

Synopsis

In a long-ago empire of unspecified time and place, Robard, the imperial Master Builder, pursues a lifelong dream. A natural egalitarian who rose up from humble roots, Robard wants to provide all citizens rich and poor with running water and indoor plumbing as good as the system he and his fellow elites now enjoy.

Over the decades of Robard's brilliant career, his dream is stymied again and again by other professional obligations, by courtly machinations, and by wars and instability fostered through three generations of a fractious, incestuous, glory-mad ruling family. The closest Robard gets is during the reign of Annika the Leopard, once a ruthless warrior who's now striving to be benevolent monarch, with a maternal, proto-feminist (yet still authoritarian) worldview. Her father, Ajay the Patriarch, had merely humored Robard's ideas over the course of his reign. Annika gives him an actual budget.

Just as the project's first phase is underway, however, serious trouble begins in the hinterlands and some of Robard's building funds get redirected to the military. Boran the Insurgent and his band of reactionary, chaotic, drug- and alcohol-addled guerrilla fighters—who want to return the land to a strict separation of the sexes—are terrorizing the countryside while also winning the hearts and minds of traditionalists.

Boran believes himself to be the Patriarch's son via a now dead courtesan. In truth, Ajay, disappointed by his spoiled playboy sons and desiring to maintain a “pure” imperial bloodline, had raped his daughter Annika from ages 12 to 15. Boran was the result. Ajay had taken the newborn Boran away from Annika and raised him in isolation as his presumptive heir.

At 16 Annika had escaped and eloped with Yasgur, a defecting soldier who eventually helped her make war on her own father and succeed to the throne. (Yasgur was killed just as the battle was being won.) She searched for her then school-age son, but he had been whisked off into hiding by her dissolute half-brothers and their loyal entourage.

Now an adult, Boran believes Annika is his aunt and an illegitimate usurper who must be overthrown. He and his followers despise the progressive changes the Empress has foisted on them—particularly the emptying of all harems across the empire (which has unintentionally led to a marked increase in prostitution) and the compulsory education of girls. Boran grows especially enraged when Annika, who had spurned all male suitors after Yasgur's death, publicly takes up with her former lady-in-waiting as Official Consort.

(Ironically, Ajay the Patriarch was not the strict theocrat that Boran believes him to be. As a matter of elite privilege, Ajay had fostered carefree libertinism and discreet secularism among his courtiers and the upper classes—while publicly declaring a respect for all the empire’s various religions. In truth Ajay was not the kind to believe in any god beyond himself.)

Boran will not learn the truth of his origins until it's too late. By the bloody final act of the story, the benevolent reign of Annika the Leopard is doomed. Robard's unfinished dream is in tatters, as is his dream of a liberated future for his gifted, ambitious teen daughter. His life and family in jeopardy, he flees to his grandmother's remote country house just as the Insurgent and his guerrillas firmly take power in the imperial city, promising a return to timeless values.

[Rough Outline](#)

Act One: The Builder. Robard approaches the Empress Annika with his decades-old drawings for a complete waterworks system that will first serve the imperial city and later be replicated in smaller towns and out into the countryside. In flashbacks we learn of the way Empress Annika’s father, Ajay the Patriarch, strung Robard along for many years, promising many times to consider the Builder’s plan as soon as he completed another official imperial project. (We only see Ajay through Robard’s flashbacks.) Now, having completed a number of similar works for Annika—including, at her request, the empire’s very first school for girls, whose initiating class will include Robard’s talented daughter—the Builder gets the go-ahead and budgetary authority for the first phase. But an increasingly powerful insurgency in the countryside threatens the progress of construction.

Act Two: The Leopard. Annika has been having a passionate affair with her former lady-in-waiting, Astrid, and now wants to make Clara the Official Consort—a decision that will have significant repercussions among many of the empire’s more traditional citizens, and will even anger one of Annika’s former male suitors so much that he’ll find ways to betray her. Other proto-feminist and “progressive” decisions made by the Empress will also create dire unintended consequences. Along with the present-day action, this act contains Annika’s memories, from becoming the object of her father’s incestuous desires, through her elopement with Yagur and their successful battle to topple Ajay. (Again the Patriarch is seen solely through Annika’s eyes in flashbacks.)

Act Three: The Insurgent. Present action through Boran's eyes, as well as his memories from his fond memories of early childhood under Ajay's care to his turbulent life hiding in the hinterlands after the Leopard's war. He is accompanied "underground" with his uncles, secretly his two half-brothers. (Ajay had once deemed these men too lazy, drunken, and venal to succeed to the throne, but in Boran they see their ticket back into power.) Over the years, these two men have rewritten recent history to make Annika seem like an outsider/usurper, have encouraged Boran to believe he's the true heir, and have helped form him as the leader of a growing insurgency.

This act will contain portions of Ajay's written memoirs (book-within-a-book style), which serve two narrative purposes: they bolster Boran's urgent desire to take back the throne, and they give a glimpse into Ajay's elaborate, effusive, and ultimately narcissistic ideas about men, women, bloodline purity, and genetic destiny. These latter are the ideas Ajay used to justify impregnating his own daughter.

