

Babel Tower

A.S. Byatt

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Babel Tower follows *The Virgin in the Garden* and *Still Life* in tracing Frederica Potter, a lover of books who reflects the author's life and times. It centers around two lawsuits: in one, Frederica -- a young intellectual who has married outside her social set -- is challenging her wealthy and violent husband for custody of their child; in the other, an unkempt but charismatic rebel is charged with having written an obscene book, a novel-within-a-novel about a small band of revolutionaries who attempt to set up an ideal community. And in the background, rebellion gains a major toehold in the London of the Sixties, and society will never be the same.

Babel Tower Details

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Author : A.S. Byatt

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From Reader Review Babel Tower for online ebook

Lucy says

it's horrible to see frederica potter an abuse victim and then to witness the misogyny and unfairness she experiences in the court system. it's unsettling to see her in this frightening, cool, environment, where an indulgent unintelligent man is coddled by his hideous aunts and housekeeper.

the book within a book, babbel tower, is classed by the powers that be as obscene, and it is somewhat revolting, although actually conservative in its morals. it makes you wonder how people on here complain about gay sex in the "the line of beauty" and if they have ever read something that is actually disgusting.

the court scenes for both this case and the divorce case are remarkably fast-paced for byatt, and compelling for it. daniel's storyline is also stronger than anything he's previously had.

Kristen Coppess says

Stunning. The depth and research that went into this book boggles the mind. Byatt is a literary critic who obviously loves the work she studies (and finds conflict with Blake, Foucault, Sade, etc.) and this is evident in her interlacing of literary quips throughout the text. The protagonist, Felicia, was absolutely captivating. She was intelligent, strong, flawed, and representative of the changes to the 1960's domestic household when the wife is Oxford educated. Richly developed historical background runs parallel to Felicia's obstacles, shortcomings, and triumphs. The novel touches on the Moor Murders, British educational reform, Lady Chatterley's Lover obscenity trials, and the Happenings in 1960's London all in line with events in Felicia's life. I can't think of what to say other than I spent every day excited to jump back into the world Byatt constructed but sad it would end. And you will never find the love life of snails as fascinating!

Susan Dehn Matthews says

In the words of Byatt's character, Jude Mason, "they're words you react to...which will leave a trace on your memory..." Babel Tower tests the reader's attention, stomach, and patience. Yet if one perseveres, the threads are woven into a tapestry that, at long last, makes sense of a unique moment in history and lures you into wholly believing her characters might actually have drawn breath in the 1960s.

Karl Steel says

You get:

- * Charles Fourier vs. Sade (in the novel, babbletower, within a novel)
- * An affectionate send-up of the medievalism and attractions to Apocalyptic Blake in 60s counterculture (and a perhaps less affectionate send up of the countercultural psychology of Laing and Marcuse)
- * A wondering exploration of the 60s developments in pedagogy

- * a harrowing feminist account of domestic violence
- * TWO courtroom dramas (first divorce, and then an obscenity charge, during which Anthony Burgess (!) appears)
- * the birth of environmentalism

Merits repeated rereadings.

Gail says

Babel Tower: an apt name. The idea of striations/laminations/layers that permeates this novel is crucial. It's intertextuality is breathtaking. Each successive passage raises as many thoughts and questions in the reader, as it attempts to answer. Rich, intoxicating and unpretentiously "literary", this #3 in the Frederica Potter Quarter is the best yet. The polyphonic narrators at times compete for the reader's attention, in a discordant babble, but this does not deter or infuriate as it might do. It motivates the reader to attune their ears and eyes more sharply to Byatt's intellectual idiom.

I loved it. I can also understand someone who loathed it ... It inspires one to emotional extremes ... Nice/good are not words to be relied upon when assessing a novel of this nature. We are in the realm of despicable brilliance!

For a particularly pertinent and identifiable rant on Britishness turn to page 567 to hear about indignation. Satirically sharp, emotionally wringing and well worth the trouble it takes to get through it.

