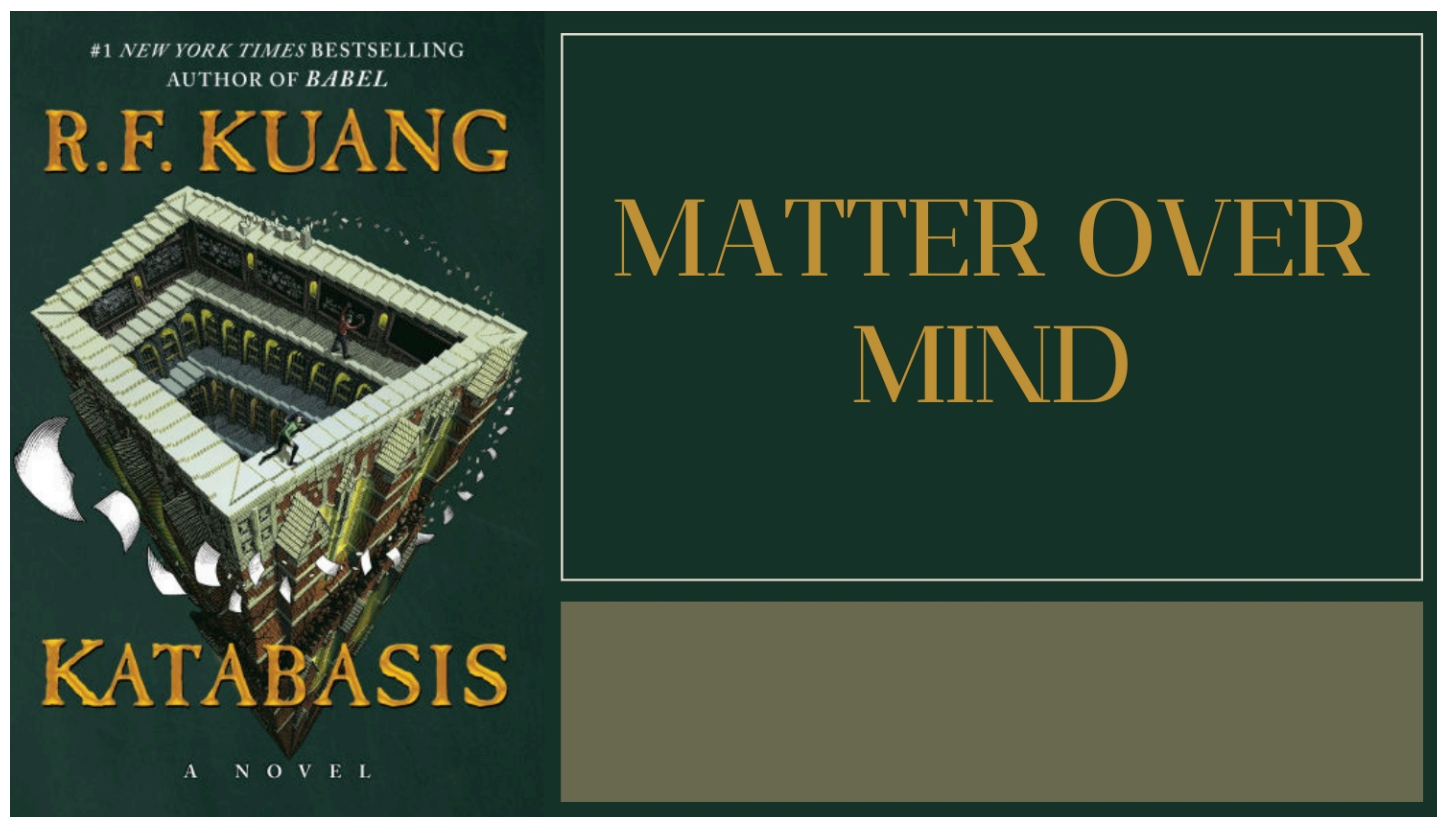


Matter Over Mind: Review of R.F. Kuang's *Katabasis*



Fei Dong

Under Review:

