

Lexicon

Max Barry

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At an exclusive school somewhere outside of Arlington, Virginia, students aren't taught history, geography, or mathematics--at least not in the usual ways. Instead, they are taught to persuade. Here the art of coercion has been raised to a science. Students harness the hidden power of language to manipulate the mind and learn to break down individuals by psychographic markers in order to take control of their thoughts. The very best will graduate as "poets", adept wielders of language who belong to a nameless organization that is as influential as it is secretive.

Whip-smart orphan Emily Ruff is making a living running a three-card Monte game on the streets of San Francisco when she attracts the attention of the organization's recruiters. She is flown across the country for the school's strange and rigorous entrance exams, where, once admitted, she will be taught the fundamentals of persuasion by Bronte, Eliot, and Lowell--who have adopted the names of famous poets to conceal their true identities. For in the organization, nothing is more dangerous than revealing who you are: Poets must never expose their feelings lest they be manipulated. Emily becomes the school's most talented prodigy until she makes a catastrophic mistake: She falls in love.

Meanwhile, a seemingly innocent man named Wil Jamieson is brutally ambushed by two strange men in an airport bathroom. Although he has no recollection of anything they claim he's done, it turns out Wil is the key to a secret war between rival factions of poets and is quickly caught in their increasingly deadly crossfire. Pursued relentlessly by people with powers he can barely comprehend and protected by the very man who first attacked him, Wil discovers that everything he thought he knew about his past was fiction. In order to survive, must journey to the toxically decimated town of Broken Hill, Australia, to discover who he is and why an entire town was blown off the map.

As the two narratives converge, the shocking work of the poets is fully revealed, the body count rises, and the world crashes toward a Tower of Babel event which would leave all language meaningless. A brilliant thriller that connects very modern questions of privacy, identity, and the rising obsession of data collection to centuries-old ideas about the power of language and coercion, *Lexicon* is Max Barry's most ambitious and spellbinding novel yet.

Lexicon Details

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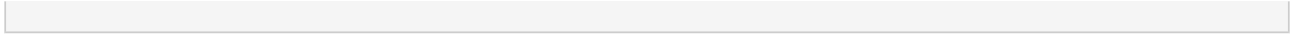
Author : Max Barry

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From Reader Review Lexicon for online ebook

Joel says

I feel somehow wrong giving a so-so review to a book that I enjoyed and read really quickly, but part of me wishes there was just a little more "oomph" to this book. Barry does a nice job with the structure, giving us pieces that fit together more and more clearly over time (though some of the twists are easy to guess, I was genuinely surprised more than once in the book) and flesh out the world of the Poets in some really nice ways.

But honestly, there should have been more. What's here feels like a less developed version of what Neal Stephenson does in *Snow Crash*, what with the "the secret history of words is that they control reality" thing. In the case of *Lexicon*, Barry gives us a universe in which the art of persuasion can be wielded like a weapon--and is, by shadowy government spooks known as Poets. When one of them discovers a word that literally has the power to kill everyone in a small Australian town, it's up to a Last Good Man archetypal figure (here known as Eliot, as all Poets are codenamed for famous writers) to figure out how to stop the word from spreading any further.

It's a neat set-up, and Barry gives us infuriatingly short glimpses of this shadowy rhetorical world in which the Poets operate, but he's so intent on giving us good action scenes (and they are good) that I felt like the richer linguistic world got overlooked. I want to know more about this organization and what they do, but apparently hints and intimations are all Barry wants to give us. That's ok, it's just not as rich as it could have been. And when he gets into the history of "Babel events" and all that kind of stuff, I would have loved a little more complexity. Make me struggle to keep up, don't just tell me, "Yep, words can be really convincing." Because duh.

But still, *Lexicon* is fun. A bibliophile palate cleanser that would make a good action movie of the Philip K. Dick variety--the kind where you have to just let yourself go with the rules of the world and not think about how silly the premise actually is. In fact, I could see a pretty good role for Michael Fassbender as Eliot.

But I digress.

Good fun, overall. Just don't expect much more.

