

## **Interview with author Vyvyan Evans, at Rogues Angels May 4<sup>th</sup> 2023**

### **How did you come up with your idea for your novel?**

VE: The Babel Apocalypse asks the ‘what if’ question: What if language were no longer learned but streamed to neural implants in people’s brains from internet in space. Just like we stream music, movies and TV today, it struck me that in the future, why not language too.

And exploring this idea, what would the consequences be? As humans “give up” on language, and offload language learning, allowing AI to take over, language becomes a commodity (like any other, such as movies, music, etc., that we now stream on demand for a fee). In short, language would become a proprietary product, controlled for and by big tech, in service of shareholders and corporate interests.

Such a development would lead to a slippery slope of issues ranging from potential censorship, to control of thought, and even, through cyberterrorism, the prospect of an existential crisis for the human race. The latter is manifested in The Babel Apocalypse most notably by a global language outage, which prevents large numbers of people from being able to communicate.

Self-evidently, in a world where most people have undergone language chipping, this would soon lead to a situation in which in the automated world there are no native speakers of language left. And with an entire population entirely dependent on language, were that language streaming ecosystem to fail, then the consequences would be catastrophic.

The Babel Apocalypse imagines a situation in which a cyberterrorist attack on language streaming servers in low Earth orbit leads to just such a global language outage. Such an event, with its low probability, would be one for which humans would be completely unprepared. In The Babel Apocalypse, entire populations of people, literally at a stroke, lose the ability to use language, becoming feral. And hence, the consequences for civilization become catastrophic.

Hence, the concerns alluded to in the book relate, ultimately, to what it means to be human; and whether implantable AI can and should be allowed to replace previously fundamental aspects of the human experience. Moreover, these concerns highlight the abuse that arises from the commoditization of what we previously assumed to be a human birth-right, namely language.

### **What expertise did you bring to your writing?**

VE: I have a background in linguistics and cognitive science, with a PhD in linguistics and a long career as a university professor. I have published many

works of non-fiction, including books on language and communication in the digital age, for lay-readers. Moreover, one of my research areas is digital communication. Hence, given the advent of smart AI, and the likes of ChatGPT, I brought my academic research to bear to imagine a future in which language is a commodity, as depicted in *The Babel Apocalypse*.

**What would you want your readers to know about you that might not be in your bio?**

VE: I am dyslexic—which makes me a horrible speller. Yet, with the assistance of excellent editors, I have managed to produce fifteen books, across genres, so far over the course of my writing career.

**As far as your writing goes, what are your future plans?**

VE: *The Babel Apocalypse* is the first in a planned series, entitled *Songs of the Sage*. There are six projected books in the 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 galaxy-wide bases.

As language involves symbol use and processing, the book series, perhaps naturally, also dwells on other aspects of human imagination and symbolic behavior, 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.

**Can you give us a sneak peek into this book?**

VE: The book is set in the early twenty-first century, when implantable, neuro-prosthetic chips are a legal requirement. Language is no longer learned but streamed from servers in low Earth orbit.

When a catastrophic language outage hits, cybercrime detective is called in, to investigate. In Chapter 1 of *The Babel Apocalypse*, the global catastrophe is introduced in the excerpt below, as follows:

I heard a group of drunken revelers behind me. "He always has a line for the ladies," said one slurred voice. The boozy pitch contour wobbled

toward me, bouncing along the polycarbonate surface. Then came an eruption of cackling.

As I was about to glance back at the voices, a light flickered in my peripheral vision, drawing my gaze upward to the night sky. A soft white glow, high up in the dark. At first it was indistinguishable from the airway lights. But it persisted, the size of a small disk at first, before shifting to red-orange, getting larger. At that point I realized it definitely couldn't be a hover car. This was farther up, probably low Earth orbit, which explained the initial white. But the shift in coloration—that meant a detonation, producing nitrogen dioxide, which turned deep orange when mixed with air. A gaseous cloud has reached the atmosphere, I thought. I was witnessing a chemical explosion in space large enough to be visible to the naked eye. But what was exploding?

As I continued looking up, the orange grew in intensity until it flared across the skyline, illuminating the entire landscape around me with an eerie red-orange. It was only then that I became aware of the newly hushed silence of the drunken revelers nearby. And the silhouettes of other people too, who had also stopped and peppered the pedestrian corridor. We were all now strange red creatures, watching transfixed in rapt silence as the night sky was on fire. And just as suddenly as it had appeared, it was gone; the orange light faded back into a deep well of pitch black.

I was pulled out of my reverie by the sight of a hover car descending onto the vertipad ahead of me. A three-wheeler autonomous hackney cab; mass-produced model. I watched in idle distraction as the glass frontage descended level with my eyeline, not twenty meters from me. Inside, I saw a woman, illuminated by the interior safety lighting—late twenties, perhaps, with a small child, a boy of about three or four. The red glow of the vertipad's perimeter security lights bounced sharply off the polymer composite shell, which advertised the taxi company in holographic lettering. The vehicle came to a standstill on the vertipad.

But something about the hover taxi held my gaze. I realized it was the autogyro system. Something was wrong. Instead of self-stowing, it remained deployed. And the vehicle stayed in place where it had landed, in the middle of the vertipad. *Strange*, I thought. *It should have taxied away onto the transit corridor by now.* Maybe the explosion had affected the landing telemetry circuit. Stranger still, given the passengers were now stuck inside, why hadn't they voice-activated the exit? The gull-wing doors remained closed.

I climbed over the thermoformed pedestrian barrier, ignoring the warning sensors as they flickered on, blinking at me, and walked up the vertipad incline toward the hover cab. The

woman peeked out, panic etched on her face. As she glimpsed me through the glass, she suddenly began banging as if in desperate supplication. I mouthed that she should issue her door deactivation voice command into the piloting VirDa. She didn't seem to understand me, so I spelled out Virtual Digital Assistant with my forefinger on the window—VirDa; a crude attempt to make her react.

She stared out at me with wild eyes through the gull wing window; a look of incomprehension. I realized that her apparent lack of understanding could only mean one thing: she was feral! Her language streaming service was out. She had no idea what I was saying, nor could she communicate with her VirDa. And then she screamed.

### **Do you outline your books or just start writing?**

VE: I always start by outlining. But then as the writing process begins, characters start to write themselves. And events take on a significance not foreseen in the plotting. So my writing process is more that of a pantsing plotter: I work within the outline until something quite different emerges.

### **How do you maintain your creativity?**

VE: I maintain creativity by going for very long runs in all weather. Air and exercise nourish the brain. Also, some of my best ideas come to me while I'm running.

### **Who is your favorite character in the book? Can you tell us why?**

VE: One of the two main protagonists in the novel is Professor Ebba Black. She is an heiress, hacker extraordinaire and may also be the leader of the Babel cyberterrorist organization set undoing the big tech monopoly.

Ebba is also one bad-ass, a high-functioning sociopath with psychopathic tendencies, who also happens to want to help people, by restoring language to them, without having to pay for language streaming subs.

If I were to come back in female form, I would want her attitude.