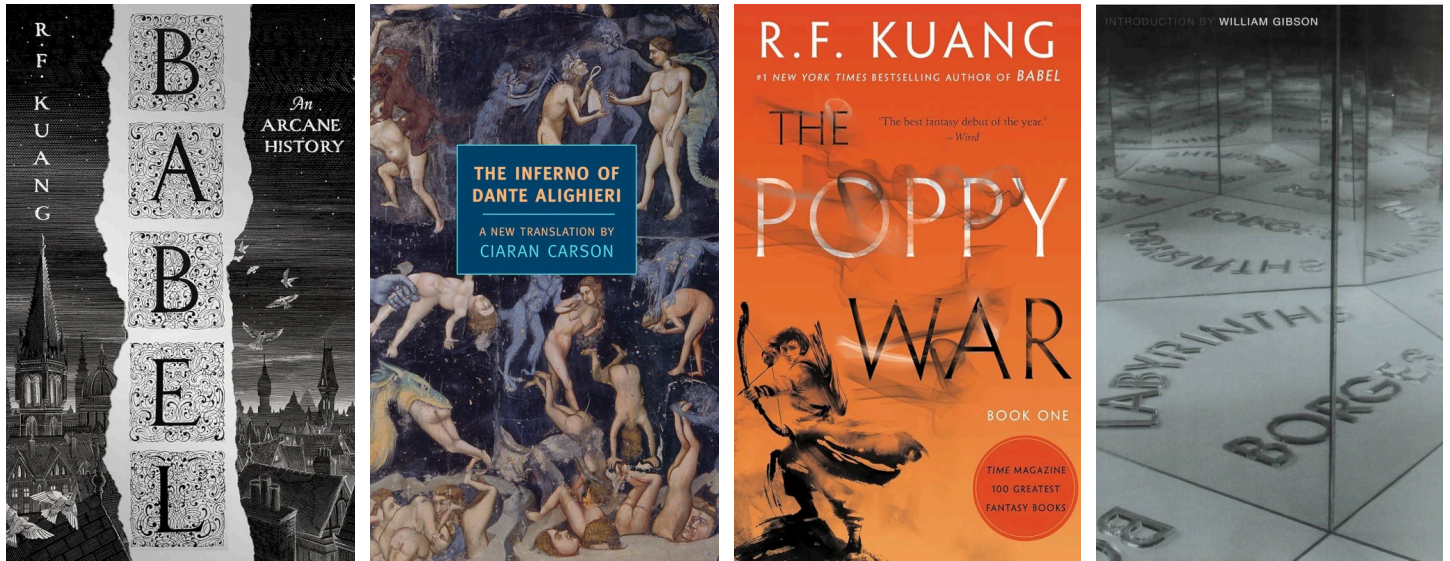
Katabasis (<https://bookshop.org/a/79715/9780063446243>). R. F. Kuang. Harper Voyager, August 2025.

In her best-selling novel *Babel* (<https://bookshop.org/a/79715/9780063021433>), R. F. Kuang wrote of how the ivory towers of the academy are entwined with the work of world-shaping colonial violence. *Katabasis*, her new work of dark academia, looks inward, interrogating how the academy glorifies the life of the mind to the detriment of the material realities of the body, how it normalizes self-harm and abuse in the name of intellectual pursuit.

Katabasis (<https://bookshop.org/a/79715/9780063446243>) follows Alice Law and Peter Murdoch, Cambridge postgrads from the Department of Analytic Magick, as they descend into hell in search of their recently-deceased advisor, Professor Jacob Grimes. A sojourn through Kuang's Eight Courts of Hell—which takes inspiration from Dante's *Inferno* (<https://bookshop.org/a/79715/9780140440065>), T. S. Eliot's "*The Waste Land*" (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/47311/the-waste-land>), the labyrinthine writings (<https://bookshop.org/a/79715/9780811216999>) of Jorge Luis Borges, and many

other mythologies, including the Weaver Girl of Chinese folk tales—is as intellectually demanding as it is physically perilous. Alice and Peter *love* a good challenge, and it’s their nearly masochistic compulsion to push themselves that makes them excellent magicians. Setting their minds to the gruelling work of harnessing logical paradoxes to rewrite the laws of reality, they learn to wield the sorites paradox to produce an infinite heap of sand, for example, or the liar paradox to force someone to speak truth.

The magic system of *Katabasis* is rich with possibilities and grounded in deep research, setting the stage for swashbuckling battles against hellish opponents, but the main thrust of the story actually lies in a slow unfolding of the hell Alice has made of her own life. Blending the rhythmic flow of an academic paper with the raw emotions of a sinner’s confession, Kuang pulls us into Alice’s mind as she scrapes together increasingly questionable justifications for increasingly questionable decisions.



