



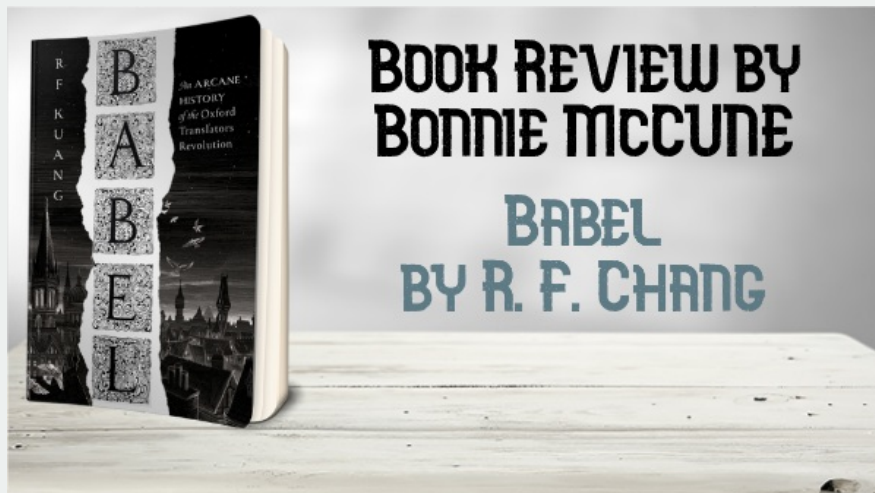
## FALL 2023 EDITION

**Hello from the Speculative Fiction Writers Association! We celebrate everything speculative fiction—from science fiction to historical fiction, from fantasy to horror. If it asks a question, our members are there looking for answers.**

### In This Newsletter...

- A review by our own Bonnie McCune of *Babel, or the Necessity of Violence: An Arcane History of the Oxford Translators' Revolution* by R.F. Kuang
- Kayelle Allen on writing lovable characters
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- Publishing news from Linda Ditchkus and Kelly Sanford
- Conference experience from Andrew Abarca
- Meet a Speculative Fiction Writers Association member—Oliver Blakemore

## BOOK REVIEW



### ***Babel--Meaning or Madness?***

**Book review of *Babel, or the Necessity of Violence: An Arcane History of the Oxford Translators' Revolution* by R.F. Kuang**

By Bonnie McCune

Into the plethora of genres and sub-genres in today's fiction rockets *BABEL, Or the Necessity of Violence: An Arcane History of the Oxford Translators' Revolution*, by R. F Kuang. The title says it all. History, deeply interwoven in a fantastic view of what might have existed, the long (500 pages plus) twists-filled story uses fiction's "what-if" attitude in the most imaginative way. It's 1830s England, and Britain rules the waves, the world's economies, even the intellectual wealth of civilization.

In an alternate reality, magical silver bars manipulated by specially trained linguists and translators affect reality. Life can be tweaked by

experts to improve an invention, increase production, improve the accuracy of bullets, heal injuries, and more. Languages are matched by pairs, similar in meaning but never completely translatable. Pairs inscribed on silver bars exhibit magical properties, but only those trained at Oxford University's Royal Institute of Translation, or Babel, have the ability to wield their power.

Enter a small group of new students. Robin Swift, an orphan from Canton, bonds with Ramy from Calcutta, Victoire from Haiti, and Letty, a white British admiral's daughter. They've been recruited because the effectiveness of translating European languages is diminishing, and exotic languages should revitalize the magic. The cluster faces dilemmas, travels the world, and learns the truth about their situation and so-called talents. "Mixed blessing" is a mild description.

But this tale isn't simply an escape into fantasy. The author firmly roots the plot in the complexities of imperialism, racism, and the strange bedfellows they make with academia. At great length, Kuang flagellates the long-lived power structures of Great Britain and points fingers at their abuses and crimes. What she doesn't do is identify the same, if not worse, villains in the rest of the world. It's past time to speak up about the WASP passion for power and riches, but surely, anyone tarred by the same brush deserves the same berating. The color of anyone's skin, or religion, or social standing, does not excuse abuses.

The book's strengths are many, the tales fascinating, the underpinnings of thoughtful tirades well aired. I cheered for the fighters for freedom and parity. But I desperately longed for exposure for these crimes and failings that are all the human race's, not just the same old straw man of European Anglos.