Amy Warrick says

So anyone whose mother ever taught them 'sticks and stones may break my bones...' knows that words DO hurt and they influence people and the pen is mightier than the sword and yadda yadda so Mr. Barry is not exactly breaking new ground here...we are READERS, Mr. Barry, who are reading this book, so, you know, give us some credit. Words be some pow'ful shit.

Anyway, the premise of the book is interesting - persuasive young people are taught mysterious words to use on a variety of personality types to then control other peeps' minds. They're called poets and then given poet code names, like Bronte and Eliot and Yeats....no Dr. Suess or Shel Silverstein, though - only serious poets need apply.

You got your rogue poet, your surprise twist poet, your poet love interests, your poet that wants to rule the

world, and various shifting poet loyalties, with lots of action (after a completely incoherent beginning that nearly had me quitting before I even had a clue what was going on). The problem is, there never is an explanation for what poets are FOR, there isn't a single fully developed or likable character here, and the interesting premise just devolves into silliness - *vartix velkor mannik wissick! Do not move! Really?*

This was a good idea gone bad. Maybe a graphic novel format would suit it better. I don't know. *contrex helo siq rattrak! Go read something else!*

Kemper says

“Vartix velkor mannik wissick! Vote for this review and then email me your credit card numbers!”

If you followed my instructions, then this is the greatest book ever written. If you didn't, then it's a decent thriller with a clever sci-fi hook to it that doesn't deliver on its full potential.

Lexicon tells two parallel stories. In the first one, Wil is an Australian who is abducted at an airport by a mysterious man called Tom who tells him that he is being pursued by a powerful and dangerous group that has dedicated itself to using language to manipulate people. The best of their members are called 'poets' and take on names of famous scribblers like Yeats or Woolf. A poet can seize control of another person by reeling off a series of special code words that hack the brain and enable them to implant commands.

The other story takes place a few years prior to this and tells of how a teenage homeless girl named Emily becomes a student of a special school where the kids are trained in the art of persuasion to become poets. The stubborn and headstrong Emily constantly chafes against the strict rules of the school, and she eventually finds herself in hot water. As Wil and Tom try to stay a step ahead of the poets hounding them, Emily's story eventually begins to dovetail with theirs and all points converge at an Australian town that was the victim of some kind of industrial catastrophe.

There are some echoes here of Neal Stephenson's *Snow Crash* which also focuses on the idea of language as a kind of virus. When *Lexicon* is exploring the ideas of persuasion and a secret group manipulating society by using mass media, it's pretty interesting. When it reverts to the thriller portion of people on the run from a vast conspiracy, then it's a lot more formulaic and not nearly as much fun.

I had some other issues with the book, but I gotta venture into spoiler country to talk about them. (view spoiler)

Also posted at Kemper's Book Blog.

Susan Tunis says

Out of context

Several years ago, I heard author Chuck Palahniuk read a story so disturbing that a woman in the audience fainted. She wasn't the first. Palahniuk summed it up thus: "The power of words."

I couldn't help but think of the above as I delved into Max Barry's fifth novel, *Lexicon*. I've been a fan of his work since *Syrup*, so I'm old school. I tend to think of Barry as a satirist first and foremost, so I was surprised when *Lexicon* opened very much like a thriller. Readers are thrown straight into a frankly bizarre interrogation in an airport bathroom, leading to abduction and multiple homicides. The abductee is an everyman named Wil. He has no idea what's going on, or why this is happening to him. Eventually one of his kidnapers becomes his protector, but he's not great about answering questions:

"You don't need to understand. You need to sit there and not do anything stupid while I take care of you. That's what you need. Look, I get that it's been a confusing night. And now you're all, But how is that possible, and, Why did he do that. But I'm not going to answer those questions, Wil, because you don't have the framework to comprehend the answers. You're like a kid asking how I can see him even though he's closed his eyes. Just accept that this is happening."

Barry places readers in the same position as Wil. No framework. This book has an unusual plot—which is good. Barry's never guilty of writing the same old thing. But *Lexicon* is challenging. It's strange. The story is told in an extremely non-linear manner that really forces readers to pay close attention to the timeline. I'll be honest, there were several times I had to double back and check where and when I was in the tale.

