

# Babel

By R.F. Kuang

1. Kuang includes a forward which explains how she warped some of actual Oxford to fit her fictional narrative and alternate universe. Was it necessary for her to provide the forward? When you read about a place you know, do changes or inaccuracies trip you up?
2. The book covers a lot of academic topics like etymology and power dynamics in international trade. But there was also the world-building with silver magic, and some major action sequences.

Of those three (academic topics, magic, and action), which would you have wanted more of and which would you have wanted less of?

3. Professor Lowell says to Robin, "Laziness and deceit are common traits among your kind. This is why China remains an indolent and backwards country while her neighbors hustle towards progress...You must resist these traits, Robin. You must learn to overcome the pollution of your blood..."

And yet, Robin was also Lowell's blood son and half British. What explains Lowell's cognitive dissonance on this topic?

4. During the Babel orientation Robin "...felt a thrum of excitement at the thought that perhaps his unbelonging did not doom him to existing forever on the margins, that perhaps, instead, it made him special".

How did that work out for him and his cohort of friends?

5. "And Robin found it incredible, how this country, whose citizens prided themselves so much on being better than the rest of the world, could not make it through an afternoon tea without borrowed goods"

The book paints a scathing portrait of England's colonialist ambitions, fed by greed and hubris. Have you read other fiction or non-fiction on colonialism? How does Kuang's depiction of colonialism square with what you know about the matter?

6. Consider Robin's story arc. Was it a matter of maturation and then radicalization? Or was he simply a frog slowly boiling in the water, who couldn't back down once it bubbled over?

7. Robin lives a splintered life. He can pass as an Englishman, but he's also derided as a "stupid Chinaman". He loves Babel, but also hates it. He appreciates the

opportunities that Lowell gave him, but then Robin killed him in a fit of rage.

How did you respond to Robin's inconsistencies. Discuss some of their causes.

8. Chapter Thirty has one sentence, "Westminster Bridge fell."

There was a lot of disagreement in the tower about it. Some felt that they went too far. But Robin felt that "This is how colonialism works. It convinces us that the fallout from resistance is entirely our fault, that the immoral choice is resistance itself rather than the circumstances that demanded it."

Where do you lay the blame? Would you have let the Westminster bridge fall? How far can/should a resistance movement go?

9. The cover flap poses the question, "Can powerful institutions be changed from within, or does revolution always require violence?"

What do you think? Can you think of examples in history where each method has worked?

10. **Descriptions of the book compare it to a cross between Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrel (magic in Britain) and The Secret History (dark academia)** But the class war, resistance movement, and ultimate barricading of the tower is also **reminiscent of Le Miserable.**

**What other literary references do you see in Babel?**

11. **BONUS QUESTION** : If you could get your hands on a clever bit of silverwork to help you with something in your everyday life, what would that be?