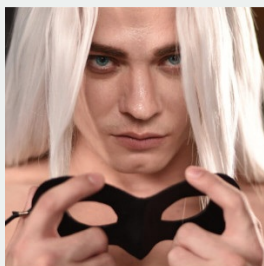
Well worth several readings, it debuted at the first spot on The New York Times Best Seller list and won the 2022 Nebula Award for Best Novel.

---Bonnie McCune, <http://bonniemccune.com>

## FEATURED ARTICLE

### Creating Characters Readers Love

by Kayelle Allen



Nik Nitzelov as Plectra, photo by @CosPhoto

In any story, plot is the spine, the various settings are its bones, conflict is its muscle, and characters are its flesh and beauty. Together, they create a framework on which to build a beautiful story full of living, breathing characters. Here are some basic tips on how to make characters readers will love...

#### **Make characters relatable.**

Think of the monster movie where someone decides to poke the monster to see if it's dead. Of course it isn't, and they are now its next victim. That type of character is what readers call TSTL - Too Stupid To Live. In other words, unrelatable. If your character stands up to the biggest meanest baddie on the block, make it for a good reason—not for the convenience of the plot or because you need someone to die at this moment to show how bad the monster is. Are there stupid people in the world? We all know the answer to that. The point is,

don't litter your story with them.

### **Give characters a reason to be miserable.**

In real life, what keeps you in a bad situation? If you have a way out, why don't you take it? But what if there is no way out? If your characters stay in a bad situation but there's no reason they would, they won't be believable. Maybe your heroine has to finish school and put up with a professor who treats her unfairly because she promised her dying mother she'd be the first in their family to graduate.

A hero who fights unbeatable odds would do so for a solid reason. In *Star Wars: A New Hope*, Luke is stuck at home with his aunt and uncle because they need him and he feels loyalty toward them. When they're killed because of the evil empire, he wastes no time in joining the rebellion. Give your characters a reason to be "stuck" before you give them a way out.

### **All characters have a line in the sand.**

Everyone has vices. But most people also have lines they will not cross. Let your protagonist see that line and have to determine if he or she will cross it. If nothing is at stake, there's no conflict. If there's no conflict, there's no story. To have a character readers love, there must be something serious at stake, such as a moral dilemma or quandary they must overcome.

### **Let characters say it their way.**

If your characters spoke without dialogue tags (such as "Mary said") and no action to indicate what they were doing, would readers be able to tell them apart? If not, it's time to work on character-oriented dialogue. Give each character a unique voice. When I wrote the *Bringer of Chaos* series, I wrote the immortal Pietas (see picture above) as a highly-educated formal speaker fluent in multiple languages. Pietas never swears and as leader of his people, he holds himself to the highest degree of honesty. His personal ethics reflect in his careful and articulate speech. When he forgets himself and speaks with his mouth full, he's mortified. He might be alone on this planet with one other person, but that's no reason to ignore good manners. The human warrior, Six, with whom he is marooned, is earthy and frank. He sprinkles his speech with slang terms and his native Spanish. He's impulsive and his words show it. Make sure your characters each use language that reflects their inner beliefs and self-image.

### **Give the villain a reason to hate.**

The bad guy should be bad for a reason. What set him (or her) on a destructive path? In *Bringer of Chaos*, Pietas had been reared from infancy as a soldier. His people had been created as immortal warriors whose only duty was to keep humans safe. If immortals were killed during battle, once he revived, they would be sent back to fight again. Humans had no sympathy for them. Eventually, the immortals turned on their creators and became the oppressors. By the time *Origin of Pietas* begins, Pietas has hated humanity for nearly two thousand years and has just seen a hundred unarmed immortals slain by human forces. Humans considered that a victory, but the immortals' retaliation against military forces was called a massacre. Pietas had good reason to hate humans.

### **Give the story its proper ending.**

When writing, it can be difficult to leave your story world. Fortunately, series are popular. If you've gotten comfortable with the characters and the world is nicely broken in, why leave? You know what works and what doesn't. If your readers love your world and the characters, plan for sequels and leave hints there is more to come.

Whether you write by the seat of your pants winging it all the way, or you're a careful plotter, weave an end that satisfies. In a romance, it's when the characters live happily ever after (or for now).