Because this is not merely Wil's story. The other central character is Emily. We meet her as a teen runaway living on the streets of San Francisco. She's hustling tourists playing three-card Monte, but Emily may have other untapped gifts. Someone sees potential. She's flown first-class across the country to take entrance exams for an elite school outside of Washington, DC. There, students are taught the art and science of persuasion. This is an institution VERY interested in the power of words. In the hands of their top graduates, the "poets," they are, in fact, weapons. That's the basic set-up, but revelations are hard-won in this tale, and I'll leave the rest of the complex plot for you to uncover.

Max Barry is exploring some very interesting ideas, and taking them to extremes. In his hands, language is almost supernatural. But he clothes his magic in a patina of science, some of it real. (It's unsurprising that a writer would choose to delve into this subject matter, and he's not the first. Taking a very different approach, Ben Marcus also explored the power of words and language in his recent novel, *The Flame Alphabet*.) Barry's got a talent for world-building. The world that *Lexicon* is set in is like our own, but with this extra layer that you and I have heretofore been unaware of. Now all is revealed.

This novel doesn't have the overt humor that I tend to associate with Mr. Barry's work. It's funny, but in a dark and subtle way. Max Barry is just an inherently funny guy, so I think there will always be some humor in his work, but this novel is the furthest from his satirical roots. The entire premise is sort of absurdist, but there's also something provocative going on there. For instance, this passage where one secret operative is describing how they collect data on citizens in order to control them:

"You are... you need to get into this stuff, Eliot. It's the future. Everyone's making pages for themselves. Imagine a hundred million people clicking polls and typing in their favorite TV shows and products and political leanings, day after day. It's the biggest data profile ever. And it's voluntary. That's the funny part. People resist a census, but give them a profile page and they'll spend all day telling you who they are."

And with this knowledge, there is power. Lexicon is a thriller, but an unconventional one. It moves at a fast pace and contains major action sequences. But I'd also classify it as speculative fiction. Truthfully, it's awfully hard to pin down, genre-wise. I don't think Lexicon will be appreciated by every reader. It's smart and it's different. If you're a fan of Max Barry, or if you're intrigued by the premise, I encourage you to give it a try.

And I don't mind telling you, I have a new-found appreciation for both Mr. Palahniuk and Mr. Barry. They are very persuasive men. They're good with words.

Susan says

Holy cow Batman! This was a really terrific story. Just very different. I'm not a huge reader of science fiction or dystopian-type novels, but I love it when I come across a good one. "Lexicon" is definitely a good one.

I actually had to read my way almost 20%-25% into the book before I was totally hooked. I found the beginning a bit confusing, but I sensed it was going to pay off if I just kept reading and it totally did.

Great concepts about language, persuasion, how language can be used as weapon, how whole populations can be controlled with language all encased in this great "race to the finish" story. Five stars. One of the most original stories I've read this year.

Ashley Brooks says

Yes. Loved this.

Amanda says

3 1/2 stars.

Are you a cat or a dog person?

In the world of *Lexicon*, your answer reveals everything they need to know about you. Who are "they"? They are the poets, people who are hardwired to resist persuasion and to use language as a weapon against the rest of us. Studying linguistics, personality and psychology, poets have the ability to subvert free will and compel us do as they wish. The most powerful poets are given pseudonyms that appropriately demonstrate their mastery over language and, thus, over society: T. S. Eliot, Charlotte Bronte, W. B. Yeats, Sylvia Plath, Virginia Woolf.

Lexicon tells the story of Emily Ruff, a homeless teenage grifter who shows promise as a poet, and Wil Parke, a man who unknowingly survived an apocalyptic event in Broken Hill, Australia. As Emily is recruited by the poets and sent to an exclusive school to cultivate her gifts, Wil is on the run from would be assassins for reasons unknown. As their stories intertwine, Barry explores the power of words and the sway they hold over us.

Lexicon is a clever exploration of modern society. In our media saturated culture, we are surrounded by

words from a variety of sources, most of whom have a vested interest in persuading us to adopt their viewpoint or engage in action that is beneficial to them. What are politicians, corporations, pundits, and advertising executives if not "poets"? And, more often than not, they succeed in manipulating and coercing the American public. There is so much spin that it's often hard to tell where the truth ends and the fiction begins--even more chilling is that many people don't even care, content to let the bias of others "think" for them.

