Babel Tower Short Guide

Babel Tower by A. S. Byatt

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Contents

Characters

Babel Tower, like most of Byatt's fiction, has an extensive cast of characters. She even admits to borrowing one minor one from a novel by Iris Murdoch. In addition to Frederica, her parents, brother, niece and nephew, all make minor appearances, while Daniel is one of the stronger presences in the novel. Outside of her family her son's friends, her students, the lawyers at the trials, her husband's sisters, her boyfriend, her friends from Cambridge, her colleagues, and connections of all these people appear in the novel. All these characters have some part to do with the culture of Britain in the 1960s; the artistic community, the scientific community, the business world, the rural life, are all represented by individuals who are rarely stereotypes. Further, just as Byatt quotes frequently from other writers, she makes up a review of Babbeltower by the author Anthony Burgess; although he does not appear personally, her characters are placed against a backdrop of actual persons. Alexander Wedderburn, a playwright who used to teach with Frederica's father, is one of the more present minor characters, in part because he is on the Steerforth Committee and so many of the scenes about it are written in his point of view.

Daniel is perhaps the most well-developed of the characters who are not Frederica; his emotional life is presented to the reader, while most of the other characters are seen through Frederica.

Daniel, who is estranged from his son as a result of his grief over his wife's death, endures frequent recollections of seeing his dead wife and finds himself unable to talk to people bout it. Because Frederica married Nigel when she was grieving for her sister, she and Daniel are tied painfully together; as her marriage breaks up, he is constantly reminded of Stephanie's death. Stephanie is not present, but her daughter, very like her, and Daniel's grief create an absence that is felt in the novel.

Frederica is certainly the most significant character, followed by Jude Mason, who is not as well developed, largely because he is seen through Frederica's eyes. Frederica appears in two earlier novels by Byatt; in The Virgin in the Garden she is seventeen, while Still Life is about her three years at Cambridge. In those books she is rebellious, sexually attracted to older and inaccessible men, and a voracious reader. In Babel Tower she has been beaten down by her bad marriage and softened by her son; while she continues to be assertive and sexually driven (indeed, part of the reason that she married Nigel is that the sex was good), she thinks first about what to do for Leo.

Her life is more inextricably connected to her son than it is to her friends and other family members, and that connection, along with Frederica's awareness of how badly mistaken she was when she married, makes her somewhat more cautious and careful than she was as a teenager.

Frederica is a complicated character, exceedingly intelligent and well-educated, full of sexual energy, and good at the profession she adopts, teaching. She is also a mother who considers leaving Leo with her husband when she flees because she does not feel

it is fair to take him away from the things and places that he loves, a mother who reads constantly to her son, a mother who is careful not to put her boyfriend before her son.

Frederica cannot be described in any stereotypical phrase; she is neither sexless intellectual nor sex-maniac, good wife nor bad mother. She is a woman with a need to satisfy both her mind and her body, an independent woman who is devoted to her son. She is at first an example of a woman as a human being, a person who makes mistakes and has passions and is a competent professional. Other characters, particularly women, dislike Frederica because of her aggressiveness, which reflects how Frederica breaks from the cultural norms.

Jude Mason also is outside of the cultural norm. His age is indeterminate; he has extremely long grey hair but appears to be close to Frederica's age and is described at the trial as a young man. He makes his living by posing as a model for art students; he never washes and appears to have only one suit of extremely dirty clothes. Frederica is able to recognize his presence by his odor. Jude calls Daniel to talk about faith and God; he comes to Frederica's classes and interrupts her lectures about D. H. Lawrence with his own comments; he is an outcast but becomes part of her circle. He is part intellectual, part vagrant. He is acknowledged to be a good writer. He has abandoned his upper-class parents and changed his name from the one he was born with; Jude Mason is a reference to Thomas Hardy's novel Jude the Obscure (1895; see separate entry). In that novel Jude is a stone mason who toils in obscurity but can see himself as an artist; Jude in Babel Tower states that he took the name because he wanted to be obscure and because he believes that "art is craft first."

