

**An Examination of *Fourth Wing* and *Babel* as
Case Studies for Diversity in Spec-Fic Publishing**

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Introduction

Science fiction is the storytelling of “what if” and what is possible, with backdrops of a familiar yet unfamiliar setting, often generating conversations about the future of humankind (“Definitions of SF”). But science fiction is just one of the genres that explore possibilities and alternate realities and futures, including fantasy, horror with fantastical elements, and magical realism, which, alongside a few other genres, became known as speculative fiction in academia, an umbrella term. Speculative fiction is an all-encompassing genre filled with narratives that explore the “what if” narrative, going from a completely secondary world, which author J.R.R. Tolkien defines as fictional worlds separate from our world, to settings with only the most minute of changes to our contemporary reality, such as alternative histories (Tolkien).

Speculative fiction, including subgenres like fantasy and science fiction, has been steadily growing in popularity in the 21st century. Before, it was not as mainstream, as it was popular and resonated with nerds, with the general public liking only a few pieces of media, such as *Star Wars*, *The Twilight Zone*, and *The Hobbit* by J.R.R. Tolkien. But that has changed recently, with shows like *Invincible*, *The Boys*, *Game of Thrones*, and *Stranger Things* getting massive amounts of viewership. According to Ella Creamer in *The Guardian*, the British Library has acknowledged the growth in fantasy fiction with an exhibition that went from late October 2023 to February 25, which was “Fantasy: Realms of Imagination.” It explored “the long history of fantasy through manuscripts and early editions of landmark novels, as well as props, costumes and clips from popular TV shows and

films that expanded the genre” (Creamer). There has been a growing interest and demand for fantasy, including in the literary world. Bloomsbury Publishing had record profits in the first six months of 2023 because of the boom the genre experienced, driven by authors like Sarah J. Maas, with her hashtag getting over 2.7 billion views on TikTok as of 2023, which “led to her dominating this year’s science fiction and fantasy charts” (Creamer). This rise in popularity can be seen even in the book deals authors receive, such as the Associated Press sharing that author Leigh Bardugo received an 8-figure book deal with Macmillan Publishers, where she will publish twelve books spanning multiple genres, age groups, and “across several imprints.”

I have always loved everything speculative fiction, from early 2000s Nickelodeon and Disney shows like *The Troop* and *My Babysitter’s a Vampire* to HBO’s *Game of Thrones*. As a reader who loves speculative fiction and the literature of “what if,” I think it is exciting and great that it is becoming popular and becoming more mainstream. I believe its growing popularity is important because the genre explores alternatives to things in our lives that have real implications and consequences. We need narratives that explore alternatives because they can offer insights into our world that we may not be aware of because we are so absorbed in our day-to-day mundane lives. The insights these fantastical worlds can offer us are good because of how oppressive our contemporary political reality is, a world where we do not know who we can trust, such as many of the presidents of Peru facing impeachment and atrocities occurring worldwide.

However, despite speculative fiction being known for exploring possibilities, non-mainstream publishing has more women writers and women and people of color than mainstream publishing.

There is a link between questions of diversity in the publishing workforce and representation in terms of characters in contemporary works of speculative fiction. In general, the publishing industry promotes white authors more than other authors. For example, in 2020, writers Richard Jean So and Gus Wezerek of the *New York Times* set out to find how diverse the publishing industry was in terms of racial representation. They compiled data, reviewing only English-language books between 1950 and 2018 and the large publishing houses, Simon & Schuster, Penguin Random House, Doubleday, HarperCollins, and Macmillan. Of 7,124 books and 3,471 authors whose race they could identify, they discovered that around 95 percent of the books were written by white authors (So and Wezerek). Speculative fiction is no exception to this lack of diversity, with many of the female protagonists in Young Adult (YA) dystopian fiction being white, such as Mare Barrow from *Red Queen*, Katniss Everdeen from *The Hunger Games*, and Beatrice (Tris) Prior from *Divergent* (“Race in Young Adult Speculative Fiction”). *Fireside Magazine* used to sponsor something known as the #BlackSpecFic report, which highlighted a similar level of disparity in the representation of black authors in speculative short fiction essays. In *Fireside Magazine*’s 2017 report, they found that “only 4.3% of the stories published by speculative fiction publications were written by Black authors” (Kane).

Something else to notice when considering the lack of racial inclusion in publishing is the books that have been gaining popularity. While the problem of mostly white authors remains true, it is also true that, in speculative fiction more than any other genre, a growing number of writers of color are receiving more and more attention and awards, such as N.K. Jemisin winning the Hugo in the “Best Novel” category three years in a row with *The Broken Earth* trilogy. But although there has been a

surge in people of color and queer writers of color nominated for the big speculative fiction awards in the past decade or so, only one non-white author, Silvia-Moreno Garcia, was nominated for the “Best Series” and “Best Novel” categories in the 2023 Hugo Awards. This illustrates a tension in the politics informing publishing and reading.

What I am describing here is a literary context in which both publishers and readers are increasingly self-aware of interconnected political forces informing what we read and, by extension, the versions of “what if” we imagine. On one hand, histories of racism and oppression in the U.S. are reflected in contemporary publishing in terms of who works in publishing and whose stories get published. At the same time, as some writers and readers become aware of this and demand something different, we are seeing more and more speculative fiction works that invite readers to imagine less oppressive realities. This context is relevant to the heart of my thesis, in which I will discuss two recent works of speculative fiction that have been gaining a lot of attention and praise online. One, *Fourth Wing*, is by Rebecca Yarros, a white woman. The other is *Babel* by R.F. Kuang, a woman of color. *Fourth Wing* by Rebecca Yarros imagines an alternative reality in which the military rules and involves itself in a fictional country’s educational institutions where dragons are not fictional, and people train to bond with them. *Babel* by R.F. Kuang is set in England in the 1830s and imagines an alternate history where magic and languages taken from other cultures play a large role in British colonization. But despite their differences and the two different realities they present in their worldbuilding, they are both representing and complicating something about political oppression and limitations in their worlds that we can apply to our own. These two novels are important to examine in the speculative

fiction publishing landscape because they signify a change happening in speculative fiction, where publishers are becoming more aware of reader interests.

At the same time that some readers focus critically on the whiteness of publishing and speculative fiction awards, publishing has also begun to pay a new kind of attention to readers, specifically readers on social media who have lots of followers and have begun to have a significant impact on sales. The popularity of the two novels is influenced by the marketing campaigns and how much money the two books' respective publishing houses invested. Marketing campaigns include elements such as advertisements, distributing Advanced Reader Copies (ARCs) physically or digitally, and contacting influencers. Not every publishing house can afford such extravagant marketing campaigns, with some preferring to distribute digital Advanced Reader Copies more than physical ones because of how much ARCs cost and because websites like Netgalley and Goodreads require money for giveaways. *Fourth Wing*'s marketing team made sure to emphasize that the book came with stenciled edges, something that usually only book subscription boxes like Illumicrate and Fairyloot would do, which would typically cost \$30-40 per month. *Fourth Wing* checked all the boxes for what is popular on social media, such as tropes like enemies to lovers and forced proximity. The Advanced Reader Copies of the novel had four versions, and the publisher's marketing team sent the copies in a promotional book box to the influencers they knew would love and promote the book. *Babel* gained attention through ARC giveaways on Netgalley and Goodreads, along with influencer reviews, and because it was promoted as a "thematic response to *The Secret History* and tonal retort to *Jonathan*

Strange & Mr. Norrell (Netgalley). The book was even Fairyloot's Adult Fantasy Book-Only subscription for February 2023 and Illumicrate's book for August 2022.