While I enjoyed the premise of *Lexicon* and was certainly drawn in by Barry's fast-pace, the sense that it could have been *more* nagged at me. Its premise is one that could lend itself to a more complex, nuanced examination of the ability of speech to influence, but Barry keeps it at surface level. While Barry's intent seems to have been to write a fun, intelligent thriller, I would have readily signed on for something more substantial. For example, the purpose of the poets and the intricacies of their organization is never revealed, and the specifics of how their influence works is given only a basic "nuts and bolts" explanation.

However, I was still set to give this a 4 star rating just for its inventiveness and the fun I had along the way, until the unsatisfying end. No spoilers here--I'll only say that, for all the originality of the premise, the ending was underwhelming and predictable.

Cross posted at This Insignificant Cinder and at Shelf Inflicted

Jim Loter says

Were I 20 years younger I would have read this and then immediately rushed to grab books on Peirce's semiotics, Searle's speech-act theory, and Wittgenstein's philosophy of language to produce a conference paper titled something like "Locution, Linguistics, and Lexicon: Words and Gender Power Dynamics in Max Barry's Fiction." But I'm not a graduate student anymore so I can read books for pleasure now!

And, boy, did I enjoy this book. It's as if Barry is one of the "poets" from the novel and he has learned the exact combination of words and narrative elements to cause all of my critical defenses to fall.

The central premise is that words are not simply signs for communication; they are containers of meaning that have a neurological effect on people's brains. Gifted and specially-trained individuals - "poets" - learn to size people up psychologically and then utter the specific "words" that cause an individual to drop all defenses and become utterly persuadable. Great power can be derived from this ability, and power corrupts....

The story unfolds in a dual-narrative fashion - one thread follows Wil and Tom as they are chased by an unknown organization bent on destroying Wil (free will?) because of his peculiar immunity to the poets' powers. The second follows a 16-year-old runaway girl named Emily who is recruited and sent to a special school to train to become a poet (shades of "Harry Potter" and Lev Grossman's *The Magicians*). Of course, the two threads intertwine and collide, and this is handled in a very clever and satisfying way.

My only complaints are minor. I would have liked to have learned more about the character of Yeats, especially his belief in god and love of shoes (which may be related in some way I'm unclear on). The dialogue between Wil and Tom ran on a little at times and got somewhat annoying. Finally, I think the ending "cheated" a bit, though nothing too egregious.

Overall, I was quite taken by this book, but that may have something to do with my predilection for the underlying premise and themes of linguistic power. Nevertheless, I highly recommend it - especially for the

highly verbal among us.

Ben says

(I listened to this on audiobook. While it helped distinguish who was speaking in each chapter, the female reader's Australian accent was absolutely terrible. This may have biased me a bit when it came to this review).

The first half of this book was incredibly well organized and developed. I'm usually put off by books dealing with "secret societies", but this one drew me in more and more. As a former English teacher who taught argument and rhetoric, the concept of language, argument, and rhetoric being so powerful as to break past a person's perception filter (Dr. Who reference) and cause a person to act unconsciously really spoke to me (no pun intended).

The story begins to break down when "Woolfe" finds the bare word. The frantic and random nature of her freaking out and (eventually) attacking the box and how she broke out made me rather confused, and question why the author shifted her nature so suddenly. I get that Yates had effectively and subconsciously manipulated her to act in such a way, but the part felt out of the ordinary. I presumed that the following chapters would make sense out of this, but they just got more confusing. A piece of paper attached to the "bare word" causes everyone who looked at it to kill? (I did enjoy the ironic nature that the word and order to kill were located in an emergency room). It seemed like a "way-too-convenient" and weak plot device.

This next point, while brief, deserves its own paragraph. What I thought was a book about the "power of words", by the end, had become another victim of the cringeworthy thematic abomination that is "the power of love conquers all". The fact that Woolfe and Harry's "love" was more powerful than the bare word and the other command words makes this book akin to one of the orphaned paperback romances that corrupt an aisle at grocery stores everywhere. Of all the clichéd thematic abortions to surprisingly show up, it HAD to be the most stercoreaceous one of all.