Boran and his followers are anxious for a return to strict separation of the sexes and keeping women out of public roles. (Perversely, these same ideas about female sanctity and bloodline purity get twisted by Boran's drug-addled guerrillas to justify kidnapping and rape as war tactics.) The present-action of this final act begins around the time of Annika and Clara's public coming-out, and ends with Boran's violent retaking of the imperial city in the name of Ajay. Just as he is about to execute Annika and Clara, he hears—but refuses to believe—the truth of his origins.

[Developing the narrative voice](#)

I have been jokingly calling this book idea a cross between GAME OF THRONES and ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF SOLITUDE, without magic, zombies, or dragons. What will keep this literary fable from seeming too much like a Hollywood-style epic is its narrative voice. The right ironic tone will elevate the story above cliché. The narrator I'm imagining is most definitely a She—wry, clever, understated, with a dark sense of humor. She is historically omniscient and unbounded by human time (hence some occasional anachronisms that slip into her telling). She is both amused and aggravated by human foibles and hypocrisies—yet not nihilistic. Somehow she is still in love with people and their predictably self-destructive patterns.

My most relevant models or inspirations for this type of voice include the works of Gabriel Garcia Marquez as mentioned, but also Cynthia Ozick's The Puttermesser Papers, Jeanette Winterson's early historical fables Sexing the Cherry and The Passion,

Italo Calvino's Invisible Cities (the world-historical spirit if not the poetic abstraction), and Karl Ove Knausgaard's A Time for Everything.

[Another important literary role model](#)

A.S. Byatt's entire oeuvre has been a lifelong inspiration to me, especially The Children's Book, Possession, Babel Tower, and Angels & Insects. She is masterful at dramatizing the dialectics of freedom versus repression, both on a large scale and within family units. Her characters can be brilliant and accomplished yet profoundly self-blind. Byatt has delved often into the terror and the philosophical implications of incest, especially when it's connected to the concept of bloodline "purity." She has examined gender roles and expectations, artistic obsession, science v. religion, orthodoxy v. spontaneity, and so forth. Above all, she has a highly developed sense of irony without becoming satirical or misanthropic. If I had to choose a single literary role model in terms of the scope of her intellectual interests, it would be Byatt.

[Characters: Protagonists](#)

ROBARD THE BUILDER. Compact, fit, not very tall, bald at an early age, pleasant face, round glasses. Not charismatic but quietly confident. Hard worker, beset from a young age by visions/dreams. Naturally sympathetic to common people because of his own humble roots. A democratic soul by temperament. Worldly, traveled, open-minded. I see him as something of a Gaudi figure—visionary artist but also genius engineer—yet less ecstatic, more grounded in reality. Somewhat detached from politics, not corruptible, has succeeded in a complex world solely on his integrity, but that is always being challenged from the outside. Despite his upwardly mobile position within Ajay's court, he knows very little about the imperial family's (often evil) internal workings. He is a bit of an "innocent abroad." Later, against the Empress Annika's deep pessimism and tendency toward misandry, Robard is the cautious, perennial optimist and humanist.

ANNIKA THE LEOPARD. Empress during the entire present-action of the novel. (Her backstory supplied in flashbacks and implied via Ajay the Patriarch's book-within-the-book.) Tall, broad-shouldered, muscular, intimidating like an Amazon or Valkyrie, with strikingly large green eyes. Beautiful in a severe manner that intrigues but also intimidates most men. A ruthless warrior yet possessed of a certain genuine maternal gentleness. There is a tough shell around her from having been violated by her father when she was still very young. Does not see herself as a victim, though. Her lifelong rage against the Patriarch is focused on his theft of her baby boy. When feeling confident in her power, she displays her kindness and compassion, especially for the plight of girls.

But she is no egalitarian, and retains a bit of her father's imperial narcissism. She puts her progressive ideas into laws by fiat and compulsory programs for all citizens. This creates enforcement problems and backlash. As Annika ages, and her power becomes threatened, she begins to reconsider whether the protection of girls is more important than their education and liberation.

BORAN THE INSURGENT. Mournful, bewildered, and enraged in his childhood after his beloved "father" Ajay was killed, he grows into a flinty, self-righteous, increasingly theocratic figure who shields himself from the violence within his own ranks by counting on his two "uncles" (half-brothers) to report only the sunny version of events. A small and rather sickly individual who develops a mysterious, charismatic, mesmerizing public presence. He takes no alcohol or opium, unlike his uncles/*consiglieri*, who manage to form a band of violent hooligans into a guerrilla army—almost a cult—deeply loyal to Boran.

AJAY THE PATRIARCH. Seen only in third-person by the three other protagonists, and in first-person via his imperial memoirs, Ajay is a paradox—a fiercely successful empire-builder who allows his various subjects to practice their own tribal religions but expects a cult-like worship of his own powerful personage. A charming operator who gets exactly what he wants. Almost nobody truly hates him, except for Annika. When she topples him, many of his subjects remain loyal to the old regime.