In my thesis, I will look at these two anti-totalitarian novels that imagine different political realities in varying degrees, with *Babel* being more overt in its message than *Fourth Wing*. In *Babel*, the history of the world matches our own, but with magic, where the British Empire uses a combination of magic and languages stolen from other cultures for its colonization efforts. The main character is a mixed-race boy from Canton, China, and he struggles with his loyalties because he likes the life he is afforded because of colonialism but loathes it at the same time because his comforts are a result of colonialism and relies on being complicit. *Fourth Wing*, on the other hand, takes place in a completely different world where the military exercises extreme control over politics, to the point where the educational institutions are connected to the military. One of the main educational institutions recruits youths to ride dragons, using propaganda to condition people into accepting a life where they have little agency. But the main character, though already conditioned, starts to unveil the lies and information the government has been keeping from everyone and the extremities it goes through for control, and she realizes that not everything she read and was told was the truth. It is through spending time in the institution that the main character learns how oppressive the government is and how much information they have been keeping from everyone. In spite of their differences, one huge reason their popularity matters is because they invite readers to imagine "what if." They invite us to see the oppressive nature of our own political status quo reflected in their imagined worlds, and thereby invite readers to imagine ways to critique and change reality outside the fictions.

With these two novels, I want to look at how they express anti-totalitarian views, which means expressing opposition to governments that have complete control over everything. For example, both authors use main characters who recognize the oppressive nature of their government and realize how easily they went along with everything. Apart from looking at how Kuang and Yarros express these anti-totalitarian views in different ways, like through the language they use, I will compare the views with the responses I find online. I want to gauge how people are responding to the novels because I do not believe that the promise of social media diversifying or democratizing publishing is necessarily happening to the extent that it can.

I will analyze the rhetoric and narrative elements of each novel, drawing explicitly on critical frameworks. The frameworks include postcolonial criticism, feminist critique, psychologist Jerome Bruner's "The Narrative Construction of Reality," and philosopher Michel Foucault's insights on power. I am using these four frameworks because they work well together in my exploration of empire and anti-totalitarian novels, with Bruner's concept serving as a great reason as to why these "what if" narratives are so valuable in teaching people and offering alternatives.

Relevant Theoretical Frameworks

Feminist and postcolonial literary theory are most useful to my discussion of the two novels, given *Fourth Wing* and *Babel*'s particular portrayals and critiques of oppressive political systems.

Author Lois Tyson states that feminist critique is concerned with "the ways in which literature (and

other cultural productions) reinforces or undermines the economic, political, social, and psychological oppression of women” (Tyson 79). Tyson offers tools for feminist analyses of characters and events in novels by reminding readers that gender roles for both men and women are determined by patriarchy, a social/political system that benefits men and oppresses women. In patriarchal contexts, women have been written off as hysterical and were placed in mental institutions for not behaving in the ways that the patriarchy agreed with between 1850 and 1900, which relates to the psychological oppression of women (Pouba and Tianen). Even when fictional realities portray non-patriarchal societies as *Fourth Wing*, it is important to remember that readers of these pieces of fiction are themselves shaped by the patriarchy and traditional gender roles, given the status quo of male dominance in our contemporary reality of the U.S. To undermine patriarchy is to go against its ideals, such as portraying women as decisive and strong rather than indecisive and weak, which is what traditional gender roles assign to women. To reinforce patriarchy is to do the opposite, such as killing off female characters to advance the journey of the male main character. With postcolonial criticism, Tyson states that it “seeks to understand the operations—politically, socially, culturally, and psychologically of—colonialist and anticolonialist ideologies” (Tyson 399). That is to say, the framework aims to understand the workings of both colonialist and anticolonialist ideologies and, similar to feminist critique, seeks to understand how literature reinforces or undermines colonialism, and if it does the latter, it is anticolonialist. For example, *Babel* would reinforce colonialism if Robin, the main character, despite his identity and moral crises, joined the British Empire. Feminist and postcolonial theories are so useful to analyze these two works’ approach to “what if” because they explore these alternative realities, how oppressive governments can be, and offer a way to look at power dynamics and resistance.

Parts of my analysis also draw on Foucault's insights and Bruner's insights. Foucault claims that many of the things that we take as a natural or a given, such as the natural concept of "sex," were socially constructed (Culler 5-6). So, we should question whatever is presented to us as natural or a given. He states that power was a result of this construction, attempting to label things to exercise control over them. But power is pervasive, so much so that it is impossible to operate outside of its reach because it is everywhere, and not just derived from the social concepts that humans create, like the concept of gender, but even in the frameworks we use to think about the world because according to Foucault, power is not just one thing. It is not just an iron grip but knowledge as well. These insights are useful to my overall discussion of the novels because they help examine how totalitarian regimes and empires function, such as through the suppression of information. Jerome Bruner's insights work with Foucault's because Bruner claims that people make sense of the world around them by creating narratives or stories. He states that part of the concept came from psychologist Lev Vygotsky, who believed that cultural products affect our views of reality, and Bruner expands on the idea, stating that we use narratives to "organize our experience and human happenings" (Bruner 4). Knowledge is power, and narratives are a form of knowledge, therefore affecting our sense of reality. Bruner is important to my discussion of the responses to the novels because his work taps into the nature of reviews and explores how narratives influence readers, which plays a large part in why I find these "what if" stories so interesting because they can alter how you think.

Fourth Wing

Using Foucault's insights on power and Tyson's insights on feminist critique, we can see what Yarros is doing through her worldbuilding and language to express her underlying messages of how power operates across a fictional society and anti-totalitarianism. She shows how power can complicate gender dynamics, which are socially constructed by the patriarchy, and combats empire by placing the moral center of the novel with the underdogs, those who are compassionate not just toward one another but the world itself, doing their best to try to protect everyone. The approach to "what if" holds political relevance beyond the novel because it portrays an oppressive government and offers an alternative way of dealing with them, which is rebellion, or learning as much as possible.

The novel portrays an exaggerated form of military control over politics in one of two known fictional societies within the book, the kingdom of Navarre. The government, which is military-dominated, exercises control over its histories and institutes, especially in how its educational institutes run and operate, where there is no separation from the military. The Basgiath War College is one of these institutes, training future members of the military once they reach the age of twenty. Navarre has six provinces and is under constant threat from another kingdom that borders it, Poromiel, making the kingdom reliant on an ever-ready military, where youths form its core. The institute has four quadrants, with the most important being the Riders Quadrant, which garners the most attention and recruits, as the future dragon riders are its main line of defense against Poromiel's aggression.

