.

Kuang deftly introduces two interweaving themes just six pages in. Robin Swift is the son of a Chinese mother and a prominent Englishman who has swooped in to pluck Robin from plague-ravaged Canton (Guangzhou). Professor Richard Lovell is a preeminent translator who sees Robin as an experiment in selective upbringing—a tool to be sharpened rather than a son. To test the eleven-year-old's grasp of English, Lovell asks him to read a passage from T*he Wealth of Nations*. Robin is too young to understand what he is reading, but Kuang tells her readers in a footnote that Smith is arguing against colonialism. Lovell then hands Robin a silver bar with Chinese characters on one side and an English phrase on the other. When he reads the words in sequence, he generates a physical result by activating the stress that is always involved in translation. So, *Babel* is a book about power, both the economic and military power of imperial Britain and the power of language to express and perpetuate power relations.

Kuang deftly knots together her three plot lines. Robin's education, moral formation, radicalization, and attempt to become the hero of his own life run from the first pages when he is a child cast among strangers to his end as a suicide bomber. After a long prologue covering Robin's lonely adolescence learning Greek and Latin under the cold eye of Professor Lovell, the schooldays plot takes center stage when Robin arrives in Oxford to study at the Royal Institute of Translation and meets the three other members of his cohort. The political story builds intermittently behind the scenes of university life and then bursts forward to dominate the last half of the novel.

Kuang departs from our consensus history by positing that silver has an innate power that can be released by the right pair of words and transmitted at a distance. Oxford's skilled translators inscribe an English word on one side of a bar of silver and a closely related word from another language on the other. The tension in translation, the gaps and overlaps in meaning between the two words, can be tuned to affect the material world. Bars of inscribed silver can make gardens brighter, wagon loads lighter, and cannons more deadly. They can bolster the foundations of buildings and drive ships faster than wind alone. The steam engines of the silver-industrial age need silver more than coal, translators more than engineers. England did not discover the power of silver—Emperor Charles V established Secretaría de Interpretación de Lenguas in 1527 to capitalize on the flow of silver from the mines at Potosi—but it has used its economic and military power to amass the most silver and train the largest cadre of nineteenth-century translators. In a sense, Kuang's speculation is a thought experiment about an alternative energy source for the industrial revolution.

The book centers on four outsiders who come to Oxford already groomed to hone their skills as translators, but who also face a cultural translation gap among themselves. Ramiz Rafi Mirza, from Bengal, Victoire Desgraves, from Haiti via Paris, and Robin, from Canton via England, all understand their subordinate position in the British racial hierarchy, the impacts of European domination on their homelands, and the necessity of solidarity. They eventually reject the tempting option of being a well-paid but disrespected cog in the machinery of British imperialism. The fourth classmate is Letitia Price, whose personal story is one of tenacious efforts to break free of restrictive English gender roles, but who is still English to the core, unable to comprehend the problem with benevolent imperial uplift that is so obvious to others. She cannot bridge the translation gap between her imbedded cultural assumptions and the insights of the others. Nor does she share the same sense of history. She thinks a future dominated by the British Empire is inevitable; Robin thinks that it is malleable by individual decisions and actions.

The full title of *Babel* gives away the plot, promising a violent revolution by, most likely, the secret Hermes Society, which recruits Robin in his first year at Oxford and eventually embroils all four friends. The second half awkwardly incorporates some standard suspense novel plot twists and accelerates toward the seizure of the Institute of Translation (popularly the Babel Tower), where Robin and the others have been studying and where the power of silver is concentrated. Robin accepts the necessity of violence through increasingly drastic sabotage that climaxes in the destruction of London's Westminster Bridge. When the revolution fails to spread beyond some barricaded streets in Oxford, he finally brings down the Babel Tower itself around his head ("let me die with the Philistines" cried Samson in the Temple of Dagon).

What sort of history is this "arcane history?" We are supposed to think, at least in part, that it is based on the chronicle that one of the revolutionaries compiles in the last days in the Babel Tower. He wants an insiders' record to counter the official narrative that is sure to come when the revolution fails. The notebook is smuggled out on the last day that the tower stands, presumably

including something of Robin's own memories and thoughts. Kuang fills in the inevitable blanks in the written record with the novel's nearly unfailing focus on Robin's thoughts and actions.