Just to make the trip, Alice accepts a Faustian bargain to give up half her remaining lifespan, just as she’s accepted countless other sacrifices throughout her career. This parallel between the afterlife and the academy is made explicit in Hell, which initially appears to Alice as a campus. I found this gimmicky at first blush, but Kuang’s world-building is as methodical as a mathematician’s proof. This Cambridge, we soon learn, fosters a culture of asceticism, and Alice routinely mistreats her body to hone her mind: missing meals, sleeping in labs, even using magick to skip bathroom breaks. Unhealthy politics are also commonplace: Alice quips about “inappropriate faculty-student relationship[s]” like it’s an inside joke, and glibly remarks “that the academy was sexist was such a boring truism” and that she can’t (or won’t) study at American schools because they’ve “fired all the Communists.” Enduring emotional, moral, and physical indignities for a shot at academic glory—that’s a trade-off every burnt-out grad student understands. Unlike the initial ignorance of *Babel*’s protagonist, however, Alice is clear-sighted about the toll academia demands; but intellectualizing the problem doesn’t actually fix the problem, and only enables Alice to normalize and tolerate further harm.

Katabasis is implicitly set against the rapid technological advancements of the Cold War era. Outside of that offhanded reference to the Red Scare–induced prejudice against Chinese-Americans like her, Alice rarely grapples with the struggles of being an ethnic minority in Western academies. Indeed, she rejects any identity or label outside of “magician”, and maybe that’s the point? While *Katabasis* digs into Alice’s disdain for second-wave feminism, the lack of focus on racism in academia, a major theme in *The Poppy War* (<https://bookshop.org/a/79715/9780062662583>) and *Babel*, seems like a missed opportunity to explore intersectionality.

An introspective novel that will resonate with academics and overthinkers, Katabasis resists simple moralizations about life and death.

Alice is also well-aware of her professor's trail of victims: the female advisees Grimes got handsy with, the undergraduates who died under his supervision. Still, Alice reasons that, since magick requires a mastering of logic, great magicians like Grimes must be logical. Even as he exploits her body as a subject of his dangerous experiments and sexual advances, Alice believes all this will pay off eventually, sunk-cost fallacy be damned. She's far from the mythical "perfect victim": Alice can be just as cruel and self-serving as Grimes, and insists—to Peter, to herself, to the reader—that she gave Grimes "her fully informed consent from the beginning." She has a tendency to back herself into corners with her "eyes wide shut," and I find myself alternately frustrated and fascinated by Alice's line of reasoning. By writing a protagonist who has no interest in being sympathetic, only reasonable, Kuang shows the limits of pure reason. Indeed, it's Alice's intellectual impulse to find method to Grimes's madness that blinds her to the obvious if dissatisfying conclusion: Grimes, like any person, is not a rational agent.

Like Grimes, Peter Murdoch, the novel's deuteragonist and a wealthy, legacy department darling, also personifies Alice's frustrations with the contradictions within academia. For much of the novel, Peter paradoxically appears to be two people at once: an intellectually stimulating lab partner Alice was once in love with, and a two-faced rival seemingly plotting her downfall. Yet, despite Alice's doubts about Peter, she relishes how they push each other to explore bolder, more outlandish, and seemingly impossible feats of paradox magick, to consider and create new possibilities even within the confines of Cambridge and Hell. While I found Peter comparatively underexplored, when he finally confides in Alice of his experiences with chronic illness and the unaccommodating academy, I was moved by the poignant parallel drawn between their bodily struggles. In striving to achieve "mind over matter," Alice and Peter's hatred for the external pressures exerted on their bodies distills into a hatred for the body itself, amplifying apathy for their own wellbeing to the point of self-harm—of suicidal ideation.

In Cambridge, Alice casually dreamed of dying. It's only in Hell, where she encounters deceased magicians free from bodily needs and in singular pursuit of intellectual aspirations, that Alice finally understands the maddening and mutilating consequences of existing solely for the mind. An introspective novel that will resonate with academics and overthinkers, *Katabasis* resists simple moralizations about life and death. It encourages us to accept the nonsensical natures of the human body, mind, and heart, not to explain them away: for only in the unexplainable is there room for possibility.

Fei Dong (<https://feidong.ca/>) is a Chinese-Canadian writer, editor, and book reviewer. A graduate of University of Waterloo and Centennial College, Fei is passionate about literary advocacy, and has worked for a number of art festivals, reading series, and non-profits to cultivate diverse and engaged reading communities. You can find more about their work, including other essays on SFF fiction, at feidong.ca (<http://feidong.ca>).

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