INTERVIEW with Vyvyan Evans @It's Raining Books 24th May 2023

Why do you write in your genre?   What draws you to it?

VE: I write in science fiction, the literary genre of ideas. Science fiction has a long and illustrious habit of predicting the future. In 1940, with his first in the Robot series of stories, Isaac Asimov predicted some of the ethical issues that would arise as artificial intelligence comes to have a more pervasive influence in our daily lives.

Today in the twentieth first century, we are on the brink of a Fourth Industrial Revolution, sometimes dubbed 4IR. This is where automation and connectivity, via the internet, will dramatically alter the way in which we interact with each other, as well as everything around us, in our increasingly joined-up technological environment. And I predict, in less than one hundred years from now, this new technology will transform many aspects of our daily lives that we currently take for granted, including language itself.

Indeed, in 2015, many of the world's leading scientists warned, in an Open Letter and accompanying report, against the new dangers of AI, as a consequence of 4IR. This Open Letter was issued in response to new breakthroughs in AI that, without adequate control, might pose short and long-term existential threats to humans.

But potential dangers come not just from the use of AI, in the sense of, for instance, The Terminator series of movies, in which AI seeks to wage war and destroy humans. New implantable devices, that will enhance how we as humans can interact with our new tech-landscape, will also give rise to potential dangers. Language is, arguably, the single trait that is the hallmark of what it is to be human. And yet, in the near-future, language-chipped humans, or 'transhumans', will have enhanced abilities that bring new opportunities, as well as ethical challenges and even threats.

These challenges and dangers are what are predicted in my new book, The Babel Apocalypse. The novel warns of the dangers of humans giving up on language, quite literally having something akin to ChatGPT in our heads. When lose language, humanity loses.

What research (or world-building – for fantasy/paranormal/Sci-fi) is required?

VE: I have a background in linguistics and cognitive science, with a PhD from Georgetown University and having worked for many years as a professor of linguistics. In The Babel Apocalypse, I explore one possible future for language, if the current research trajectory continues, and we no longer learn language it, but stream direct to neural implants in our heads.

I find science fiction to be appealing as a genre, as it really is an advantage to be a subject matter expert. To write convincingly, especially in so-called 'hard' science fiction, such as The Babel Apocalypse, which strives for scientific accuracy, it is important to have relevant background in the story and the ideas being conveyed. And it seems to me that this cannot be adequately replicated without some meaningful level of expertise.

Name one thing you learned from your hero/heroine.

VE: There are two main protagonists in the book, a male and female. But the standout character has to be the heroine, Professor Ebba Black, an heiress, hacker extraordinaire, and someone who may be behind the mysterious Babel cyberterrorism organization. She is one-badass.

I've learned from her that you can be a high-functioning sociopath with psychopathic tendencies, and still be fundamentally good, and try to things that make a difference. For Ebba that means trying to restore language to humanity.

Do you have any odd or interesting writing quirks, habits or superstitions?

VE: My best ideas come to me either when I'm in the shower, or out for a run, when I have nothing to write them down with. It's then a race against time to get access to a pen and paper, or a smart device, to write out the ideas before they disappear.

Are you a plotter or pantser?

VE: I'm a bit of both. I plot and then pants within the outline plot, reworking ideas many times, cutting, adding, revising. The Babel Apocalypse first took form in 2019, but it's been almost four years of work to achieve the finished work that I wanted.

Look to your right – what's sitting there?

VE: An open suitcase.

Anything new coming up from you? What?

VE: The Babel Apocalypse is the first book in the Songs of the Sage book series. 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.

Do you have a question for our readers?

VE: Do you have a favorite science fiction book? And what makes it so special?