Zanna says

I remember this long book being gloriously nebulous and complicated, spreading tendrils into the many subjects that interest its curious-minded protagonist. I read it almost constantly over several days while I was doing some extremely elaborate hair extensions on myself, and the hours flew by as I wandered through the layers of Frederica's life. Maybe another read is in order...

Siria says

Babel Tower is an immensely pleasurable reading experience. Not because it's a particularly cheery book—god, it's not—but because it demands such intensity, such devotion of the reader and repays it all with interest. The intertextuality of it all is such a delight—books within books, *Babbletower* hidden within Babel Tower, the stories, the letters, the references to other novels—all giving rise to a level of introspection which feels organic rather than forced. Her characters are all incredibly vivid, even if I don't think I would particularly like to spend much time with any of them—Frederica is a little too much of a woman of her time—and really I do think that A.S. Byatt is one of the most intelligent authors working today.

Davide says

«Ero così sicura della vita, una volta. Volevo.»

Avevo un po' di timore a rileggere – diciassette anni dopo la prima volta – uno dei miei libri preferiti. Ma mi sbagliavo: lo trovo ancora bellissimo.

E forse stavolta capisco meglio quanto il titolo alluda a una delle questioni fondamentali dell'opera di Byatt: il rapporto tra linguaggio e mondo.

E leggendolo per la prima volta nella giusta sequenza temporale mi rendo conto che Byatt è arrivata al terzo romanzo di Frederica Potter, una ventina d'anni dopo il primo, diventando solo ora pienamente "sé stessa"; dopo essere passata attraverso *Possessione* e *Angeli e insetti*.

Il cambiamento più vistoso è dato dal fatto che prima non era ancora così viva la compresenza di diverse narrazioni, la moltiplicazione degli autori interni, l'incastro tra livelli di testo diversi, tra forme diverse di scrittura che si rispecchiano e si respingono, si riprendono e si approfondiscono a vicenda.

La Torre di Babele è quindi più ambizioso dei due precedenti: intreccia subito non solo le diverse storie dei personaggi che già conoscevamo ma anche le pagine di un altro libro, pubblicate con un font diverso e aperte da una piccola conchiglia a segnare l'inizio del diverso statuto della scrittura. Sono pagine del «libro che tanto trambusto avrebbe provocato, ma che all'epoca non era che un mucchio di appunti scarabocchiati, e un pullulare di scene, immaginate e ri-immaginate». Si tratta di una «riuscita rappresentazione di un mondo in parte fiabesco, in parte distopico», (view spoiler); una vicenda ambientata nel periodo del Terrore, in Francia, quando un gruppo di persone raggiunge un luogo isolato dal mondo, la Tour Bruyarde, per costruire un «mondo nuovo almeno per questi pochi eletti»; e creare una «nuova vita» come «esperienza di libertà», «vivendo in amicizia vite appassionate e ragionevoli».

Ma questo è solo l'esempio più eclatante: altre scritture interne si susseguono: (view spoiler).

Insomma, ancora una volta, leggere queste pagine fa venire voglia di rileggerle, di leggerne altre che qui sono richiamate, di cercare altri libri; addirittura di studiarli e di insegnarli:

«- Ignoravo cosa fosse insegnare. Pensavo che fosse *arido*. Ma non lo è. Rende le cose più reali... un altro mondo, che è anche questo mondo, rende le cose più reali in *questo* mondo, chi l'avrebbe detto.» (così dice a un certo punto Frederica a suo padre: l'irrequieta Frederica che nel primo libro voleva voleva voleva... a cominciare dall'allontanarsi dal padre, che ha dedicato la vita all'insegnamento della letteratura).

Madelyn says

Great book, although it's difficult to get started. Very much about the lyrical value of language, which sounds pretentious, but only because it matches the pretension in the book. Frederica, the heroine, is at once likeable and disagreeable, and yet you cheer for her throughout. Within the book, you have two trials--one of Frederica's divorce, the other involving a book called "Babeltower" which is on trial for obscenity. Many references are made to the Lady Chatterley's Lover trial. On top of this, you have Frederica's "Laminations," which is a collection of pertinent and not-so-pertinent quotes, letters, and vignettes that seem to be collected in something of a common place book.