Jude the Obscure, like Babbeltomr, was attacked upon its publication, and Hardy gave up writing fiction. When Jude is made to cut his hair and wear a suit for the trial, he is diminished. One of the characters describes Jude as a "holy fool," and Frederica comes to agree with that assessment. When Jude's signature is necessary for the appeal, Frederica and Daniel find him, very thin and ill, in his apartment in the slums; he has given up all hope with the banning of his book.

Byatt never lets the reader into Jude's point of view, but he grows from someone Frederica dislikes intensely to someone who has been stripped of his integrity and is deserving of pity. He is the artist who puts everything behind art, a trite figure, but he truly does it; he is an ascetic. Byatt saves him from stereotype not only by the vivid physical descriptions of him but by his steadfastness about his writing. It is a part of him.

Although the trial raises various ethical questions about the writer's roles and responsibilities, one sees that Jude has given everything he has to his writing; whatever the effects of Babbeltower, writing is what keeps Jude human.

Social Concerns

Babel Tower, sequel to *The Virgin in the Garden* (1978; see separate entry) and *Still Life* (1985), is set in the England of the 1960s and touches on a number of different social concerns. It brings up but does not emphasize fears about nuclear bombs, the Vietnam war, and damage to the environment; it focuses extensively on questions about the English school system, women's roles in society, and freedom of speech. The principal character, Frederica Potter, simultaneously undergoes a divorce from her traditionminded and abusive husband and observes the obscenity trial of a book which at least in part is drawn from the author's experience at a prestigious English public school.

The novel has two intertwining plots and several subplots. Frederica, who speaks several languages and has a First in English literature from Cambridge, leaves her husband, Nigel Reiver, because he does not allow her to work or to continue her intellectual pursuits. Through Frederica's struggles with her husband and her lawyer, who points out that she must have grounds for divorce more substantial than not being allowed to work, Byatt emphasizes how confined women were once they married; in the Britain of the 1960s, a woman was not expected to be a wife and an intellectual, to be a mother and to work. Because Frederica has a child, the expectation is that she should stay home and raise the boy, who also lives with a housekeeper and two aunts. She is able to prove her husband's infidelity with prostitutes at a night club, but she cannot document the abuse, and so she does not have much legal ground. What most hurt her about the marriage, Nigel's refusal to allow her to continue her intellectual life and her friendships, is exactly what a judge who maintains conventional views of women's roles will find unreasonable.

After trying to persuade her to come home, Nigel eventually countersues for divorce on the grounds of Frederica's adultery after she left him, and the court finds in favor of him rather than her. In the custody battle for their child, Leo, Nigel's lawyers claim that Frederica is a bad mother on account of her desire to work, her promiscuity, and her refusal to send Leo away to the prestigious boarding schools that Nigel attended. Frederica married out of her class, and the custody battle contrasts her middle-class, welleducated background with Nigel's wealth.

Throughout the long process of the divorce and the court proceedings in both the divorce and custody cases, Byatt shows how the prevailing view that women who are intellectuals should not be wives and mothers hurts Frederica and, by implication, other women. It is evident that Frederica deeply loves and is loved by her son and that she is less than a person when she is not allowed to engage in intellectual pursuits. The judge, after talking to both Leo and a social worker, awards joint custody and allows Leo to remain where he wants to be, with his mother. Although women often no longer have the same expectations placed upon them, painful divorces and domestic abuse are even more evident in the public eye now, and Frederica's attempts to do what is best for her son and still maintain an independent life foreshadow many of the struggles that contemporary single mothers have.

The second, and related, plot has to do with the publication of a novel, Babbeltower, written by Jude Mason. Byatt connects the plots tightly through the character of Frederica; it is she who overhears Jude reading from his book and brings it to the publisher for whom she reviews manuscripts. The novel within the novel□Byatt includes large sections of Babbeltower in Babel Tower□begins as a fantastic romance in which a group of people leave the oppressive regime of their country to set up an egalitarian community, but the community soon becomes one in which sadomasochism and torture dominate. Babbeltower is consequently prosecuted under the 1959 Obscene Publications Act; it is found obscene, but on appeal the ruling is overturned. Part of the reason that the book is found obscene is that the trial is set as occurring not long after the actual 1966 trial of Myra Hindley and Ian Brady, who were convicted of torturing and murdering several children. They had in their possession the works of the Marquis de Sade, and the prosecution's argument in the Babbeltower trial is that books which depict sexual torture can indeed lead people to imitate them. Here, Byatt represents the social concerns that culture was falling apart and becoming decadent; Jude's novel is published in the era of drug use, free love, and other equally graphic and disturbing art. And although the book is set thirty years before its publication, society of the 1990s is even more aware of and concerned about pedophiles and sex offenders. The arguments that are made against Babbeltower are arguments that are made in the United States today against television shows and films.