In the text, we follow Violet Sorrengail, a twenty-year-old with dreams of joining the Scribe Quadrant at Basgiath War College. Her mother, General Lilith Sorrengail, has other plans for Violet, sending her off to the Riders Quadrant instead, where if she survives and passes various exams and tribulations, she will bond with a dragon and become a dragon rider.

Violet, as mentioned before, is against joining the Riders Quadrant because it was not the quadrant she wanted and because, though not named in the text, she has Ehlers-Danlos syndrome (EDS), which causes joint hypermobility, among other effects. But Lilith, Violet's mother, forces her to join because she believes it is the only respectable quadrant. This is one way we can see how youth and even former youth like Lilith are conditioned. Essentially, those who join the Riders Quadrant are cannon fodder. Before they can even reach the school, candidates have to cross the parapet, a long stone bridge two hundred feet in the sky and eighteen inches wide. Violet reveals in her inner monologue: "The parapet claims roughly fifteen percent of the rider candidates" (Yarros 34). The word "roughly" adds to the detached nature of how candidates are viewed and treated by the government, as it does not have an exact estimate for parapet-related deaths. That word choice shows how empires treat people when they are no longer valuable. When Violet meets two friendly candidates, Dylan and Rhiannon, we see how deeply the conditioning in this totalitarian kingdom goes. Both joined as candidates willingly, Dylan stating this: "Because my mom's begging me to change my mind for *months*. I keep telling her that I'll have better chances for advancement as a rider, but she wanted me to enter the Healer Quadrant" (Yarros 31). The quote reveals that people know how dangerous entering the Riders Quadrant is, to the point that Dylan's mother is begging him not to join. This is not a

conversation Dylan had once, but a few times, which we can see by the word “months.” But the words “begging” and “advancement” reveal how deeply the conditioning of youth goes, to the point where his mother’s pleas fall on deaf ears and where advancements and additional perks are good tradeoffs for one’s life. Characters like Rhiannon and Dylan are willing to become cannon fodder, knowing fully well that they might not even survive the training. They do it because of the additional perks that dragon riders receive, and the conditioning that convinces them that those perks are worth risking their lives for.

Here is an example of power operating through the military’s control of politics; through propaganda and conditioning, along with everybody except a few people getting a choice in which quadrant they will join, Rhiannon and Dylan falsely believe that they have agency. In reality, they are operating within the realm of power. Despite Dylan’s proclamation that he will survive, he ends up dying. But his name will just be added to the list of candidates who did not survive, showing how dehumanizing power can be through conditioning.

The conditioning extends not only to youths gleefully prepared to sign away their life for the chance to ride a dragon but in how readily they accept information without a second thought. Violet, as a general’s daughter, has access to much more information than the average person, leading her to believe every piece of information that was given to her. For instance, five years before the novel, an event known as the Tyrrish Rebellion took place when one of the provinces attempted secession. Violet believes she knows the “truth” about the rebellion, and that is far from the truth. What Violet does know is that the children of the rebels were given marks by dragons known as rebellion relics, which are

used to identify them. They are known as “Marked Ones,” and it is through one of them—Liam—that Violet realizes how truly little she knows.

Violet has read many texts about the rebellion, along with information that others do not have access to, such as the death roll of the rebels who were executed. But we see through her interaction with Liam that some things were kept from her, which she did not question, and just accepted all information coming her way as a given. When Liam reveals that he was fostered along with another boy, Violet says this: “‘You were fostered?’ My mouth drops open. Fostering the children of aristocrats was a custom that died out after the unification of Navarre more than six hundred years ago” (Yarros 340). Yarros uses the phrase “My mouth drops open” works to emphasize Violet’s ignorance regarding the aftermath of the Tyrrish Rebellion, while the words “a custom that died out” reveal that Navarre is keeping secrets from its citizens and is lying about the past, reflecting Foucault's insights on power, that you cannot take everything as a given. What I find most interesting that, again, reflects Foucault’s insights on not taking everything as a given is that you cannot even trust official government documents like the death roll on the execution of Tyrrish rebels. Isaac, Liam’s father, was not part of the rebellion, but he was executed on the same day as Liam’s mother, as Violet reveals, “‘He isn’t on the death rolls of the executions from Calldyr’” (Yarros 341). By mentioning the death rolls do not include the death of Isaac’s father, Yarros is showing how empire works, and one of those ways is through the suppression of information and conditioning characters so much with propaganda that they take everything as a given.

We see, too, that Violet does not know about the lack of agency Liam and the other Marked Ones have. Through Violet, we are led to believe that she is the exception and that everyone else has the agency to choose what quadrant to go to, which is the information Violet goes on when Liam says he has a sister who is one year younger than him. She says, “‘She could always choose another quadrant,’ I say smoothly, hoping it will soothe him” (Yarros 342). The word “always” emphasizes Violet’s ignorance, with her expressing the false belief that his sister has agency. Liam reveals that his sister has no choice in the matter because all of the children of the Tyrrish rebellion rebels are riders. He says, “‘We’re all riders. It was part of the deal. We’re allowed to live, allowed a chance to prove our loyalty, but only if we make it through the Riders Quadrant.’ He stares at me in bewilderment. ‘You don’t know?’” (Yarros 342). It is significant to focus on the charged language in the quote. Loyalty, in the sense of how devoted one is, usually implies having a choice in the matter, but that is juxtaposed with words like “‘We’re allowed to live,” where the government phrases it as if the children of the rebels have a choice (Yarros 342). It is either death or potential death trying to become a dragon rider, which is not much of a choice. I argue that through Yarros’s portrayal of the Navarre government, it shows how oppressive it is to dissidents and how far one’s conditioning can go.

Through this interaction, there is this extreme level of conditioning. Before coming into contact with Liam, Violet did not question anything regarding the rebellion, treating every text and piece of information she came upon that spoke of it as truthful, never daring to question it. As a general’s daughter, why should she doubt the information she was getting her hands on? But it operates as an example of why to not take everything as a given. There is another level to this interaction, which has to do with knowledge as power, which Foucault argues is one of the ways power

operates. The kingdom is concealing information regarding the rebellion and putting half-truths into the world to control the narrative. So, there are two levels of power here: the conditioning and then the controlling of knowledge. This, along with the conditioning of youths and leaving people with no agency, are just two examples of the exaggerated form of military control over politics.

There is another layer to the fictional society Yarros has created. Because of how power operates in the society, with everything being so reliant on the military that even educational institutions are highly militarized, gender dynamics become complicated, with traditional gender roles and expectations being challenged, with women being equal participants in the militaristic landscape of Navarre. For instance, Violet's mother, Lilith, holds a significant and typically male role in the kingdom as a general. Her position is unquestioned, opposite of our world's traditional gender roles, especially with her husband, Violet's late father, having a less physically taxing job as a member of the Scribe Quadrant. So, women in the story have positions of high authority.