One of the reasons that I was drawn to this book in the first place was the beginning, where Byatt introduces the novel in several ways (and as someone who is unfamiliar with the rest of the series, none of them made

sense at the time). I didn't really know where she was going, but the prose is excellent, and when I got to Hugh Pink's thoughts on pomegranates, I was hooked.

Because of Byatt's ability to write so well, there are parts of the book that are really difficult to get through. For example, the very descriptive domestic violence was hard to read, although I appreciate that the most brutal act of violence is not described in such detail. I don't like to think of myself as a prude, but I was also repulsed by the description of break-through bleeding and her love-making with Paul (or was it John?) Ottakar.

I would highly advise this to a) a professor of English, looking for something to analyze; b) a 20-something with academic dreams (me!!!); or c) a retiree with a great deal of patience. Otherwise, the book requires a great deal of time and effort to get through (see: I read the book with a dictionary at my side). That said, I ended up passing this book on to one of my neighbors (he fits into the retiree with a great deal of patience category) and then handed it off to one of my more precocious high school students. Based on her emails, I believe that she is enjoying the book quite a bit, although the domestic violence gave her some trouble.

Ubik 2.0 says

Il romanzo è essenzialmente un lavoro sul tema della comunicazione, dell'educazione e della libertà, donde il titolo: molteplici personaggi secondari operano in questo campo e, tanto per esemplificare, la compagna di casa di Frederica è la segretaria di una commissione ministeriale sull'educazione scolastica che esegue ispezioni conoscitive e il cui dibattito interno, sempre incentrato sul dualismo regole/libertà, occupa interi capitoli del libro dando modo all'autrice di sfoggiare la notevole erudizione che ne caratterizza l'opera, così come già appariva evidente nel suo libro più famoso, *Possessione* (1990).

Le digressioni hanno dunque la duplice conseguenza, da un lato di raffreddare il pathos del racconto che rimane comunque intrigante anche se non vuole essere avvincente, dall'altro di avviluppare il testo in un virtuosismo di stili, di punti di vista, di materiali che la Byatt maneggia con grande padronanza, sorprendendo non di rado il lettore con improvvise e vertiginose virate, degne di un poliziesco.

Eccellenti sono a questo proposito le descrizioni dei due processi, dove la dialettica accusa-difesa, giudice-imputato-testimone, fa continuamente dimenticare che l'oggetto della disputa non è un omicidio o una tragedia, ma un "banale" conflitto coniugale o un'accusa di oscenità di un testo. Molto precise sono le caratterizzazioni dell'intelligenza e dell'oratoria dei due accusatori che, sebbene siano posti a contrapposizione dei personaggi cui il lettore è portato ad immedesimarsi (sicuramente Frederica, ma anche Jude o quanto meno coloro che si contrappongono alla censura), non possono non lasciare affascinati per la capacità professionale.

Apparentemente un libro freddo, secondo lo stereotipo della letteratura inglese, ma nel quale covano pulsioni proprie del passaggio epocale in cui la vicenda si svolge che comincia allorchè una donna emancipata e non scevra da errori e un giovane artista fantasioso, il cui aspetto vuole suscitare repulsione, sembrano destinati a soccombere ma alla fine resuscitano mentre la società, anche attraverso le imprevedibili sentenze dei suoi tutori, sta rapidamente mutando pelle poichè sullo sfondo comincia a comparire il nuovo mondo, con i Beatles, le minigonne, la libertà sessuale e gli altri segnali di libertà che pervadono la swinging London.