Lindsey Rey says

This was my jam! Recommended for fans of The Magicians, Vicious, and The Night Circus.

Manuel Antão says

If you're into stuff like this, you can read the full review.

My first Max Barry. Maybe my last...

Suspension of Disbelief necessary to read the book.

The characters are overall pretty weak. The rest of the novel is not solid enough to compensate for this shortcoming. The particular of the central plot device is also way, way over the top.

This is one of those books where the sum does not equal some of the good of its parts. The idea is brilliant, the writing is somewhat solid, but the execution is quite flawed, and left me wanting.

Angela says

More like 1.5 stars?

As a lover of language - how we use it to not only communicate but change the world around us - this book was immediately interesting to me. Words are important, a sentiment uttered more than once in this book and implied throughout. To put it bluntly, words mean things, and should be chosen with care and respect.

I'm not even quite sure what I was expecting of this book anymore, but it does start out running - and you better be prepared to chase after to keep up. You're thrust right into the action, on a bathroom floor as Wil gets a needle shoved into his eye and questions hammered at him. Then there's shooting and running and all sorts of other things being thrown at you. I will say that the book hardly had a slow moment. There was a 10% section somewhere near the middle that didn't seem to be bursting with fights, but that was it. Otherwise it was non-stop. Unfortunately, this didn't exactly appeal to me. I enjoy some good action, but it's characters that I care about most and here the characters never came alive for me.

Honestly, I find I have trouble even describing them. Instead of the actions of the world shaping them, and their choices, I felt like they were players on a stage with pre-determined events. They moved from one event to the next. It was the events that were important here, not the characters.

The language aspect, which I was really looking forward to, was mostly glossed over, or used as a platform to talk about social media, media bias, and speak about society today in general. I enjoyed these thoughts objectively - I've thought them before; that I make too much of myself available on social media and the internet, enabling companies to compile data about me to better sell to me, or convince me of whatever they want. With targeted advertisements flooding websites, it's not hard to believe some of the things the Poets do or plan. I liked this in the same way I like a good debate though, in person. It's interesting and fascinating - but written down it just becomes a bit dry. And these moments - either clippings from news sources about events in the book, or messages on internet discussion boards, or comments/discussion from readers served only to slow the book down and bog down the action. Interesting, but ultimately it felt redundant, and I felt that time could have been better used elsewhere.

More time spent on explaining what the hell is going on would have been appreciated. The book jumps from character POV to character POV, with barely a word that it's happening. It jumps from timeline to timeline to timeline, we're working with about 4 different and distinct timelines here, and it sometimes took me pages to figure out which timeline I was in. I spent the first 30% of the book with no clue as to any of the basic structure of the world, the motives of any of the characters, or the reason things were happening. When I finally did begin to get an idea, I felt like the book was doling out information like it was a precious commodity. Perhaps that's fitting in a book about the importance of words, but I didn't like feeling like a mark that was being 'compromised' - in case you're wondering, they compromise you and make you do whatever they want.

I think it kind of succeeded though because I did end up finishing the book, despite my wanting to DNF it

several times. I almost did the last time at 80% of the way in, when I could barely make myself care how it all turned out. I did though, and I can't really determine if I'm glad or not. After the hell the characters were put through in the book it all tied up a bit too neatly for me.

Perhaps this is a case of this book just not being for me. It's possible that what I was hoping for and what I got were simply on widely separate ends of the spectrum. I can't pretend that I enjoyed this book though. I vacillated between confusion, boredom and irritation too much throughout.

🌹Rose?? says

Words hold power. Words can harm. Welcome to the world of word wizards. I have just discovered a new favorite author and plan on reading all things Max Barry.

Many genres blended into one ultimate mind bending, super smart and fun, exciting thriller. I love psychology, and how this explains what real wizards are. Just highly enlightened persons who can read all your weaknesses through just a few questions, body language etc and takes it to a whole new level to learn how certain words will persuade and control an individual based on this knowledge. Of course this is more complex than that. What happens when power gets into the wrong hands?

This is a twisty little treat that I highly encourage thriller fans to pick up. I hope I can persuade you to read this based on my words. :)

XX Sarah XX (former Nefarious Breeder of Murderous Crustaceans) says

? **August 10, 2018:** only \$1.99 today! ?