Again, opposite to the traditional gender roles of the modern world, there is no disparity between men and women, even in regard to strength. For instance, the dragon rider candidates have sparring matches where it is their goal to win and remove their opponent's dagger once the match is over. Rhiannon, Violet's friend, has a match against a boy. Violet says: "I'm so nervous I could puke as I stand at the side of the wide black mat, watching Rhiannon beat the ever-loving shit out of her opponent. It's a guy from Second Wing, and it takes almost no time for her to get him into a headlock, cutting off his air supply" (Yarros 144-145). The words "almost no time" show how easy it is for Rhiannon to win her match, but the words say more than that (Yarros 144). They showcase an equal playing field between men and women, where women are not viewed as inferior, as the patriarchy

would suggest, but as equal. Rhiannon wins her match, removing the dagger from the guy's side after he passes out. And despite Violet being physically weak due to her disability, when she has a sparring match against a character named Jack, people are against the matchup not because she is a woman but because everyone knows that Jack despises Violet and wants to kill her. Not even Jack insults her about being a woman during their fight.

Using Tyson's insights on feminist criticism, we see through these instances how the text is undermining patriarchal ideology by making the oppression of women nonexistent because both men and women are treated and viewed as equal in the text. Their existence and place in a highly militarized institution is not being questioned. The difference between how gender dynamics are handled in Navarre versus our world emphasizes the idea that power structures influence and put gender dynamics and roles into place. An important insight from Foucault regarding power comes from his analysis of the history of sexuality, where he finds that much of what we perceive as a given was constructed by people, like the idea of biological sex. I argue that through the deconstruction of traditional gender dynamics in the text, Yarros is stating how power plays a significant role in the social construction of gender, showing an alternative reality where women are seen as equal to men, holding positions of high authority without people doubting their skill set. This matters because it expresses a possible alternative to the current gender dynamics prevalent in the world where everyone, both men and women are equal. It shows how gender is socially constructed and that there is no reason why women cannot get many of the same opportunities as men, especially ones that require more intelligence than physical strength.

I argue readers should see based on my analysis of Yarros's portrayal of power in setting and plot and gender in characterization and setting that it is a critique of military control over politics where the novel's moral center is not with the highly militarized power but with the underdogs and outliers of the kingdom, Violet and the Marked Ones. Violet is not as strong as the other candidates due to her disability, so much so that she has to poison her opponents before a sparring match to even win. Violet is different from her mother, who, by being a general, we can assume is complicit and plays a significant role in much of the military's actions, such as withholding information from the public. But here is Violet, and despite being weak, she is trying to not be complicit in the government's actions when she realizes how much it has been hiding and the inconsistencies. She is going to be the one to do things the moral way, and one of those ways is to align herself with the Marked Ones and learn from them. They are the moral center of the novel because they are actively still trying to save the kingdom despite how they have been treated, and one of those ways is by trying to destroy the foe known as "Venin," the enemy of both humans and dragons alike. The Venin are why Tyrrendor attempted secession in the first place; Tyrrendor wanted to join the fight against them. So, through the Marked Ones and Violet's compassion, we have the moral center, and by having them as the moral center, Yarros is critiquing the military and how blind power can become, especially with the realization that the rebellion began as an attempt to safeguard everyone. By placing the moral center not within the government, Yarros makes *Fourth Wing* an anti-totalitarian novel because the Marked Ones and Violet are people who actively choose not to be complicit. While the government is trying to control everything, the underdogs are the ones actually trying to keep everyone safe and focusing on issues that affect everyone. The text is speculative fiction, meaning that it explores possibilities or "what if." This

matters because the text allows us to see the oppressive nature of our own political status in real life, which is reflected in the world of the novel, inviting us to explore alternative ways of thinking and changing things in our own reality.

Reviewers

Any inquiry into the politically progressive potential of speculative fiction's fiction includes looking into online reading communities, which have grown at even greater rates than the speculative fiction publishing growth mentioned earlier. Reviews online and on social media are a good way to gauge trends in publishing and how they may or may not intersect with reader and reviewer preferences. I went into researching the responses of people online to *Fourth Wing* to look into the politically progressive potential of the novel. For this, I am keying in on what reviewer insights reveal about the following: how people speak about the novel and the inadvertent status quo of whiteness they reinforce, the separation of novels from the culture they are created in, which means how reviewers treat the novel as if it is separate from politics, and the impact of narratives. Reviewers tell us, either by what they exclude or do not mention, how those reviewers have been impacted by narratives. For this analysis, I will rely on Foucault's insights on power to discuss the influence reviewers have on readers and how power operates through reviewers with the status quo that they are not even aware they are promoting. In addition to Foucault, Bruner's insights on narratives are useful in discussing how narratives impact one's sense of reality. I will use these insights on three reviews of the novel.

Reviews on social media, especially TikTok, offer valuable insights into how social media platforms promote books. One common way is describing the tropes that are in the books, such as

enemies to lovers, forced proximity, and fake dating. Many reviews are rehashes of the plot with one or two comments on why the reviewer likes the book crammed into a 45-second video. But even longer reviews on the platform do not go into detail beyond that. One TikTok review that I find significant in these aspects is from an account known as *The Shameless Book Club*. In the video, one of the women running the account says that the novel is “the perfect intro book for people who don’t usually read fantasy books” (theshamelessbookclub, 2023, 00:00:01). In beginning the video by describing the book as a good introduction for people who do not typically read fantasy, one would assume that she would mention aspects related to worldbuilding or the somewhat modern language used in the book. She does not, instead going on to say that the novel has three ingredients that make it the perfect fantasy novel: adventure, sex, and storyline. In the reviewer’s focus on those ingredients, we can see what is important for reviewers and the TikTok platform, with people sometimes refusing to read a novel if it does not have an adequate amount of “spice.” While she does not explain why these are significant ingredients, the novel is digestible for first-time fantasy readers because of the heavy lean into the romance aspect, which is what a large portion of readers on TikTok take an interest in. Nowhere in the review does it mention why, for example, she enjoyed the fantastical aspect of the book. Typically, when reviewing fantasy novels, reviewers will talk at least some about the magic system, such as people enjoying the language-based one in R.F. Kuang’s *Babel*. However, this reviewer does not discuss or mention the complicated gender dynamics or how women are as strong as men in the book. From that exclusion, we can conclude that her sense of reality has already been impacted, or that it is something she does not notice because it is becoming more common in speculative fiction books. Strong women in books is not a new idea, and there has been a rise in female authors in fantasy in recent years. Fang

Runin from R.F. Kuang's *The Poppy Wars* and Aelin Galathynius from Sarah J. Maas's *Throne of Glass*, are both strong female characters that are on par with the male characters in their respective series.

Many reviews treat *Fourth Wing* as separate from the culture and world in which it was created. Very few go into detail about what Yarros is trying to say through her worldbuilding and why many of the aspects of the novel feel familiar, such as the anti-totalitarian sentiments expressed, similar sentiments to many popular dystopian novels like *The Hunger Games* and *Divergent*. Such reviews rarely go beyond descriptions of the events in the story. George Kerr's review in *The Berkeley Fiction Review* exemplifies this. She writes that her favorite part about the novel is that it "didn't take itself too seriously" (Kerr). The words "too seriously" emphasize her previously expressed thoughts. She was tired of forcing herself to read classics and revered books, and *Fourth Wing* is an easy and digestible read. Talking about the book in such a way makes it seem like the novels are outside the realm of politics, similar to how people complain that television shows today are too political as they go back to watch old sitcoms like *Friends* and *Seinfeld*. She adds, "At a time in my life when everything feels serious, at a school like Berkeley, where sometimes it feels like students are constantly pressure-cooked by stress, it was a breath of fresh air" (Kerr). The novel was refreshing because of how unserious it was in comparison to college life and expectations. But again, the text is only talked about in that manner. When the review does delve into a discussion of worldbuilding, Kerr only says that it has dragons and "hot dragons riders" who can telepathically communicate. Where it could mention the war college or that the plot is reminiscent of early dystopian novels where not everything is as it seems, it does not. *Fourth Wing* has messages that the online audience ignores while focusing more on the romance aspect

than anything else. The novel is written in the present, so it is affected by many outside influences, such as female empowerment becoming more prevalent and necessary in storytelling.