Quasi inutile ricordare che la Byatt, fatte salve tutte le caratteristiche peculiari sopra descritte e tutte le differenze (di sesso, età e stile) che la separano dai suoi connazionali McEwan, Coe, Hornby, Amis, come

Amanda says

AS Byatt is a goddess of language. This book was sharp and dangerous in its exploration of human desire, education, language, love, and power. It was a bit of a shock after *Still Life*, in which the language was warm, full, sonorous - *Still Life* was complete and still, like *Stephanie*; *Babel Tower* is edgy and driven like *Frederica*. Jude Mason's book was difficult to read, but Byatt makes you believe in its value. If ever there was a book that encompasses everything that is important, I think this would be it. Reading it you become so submerged in its reality that the line between fiction and non- becomes rather faint. Byatt's overwhelming literary, cultural and (sometimes) scientific knowledge blaze through the pages of this book, and her brilliant use of literary allusion not only shows the absolute relevance of literature to life but also form a sort of literary puzzle for readers to interpret (no matter how much of it you think you recognize, you can be sure she's always got one more allusion hidden just past your view...) This is my favorite series of books and of them BT is in some ways the best so far. (Anyone interested in this book: I recommend that you read *Virgin in the Garden* and *Still Life* first!)

Lo says

Honestly, I don't have a very high opinion of this book, but I think a good part of that derives from the fact that I felt like I missed the point to this book. *Babel Tower* seemed unduly long to me (by about 400 pages), with quotations from other books and trivial conversations filling up the bulk of the book. It also is written, in my opinion, incongruously, the storyline fluctuating rapidly and character's actions unjustified. For example, it irked me that in *Frederica*'s trial that the fact that Nigel assaulted her father and her brother in law was largely disregarded (it was mentioned once) and instead the court focused on the hearsay evidence about Nigel throwing an axe at *Frederica*. Why wasn't her family in court defending her? Why wasn't the instance when Nigel came to her family's home and called her a bitch mentioned? Nigel is allowed 3 witness who clearly would never side against him, while *Frederica* has no one (but her family is 'supportive' of her). It makes no sense, and I chalk it up to a flaw in the author to present a fictional reality as she saw fit, rather than a work of fiction based in reality.

The story line itself had potential, *Frederica* is the epitome of a 'modern' woman in the late 1960s, well educated, career driven, and sexually free, and after filing for divorce with her husband, she demands custody of her child, who it is questionable how much she loves him and would actually provide a good home at times. There are definitely two sides of the coin: Nigel, a violent and unstable wealthy man, could provide Leo (their son) with a stable and loving environment between him and his three stables. However, Nigel is gone for long stretches of time, and as I mentioned before, he is of a violent nature, prone to temper tantrums, and would use Leo as bait to bring *Frederica* back.

Yet, *Frederica*, although emotionally stable and affectionate towards Leo, is barely financially stable and has questionable morals (it isn't a stable environment for a child if you are sleeping with different men based on your mood). I wouldn't want Leo to live with either of them, honestly, but if I had to choose, I would probably choose *Frederica* just on the premise that she lives with Agatha and Saskia, who are a stable and happy mother daughter pair and would provide a positive influence for Leo.

The book also goes into another subplot about a controversial book published at the same time. Honestly, I didn't follow that plot line as well because it seemed to just be 'added' on later in the book to add more excitement.

I honestly wouldn't recommend this book to people who follow my literary tastes. I guess if you like books about human emotions (and not necessarily their veracity) and drama, this might be a good read for you.

Feather Stolzenbach says

Probably my favorite of the four - intense and fun to read.