One of the defense counter arguments, besides that the book has literary merit and is essentially a cautionary tale, is that the brutalities which take place in the boys' dormitory in the "utopia" are depictions of actual brutalities that the author endured as a boy at the Swineburn school. This connects this aspect of the plot even more closely to Frederica; Swineburn is the school where her husband went and where she does not want to send Leo. Although the trial of Babbeltower is about the limits of speech and art in a free society, as Frederica's divorce is about the role of women, both trials connect in that they publicly bring up concerns about the English school system. Nigel asserts in the custody battle that Swineburn has changed from how it has been depicted in Babbeltower and in the press accounts of the Babbeltower trial, but that does not keep the judge from agreeing with Frederica that little boys should not be sent away from home for school. Further, Jude Mason's descriptions of his separation from his parents because of being away at school occur in the novel before the custody hearing, thus giving weight to Frederica and Leo's closeness in the eye of the reader.

Byatt's concern with education extends beyond indicting, directly or indirectly, the public school system to which only the upper classes belong. One of the subplots of the novel involves the examination of the teaching of English to children in a variety of schools. Members of the committee visit schools where no grammar is taught, schools where children have open classrooms, and schools where the children are mixed in age, among others. Part of what Byatt is doing here is reporting on a cultural occurrence; the 1960s saw changes in educational theories and practices. She is also, however, interested in how people, not just children, learn. Frederica, whose father and sister were teachers, teaches a literature course at an art school and an extramural course for adult learners; she frequently contrasts the way the adults approach the texts with the way the art students do. Byatt sets Frederica's thoughts about teaching and learning

against the work her brother and his neuroscientist colleagues are doing with the brain and memory, and compares human language acquisition to computers. These scientific issues, which are themselves connected to concerns about genetic damage caused by pesticides and nuclear tests, reflect the social concerns of a culture in transition, a culture that questions what it has been taught about how people's minds work and that is uncertain what lies ahead. While Babel Tower is set in the 1960s, these issues remain current in a society where technology is changing faster than can be imagined and where educational institutions cannot keep up.

Techniques

Babel Tower is a technically complicated novel. Byatt writes in the present tense, which is common for the contemporary writer, although this is the first work in which she has used it; she also adopts an omniscient voice and the use of multiple points of view. The sum effect of this is to complicate the narrative, to weave in past and future happenings with what is going on, to show how Alexander's life intersects with Frederica's and how they are separate, to present a picture of the world that is very realistic: jumbled, multilayered, and filled with ordinary events that have great meaning to those who experience them. Sometimes Byatt shifts point of view into a minor character who does not appear frequently at all simply to make space for that character's thoughts on a complicated scientific issue; she also uses it to trace out the tangles of relationships between various characters. Many of the characters appeared in her earlier novels, and though she gives enough information for the person who has not read The Virgin in the Garden or Still Life to understand who is who and to follow the narrative, the reader unfamiliar with either British culture or Byatt's other works may be confused about why certain characters are important. Further, Byatt is a well-educated and literate woman, and she does not put that aside in her writing; for example, her characters have conversations about books that she assumes the reader has read. Because of the richness of the world she creates and the dependence of that world upon other literature, the narrative movement is at times slow and complex. She is not writing an action novel or a romance but rather is trying to depict what the world was like for some people in the 1960s. It is a novel that is not afraid of thought.

