



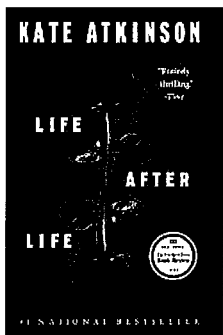
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Life After Life (Atkinson)

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**Life After Life (Todd Family, 1)**

Kate Atkinson, 2013

Little, Brown &amp; Co.

529 pp.

ISBN-13: 9780316176491

## Summary

On a cold and snowy night in 1910, Ursula Todd is born, the third child of a wealthy English banker and his wife. Sadly, she dies before she can draw her first breath.

On that same cold and snowy night, Ursula Todd is born, lets out a lusty wail, and embarks upon a life that will be, to say the least, unusual. For as she grows, she also dies, repeatedly, in any number of ways. Clearly history (and Kate Atkinson) have plans for her: In Ursula rests nothing less than the fate of civilization.

Wildly inventive, darkly comic, startlingly poignant—this is Kate Atkinson at her absolute best, playing with time and history, telling a story that is breathtaking for both its audacity and its endless satisfactions . (*From the publisher.*)

A God in Ruins, the companion book to *Life After Life*, was published in 2015.

## Author Bio

- Birth—1951
- Where—York, England, UK
- Education—M.A., Dundee University
- Awards—Whitbread Award; Woman's Own Short Story Award; Ian St. James Award;
- Saltire Book of the Year Award; Prix Westminster
- Currently—lives in Edinburgh, Scotland, UK

Kate Atkinson was born in York, and studied English Literature at the University of Dundee, gaining her Masters Degree in 1974. She subsequently studied for a doctorate in American Literature which she failed at the *viva* stage. During her final year of this course, she was married for the first time, although the marriage lasted only two years.

After leaving the university, she took on a variety of miscellaneous jobs from home help to legal secretary and teacher. She lived in Whitby, Yorkshire for a time, before moving to Edinburgh, where she taught at Dundee University and began writing short stories. She now lives in Edinburgh.

### Writing

She initially wrote for women's magazines after winning the 1986 Woman's Own Short Story Competition. She was runner-up for the Bridport Short Story Prize in 1990 and won an Ian St James Award in 1993 for her short-story "Karmic Mothers," which she later adapted for BBC2 television as part of its Tartan Shorts series.

Atkinson's breakthrough was with her first novel, *Behind the Scenes at the Museum*, which won the 1995 Whitbread Book of the Year award, ahead of Salman Rushdie's *The Moor's Last Sigh* and Roy Jenkins biography of William Ewart Gladstone. The book has been adapted for radio, theatre and television. She has since written several more novels, short stories and a play. *Case Histories* (2004) was described by Stephen King as "the best mystery of the decade." The book won the Saltire Book of the Year Award and the Prix Westminster.

Her work is often celebrated for its wit, wisdom and subtle characterisation, and the surprising twists and plot turns. Four of her novels have featured the popular former detective Jackson Brodie—*Case Histories* (2004), *One Good Turn* (2006), *When Will There Be Good News* (2008), and *Started Early, Took My Dog* (2010). She has shown that, stylistically, she is also a comic novelist who often juxtaposes mundane everyday life with fantastic magical events, a technique that contributes to her work's pervasive magic realism.

*Life After Life* (2013) revolves around Ursula Todd's continual birth and rebirth. Janet Maslin of the *New York Times* called it "a big book that defies logic, chronology and even history in ways that underscore its author's fully untethered imagination."

*A God in Ruins* (2015), the companion book to *Life After Life*, follows Ursula's brother Todd who survived the war, only to succumb to disillusionment and guilt at having survived.

Atkinson was appointed Member of the Order of the British Empire (MBE) in the 2011 Birthday Honours for services to literature. (*Adapted from Wikipedia.*)

## Book Reviews

[Atkinson's] very best...a big book that defies logic, chronology and even history in ways that underscore its author's fully untethered imagination...[it] is full of mind games, but they are purposeful rather than emptily playful...Even without the sleight of hand, *Life After Life* would be an exceptionally captivating book with an engaging cast of characters.