From the Publisher

At the heart of the novel are two law cases, twin strands of the Establishment's web, that shape the story: a painful divorce and custody suit and the prosecution of an "obscene" book. Frederica, the independent young heroine, is involved in both. She startled her intellectual circle of friends by marrying a young country squire, whose violent streak has now been turned against her. Fleeing to London with their young son, she gets a teaching job in an art school, where she is thrown into the thick of the new decade. Poets and painters are denying the value of the past, fostering dreams of the rebellion, which focus around a strange, charismatic figure - the near-naked, unkempt and smelly Jude Mason, with his flowing gray hair, a hippie before his time. We feel the growing unease, the undertones of sex and cruelty. The tension erupts over his novel "Babbletower," set in a past revolutionary era, where a band of people retire to a castle to found an ideal community. In this book, as in the courtrooms, as in the art school's haphazard classes and on the committee set up to study "the teaching of language," people function increasingly in groups. Many are obsessed with protecting the young, but the fashionable notion of the children as innocent and free slowly comes to seem wishful, and perilous. Babel Tower is the third, following *The Virgin in the Garden* and *Still Life*, of a planned quartet of novels set in different mid-century time frames. And so the personal and legal crises of Frederica mirror those of the age. This is the decade of the Beatles, the Death of God, the birth of computer languages. In Byatt's vision the presiding genius of the 1960s seems to be a blend of the Marquis de Sade and *The Hobbit*. The resulting confusion, charted with a brilliant imaginative sympathy, is as comic as it is threatening and bizarre.

Hugh says

I am revisiting and expanding this review because I am currently reading *The Blind Assassin*, which reminded me of this book.

I recommend the Frederica quartet to any serious reader with enough time to read it, and this, the third volume, is probably the best. As always with Byatt, it is brimming with ideas and erudition, but she never loses track of her characters and their development.

Frederica has escaped from her disastrous marriage, and is now working in publishing. As in *The Blind Assassin*, much of the story takes the form of a book within a book - a fantasy set in a utopian community which becomes the subject of an obscenity trial. There is also quite a lot about education, and how education policy is formed by liberal committees - this subplot is explored in more depth in the final part of the quartet *A Whistling Woman*, and allows Byatt to create some entertaining caricatures, particularly the pop poet.

The first two parts of the quartet are *The Virgin in the Garden* and *Still Life*

Laura says

From BBC Radio 4 - The Frederica Quartet:

16/30: Frederica has given up her care-free, independent Cambridge lifestyle. Will settling down bring happiness? Stars Indira Varma.

17/30: Daniel gets an urgent phone call about his daughter and has to face up to the consequences of his actions.

18/30: Frederica's fraught marriage is put under even greater strain when she makes a shocking discovery.

19/30: Nigel goes in search of Frederica, who has left, taking Leo with her. But was that the correct decision?

20/30: Frederica visits the doctor and makes a major decision. Daniel learns the identity of his mystery caller.

21/30: Frederica's estranged husband Nigel demands to see his son Leo and she finds a new love interest.

22/30: Frederica discovers that her new lover, John, has an unhinged brother and Paul makes a dramatic statement.

23/30: The day of Frederica's divorce finally arrives and she learns whether she has won custody of her son, Leo.

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b007jsnk>

Mag says

It is a novel of ideas. It was a pleasure to read, and I could go back to the beginning right away, start reading again and still find interesting issues to think about. It reflects and discusses issues which were topical in the 60s, like women's rights, new trends in education, changes in what was designated obscene and sexual revolution. It is also paradise for those who like literary analysis, and discussions in philosophy and ethics. It is dense with ideas on and from Nietzsche, Blake, Fourier, D. H. Lawrence, Kafka, Forster and the Marquis de Sade. Blake is quoted and referred to most extensively, and I find it not accidental. The book itself is an extended Song of Innocence into Song of Experience on many levels.

It's about the "innocence and experience" of Frederica, the main character, who finds out what is important in her life, and of a group of people who isolate themselves to practice sexual and social freedom. The idea of the society of 'freedom' is tackled by a book within the book: *_Babbletower_* - a utopian/dystopian tale in which a group of nobles are trying to build a utopian society based on the premise that everyone should do what brings him pleasure. But, what if somebody finds cruelty bringing him pleasure?

The author of the book within the book is put on trial for obscenity. At the same time the main character of

the novel, Frederica, finds herself in divorce and custody proceedings. Both trials borrow extensively from the real trials that took place in England at the time.