[Characters: Secondary](#)

LAKSHMI, Robard's daughter. A tough, smart little girl whose father wants her to be able to flourish and pursue her ambitions. She spends much of her time in Robard's shop among his associates and apprentices—all men who treat her with respect and encouragement, although as she approaches her teen years, some of them start to think she needs to be reined in by traditional gender separation.

GERRAD, Annika's factotum/imperial whip. Meant to be the Leopard's eyes and ears on the ground, and the executive governor among all the leaders of the various towns and regions. Was deeply loyal to Yasgur and Annika during the war but has been romantically spurned by the Empress since then. His desire and jealousy will have broad consequences.

ASTRID, Robard's wife and something of his antagonist, as she is far more traditional than he, and chafes at the Empress's compulsory progressive changes. She wants, first

and foremost, to see her daughter remain docile rather than ambitious, in order to attract the right kind of husband.

CLARA, Annika's lady-in-waiting who becomes her wife (official consort). A foreigner captured during Ajay's imperial conquests, who at first does not share any common language with the Empress. Annika at first requests sexual services from her as a matter of imperial privilege. Unexpectedly she falls in love with Clara, and seeks to make her a true partner, although that is far from an easy transition for either woman.

YASGUR, a former captain in Ajay's army who defects to rescue Annika from her bondage inside Ajay's harem. Patriotic, moral but not moralistic, weary of political lies and subterfuge. A fundamentally good man, a bit beaten down by the world as he finds it. He marries a still-young Annika in secret yet refuses to touch her sexually until she comes of age. Years later helps her make war successfully upon Ajay, but does not survive the battle. Gerrard, who eventually betrays Annika, was his best friend from childhood.

LOTHAR and JIRO, Annika's two half-brothers, posing now as Boran's uncles. Spoiled, lazy, arrogant, and treacherous. Basically a couple of rich bros pissed off at their loss of privilege.

[Research & Reading](#)

This list of sources seems insanely long and dense, but since I am reading for narrative inspiration rather than factual retention, I should be able to ingest/skim/cherrypick much of this material in 6 focused months, 2-4 hours of work daily.

Global economic history

Fernand Braudel's 3 volume Civilization and Capitalism 15th-18th Century, Barbara Tuchman A Distant Mirror: The Calamitous 14th Century, and similar titles. The feel of everyday life for the characters will be primarily premodern, albeit undefined. Also, to help situate myself in reality while building this make-believe world, I'll use high-school level world history texts for quick reference.

Power, tyranny, imperial history (fiction & nonfiction)

- The Internal Library: On Dictators, the Books They Wrote, and Other Catastrophes of Literacy by Daniel Kalder. I'm about halfway through already. This will serve as

inspiration for Ajay the Patriarch's memoir, sections of which will show up among chapters.

- Stefan Zweig The World of Yesterday. I'm almost done re-reading it. One of the most poignant personal accounts of a cultured, bourgeois, pluralistic society sliding back into nationalist barbarism.
- Foucault on power—re-reading quickly for the first time since my 20s, to remind myself of his fundamental concepts
- Robert Graves I, Claudius
- Murasaki Shikibu Tale of the Genji
- Mughal history and Taj Mahal
- The famed multigenerational Jahan family who ruled Mughal India was one of my original inspirations for this book, although I do not intend to refer to them directly or even indirectly. Two recently published books about the Jahan family are critical reading: Shah Jahan by Fergus Nicolls, and Empress: The Astonishing Reign of Nur Jahan by Ruby Lal.
- Plato, Herodotus, Gibbon....glancing back at some of these classics for wisdom about war and empires

Other research areas via websites, magazine articles, and shorter books or book sections:

World tyrants from pre-modern through 20th century and beyond. There are striking patterns of thought, behavior, and speech that all authoritarian leaders seem to share, even down to their preferences in architecture and interior design. (E.g., a recent Politico article called Trump's Dictator Style, noting the similarities between his home and hotel decor and those of tyrants like Saddam Hussein or Nicolae Ceausescu).

Women's lives inside harems and/or within the confines of royal courts. (The Pillow Book may be among my readings.)

Father-daughter incest as a form of empirical narcissism run amok. (There is current psychological research on this topic, found at the PubMed website.) The general idea of keeping bloodlines "pure"--a concept that will be slyly advocated in Ajay the Patriarch's memoirs. The later life experiences of female survivors of incest.

Architectural history and the history/workings of early plumbing systems--to help understand and situation my main protagonist, Robard the Builder.

Rape/kidnapping of girls as war tactic. This is what Boran the Insurgent and his drug-addicted armies use to start terrorizing the countryside--casually at first, and then in a deliberate, goal-oriented manner. US soldiers at My Lai, the Boko Haram, and various factions in the Yugoslavian civil war are just a few recent examples of this time-honored atrocity.