**Janet Maslin - New York Times**

Atkinson's new novel (after *Started Early, Took My Dog*) opens twice: first in Germany in 1930 with an English woman taking a shot at Hitler, then in England in 1910 when a baby arrives, stillborn. And then it opens again: still in 1910, still in England, but this time the baby lives. That baby is Ursula Todd, and as she grows up, she dies and lives repeatedly. .... [H]alf the book is given over to Ursula's activities during WWII, and....through Ursula's many lives and the accretion of what T.S. Eliot called "visions and revisions," she's found an inventive way to make both the war's toll and the pull of alternate history, of darkness avoided or diminished, fresh.

**Publishers Weekly**

If you could travel back in time and kill Hitler, would you?...

[Atkinson's] protagonist's encounter with der Führer is just one of several possible futures. Call it a more learned version of *Groundhog Day*, but that character can die at birth, or she can flourish and blossom; she can be wealthy, or she can be a fugitive; she can be the victim of rape, or she can choose her sexual destiny. All these possibilities arise, and all take the story in different directions, as if to say: We scarcely know ourselves, so what do we know of the lives of those who came before us.... Provocative, entertaining and beautifully written. It's not quite the tour de force that her *Case Histories* (2004) was, but this latest affords the happy sight of seeing Atkinson stretch out into speculative territory again.

**Kirkus Reviews**

## Discussion Questions

1. Ursula Todd gets to live out many different realities, something that's impossible in real life. Though there is an array of possibilities that form Ursula's alternate histories, do you think any and all futures are possible in Ursula's world, or are there certain parameters within which each life is lived?

2. As time goes on, Ursula learns more about her ability to restart her life—and she often changes course accordingly, but she doesn't always correct things. Why not? Do you think Ursula ever becomes completely conscious of her ability to relive and redo her lives? If so, at what point in the story do you think that happens? And what purpose do you think she sets for herself once she figures it out?

3. Do people's choices have the power to change destiny? How do you think Ursula's choices are either at odds with or in line with the ideas of fate and destiny throughout the story?

4. Do you think Ursula's ability to relive her life over and over is a gift or a curse? How do you think Ursula looks at it? Do you think she is able to embrace the philosophy amor fati ("love of fate," "acceptance") in the end?

5. Small moments often have huge ramifications in Ursula's life. Do you think certain moments are more crucial than others in the way Ursula's life develops? Why, and which moments?

6. *Life After Life* encapsulates both the big picture (the sweep of major global historical events) and the small picture (the dynamics of Ursula's loving, quirky family). How are these pictures tied together? When do Ursula's decisions affect the big picture more, or the small picture more? When do they affect both?

7. How does Atkinson portray gender throughout the story? How does she comment on the gender roles of this time period, and which characters challenge those roles—and how?

8. How does Atkinson's humor pepper the story? In what ways is she able to bring a bit of comedy to her characters and their stories as relief from the serious and dark subject matter?

9. How do the various relationships within the Todd family shape the story? What is the significance of maternal bonds and sibling bonds in the story?

10. How does Atkinson capture the terror and tragedy of the Blitz? How does war become its own character in the book? What type of commentary does Atkinson make on the English approach to war? Why do you think Atkinson portrayed one of Ursula's lives in Germany, experiencing war and the bombing from the opposing side?

11. On page 379, Ursula faces a bleak end in Germany with her daughter, Frieda. She chooses death over life for the first time, saying, "Something had cracked and broken and the order of things had changed." What do you think she means by that? Is this a significant turning point to Ursula's story? Do you think the end of this life affects her decisions in other lives that follow?

12. On page 354, Klara says, "Hindsight's a wonderful thing. If we all had it there would be no history to write about." Do you think this is true? In what ways does the use of hindsight come to pass in the book?

13. "'Well, we all get on,' Sylvie said, 'one way or another. And in the end we all arrive at the same place. I hardly see that it matters how we get there.' It seemed to Ursula that how you got there was the whole point..." (page 252). Do you agree with Sylvie or with Ursula? How does this relate to a philosophy raised by Dr. Kellet—that "sometimes a bad thing happens to prevent a worse thing happening" (page

160)?

14. Along similar lines, Ursula says to Teddy on page 446, "You just have to get on with life.... We only have one after all, we should try and do our best. We can never get it right, but we must try." And Teddy responds, "What if we had a chance to do it again and again until we finally did get it right?" What do you think it means to get things right? Is Ursula attempting to make things "right" in life each time she's reborn? If so, which things in particular—and how?


15. On page 277, Ralph asks Ursula if she could have killed Hitler as a baby, and Ursula thinks, "If I thought it would save Teddy.... Not just Teddy, of course, the rest of the world, too." Do you think Ursula ultimately had to choose between saving Teddy and saving "the rest of the world"? If so, why did she choose as she did? And was she able to save either?