The most interesting technique that she uses is that of putting other texts in with hers. The portions of Babbeltomr that are present are set in a different type, making them easily distinguishable from the body of the novel, as are the extracts of other novels that Frederica pastes into a journal. One of the characters in Jude's novel talks about stories as a way that people present themselves to each other, and Byatt seems to extend that idea beyond the idea of "true story" to the idea of "multiple stories": She presents several possible beginnings for the novel. Frederica, when describing a novel to her class, says that, "It is made in the head and has to be remade in the head by whoever reads it, who will always remake it differently"; Byatt weaves multiple texts together to remind the reader of how he or she is constantly remaking Babel Tower.

The novel's form, that is, provides an example of the idea that what one reads, one reads in context. The events of Frederica's life must be read differently when they are interwoven with Jude's novel about freedom and pain than they would by themselves. However, the use of Jude's novel is not always effective; the writing tends toward the cliched in the beginning, for example, which casts some doubt on whether the book is as good as the characters seem to think it is. But by using it Byatt is able to give a sense of what is on trial and to remind the reader that writing and reading can be complicated acts.

Related to this technique of intertextuality is Byatt's regular use of allusion, or reference to other literary or historical concepts or works. The most obvious example of this is the

tide; Babel Tower refers to the biblical Tower of Babel (Genesis 11:1-9), whose construction caused God to divide one language into many. The novel's title thus connects closely to its questions and concerns about language. Another allusion is the Swineburn school, which is probably a reference to the Victorian writer Algernon Charles Swinburne. While a student at Eton, Swineburn was exposed to the bullying of students by other students and floggings by the masters, events which contributed to the sado-masochistic sexual fantasies which appear in his poetry, drama, and novels. Although Byatt does not evoke Swinburne's work directly, the reader who is familar with Swinburne's life and literature can make connections between Swinburne and Jude. Allusion is also used in many of Jude and Frederica's conversations or thoughts; for example, when Jude first meets Frederica and sees her repugnance at his smell, he quotes Shakespeare's The Tempest (1611) without stating that he is doing so. It is up to the reader to recognize the reference.

Another technique Byatt uses is that of presenting the trials largely in the form of a court transcription, with questions and answers occasionally broken up by narrative. This is highly effective in that it keeps what might be otherwise tedious dialogue fresh and that it allows the reader to feel present in the courtroom.

Byatt's other devices, particularly the omniscient voice and the present tense, can distance the reader from what is going on, but in the trial scenes she is able to make the events much more immediate and suspenseful. This technique is not an unusual one, but it does add another level of stylistic difference to the novel.

A final and interesting technique is a graphic one: the use of drawings of snail shells at the beginning and end of each extract from Jude's novel. This links Jude's novel to the work that some of Frederica's acquaintances are doing with snail genetics to Tolkien's novel The Hobbit (1937), quoted throughout Babel Tower, in Tolkien's book, Bilbo and the dwarves find the entrance to the dragon Smaug's lair with help from a thrush cracking snails.

Themes

In many ways the themes of the novel cannot be easily separated from the social concerns; Frederica's struggles as a woman are struggles many of Byatt's female characters in other novels engage in. Her work is consistently concerned with examining women's roles in society, often within the academy, and showing how women are oppressed. And because Byatt's work usually includes characters who are teachers and characters who are writers, she consistently explores what teaching should be and different ways in which readers and writers interact. By putting one of her fictitious works on trial she extends the discussion of the ethics and effects of fiction into the larger culture, but the underlying questions are not that different from those she poses in her 1967 novel The Game, in which a wri ter's book about her sister leads the sister to commit suicide.

The fear of Babbeltower is a cultural one, a fear that words will lead people to do murder, but the thematic question of what a writer's ethics are is the same as in The Game. The difference, perhaps, is that in the case of The Game the reader sees the effect of the novel in question while in Babel Tower the reader sees the effect of censure on the author and has no evidence that the novel Babbeltower causes harm. Because Byatt has included passages, some of them sexually graphic, from the imaginary novel the reader is able to consider the effects of the novel upon himself or herself and consider the effects of art and what power a writer has; the thematic concerns are enacted in the reader's own responses to the text of Babbeltower.