Ana-Maria Cărciova says

This is a book about love, literature, it is quite entangled and a reason for a great headache but it doesn't push it, it just flows in its subtle comparisons, inequities, quotes, misery, anxiety, ambivalence. As a story it is mainly segmented in 5 stories that free themselves from their main corpse as they again and again build it. Frederica, who fights for the custody of her son, Leo and her own decisions that are unknown and frighten her in her runaway from her beloved, aggressive ex-husband, Nigel. She is a well educated woman and wants to go on being like this, whereas the society stops her from doing so, on the grounds of its own rules of correctitude (the woman caring only for her child, cooking, pleasing others, talking about dishwashers and clothes). Frederica is more than this and she acknowledges this the hard way; she is on the contrary a mean of hatred for other women who know how it is to suffer, to be neglected (the individuality of women can not be achieved, the individuality of human beings shock those who relinquish it for the sake of others). On the other hand, there is Jude Mason, a suicidal aspiring artist who uses Daniel (a clergyman, Frederica's brother-in-law) as a way of salvation from his own "neutrality of senses". He does not want anything, apart from being the one who shows the sickening part of the humanity; doing so by writing "Babel Tower", the story of the ones who wished to find a better place, without ranks, loathing, cut short desires and the Oneness that prevail in this whole story on different levels of it. The Babel Tower's human beings tried their best to undo themselves which is physically, sexually, psychologically impossible as people can not be One, they have different yearnings which they achieve in divergent ways; trying to bring them closer will just bring them closer to their own dehumanization, a state of natural abstract ambivalence which can not be fought against. They began their own sessions of cruelty, of loathsome divided cravings. Culvert the Projector is the one that firstly coughs up his true nature when he is blinded by his homosexuality: "you can do what you want and I can assure you that what you want is what I want". Jude and Frederica confront their naysayers, the lies that alter their behaviour: Frederica's pure feelings for her son are shadowed by his aunt's motherhood, whereas there are various types of showing your love and Frederica knows this, they can convince her that she is the one to blame for thinking only about herself and conceal her beneath their own complexes. On the other hand, Jude brings Frederica's suffering on a higher scale where we are all participants, we are our own monsters, but when we explain ourselves, the language intimidates us so that we hide behind the conventions (that the Babel Tower's community highly disagreed with) such as church, family, education. The ones that persuade Jude to run again from the outer world, that bruised his already anxious heart, are the ones who obscure their bleachedness on behalf of a better world which everyone spoils more or less. The other characters, even though I do not explain their story in a aforementioned manner, are the ones that bring us back to the reality that is not quite far away from the fictitious background of "La Tour Bruyarde". Daniel is the one that offers help with a sense of impartiality that seems the best way of dealing with suicidal thoughts (Jude Mason is one of his "patients" who calls him and asks for his indirect help by mocking him), Frederica's friends are the example foundation of the new wave of people to come: not ashamed, who can talk freely about their sexual life, who can have fun and do what they want, Frederica's ideal, they are all man just to emphasise the feminist part of this story (which I decided not to speak subjective about in this review). Agatha (Frederica's only female friend), Frederica, Phyllis Pratt (female writer with strong views), Saskia (Agatha's daughter) and Lady Roseace are the ones who keep it all flowing, with their independence they struggle to receive more than they are meant to have, they manage more or less to escape: Lady Roseace died, while the other female characters survived in a society that with years passing grant and slobber over its insanity, which in analogy with the forgotten restrains, is the war of incongruity. The ending is a revelation, is a nod: "yes, we are going to hell whether you find a rope or burn

your arse trying to catch one", no the monks won't help us, we will become more and more extravagant, we will change the meaning of words, we will change our language, we will have so many ways of expressing ourselves that we will stop fighting the urge of strangling ourselves. This book is a book in a book, you may not find the first resemble to the first or vice-versa, but the strickening Oneness will blow you. The language and the body, what we want and what we have, philosophy and church, people and people, man and man, woman and woman, shit and shit, children and grown ups, purity in falsity or purity in the uninhibited, the Oneness is not possible, we cry for it, we beg for it, we imagine it in forms and shapes, in sweat, blood and semen, but even in ourselves the Oneoness we believe we are will race against itself. We are a biped mixture, we can talk all our lives about ourselves, we can, we can! Highly recommended book!