16. Life continues to restart over and over for Ursula and the Todd family, and outcomes vary greatly each time. What happens to the characters changes drastically in many of the versions. Do you feel the characters change just as drastically, in terms of who they are and what they are like? Or do you think they fundamentally stay the same? Ursula learns many things about life and its progression, but does she herself change over the course of the book?

17. What are the biggest questions this book raised for you? How did it change the way you think about the course of your own life?  
(Questions issued by publisher.)

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## Discussion Questions for Kate Atkinson's *LIFE AFTER LIFE*

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control. Most other researchers at the time saw the problem of controlling an airplane as being similar to steering a boat. But the Wrights had the insight that airplanes, unlike surface ships, had to take three dimensions into account, not just two, in order to maintain stability and control.

How to do that was the problem. Wilbur observed that birds changed the angles of their wings when turning and one day he was idly playing with a long cardboard box that had held bicycle inner tubes. He flexed it, and the idea of wing-warping was born. By changing the shape of the wings, the airfoil could make smooth and, significantly, controlled turns. (Today, the ailerons on the wings perform that function.)

Only after they were confident that they had mastered control, with a series of glider trials, did they mount Charlie Taylor's engine on a glider and build an airplane. On December 17, 1903, Orville lifted off from the sand dunes of Kitty Hawk, on the outer banks of North Carolina, and flew 110 feet in about 11 seconds.

The world would never be the same.

David McCullough has written many bestsellers, including biographies of John Adams and Harry Truman, and won just about every prize there is to win, including two Pulitzers, two Francis Parkman Awards, and a National Book Award. In 2006, George W. Bush gave him the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the country's highest civilian award.

This author is quite incapable of writing a bad book. And *The Wright Brothers* doesn't come close to being one. But it suffers from two problems. One is that after the triumph of December 1903, the story loses drama and becomes an endless succession of flights that were higher and farther and faster than ever before. And the Wrights soon ceased to be central to the story of aviation.

Wilbur died in 1912, at age 45, of typhoid fever. Orville lived on to 1948 (long enough to see, and regret, what awful destruction the airplane was capable of when used in warfare). But he stopped flying after about 1915 and essentially retired.

The second problem is that the central characters, despite McCullough's characteristically first-rate research, remain essentially unknowable. Neither wore his heart

on his sleeve, to put it mildly. Their private, inner lives remain just that, private, and the reader is frustrated that he never learns what made these two brothers really tick.

Still, the story of two brothers who, while running a bicycle shop and using only their own modest resources, solved one of the great technical problems of their time and helped define the 20th century is an extraordinary one. >

## Life After *Life After Life*

*A God in Ruins: A Novel*

By KATE ATKINSON

Little, Brown and Company,  
480 pages

Reviewed by FERNANDA MOORE

YOU NEEDN'T have read *Life After Life*, Kate Atkinson's excellent ninth novel, to enjoy her tenth—

but it helps. While not precisely a sequel, *A God in Ruins* describes the same upper-middle-class English world as its predecessor and even revisits many of the same scenes. Both revolve around the Todd family—stolid Hugh, prickly Sylvie, and their five children. Both books begin at Fox Corner, the family's house just outside London in the idyllic years before the Second World War, and march inexorably toward the horrors that follow. The plot of *Life After Life* turns on a gimmick: Ursula, one of the children, lives and

dies and lives again dozens of times. *A God in Ruins* plays no such tricks. In this book, the dead (and there are many) stay dead.

The hero of *A God in Ruins* is Teddy, Ursula's favorite brother and the Todd family's golden boy. He's a tenderhearted chap, fond of birds and animals, "a kind boy who gave bullies no quarter" at school, "deplorably honest" at home. As a child, he sleeps with his beloved dog at the foot of his bed and *Scouting for Boys* tucked under his pillow. Eventually, he grows into a young man self-reflective enough to realize that his existence is charmed: "Happiness, like life itself, was as fragile as a bird's heartbeat, as fleeting as the bluebells in the wood, but while it lasted, Fox Corner was an Arcadian dream."