Besides the theme of a woman's struggle for independence and the continuing question of the power of writing, Byatt explores cultural alienation and the nature of language. Frederica's brother-in-law Daniel Orton, a minister, works as a counselor on a telephone help line. People call him because they are suicidal, because they are guilty about having abandoned their families, because they are worried. Jude Mason calls to debate about the existence of God. While Jude is not the typical caller, the other people who turn to Daniel are representative of a group of people who feel as though they have no one who will listen to them but an anonymous voice on the other end of a telephone. Nor are these people the only ones who feel adrift and isolated.

One of the novel's recurrent images is the work of J. R. R. Tolkien and the need for a fantasy world as a means of escape from the problems of the present, a theme which is itself the subject of Jude's novel. Very near the novel's end, Frederica goes to a "Happening" at the stage of an art school; one group of actors is dressed as elves and quoting Tolkien while another group quotes the poetry of William Blake. The Happening is interrupted by a group of people playing musical instruments, carrying protest posters and dead pigs' heads, and probably under the influence of one mindaltering drug or another. Tolkien and LSD sit side-by-side as ways for the despairing and disaffected to form small communities of their own.

The thematic exploration of language is less obviously connected to social and cultural concerns, although the image of the tower of Babel and its idea of a unified culture split

by a change in language returns constantly. One member of the Steerforth Committee that is examining educational methods is a professional grammarian; he thinks about the idea that there was an original language disrupted by God, about the linguist Noam Chomsky's ideas about generative grammar and "deep structure," about the relationship between the structure of the brain and the structure of language. Another character, Hugh Pink, a poet, thinks about finding the right words to express his ideas. In a scene at a school, the teacher asks the students to think about how words that are synonymous sound different and have different connotations. A psychoanalyst who testifies, rather incomprehensibly, at the obscenity trial has written a book called Language Our Straitjacket. Byatt seems to be less interested in explaining how language works or the theoretical ideas that have been constructed about it and more in the varying ways in which it is a part of every person's existence. Frederica's son is able to say almost any word he hears and has a very large vocabulary; Frederica is stunned at the end of the novel to discover that he cannot read. Here Byatt works both with the relationship between oral and written language and with the tradition of language that is part of Frederica's background; because she has been a reader she expects her son to be so as well. Her reading is part of what separates her from many other women. She has a different relationship with language. Byatt uses these different ideas about language to explore how it ties people together and disconnects them from each other. The obscenity trial is about the power of language to cause harm; the divorce is about Frederica's need to continue working professionally with words instead of enduring Nigel's silences; language is the only thing that binds the people who call Daniel to him.

Adaptations

A 1996 abridged version read by Eileen Atkins was produced by Random House Audio Books.

Key Questions

Because of its length and complexity, Babel Tower could easily be discussed with several different focuses. A group that is familiar with some of the books that Byatt draws on could begin by talking about the kinds of connections she makes and extend the discussion to the ways in which literary works affect each other. A group could focus on a related topic, that of the effects of writing upon the readers, by considering the effect of Babel Tower as a whole or the effects of Jude's novel upon the group and upon the characters within the novel. Another approach would be to think about the issues facing Frederica, issues shared by many women: single parenting, cultural oppression, balancing sexual and intellectual lives and desires. Readers might also think about their experiences with schooling and learning and move from discussing the book itself to discussing their experiences with education and language. How, for example, do they see language as a social force that connects some people and causes gaps between others?

1. Is Babbeltower obscene? Can obscenity be outweighed by literary merit?

2. Consider the differences between Frederica's adult students and her students at the art school. What are the different ways that they (and other characters) read or use books?

3. What do you think about the schools that the Steerforth Committee members visit? Alexander is concerned that students do not have a place to be quiet and thoughtful—is this important?

4. The book presents many different kinds of artists and creative people: writers, sculptors, musicians. Discuss the different approaches to and forms of creativity.

5. Why does Frederica become involved with John Ottakar? What does he offer that Nigel doesn't? Is she making another mistake?

6. Frederica is described as never having had female friends, and she clearly does not get along with the other women at Bran House. How is her relationship with Agatha Mond different from other relationships she has had with women?

Why does she have trouble with those relationships?

7. The novel includes several parent child relationships: Frederica and her son, Frederica and her parents, Daniel and his children, Jude and his parents. Think about the differences in these relationships and how they affect the ways the characters live.