Reviewers have influence over readers, and in this case, suggest the novel as a good read for people looking to get into fantasy or who want an easy read. And while it is good that reviewers are helping people get back into reading, they are still working within the constraints of power, even when they claim to be for diversity. By promoting *Fourth Wing* as an easy novel to escape into and treating the novel as if it is separate from politics, the two reviews are inadvertently supporting the status quo of whiteness as the standard. They are proving to publishers that regardless of the story quality or writing, white stories will do well, especially if they are easy to read. So, what reason is there to change the status quo if it is making them money? Publishers will look for their next *Fourth Wing*, similar to how they tried to find their next *Twilight* in the late 2000s and early 2010s.

However, some reviews reignite the hope that social media can be a powerful tool in diversifying publishing and bringing awareness to issues. One review that I will consider and analyze is Marines' on TikTok, where she criticizes *Fourth Wing*, explaining why the book is both problematic and not well-written. She describes how many romantic fantasy authors in addition to Rebecca Yarros, including Sarah J. Maas and Jennifer L. Armentrout, make use of a vaguely and ambiguously described man of color for the love interest who is also fetishized. Marines describes the videos that surfaced in response to her video comparing Sarah J. Maas and Rebecca Yarros because Yarros confirmed in a comment section that Xaden, the male love interest of the novel, is a man of color. She states it "started some discourse around the description surrounding Xaden and the use of words like bronze and tawny, and what that means and how this all ties into white as the default and what a description needs

to be for it to read as a person of color. If, like saying the skin tone is tawny is not enough, what will be enough?” (mynameismarines, 2023, 00:00:36). People thought Xaden was a white man before Yarros’s confirmation, so that is where the white as the default point stems from. Marines mentions descriptors like bronze and tawny that authors like Yarros and Maas use to describe their ambiguous man-of-color love interests, stating that they do not actually clarify whether a character is a person of color or not. In the video, she asks, “The use of these descriptors do not happen in a vacuum, right?”

(mynameismarines, 2023, 00:01:06). With the use of the word vacuum, Marines is stating that descriptors like bronze and tawny go into the outside world, carrying implications with them. The words carry meaning, both connotative and denotative. It is similar to the intentions versus impact arguments, where despite your intentions, the impact could still be negative. And in popular romantic fantasy series, the use of such descriptors is now a pretty common pattern and that “part of the reason that it is so easy to miss these men as men of color is not only sort of the vague descriptors but because of the absolute lack of worldbuilding in all of these really weak and poorly written romantic fantasies. Because for instance, what does it mean for Xaden to have brown skin? But having absolutely no context or idea for what race means in this world means it’s actually pretty meaningless”

(mynameismarines, 2023, 00:01:11). Using words like context and idea to talk about the lack of one in *Fourth Wing*, Marines is emphasizing how performative these vague descriptors are. Race means nothing in the world because there is no explanation for what it means for Xaden, like Marines mentions, to have brown skin. Are there lots of people of color in the world and if so, are there any cultural differences?

Marines describes, too, the racist trope that characters like Xaden or Rhysand from *A Court of Thorns and Roses* fall into:

“What to me carries a lot of meaning is a specific trope that Xaden falls into. These are men in these romantic fantasies that are ambiguously described that are some light shade of brown that could also be a white man with a tan. They are often violent and aggressive, but they are fetishized and sexualized. These men are also aggressive and preying on white women in the story or robbing them of their agency, and they also often have these very shallow descriptors that either perform race like Xaden’s very large and almost tribal tattoos or they feed into racist stereotypes and tropes and specifically the ones that are hypersexual” (mynameismarines, 2023, 00:01:56).

Using the word “trope” emphasizes how common it is, or is becoming for romantic fantasy novels. By mentioning that the people of color characters can be mistaken for a white man, she is emphasizing not only how empty the descriptors are but how it can be a cop-out to have it both ways, having a person of color character without having to make it clear or emphasize it. The word preying to describe the actions of many of these love interests emphasizes the animalistic way they are portrayed, and that animalistic portrayal plays into many racist stereotypes about people of color, such as how Violet is lusted after by Xaden. Words like violent and aggressive are used to juxtapose words like fetishized and sexualized to emphasize how characters like Xaden are treated; they are both exotic but dangerous,

which is a common trope romance novels play into. It is inherently problematic to portray men of color as animalistic and violent as a way to also sexualize them.

Already in this review, we see Marines going into detail about her problems with the novel, aspects that other reviews did not cover, such as the lazy worldbuilding Yarros employs and how describing Xaden as a man of color is meaningless and lazy if there is no context as to what race means in the world. What I find most significant here is how she goes into detail about why Xaden and other characters in romantic fantasy portrayals are inherently problematic by not only playing into racist stereotypes and tropes but also hypersexualizing the characters. This review shows how social media can be a powerful tool in the publishing industry and may add some nuance to the conversation about representation and diversity, especially if a book like *Fourth Wing* was so beloved by the internet. I did not realize Xaden was a man of color when I first read this book, and it was not until the author's comment that I knew. I especially did not consider how characters like Rhysand from *A Court of Thorns and Roses* and Xaden play into some very racist stereotypes and tropes. Such reviews can bring awareness to issues that go beyond just a denotative reading of the novel.

Babel

Using Foucault's insights on power and Tyson's insights on postcolonial criticism, we can see what R.F. Kuang is signaling through her worldbuilding and language in her alternative history of colonial England in the 1830s about how power operates in an empire, how oppressive it is, and anti-totalitarian sentiments. Postcolonial criticism ties in with Foucault's insights on power because it

is impossible to operate outside of power's reach, with the very frameworks we use to think about the world being a result of power itself—all of this nuance is something that Kuang covers in *Babel*.

In the text, we follow Robin Swift, a boy from Canton, China, who has been sent to Babel, Oxford University's Royal Institute of Translation, by his father in 1828. Babel works for the British Empire by supplying them with translation and language in the form of silver bars, which relies on tying different languages together based on their origin and the meanings that get lost in translation. These silver bars fuel the British Empire and help them dominate parts of the world by making ships go faster, healing people, and other things that help in the empire's colonization efforts and making their lives easier. Robin struggles with his loyalties, not knowing whether to aid the British Empire and Babel or to go against them.