It's a dream with a brutal awakening. When England declares war, Teddy is 22 and has reluctantly returned to work in his father's bank after a blissful year of gentlemanly lollygagging in France. Joining the Royal Air Force seems, at first, both adventure and escape: "Now he realized that the cage doors were opening.... He was about to be freed from the shackles of banking. Freed,

FERNANDA MOORE last reviewed Toni Morrison's *God Help the Child*. Her short fiction has appeared in COMMENTARY as well.



too, he realized, from the prospect of suburbia, of the children who might turn out to be 'rather dull.' Freedom even from the yoke and harness of marriage." Teddy has always assumed he will marry the actual girl next door—Nancy Shawcross—and live exactly as his parents lived.

But his romantic visions—he imagines himself a skylark or even an angel, fighting bravely for justice—are quickly dashed. The RAF, he realizes, are "not so much warriors as sacrifices for the greater good. Birds thrown against a wall, in the hope that eventually, if there were enough birds, they would break the wall." He's captain of a Halifax bomber, and Atkinson does a terrific job describing the gritty, unromantic facts of life as a pilot in the RAF. There's no glamour and very little glory; the bombing raids themselves are claustrophobic and terrifying, while the time between sorties passes in an ecstasy of dread.

"Superstition was rampant on the station," Teddy recalls. "Everyone in the squadron seemed to have their own voodoo—a lock of hair, a St. Christopher, a playing card, the ubiquitous rabbit foot. There was a flight sergeant who always sang *La Donna è Mobile* in the crew room when they were getting dressed in their flying clothes and another who had to put his left boot on before his right. If he forgot he had to take all his kit off and start again. He survived the war. The flight sergeant who sang *E Donna Mobile* did not."

Bombers crash during takeoff, during landing, over sea, and over land. Engines fail, propellers seize, oxygen tubes freeze, planes collide in midair or release their bombs accidentally on one another. Teddy and his crew bail out over the ocean and spend two nights lost at sea; a week after their rescue, those who survive are back on the runway again.

And yet Teddy survives. Atkinson reveals early in the book that Teddy

lives through not only the war, but the rest of the 20th century and into the 21st. The novel's chronology is complex, for though Atkinson does not subvert the laws of physics as she did in *Life After Life*, the plot of *A God in Ruins* flashes forward as often as it flashes back. Past, present, and future jostle hectically for the reader's attention, often within a single scene. One minute we're with Teddy contemplating his father's headstone, "still harsh in its newness," and then the next minute we're 60 years in the future, the headstone "softened by lichen and the inscription...growing quietly less legible." At 85, Teddy thinks this will be his last visit to his family's graves; Atkinson begs to differ. "He would have been surprised to know that he still had another decade and more ahead of him," she writes.

In less capable hands, this sort of thing could doom a novel: Why keep turning the pages if we know how things turn out? Yet Atkinson knows just when to spill the beans and when to hold back, and there's plenty of suspense (along with a couple of outright surprises) in the book. Though the action is seldom straightforward, the plot steadily thickens.

Teddy goes home to marry Nancy Shawcross as planned. But the Arcadia Teddy thought he was fighting for—England, Fox Corner, the fields of sunflowers he remembers from France—is, despite the Allied victory, doomed. "The war had been a great chasm and there could be no going back to the other side, to the lives they had before, to the people they were before," Atkinson writes. "It was as true for them as it was for the whole of poor, ruined Europe."

He and Nancy beget a perfectly dreadful daughter named Viola; she marries badly, abandons her children Sunny and Bertie, and makes the rest of Teddy's long life consistently difficult. The reader knows

this already (Viola was introduced on the novel's fifth page), but Atkinson holds back a few surprises; eventually, we're shown a plausible reason for Viola's egregious behavior. Still, there's no denying that Viola's generation lacks some crucial element of moral fiber. Dealt the same cards, Teddy would have played a very different hand.

And then, at the novel's drawn-out end, when Teddy lies dying of old age in a nursing home, Atkinson makes a disastrous authorial choice.

It was over. Teddy sank to the silent sea-bed and joined all the tarnished treasure that lay there unseen, forty fathoms deep. He was lost forever, only a small silver hare to keep him company in the dark.

And with a massive roar the fifth wall comes down and the house of fiction falls, taking Viola and Sunny and Bertie with it. They melt into the thin air and disappear. Pouf!

In one of fate's many iterations in *Life After Life*, Teddy dies in combat, shot down in his Halifax over the North Sea. Now, in the final pages of *A God in Ruins*, Atkinson suddenly decides that this truncated version of Teddy's life was the true one. The book we've just finished reading, she announces, was a figment of Teddy's dying imagination, a fantasy constructed in the final seconds before he plummeted to earth. "All the birds who were never born, all the songs that were never sung and so can only exist in the imagination," she writes. "And this one is Teddy's."