Katerina says

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P.S. On a more personal note, ??? ?????? ??? Still Life - ?????????? ??????? ? ????????????

"Do you love him?"

"More than anything else, including myself, including my books, whether I want it or not. It's just the nature of things. It's a ridiculous question."

Bettie? says

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b007jsnk>

Description: *Babel Tower follows The Virgin in the Garden and Still Life in tracing Frederica Potter, a lover of books who reflects the author's life and times. It centers around two lawsuits: in one, Frederica -- a young intellectual who has married outside her social set -- is challenging her wealthy and violent husband for custody of their child; in the other, an unkempt but charismatic rebel is charged with having written an obscene book, a novel-within-a-novel about a small band of revolutionaries who attempt to set up an ideal community. And in the background, rebellion gains a major toehold in the London of the Sixties, and society will never be the same.*

Frederica has given up her care-free, independent Cambridge lifestyle. Will settling down bring happiness? Stars Indira Varma.

Daniel gets an urgent phone call about his daughter and has to face up to the consequences of his actions. Stars Shaun Dooley.

Frederica's fraught marriage is put under even greater strain when she makes a shocking discovery.

Nigel goes in search of Frederica, who has left, taking Leo with her. But was that the correct decision? Stars Mark Bazeley.

Frederica visits the doctor and makes a major decision. Daniel learns the identity of his mystery caller. Stars Shaun Dooley.

Frederica's estranged husband Nigel demands to see his son Leo and she finds a new love interest.

The day of Frederica's divorce finally arrives and she learns whether she has won custody of her son, Leo.

Bloodorange says

Babel Tower, the third volume in the 'Frederica Quartet' series, was, to me, the easiest one to read and the most engaging one - possibly because Frederica is now getting closer to me in age, and I am interested in other women's bookish motherhoods.

Some notes on this novel:

1. It is set in England, during the Swinging Sixties, at the time of vast social changes. The events defining the book's moral landscape, and at the same time reinforcing its central theme of judgment, are Lady Chatterley's Lover obscenity trial of 1960, Sexual Offences Act of 1967, and the Pill and Frederica's divorce/ child custody trial in between.

(A glimpse of what is to be expected: at some point, a single mother explains she is a public servant because women in public service are allowed to have up to two illegitimate children, no questions asked.)

2. Each book in the Quartet has a different art in its centre. This novel's central art is language; Byatt shows language, reading and crafting narratives as ways of self-expression, world perception, making sense of the world (the novel itself has a fairy-tale structure).

Reading and telling stories are familiar and understandable to Frederica – people she feels most comfortable around, 'her people', are people who need narratives; she even starts writing one, non-linear and collage-like, herself. Reading is presented as way of achieving upward mobility, a form of escapism (Frederica's excessive reading in her husband's secluded house at the beginning of the novel is a sign of her trying to maintain her identity), something not commended in mothers (at some point, Frederica has a completely unparanoid feeling that reading too much might hurt her chances of securing child custody).

Yet Frederica meets new people – she moves from her husband, Nigel, who has no words, no language, to lovers whose brains are wired in a different way than hers (is that a part of the attraction? I understood, quite early, that I wouldn't be happy with a man as bookish as myself). Professionally, she starts teaching

literature, and meets people – artists, mathematicians - for whom it is a new, and often obscure, form of expression. (They understand the language of clothing, though – in this novel, what one wears is often consciously used to express or conceal one's image, affiliation, interests - the Ottokars, Jude, doll-like art students, Frederica, Nigel.)

3. Another major theme in the novel is nature vs. nurture; the power of education, the questionable nature of 'innocence', what children taught and children left to themselves are capable of, books' power to corrupt readers.

A great volume in a great and highly recommended series.