Robin is living a life of contradictions in terms of his experience as a mixed-race person in England in the early 1800s, where he is accepted more than other people of color because he can pass as white in the distance, but is still considered an "other," and his struggles between what he wants versus what he knows is right. He has a half-brother named Griffin, who semi-inducts Robin into the Hermes Society, a foil to Babel that is meant to stand against it and the British Empire. It is not until Robin has a discussion with his half-brother that he realizes how infuriated he is about how the British Empire takes languages and cultures from other countries but refuses to give them silver bars or anything in return. After this revelation, he goes into the doubleness of his feelings and their contradictions: "He hated this place. He loved it. He resented how it treated him. He still wanted to be part of it—because it felt so good to be a part of it, to speak to its professors as an intellectual equal, to be in one great game" (Kuang 120). Words like resented and good juxtapose each other, emphasizing the doubleness

in how Robin feels and outside of the context of the scene, his identity as a mixed-race person living in England in the early 1800s.

Many of the contradictions Robin feels carry throughout the majority of the novel. He helps the Hermes Society by stealing a few books from Babel's collection. But overall, he has doubts and, at some points, becomes relieved when the Hermes Society stops calling on him. He enjoyed the comfort and joy of being part of Babel and being surrounded by language and texts he needed to translate alongside his cohort. He is complicit in the British Empire's colonialism efforts by removing himself from the Hermes Society and continuing on with his life as if he were just another student at the Institute of Translation. A lot of his willingness to be complicit, despite the contradictions he feels regarding his decisions and feelings, stems from the frameworks he uses to view the world. I find Foucault's insights on power to be useful here. Robin thinks of the fight against the British Empire and Babel that Griffin instead to be uneven and hopeless, saying that it is "You on one side, the whole of Empire on the other" (Kuang 176). Griffin, however, says, "Only if you think the Empire is inevitable" (Kuang 176). Power operates here by making characters like Robin feel as if it is hopeless to stand up against the British, therefore making them unlikely to do so, decreasing retaliation despite whatever one may believe in. As the British wield a lot of influence and control, they make it seem as if a fight against them will only lead to disaster, flaunting their naval superiority in the aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars. In the end, the British Empire gets to do what it wants.

Another example of how Kuang shows how power operates in a colonial society, particularly through the frameworks of characters, happens again through an interaction between Robin and Griffin. Robin is somewhat apprehensive about the Hermes Society because he is injured on one of the

jobs and is upset because he's risking a lot, yet he is still being kept in the dark by Griffin. Griffin says, "You have such a great fear for freedom, brother. It's shackling you. You've identified so hard with the colonizer, you think any threat to them is a threat to you. When are you going to realize you can't be one of them?" (Kuang 217). Here, Griffin explains Robin's predicament, which is his inadvertently trying to identify with the colonizers given his apprehensiveness about the Hermes Society. Words like shackling emphasize the idea that Robin is doing the wrong thing by trying to identify with the British, that it is limiting him and causing him more harm than good because while he is doing that, he does know that what the British are doing is wrong. Having access to all these resources that he did not have when he was living in Canton and spending his formative years in England is an example of power operating by taking advantage of Robin, whisking him away from his roots and instilling within him a sense of gratefulness, making him believe that the British Empire is the pinnacle of society, therefore leading to his identifying with the colonizers in some ways because he sees himself as one of them.

This idea is actually brought up by Robin when he realizes the realities and implications of what the British Empire is doing with their acquisition and distribution of silver bars:

"Did you ever read *Gulliver's Travels*? I read it all the time, when I lived here—I read it so often I nearly memorized it. And there's this chapter where Gulliver winds up on a land ruled by horses, who call themselves the Houyhnhnms, and where the humans are savage, idiot slaves called Yahoos. They're swapped. And Gulliver gets so used to living with his Houyhnhnm master, gets so convinced of Houyhnhnm superiority that when he gets home, he's horrified by his fellow humans. He thinks they're imbeciles. He can't stand to be around them" (Kuang 306-307).

Robin here comes to the realization that he underwent a transformation similar to the character in Jonathan Swift's novel, *Gulliver's Travels*. Robin has lived in British society for quite a number of years, and by ripping him away from his culture and making him diasporic, he becomes vulnerable to the indoctrination efforts of the British Empire to the point where he identifies with the British and views them as the pinnacle of society. Kuang emphasizes this by using words like savage and superiority, which juxtapose each other to explain the change that the protagonist of the Swift novel went through, which was Robin's predicament. He comes to this realization when he returns to Canton in the second half of the novel, after seeing the effects of the opium trade.

This sense of identifying with the colonizers comes, too, from how Chinese people are viewed by the British Empire in the novel. A Babel professor, Professor Chakravarti, tells Robin why there are not many Chinese students at the institute. Chakravarti states that the professor in charge of translating Mandarin believes Chinese students would not acclimatize well. He says to Robin, "But that doesn't mean you," Professor Chakravarti said quickly. "You're raised properly and all that. Wonderfully diligent, I don't expect that will be a problem" (Kuang 112). We can see the colonial logic here, that the British are superior and that only students who have assimilated into British culture, which only applies to people of color, are qualified enough to be part of the translation process. This degrading view of Chinese people is seen again in the novel, showing how power operates by making people into "others," to the point that they want to assimilate and identify themselves with the British as much as possible. This interaction happens when Robin returns to Canton with his cohort. "It's their free choice, isn't it?" Mr. Baylis said. "You can't fault business. Chinamen are simply filthy, lazy, and easily addicted. And you certainly can't blame England for the foibles of an inferior race. Not

where there's money to be made'" (Kuang 299). Here, we too see this colonial view of the colonizers, the British in the case of the novel, feeling like they have a right to exploit other countries for their resources and "civilize" them because they are not living the British way, which is emphasized by the use of the word inferior. The words free choice go against what is actually happening where people are becoming addicted to opium and do not know how harmful it is. The view expressed in the quote is similar to the one in Rudyard Kipling's poem, *The White Man's Burden*, where Kipling expresses the idea that white people are obligated to civilize the non-white people of the planet, that it is their responsibility in life. Of course, the similarity is there because Kipling was proposing this be done through colonialism and *Babel* has anti-colonial views.

R.F. Kuang expresses her views of colonialism, the British Empire, and anti-totalitarianism quite clearly throughout the book, but especially in the last third when Robin finally begins to take action and realizes that Griffin was right about many things, especially about how cruel the British Empire is and how it must be stopped. Robin and Victorie, who is part of what is left of his cohort, invade Babel with guns. Being scholars, the staff and students who are there are not fighters and fail at their attempts to rob the two of their weapons. The staff and students are given a choice. Join the revolution, or leave never to return to Babel. The majority leave, with only two professors and a handful of students staying behind to aid Robin and Victorie. Their mission was to stop the British Empire from waging war on China, which had been instigated by British opium trading companies and a professor at Babel. They have to spread the word and make it important for British citizens to realize the implications of the war. To make people pay attention to their cause, they begin to make the silver bars that are working in England useless.