How do you know where the end of a story is? Easy. When you've told all there is to tell, stop. That's a simplistic answer, but every story has a beginning, middle, and end. It helps to know where you're heading when you begin. When the resolution of the story's main question has been answered, tie it up.

### **Bringing it all together.**

A good story has solid conflict and believable settings. Give the people in it reasons to be there. Cause them to stay in or leave their situation because it makes sense, or because they have no other choice. Allow their moral background to make decisions for them. Let your people

each speak with a different voice. Create dialogue that's recognizable or unique to the main characters. Know why the villain is the villain, and show the villain's morality (or lack thereof) to your readers. Finally, when you get to the end of your story, and you've tied up all the loose ends, stop.

---Kayelle Allen is a member at large of the Speculative Fiction Writers Association. She is the author of a whole bunch of great books. You can find out more about her and her work on her website: <https://kayelleallen.com/>

## SPECULATIVE FICTION IN THE NEWS



### Voyager's Communication Hiccup

The Voyager 2 space probe is the third of only five human-made craft that have left the solar system. Because of its odyssey (and I don't feel like the word is an exaggeration in this case), the spacecraft has grabbed the imaginations of many speculative fiction writers and has never let go. Launched in 1977 with the mission to observe the outer planets of the Solar System, Voyager 2 technically completed that mission in 1989 when it completed its flyby of Neptune's system. After that, NASA just sort of left it on. Because why not?

It is the purview of speculative fiction to speculate about strange events, and recently Voyager 2 had one of those hiccups that will no doubt inform science fiction stories for years to come.

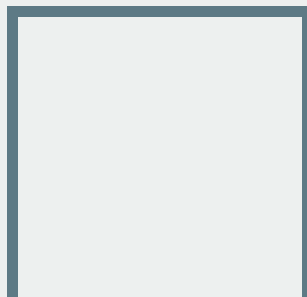
On July 21st, 2023, NASA lost contact with Voyager 2. Their story is that a computer input error Earthside sent a command to Voyager 2 that shut its communication down.

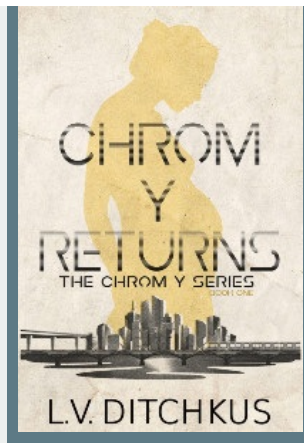
Then, on August 2, the same year, NASA detected a signal from Voyager 2 again. And all is well in the world. The story is probably that benign...

But it might not be.

---You can read the whole story: <https://www.npr.org/2023/08/02/1191341035/nasa-voyager-2-spacecraft-contact>

## PUBLISHING NEWS





**New Release: *Chrom Y Returns:*  
*The Chrom Y Series: Book One* by L.V.  
Ditchkus**

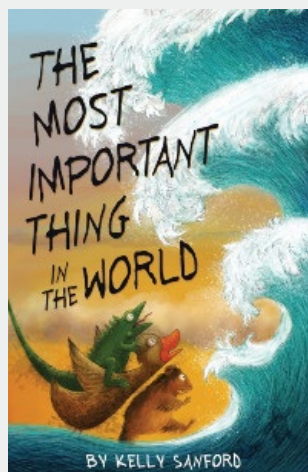
Speculative Fiction Writers Association member L.V. Ditchkus' novel has been recently published. Here's the blurb:

"Hundreds of years after a horrific disease destroys Earth's male population, Sofia Andes7 and her wife embark on a perilous journey back in time to save humankind. While Sofia's wife impregnates herself with five male zygotes, Sofia is transfixed by the sleeping sperm donor. Sofia's first and subsequent trips to the twenty-first century awaken long-dormant feelings, and she begins to question the presumed differences between men and women. As she grapples with the ethics of stealing sperm from the unwitting donor, Sofia hatches a plan to spare him from the deadly virus. But Sofia's altruistic plan may never materialize. Tenacious Sofia's first priority is to protect her wife's unborn babies from male-hating terrorist groups, questionable actions of their government, and a nefarious Artificial Intelligence. With humanity's future at stake, Sofia will draw on all her strengths to save the people she can. However, the laws of time and space have their own imperatives, and saving everyone she loves may be beyond her reach."