This is not only hackneyed, it's absurd; an ending better suited for a soap opera. And it's a conclusion profoundly unworthy of the novel it purports to wrap up—a novel that, until then, is layered, nuanced, and original indeed. ☹

PW talks with Kate Atkinson: the making of a heroine

Martha Shulman

*Publishers Weekly*. 260.8 (Feb. 25, 2013): p139. From *Literature Resource Center*.

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<http://www.publishersweekly.com/>

Full Text:

Kate Atkinson talks about her latest book, *Life After Life* (Reviews, Jan. 14; pub date, Mar.), in which Ursula Todd lives through the 20th century—including the Second World War—multiple times

Do you think of *Life After Life* as a war novel?

No. I don't think in genre terms, and also, to me, a war novel is a guy thing. But it was always going to be about the war. She had to go through the Second World War before she could know what she was going to do. I knew that she was going to die and come back to life and die and come back to life until she realized what was going on.

[ILLUSTRATION OMITTED]

Seeing her go through the war years multiple times—not only in her native England, but also in Germany—highlights the female experience of these events.

Yes, women weren't on the front lines. But a huge number volunteered to be air raid wardens: it was a very neighborly thing; you had your neighborhood and you needed to know that neighborhood. And when you talk to women of that age, they had exciting times in the war.

You convey that, but you also convey the horror of being bombed.

I'm fascinated by the Blitz; that's really why I was writing the book. If I could go back to any time in history, it would be London during the Blitz, because it was such a unique experience. When we look now at Afghanistan and see people being blown up by bombs, we know it's absolutely disgusting and horrendous, but we forget that that's what was happening in London during the war. The propaganda of that era put forward the Blitz spirit of "We can take it," and sometimes it's hard to look behind that.

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available**

This feels like a feminist book, which is meant as a compliment.

Yes. Feminism is such an incredibly awkward word for us these days, isn't it? Not to be feminist would be bizarre, wouldn't it? There is a lot in the book about the powerlessness of women, but also about the power of women. If you think of Ursula's aunt Sophie, who's a generation older, she's very frustrated, but also very powerful. In every generation there's going to be a different kind of woman.

We think of alternative history as closer to science fiction, but that's a bit of what you're playing with, isn't it?

Alternate history fascinates me, as it fascinates all novelists, because "What if?" is the big thing. I tried to keep it as subtle as possible; I didn't want it to feel like a time travel book. But at the heart of it is a great cliché: "What would have happened if Hitler had been killed?"

When Ursula's in Germany, she befriends Eva Braun.

I got totally fascinated with Eva Braun. But I always knew there would have to be a counterforce to the Blitz. We helped destroy Germany: they suffered infinitely more than we did, and I just felt that I had to have her have a life there. In Germany, Ursula goes through the looking glass, and it changes her. I wanted her to feel different after she's been in Germany; throughout the book she's becoming less passive, and I knew when she came back from Germany she'd be more vigorous. It's the making of a heroine, and it's a slow birth.

Shulman, Martha

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Kate Atkinson

British Novelist ( 1951 - )

**Contemporary Authors Online.** Detroit: Gale, 2016. From *Literature Resource Center*.

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Updated:01/08/2016

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#### PERSONAL INFORMATION:

Born 1951, in York, England; married (marriage ended); married; children: (first marriage) Eve, (second marriage) Helen.

**Education:** University of Dundee, M.A., 1974. **Addresses:** Home: Edinburgh, Scotland.

#### CAREER:

Writer. Has worked as a home nurse, legal secretary, and teacher.

#### AWARDS:

Winner of *Woman's Own* short story competition, 1986; Ian St. James Award, 1993, for short story "Karmic Mothers"; Whitbread Book of the Year Award, 1995, and *Yorkshire Post* Book Award for best first work, 1996, both for *Behind the Scenes at the Museum*; E.M. Forster Award, American Academy of Arts and Letters, 1997; Saltire Book of the Year Award, and Prix Westminster, both for *Case Histories*; Book Club Winner, British Book Awards, 2009, for *When Will There Be Good News?*; member of the Order of the British Empire, 2011; Waterstones UK Author of the Year, Specsavers National Book Awards, 2013, Costa Award for best novel, 2013, South Bank Sky Arts Award, 2014, all for *Life after Life*; Costa Book Award for best novel, 2016, for *A God in Ruins*.