P.S. I read this book two years ago and still haven't written an actual review for it! But I said I'd write it by 2068, which gives me 50 more years to think about it! **Yay and stuff!**

YES YES YES YES YES.

Simple as that.

Max Barry. You either get him, or you don't. So to those **poor souls** who happen to think his books are **total crap** *waves enthusiastically at Dan*, I say: I am so sorry. Please try not to feel too bad about this **sad state of affairs**. It is, after all, not your fault if you were born with **Despicable Book Taste** (DBT™) (view spoiler).

?? **Full Words and Coolness and Violence Oh My Crappy Non Review** (WaCaVOMCNR™) to come.

Eventually. Say in 2068 or something. This one is going to be a pain to write. Because this book is just **too bloody brilliant and stuff**.

Mike says

So what is a word? Sort of a funny question on its face. Words are one of those basic facts of life we don't really notice apart from the brief span of time we are learning to read. Words just exist as a sort of background noise of our lives, part of the scenery.

But words are so much more powerful than that. When you read a word there is a discernible change in your neural chemistry as your brain reads and processes it. The very same brain that controls movement, identity, motivations, passions. What if there existed words that did more than just change a little bit of brain chemistry, but actually hacked the brain, allowing it to be manipulated like a computer? (If this is reminding you of Snow Crash, you aren't alone)

Max Barry takes this idea and runs with it, creating a secret international society that has discovered words that can influence and control. Not just that, but they have such a thorough understanding of human psychology they can segment all of humanity into groups and use specifically tailored words and suggestions to influence them. Sort of scary, right? With a few words a person can be made to commit suicide, to passionately protect a hated enemy, to forget their identity and assume a new one. Really scary stuff.

Lexicon presents itself both as a thriller, with two of the characters forced together and on the run from members of this shadowy organization, and some nice world building through flashbacks of another character. Barry nicely balances character development, world building, and pacing with a smattering of in world media pieces that I always enjoy in books.

His extrapolation of the words as hacking tools and the organization that uses them was my favorite part of the book. Instead of just sitting on their laurels, they actively seek out new and better ways to understand human psychology and new words to unlock the human mind. Heck, I would read a whole book just about the school they send promising potential "poets" to. Barry's imagination and subtle understanding of the power of language and human thought was quite engaging and enjoyable to read.

My only complaint (and reason the book lost a star) was that the book ended too abruptly. It went from 99 mph (that's miles per hour for you folks who live under the tyranny of the metric system) thrill ride to a full stop at the end. I would have liked a bit more time for the narrative to breathe and some more relationship developments between characters. There was so much more of the world that could be explored (such as the non-english speaking members of the organization) and I would have loved to have seen more of the Eliot-Wil bromance when people weren't trying to kill them every 5 minutes.

All in all I highly recommend this book. It has a fun take on linguistics and some top notch, nuanced characters to get invested in. It is a very fast read that leaves me wanting so much more.

Barbara says

Emily Ruff, a 16-year-old con artist, is happily working her card tricks on the streets of San Francisco when she meets 'T.S. Elliot.' The 'poet' soon carts her off to a special school in Virginia where she'll learn to use

words to "persuade" (i.e. control) people. All graduates of the school take the names of well-known poets before they're let loose to fulfill the school's agenda - which seems to be to control the world.

Unfortunately for Emily she breaks some rules before graduation and is banished to Broken Hill, Australia. There Emily falls in love - a big no no for poets - and comes across one of the most dangerous words in the world, a 'bareword.' Using the bareword Emily causes the death of every single person in Broken Hill except for herself and one other survivor, a blue collar worker named Wil Parke.

Wil soon becomes the target of an evil cadre of poets who are determined to dig through his brain to discover how he lived through the carnage. Emily is a wily, clever girl who can lie/steal/cheat her way out of almost any situation and her journey through the book is fascinating. Unfortunately Emily is hard to root for since no sane person would really like to become acquainted with this conscienceless con artist in real life.

In fact this is a problem with almost all the characters in the story, who seem too self-interested and ruthless to be likable people. Wil is an exception as he appears to be a helpless victim of circumstance caught in a situation he doesn't comprehend.