From the quotes, we can see that the author believes that colonial empires, while potent in terms of strength and influence, are weak when you take away the very things they stole from other cultures and they no longer have foreign help. Oxford, where much of the novel takes place, begins to fall apart after the removal of several silver bars. In response to the city's decay, Robin says, "How slender, how fragile, the foundations of an empire. Take away the centre, and what's left? A gasping periphery, baseless, powerless, cut down at the roots" (Kuang 469). The words fragile and powerless work together to emphasize the idea that colonial empires like the British Empire are weak when you take away things that they stole from other cultures. The decay of Oxford makes Robin realize how dependent the British Empire is. He says, "It revealed the sheer dependence of the British, who, astonishingly, could not manage to do basic things like bake bread or get safely from one place to another without words stolen from other countries" (Kuang 471). Words like stolen and dependence work to emphasize how reliant the British are on stolen goods to the point where they cannot manage basic actions without them.

Two quotes exemplify Kuang's views on colonialism and the British Empire, and tie in with Foucault's views on power. Before invading Babel, Robin and Victorie had been working with the Hermes Society to spread the news of the war through pamphlets, but everything that could go wrong did, including multiple deaths and a betrayal. But through the tragedies, Robin comes to the realization of how pointless the pamphlets would be. In Robin's internal thoughts, he says, "He almost laughed at the absurdity. Power did not lie in the tip of a pen. Power did not work against its own interests. Power could only be brought to heel by acts of defiance it could not ignore. With brute, unflinching force. With violence" (Kuang 432). This quote ties into Foucault's insights on power. It is

impossible to operate outside the constraints of power, so here Robin is coming to the realization that the only way to upend colonialism is through extreme actions that power cannot ignore, especially since he realizes power will not work against its own interests. These views are emphasized through words like ignore and force, which purposefully juxtapose each other to show what must be done.

The other quote comes in when Robin and his fellow revolutionaries get word that British citizens are rallying together across England, strikers from years past, and those who had lost their jobs due to the British Empire's reliance on silver bars. Robin says, "And if the oppressed came together, if they rallied around a common cause—here, now, was one of the impossible pivot points Griffin had spoken of so often. Here was their chance to push history off its course" (Kuang 477). Something to look at is the language Kuang is using. Oppressed carries a lot of meaning, especially in consideration of oppressed parties of the past and present, such as Latinx and African-Americans in the U.S. By using such a charged word, Kuang is presenting an alternative that people outside of the novel can use to stand up to oppression and totalitarianism, which is for everyone who is oppressed to band together in support of one cause. People cannot just say they are against something to make a difference, especially such a significant one, like putting a stop to the war and destroying Babel to limit further colonial efforts by the British. Everyone needs to collectively stand up, and a view Kuang expresses through Robin's journey is that many people are complicit by not taking action because they enjoy the comforts granted to them by British colonial efforts and never stop to question the ethics of colonialism. This view can also be seen as a parallel of what must be done with the publishing industry, such as the HarperCollins union's demands going unanswered for months with no contracts until they engaged a the strike and got the company's attention (Alter and Harris).

Through Robin's experiences and choices, we see postcolonialism, specifically empire and power, intersect, particularly through Robin's choices in the last third of the novel. *Babel* has heavy anti-colonial themes, expressing the weakness of the empire once you remove its reliance on stolen culture and labor, and we see how power is involved in the workings of the empire through indoctrination and making people believe not only that the British are the pinnacle of society, but that it is hopeless to stand against them because of their strength. It has heavy anti-totalitarian views as well, showing how corrupt empires are and by offering them ways to deal with them.

Reviewers

In reviews of *Babel*, there are insights into how power operates through reviewers, either by dissuading potential readers or vice versa. This analysis will also look at the nuances that reviewers miss when discussing books and whether that does the novel a disservice and can have unintended effects in their reviews, all of which ties back to whether how I do not believe that the promise of social media diversifying or democratizing publishing is necessarily happening to the extent that it can. For this, I will be using three reviews.

Reviews on social media reveal how platforms promote books. On TikTok, while there are some reviews that go into the nuanced ideas that novels like *Babel* provide, many basically state what they like or dislike about the book, not explaining why they dislike or like those aspects. While some *Babel* reviews miss R.F. Kuang's message, I noticed that the reviews were much more specific than the ones for *Fourth Wing*. Emma, also known as "emmaskies" on TikTok and Goodreads, created a

three-minute review for the novel. She gave the book five stars, and she said one aspect made the novel very enjoyable for her. She mentions how well-written the book is thematically, saying:

“(…) every little thing in this book comes back to its themes of colonialism and the British ideal of white superiority, and the exoticism of South and East Asia, coupled with the dehumanizing of its peoples and being a member of the oppressed class in the center of all that and wanting so badly to be accepted and to be a part of the club and grappling with what that actually means and what that means as a person and where are your convictions, what are you willing to look away from and what are you willing to accept and can meaningful change ever happen peacefully from within or does it always require violence?” (emmaskies, 2022, 00:01:00).

Emmaskies goes in-depth discussing the nuances and ideas that R.F. Kuang is conveying in the novel. By describing what it means to be complicit, along with questions on how meaningful change can occur, she speaks to the heart of the novel, which examines how an empire operates and how the people within an empire do as well. Words like convictions and dehumanizing emphasize this anti-colonial view that the novel holds. The review reveals how she views books. She indirectly acknowledges that fiction does not exist in a vacuum. Emmaskies did not promote this book as a tragic “Dark Academia” book, but as it actually is, and explains the nuances that R.F. Kuang explores through the novel. The way in which Emmaskies does her review shows how powerful a tool social media can be. Not only is she explaining the themes, but she goes into depth on why they are so powerful, especially in the book itself as a historical fantasy set in England in the early 1800s. By

promoting this book, she will be impacting other people's view of reality because of the heavy topics R.F. Kuang delves into. The book makes you feel uncomfortable, especially when we are in the head of a character who is starting to realize his own complicity by participating in Babel and wanting to keep his cushy university life.

Bruner's insight on narratives constructing reality is useful in analyzing Chithra Vedantam's review on TikTok. She shares that she has a Bachelor of Arts degree in linguistics and says that the book feels "like a thesis on language and politics, and the ways in which language was used as a tool of dominance by imperial colonial power" (Vedantam, 2022, 00:00:19). The use of language as a tool for imperial powers is not new, but by stating this in the review, Vedantam is also stating that *Babel* is not too far off from what actually happened in the past. The novel can serve as a useful alternative because of how close it is to the past. She goes on to praise R.F. Kuang's writing regarding language and politics and her character work. Vedantam says that R.F. Kuang makes you love the characters and does not pull any punches with the bigotry and harshness the characters have to face in England, and that "it just breaks your heart and it makes your ideas not these kind of abstract concepts but real tangible and it makes you care so much" (Vedantam, 2022, 00:01:56). Her comment on abstract concepts feeling real and tangible ties in with Bruner's insights because making these ideas tangible will impact people's sense of reality. It is not just some subtext that people can ignore but something that will inform, if not change, how someone views the world because we are inside Robin's head in the novel, and Robin and some of the other members of his cohort go through so much together. All these characters experience the effects of colonialism. We can also understand how power operates through looking at this review. Here, Vedantam, though not as detailed as Emmaskies' review, does make the moves to get people to

read the book, going into detail about what to expect without doing a rehash of the plot as many of the *Fourth Wing* reviews did.