8. Does Phyllis Pratt's novel Daily Bread seem to connect to Babbeltower in any way?

9. Does art serve as a way to make people feel less isolated? What seems to be Byatt's view?

Literary Precedents

Just as the novel is technically complicated, so is it hard to put it into any genre, although Frederica's story is not particularly unusual; many mainstream novels are about the troubles women have with their marriages. Babel Tower is a literary novel that contains elements of experimental fiction seen in other work throughout the century. Virginia Woolf's novel Mrs. Dalloway (1925), for example, moves from the point of view of one character to another and presents how they exist in different worlds within the same geographical region, something that Babel Tower also does. Toni Morrison's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel Beloved (1987; see separate entry) has a narrative that is fragmented and more discontinuous than either novel. Ava (1993), by the American writer Carol Maso, has passages and quotations from other writers woven in with its narrative, a literary technique which was used by T. S. Eliot in 1922 in his long poem The Waste Land. But while Babel Tower uses these devices practiced by many Modernist and contemporary writers, it also has the reflective voice of the Victorian writer George Eliot, whose novels at times draw back from the characters to discuss both them and the culture they are part of. Further, the portions of Babbeltower in the text are to some extent modeled upon the work of J. R. R. Tolkien in their use of elements of fantasy. The content of the novel is as much based on nonfiction books and history as it is on other novels; Byatt writes with authority about the genetic characteristics of snails, for example. In fact, the book which Babel Tower is most like, though in many ways it is very unlike, is Byatt's own novel Possession (1990; see separate entry), a novel which includes the stories, poems, and letters of several fictitious Victorian writers and demands of its readers an understanding of literary history.

The similarities between the two novels are similarities of style—the interweaving of other texts—and of theme: both novels are concerned with the intellectual woman's struggles with the larger culture around her and with the artist's role in society. Further, while Babel Tower does not deal with issues of Victorian writing and contemporary scholarship about the Victorian period, the questions it raises about education and educational institutions are closely related to the questions Byatt raises in Possession about the nature of the academy and literary criticism. Nor does either book provide easy answers.

Related Titles

The Virgin in the Garden and Still Life precede Babel Tower in both time of writing and time of story. The Virgin in the Garden is about Frederica at the age of seventeen, her sister Stephanie's courtship and marriage with Daniel, her brother Marcus's troubled relationship with one of his teachers, and Alexander Wedderburn's play about Queen Elizabeth I. The novel ends with Frederica losing her virginity. Still Life picks up shortly after The Virgin in the Garden and describes Frederica's years at Cambridge, Alexander's work on a play about Vincent van Gogh, and Stephanie and Daniel's life up until her accidental death. The novels are stylistically quite different from Babel Tower, telling less complicated stories and using fewer different technical devices, but the characters and places provide a continuity among the three novels. A fourth related tide, The Virgin in the Tower (1998), has a brief scene in the beginning with Daniel, Frederica, and Alexander set about the time of Babel Tower, and Babel Tower helps put this scene into a context; one does not know who the characters are or how they are related when beginning to read The Virgin in the Garden, and Babel Tower fills in some of the holes in the book published eighteen years earlier. Both of the earlier novels also raise some of the same questions about art and writing and reading.

Byatt's first two novels, The Shadow of the Sun (1964) and The Game (1967), do not use the same characters but are thematically connected in that they explore how women are repressed by social institutions and that they have characters who are very different writers from Jude Mason and so provide contrasting ideas about what it is writers do or should do.

Although Byatt's novel Possession is not particularly similar in terms of content, it is similar stylistically.

Besides Byatt's own work, novels by other writers are clearly connected to Babel Tower. Frederica teaches and thinks about E. M. Forster's novel Howard's End (1910; see separate entry) and several of D. H. Lawrence's novels, particularly Women in Love (1921). Both novels are connected thematically in that they are, among other things, about intellectual women and their relationships with men.

Women in Love also has a character who is a teacher and one who is an artist. A third connected novel is J. R. R. Tolkien's The Hobbit (1937; see separate entry) which Frederica reads aloud to her son; Byatt uses it both as a cultural touchstone and as a contrast to the kind of fantasy that Jude Mason writes.

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