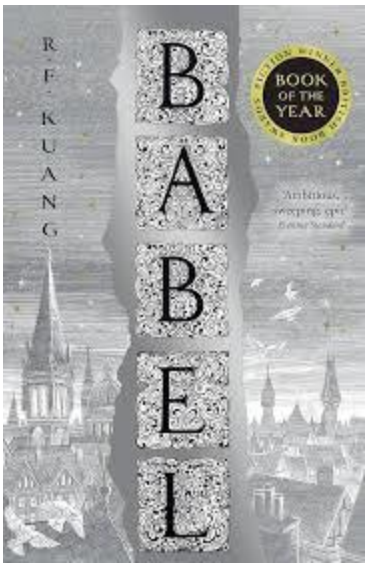

Babel
R.F Kuang
Reviewed by: Ayan Mohapatra, 15
Star Book Reviewer of Be the Star You Are! Charity
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In an alternate 1830s, the British Empire fuels its industrial revolution with magic silver bars, powered by meaning lost in translation. Robin Swift, years after being taken from his home in Canton, China, as a young boy, goes to study at the Royal Institute of Translation, or Babel, where he will learn silver-working. While there, he forms a group of friends, and all seems well until things eventually fall apart.

Babel is a very interesting novel in structure. Rather than attempt to immerse you in the world of silver magic from the beginning, it instead spends the first few chapters of the novel with Robin getting a mundane classical education. Then, when we go to Babel, the novel becomes a nice, almost cozy, book about Robin and his three friends trying to succeed at school. This atmosphere makes the latter part of the book, when things start to go wrong, so engaging that I finished the last 200 or so pages in one sitting because I could not wait to see what was next. The book does a brilliant job of really making you care for the characters in the book, so that by the end, you are fully invested in the story. The book is told largely from Robin's perspective, but there are various footnotes and interludes that include a greater variety of perspectives.

An interesting note about Babel is that the main thread tying together the book is a message against the British Empire, yet this does produce some arguable issues. Notably, for a book strongly focused on conveying a message, it doesn't necessarily convey very well some finer details. The book is rather muddled about how you should view the character of Letty, one of the Babel students, at different times, depicting her as either well-intentioned but ultimately wrong, a sympathetic character, or completely unsympathetic whatsoever. Furthermore, the book appears to be of two minds regarding the, without spoilers, drastic action that Robin finally undertakes against Britain near the end of the book, leaving the reader unsure of what the book was trying to convey. Finally, the book is over 500 pages long, which was not an issue for me but is important to keep in mind.

Overall, I would recommend Babel to Adults and engaged Young Adults who seek a book with a strong message and commentary, as well as those who appreciate historical fiction with a strong group dynamic.

Recommended Titles:

Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell, by Susanna Clarke

The Secret History, by Donna Tartt

The Poppy War, by R.F Kuang