Babel is a historical novel set in a parallel world. Canton and England of the 1830s are carefully portrayed. The England in which Robin Swift finds himself is pulled between imperial and industrial expansion and political reform. The nation is still shocked by the Peterloo Massacre of 1819 and still absorbing the effects of the Reform Act of 1832 that extended the vote to many middle-class men. The Chartists are a rising voice for further political change, but the British establishment tolerates the immiseration of industrial workers (Friedrich Engels was yet to write *The Condition of the Working Class in England* in 1844). Like many historical novelists, Kuang places invented characters in situations that match our understanding of the historical record. The bellicose Lord Palmerston is Foreign Secretary. Lin Zexu is Special Imperial Commissioner sent to deal with the British at Canton. William Jardine and James Matheson head the powerful British trading firm that wants an unfettered opium trade. Kuang teases her readers with footnotes meant to assure them that many minor points in the Babel world are also part of our consensus reality.

Babel embeds its fictional characters in this real world and allows them to interact with actual historical figures like Commissioner Lin. And like much historical fiction, a pivot comes with the imagined interaction between the fictional and real worlds, in this case when Robin decides to go beyond his duty as a translator for British interests in China and tell Commissioner Lin the truth about British intentions. His decision prompts Lin to send confiscated opium up in flames and set in motion the First Opium War of 1840.

If *Babel* is a parallel history, is it also an alternate history? We do not know, because the potential turning point occurs at the very end of the book rather than at some distance in the past (Philip K. Dick, *The Man in the High Castle*), at the beginning of the narrative (Kim Stanley Robinson, *Years of Rice and Salt*), or part way through (Greg Benford, *The Berlin Project*). We simply do not know what happens after Robin brings down the Babel Tower. Do translation centers in Cambridge and Edinburgh have the capacity to stabilize England? Will France fill the imperial void? Will England descend into chaos with the loss of its main energy sources? In our own history that the Babel world closely parallels, 1840 is premature for a proletarian revolution—the liberal risings of 1848, the Paris Commune of 1871, and other partial or failed revolts are yet to come. A short epilogue that follows Victoire after her escape from Oxford suggests that the crash of the tower has not fundamentally changed the structure of power, since she anticipates needing to continue the struggle in places beyond Europe.

In detail, we also do not know if the Hermes Society managed to achieve its goal to avert the Opium War. In our timeline, the vote in the House of Commons to accept the use of military force against China was a narrow 271 to 262, so the moderate insurgents might conceivably have had a chance to swing the vote if others had not escalated the violence. Robin is convinced that bringing down the Tower will at least delay military action, perhaps long enough for China to better prepare or for British politics to shift, but we will never know.

We contrast *Babel* with more explicit efforts to use alternate history to imagine the undoing of colonialism. Francis Spufford's *Cahokia Jazz* (2024) offers a North America in which Native nations have partially fended off European colonizers and maintain several independent or semi-independent states alongside the United States in the 1920s. Nisi Shawl in *Everfair* (2016) depicts a long, successful struggle of Africans against Belgian exploitation of the Congo and their establishment of an independent state. In *A Master of Djinn* (2021) P. Djèlí Clark introduces an element of magic to make Egypt the industrial and military equal of Britain. And a generation earlier, Terry Bisson in *Fire on the Mountain* (1988) imagined John Brown's raid as the catalyst for a war of Black independence that leads to an African and African American renaissance. These are all optimistic novels where history has been altered to reduce the power of European colonizers over non-Europeans. They are also novels in which the desired outcome results from concerted group action rather than individual heroics.

Babel leaves readers hoping, perhaps, but not knowing that the future of Robin's world might have been better. It also suggests a lesson about political change. The Hermes Society relies on agitation and discrete acts of sabotage before a frustrated Robin turns to domestic terrorism. What is absent is systematic organizing to link the grievances of British workers to the anticolonial struggle and build the political movement necessary for revolutionary change.

Carl Abbott is a historian and Emeritus Professor of Urban Studies and Planning at Portland State University. He has published articles about science fiction in *Science Fiction Studies*, *Extrapolation*, *Strange Horizons*, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, *Public Domain Review*, and *CityLab* and is the author of *Frontiers Past and Future: Science Fiction and the American West* (Kansas) and *Imagining Urban Futures: Cities in Science Fiction and What We Might Learn from Them* (Wesleyan). Not surprisingly, he is interested in the ways in which the speculative imagination riffs on the history of our consensus timeline.