#### WORKS:

#### WRITINGS:

#### NOVELS

*Behind the Scenes at the Museum*, St. Martin's Press (New York, NY), 1996.

*Human Croquet*, Picador (New York, NY), 1997.

*Emotionally Weird*, Picador (New York, NY), 2000.

*Life after Life*, Reagan Arthur Books/Little, Brown (New York, NY), 2013.

*A God in Ruins*, Little, Brown (New York, NY), 2015.

#### "JACKSON BRODIE" SERIES

*Case Histories*, Little, Brown (New York, NY), 2004.

*One Good Turn*, Little, Brown (New York, NY), 2006, published as *One Good Turn: A Jolly Murder Mystery*, Doubleday (London, England), 2006.

*When Will There Be Good News?*, Little, Brown (New York, NY), 2008.

*Started Early, Took My Dog*, Doubleday (London, England), 2010, Little, Brown (New York, NY), 2011.

#### OTHER

*Nice* (play), produced in Edinburgh, Scotland, at Traverse Theatre, 1996.

*Abandonment* (play; adapted from the British version by director Kit Thacker, produced in Edinburgh, Scotland, at Traverse Theater, 2000; produced in New York at Sanford Meisner Theater, 2005), Nick Hearn Books (London, England), 2000.

*Not the End of the World: Stories*, Little, Brown (Boston, MA), 2002.

## MEDIA ADAPTATIONS:

Short story "Karmic Mothers" was adapted for BBC 2 television as part of the series *Tartan Shorts*. The "Jackson Brodie" series has been adapted for television as *Case Histories*, ITV.

## Sidelights

Kate Atkinson was born in England but has spent most of her life in Scotland. Her first novel, *Behind the Scenes at the Museum*, recounts four generations of misery in a family living in Yorkshire, England, as described by Ruby Lennox, a skeptical adolescent whose story is humorously interrupted by footnotes relating incidents from the lives of her parents and grandparents. Yorkshire is a location with, according to *New York Times Book Review* critic Ben Macintyre, "an established and self-nurtured reputation as a place of heroic complaint." It is thus fitting that Atkinson's "jubilant, irreverent narrator ... at once celebrates and mercilessly skewers her middle-class English family," according to Megan Harlan in *Salon.com*. Ruby's father, for example, is depicted as a coarse philanderer and her mother as unfeeling and grumpy. Together they own a pet shop in which they behave unlike themselves; "the parents' lives are entirely a performance, a play scripted by themselves, which might be called 'Everything is nice and normal.' But it is not," wrote Hilary Mantel in the *London Review of Books*.

*Behind the Scenes at the Museum* flashes forward and backward in time, using the chapter footnotes. These leap off in odd directions apart from the primary narrative, often in pursuit of the history of household objects--missing buttons and odd pieces of china--or to recount the tale of how Ruby's great-grandmother abandoned her poverty-stricken brood, retreating with a French photographer, for example. "Atkinson cares for structure," observed Mantel, "and here is a delicate but robust skeleton on which hangs the muscle of narrative force and the tissue of loss and sadness and indecent merriment."

Atkinson garnered praise for the strength of her humor, as well as for her insights into family relationships. "*Behind the Scenes at the Museum* is a multigenerational tale of a spectacularly dysfunctional Yorkshire family and one of the funniest works of fiction to come out of Britain in years," enthused Macintyre. While acknowledging the work's merits, others expressed surprise that a novel of such ordinary concerns, and a first novel at that, would be the recipient of such high honors. Tim Adams remarked in the *London Observer* that "Atkinson has a genuine feel for the comedy of domestic ritual" and that *Behind the Scenes at the Museum* is "an entertaining ... debut."

*Emotionally Weird* tells the story of Effie and her mother Nora, who live on an isolated island off the coast of Scotland. To pass the time, the two women tell each other the secrets of their lives, although not always truthfully. Effie eventually learns the identity of her father, a secret she had never before been able to learn. The novel's narrative is interrupted by Effie's frequent recounting of the activities of her university classmates, much to the chagrin of her mother.