Some reviews do miss the author's message, despite saying that they understand it. Ashley Keimach made a five-minute review on TikTok discussing what did and did not work for her. Her interest in *Babel* stems from majoring in linguistics and always having an interest in etymology. She enjoyed the first half of the book more, and what worked for her were the details relating to etymology and Robin's struggle with his identity that made him feel more human. What she says did not work for her was the exploration of colonialism, not that it is bad, but that "she's not necessarily saying anything new or groundbreaking. If anything, it comes across very preachy and sometimes even redundant" (Keimach, 2023, 00:02:06). Words like preachy and redundant work to emphasize Keimach's view that the book is not needed because it does not explore anything new with colonialism. What she is missing is that while it may be preachy to her, it can be other people's gateway to learning about the effects of colonialism and how Kuang's views of retaliation can be applied to the present day. Keimach says the characters felt more like caricatures because of the modern dialogue and how they spoke about colonialism. Her biggest criticism, however, was the ending of the novel. She did not like that Robin died, with R.F. Kuang developing him in such a way that he is struggling with the idea of whether or not he should accept the new world he lives in through colonialism or fight against it by joining the Hermes Society. She did not find it believable that a character who "is kind of a coward can suddenly muster enough courage to kill himself" (Keimach, 2023, 00:03:50). The words coward and courage work to juxtapose each other, emphasizing Keimach's shock that Robin had killed himself for the cause of upending colonialism. They emphasize her thoughts that Robin's actions go against the

character Kuang originally set him up to be, a coward who is struggling with wanting the best for himself versus what he knows is right.

Keimach, disappointed by *Babel's* ending, proposes a different one that she feels would have portrayed the complexities and effects of colonialism better:

“I would have loved to see the main character waffling back and forth for the duration of his life, finally going back to his hometown, having a kid himself, and then being confronted with the opportunity of sending his kid to Oxford like he was for a ‘greater life’ and then him having to make a choice once more, and the book ending with us not knowing what he chose. The reason why I think that would have been more powerful for starting conversations about colonialism is because I believe it would have forced the readers to really think about how complex it is to deal with the effects of colonialism, even though we know it’s wrong, you’re caught in-between wanting better for yourself and your family and wanting better for the world. Instead we got a lot of really weird scenes, where it seems as if the author was encouraging violence for the sake [that] the end justifies the means mentality” (Keimach, 2023, 00:04:05).

Keimach is saying that an ending where Robin’s struggles of doubleness continue, and where he chooses whether or not to send his child to Oxford, actually portrays the effects of colonialism more accurately. She expresses this by describing how powerful the struggle would be between wanting better for both your family and yourself versus what is best for the whole world, and knowing that you

are wrong for choosing the former. But what this proposed ending and her dislike of Robin dying does is show how reviewers can miss the point of the book. The point of Robin dying was to put an end, or as much of an end as possible to colonialism, showing that you cannot really live between both worlds. R.F. Kuang's message is that it is not possible to live in both worlds. You are either against colonialism or for it, and if you are in-between worlds, then you are complicit in the British Empire's actions because you are not taking actions to prevent or stop anything. A lot of the comfort that Robin had with the institute eroded after he witnessed many of his close friends and allies die, showing how cruel and dangerous the British Empire was. His whole journey is realizing, too, that he cannot be part of British society because he will always be viewed as an "other" and because of the war the empire is trying to wage against China, only to get silver bars that will only help the British in the end.

All these reviews show the different ways power operates through reviews. It is okay to not agree with the message of a book, but to say that it is the wrong way to go about discussing colonialism misses the point of the novel, which ties in with this quote from Desmond Tutu: "If you are neutral in situation of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor" (Tutu). There is no one way to talk about colonialism, but calling for that distinct an ending is almost saying that whiteness as the standard should continue, because colonialism and knowing you are stuck there but want better for you and your family is really difficult to deal with. So, we can see that even through well-thought reviews that whiteness as a standard permeates, even if it is not the intention of the reviewer.

What This All Means

Despite the reliance on plot rehashes in reviews on social media, social media does have the power to market books. TikTok is especially influential, as bookstores like Waterstones and Barnes and Noble have tables dedicated to the “#BookTok” phenomenon; even Amazon has a section for it on its website. For example, *The Song of Achilles* by Madeline Miller was first published in 2012 but is a prominent book on TikTok. According to the New York Times, the novel sells “about 10,000 copies a week, roughly nine times as much as when it won the prestigious Orange Prize” (Harris). A lot of the buzz about *Fourth Wing* came from TikTok, as the hashtag has over 254,000 posts. According to WordsRated, BookTok assisted in selling roughly “20 million books in 2021, which represents over 2.4% of the total book sales count for the year” (Curcic). It helped in changing reading habits, too. According to Dimitrije Curcic through a survey that was done using TikTok users from the United States, at least 62% of TikTok users from the U.S. have picked up a BookTok recommendation, and 48% of American TikTok users “read more books than before the use of BookTok” (Curcic).

Social media’s influence is why a lot of publishers turn to influencers. For example, Selene Velez has an account on TikTok with over 223,000 followers. She told the *New York Times* in an interview that publishing will send her Advanced Reading Copies (ARCs) before they are out for the general public so she can make videos about them. Publishers, too, pay influencers to create videos with the fees being per video/post and ranging anywhere from a couple hundred to a few thousand dollars (Harris). TikTok is where I get a lot of my recommendations from. For example, I learned of *Fourth Wing* and bought it before it was released because I saw so many reviewers that I follow rave about it.

Publishing is a money-making industry; it is interested in generating as much revenue as it possibly can. In *Contemporary Publishing and the Culture of Books*, Jasmine Kirkbride, in the thirteenth chapter talks about how unsustainable the “growth or die” mindset is, with publishing houses aiming to generate more profit every year. There are times where publishers will cut down on costs for good reads, but Kirkbride says that some publishing houses seek to reduce costs “for artificial profit-making purposes” (Kirkbride 242). Publishers will, therefore, cut down on costs and take as many shortcuts as possible in order to ensure that artificial profit. So, for example, they may use freelancers as much as possible rather than people who are more qualified or experienced, or they cut the number of redrafts and redesigns. Such actions can lead to less diverse and new talent, along with mistakes that show up in the final product (Kirkbride 242-243).

What does that mean for diversity? Though social media has the power to diversify publishing, it is not necessarily happening. Despite that, it is important to realize that social media like TikTok is how a lot of young people are coming to reading in the first place. If publishing wants to be more diverse in its representation and its workforce, and if publishers want to keep going, they need to capitalize on the audience that is already there and is building on platforms like TikTok. To capitalize on such audiences, publishing needs to invest more in the publicity and budget that a book receives. Sure, it can be argued that book clubs like Reese Witherspoon’s or Oprah’s have helped in diversifying the public’s tastes, illustrated by *Little Fires Everywhere* by Celeste Ng and *Song of Solomon* by Toni Morrison. But I am hopeful about social media and online platforms not just because I love speculative fiction and what books in the genre explore in their “what if” narratives, but also because it is a way to

reach younger audiences. A lot of young people are on TikTok, such as people from Gen Z and Gen Alpha. I am hopeful about the influence of such platforms because everyone can have a voice on them, they are where both young and old generations are present with different views to share on novels.

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