---You can get a copy of *Chrom Y Returns* on Amazon here:

<https://www.amazon.com/Chrom>Returns-Book-One/dp/1734212543>

To learn more about Ditchkus and other titles she has written, visit her website: <https://www.lvditchkus.com/>



## **Kelly Sanford's Middle-grade Novel, *The Most Important Thing in the World***

Spec Fic Writers member Kelly Sanford has the honor of her middle-grade novel, *The Most Important Thing in the World*, which is in the running for the 2024-2025 Sunshine State Young Readers Award (SSYA) which is sponsored by Florida Media in Education.

Should *The Most Important Thing in the World* make the SSYA final list, it will be promoted as a recommended book in libraries and schools throughout Florida.

Sanford says, "That would be a huge boost for me. Because I hate marketing my work, even though I know it's essential. The recognition alone is validating. It's nice when others see meaningful qualities in my work. My fingers are crossed."

---Kelly Sanford is Workshop Chair for the Speculative Fiction Writers Association. You can find more information about her on her website: <https://www.kellysanfordwrites.com/>

## **CONFERENCE EXPERIENCE**

### **A Note from Our Member: Andrew Abarca**

"This is the second year in a row that I attended the RMFW retreat at the Franciscan Resort in Colorado Springs. It's hard to believe I was just finishing plotting my YA Urban Fantasy at the end of the retreat last year. And this year I finished draft 7 and sent it off to my beta readers. I also had the last-minute opportunity to practice my presentation on how to adapt your novel to a comic book. I'll be presenting at the RMFW conference this September.

My comic book will be available for sale there and we plan on having a giveaway. If you find the sticker hidden in your purchase, you will get a free special edition wraparound cover usually only available to Kickstarter backers."

Abarca will be running a workshop on adapting your novel to a comic book at the Rocky Mountain Fiction Writers Rocky Mountain Gold Conference in mid-September. Look for him there.

---Andrew Abarca <https://apoapsu.com>

## **MEET OUR MEMBERS**

### **Oliver Blakemore**



Hi. My mom named me Oliver. If I had a dime for every time someone asked me if I'm in a band, I'd have, like, a buck sixty. At times, it's given me pause to wonder if I picked up the wrong tool that sleepy afternoon when twelve-year-old me started typing my first novel.

When I was in my teens I read *American Gods* by Neil Gaiman. As it turns out, you can't follow Neil Gaiman's career without gaining an awareness of the headache intersection of writing, publishing, and public relations. Since then, I have pursued two careers. I have written stories. And I've chased gigs in the marketing industry.

To date, I've written fifteen novels. Two of them might even be good. They've been in the fantasy and science fiction genres. I have a good portfolio of short stories. They have a laundry list of near misses behind them because I have a chronic instinct to try to play out of my league. I've received seven honorable mentions from the Writers of the Future contest, for example.

### **If you ain't going hard, what's the point of going?**

I joined the Speculative Fiction Writers Association almost a year ago because it was time to get involved with the wider writing community. It's proved a good choice. The community is strong, the quality of writing is amazing, and it's a huge boon to be involved with people with a genuine interest in lifting each other up. There's very much a sense that rising seas lift all ships. Is that a saying? It sounds like one.

Anyway, I have taken on the Marketing Chair position for the Speculative Fiction Writers Association. I find the subject interesting. The reason I find the subject interesting is because I want a future with great books to read. That means facilitating, everywhere I can, the careers of the writers I meet.

Getting a book from idea to a stack of paper on a shelf somewhere has a lot of moving pieces. One of the pieces I understand a little is marketing. I'm excited for the opportunity to use my skills for the writing community.

By the way, I'm looking for content to incorporate into my marketing strategy. What are some writing tips you love? Let me know.

--Oliver Blakemore <https://www.oliverblakemore.com>



In the new post, *Dots and Dashes for Fiction Writers*, R. C. Beckett discusses NOT-TO-USE punctuation and best practices for dashes, hyphens, and ellipses.

<https://specificwriters.com/dots-and-dashes-for-fiction-writers/#more-3228>

NEW POSTS WANTED, contact Ralph

**Thanks For Reading!**

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