The book kept my interest and I was intrigued with the explanations/demonstrations of how people are controlled with words. All in all a pretty good book. I'd recommend it, especially to science fiction fans.

You can follow my reviews at <http://reviewsbybarbsaffer.blogspot.com/>

Olive (abookolive) says

Good lord was that a wild ride.

Darth J says

The best way I could describe it would be *The Magicians* meets *The Circle*. I was fascinated by the whole concept of understanding how language can affect people and the neurolinguistic elements had me wanting to re-up my lapsed *Psychology Today* subscription. The twists were about 80% predictable in the story though as you realize that certain characters are actually other ones well before the reveal happens. All the time spent in Australia had me feeling parched, and I don't know if that's a good thing or a bad one. Overall, I liked it.

Regan says

3.5? 4?

i really really enjoyed the first 2/3 of this book. However, I sorta got lost at the end of the story....

Stephanie Swint says

Max Barry combined Poets and secret agents in 'Lexicon.' Words can persuade us, lead us in the direction people want us to go. All a Poet has to do is ask you a series of five questions. The answers will let them know what words and sounds will bend you to their will. Ancient stories about the Tower of Babel hold more truth than we give them credit for. Wil Jamieson is at the center of a search for a word, the Bare Word. He doesn't know it but when Elliot finds him in a bathroom, sticks a needle in his eye, and starts asking the five questions he realizes his life is changed. From here people get killed, Wil is kidnapped by Elliot, and he starts to learn about a life he doesn't remember he had in Broken Hill, Australia. He is 'The Outlier,' it doesn't mean anything to him, but it means a lot to these people.

Words are fascinating. There is a power of persuasion in them, maybe not quite as strong as Barry makes it out to be, but if you study marketing and psychology there is credence to being able to make people susceptible to persuasion. It can be as simple as the color of the plate you serve food on, the temperature set in a casino to keep you awake and alert, the lack of windows in a casino to discourage the notice of passing time. These examples are not related to word choice but do relate to the science of suggestion. Barry takes this real concept and increases the risk and reward potentials with 'Lexicon'

Emily Ruff is a teenage junkie living on the streets in California. Her game is Three Card Monte and she is very successful, well successful enough that she can eat and get a fix. One day a gentlemen in a cheap suit comes to play. He's a mark, she knows if she doesn't let him win he'll continue to play, and she'll have a good night. Just as he is ready to pick she chooses to let him win at the last moment. She can't figure out why, but she's lost him. You let a guy like that win and they have no interest in playing. This leads Emily down a path to be recruited for a very special school, one with no name, that teaches her to utilize her natural skill at persuasion.

The school is different from any you have ever seen. It is very strict. Boxers fists are considered lethal weapons because of the damage they can do. Just imagine if your words had the same power.

Barry's thriller is good. I love the concept. The anachronic story is told from multiple perspectives at different time frames. The pace becomes frenetic towards the end – especially since you have key pieces of information the characters don't.

Caring about people, things, or ideas is a danger to Poets. The more someone knows about you the better they can control you. After all, it only takes five questions to categorize the average person. Poets guard against affiliations, love, want, and need eternally protecting themselves from compromise. So, what happens if you break the rules? This aspect of the story I found compelling, but it also opened the door to handling relationships/lack of relationships and sex in a very base way. If I believed Barry meant for it to come off crass I think I might respect the way he handled it better even if I did not like it. In this book, women seem to be categorized as an "Eve," women who tempt men into compromising situations because of their own wanton desire. Both Bronte and Wolf exhibit these behaviors and they are the only women in the book with real character development. It wasn't flattering, and interesting that men were seen to be more controlled/moral. From this aspect alone, I would have thought 'Lexicon' was written at an earlier time. It's an outdated notion. It's not a huge part of the book but is important to the story

I listened to Heather Corrigan and Zach Appleman's narration. They did a good job. Appleman, specifically, did a fantastic job with Wil's Australian accent and the character's personality change.

The book is interesting and for the most part enjoyable. I think many people will like it despite the concern I mentioned above. There are a lot of concepts that make it worth reading