While Greg Villepique in *Salon.com* found that the novel displays "a mischievous imagination and suggests a real talent for composing on a large canvas," he concluded that "it feels, in the end, both packed and empty, overthought and underwrought." Carolyn Kubisz in *Booklist* claimed that "Atkinson's smart, funny novel explores the power of storytelling and blurs the line between fact and fiction to the point where readers are never quite sure what is real and what is only a really good story." "Atkinson is a clever writer," wrote Beth E. Andersen in *Library Journal*, "suffusing her work with fresh humor, sharp word play, and the occasional touch of magic realism."

*Not the End of the World: Stories* is a collection of twelve stories that blend realism and fantastical elements. The plots range over a wide variety of subjects, from a woman who adopts a stray cat to the story of a television critic and his evil twin. In one tale, the young child of wealthy but neglectful parents is spirited away by a modern-day Mary Poppins figure. Another story is related through the eyes of Addison Fox, whose mother was a prostitute and who was forcefully rejected by his well-to-do father. Addison has a strange consolation when he meets his father's legitimate children and realizes that they are in even worse circumstances than he is.

Atkinson does a "masterful job" portraying troubled family dynamics, according to Amy Waldman in *People*. The "wild inventiveness" of these stories makes them "exceptionally entertaining," stated Joanne Wilkinson in *Booklist*. Atkinson's short stories are "not as intense or as unified" as her novels, in the opinion of a *Publishers Weekly* reviewer, who nevertheless recommended *Not the End of the World* as "a sharp and wholly original collection."

Atkinson's *Case Histories* serves as another showcase for her ability to portray atypical families and flawed individuals. "Disparate family histories collide and long-buried secrets resurface in this ingeniously crafted modern-day suspense narrative that combines elements of a traditional detective novel with riveting psychological character studies," reported Joni Rendon in her *BookPage* website review of *Case Histories*. The principals in the story are bound together by a strange set of coincidences linked to Jackson Brodie, a private investigator in Cambridge. Jeff Turrentine, reviewing the book in *Washington Post Book World*, believed that if judged on plot alone, the book would be considered a failure; however, "if you read the novel instead as a multifaceted character study grafted onto the detective-thriller format, it's a rousing triumph,

thanks in whole to Atkinson's boundless sympathy for her funny, pathetic, three-dimensional and fully human creations."

Brodie returns in *One Good Turn*, published in England as *One Good Turn: A Jolly Murder Mystery*. Reviewing this second outing on *Salon.com* Laura Miller commented on the series debut: "That book came as a revelation to many readers. It was undoubtedly literary--the characters were three-dimensional and idiosyncratic, the writing artful, the emotional nuances in the scenes never sacrificed to the exigencies of plot--but it was also outrageously entertaining. Despite Jackson's profession, *Case Histories* isn't quite a mystery novel, and there's something impish about Atkinson writing another book with Jackson in it, as if she's playing at writing a genre series."

Brodie is now retired and the owner of a farmhouse in France, having inherited two million pounds from a former client. As Miller notes on *Salon.com*, although he is enjoying his leisure time, he has the feeling that "real men didn't spend their days filling up their iPods with sad country songs and feeding apples to French donkeys." Brodie has reluctantly come to Edinburgh, where Julia is performing in a play during the annual Fringe Festival. There he witnesses a bizarre event. He and others waiting in line for tickets witness a man dubbed the "Honda Man" exit his car after being involved in a minor automobile accident and attack another man, Paul Bradley, with a baseball bat. Martin Canning, a timid crime writer and author of a successful series, throws his laptop case at the attacker, who then flees. This act is the "good turn" of the title. Miller wrote that this book "also isn't quite a mystery, despite the crimes and conspiracies that keep the plot humming along like an unstoppable little two-stroke engine."

Other characters include Gloria Hatter, who pays little attention to what is occurring, but instead is thinking of her eBay bid for some Staffordshire china and the imminent collapse of her husband's fraudulent real estate empire. She considers how her life might change if Graham, who has a heart attack in a hotel room while engaging in a session with a Russian dominatrix, should die.

Reviewing the novel in the *San Francisco Chronicle Online*, Dana Kletter wrote: "The grimmest moments of *One Good Turn* do not involve murder, bodily injury or betrayal. Rather, they come when Atkinson spotlights each character and makes us privy to the private monologues and flashes of memory that expose the general helplessness and weakness of the seemingly competent, the bitter rage brewing inside the mild-mannered. And though Atkinson keeps the work sprightly and terribly funny, a melancholic atmosphere pervades the novel."

Janet Maslin wrote in the *New York Times Book Review Online*: "In the past Ms. Atkinson has played the minor time trick of letting events almost converge and then replaying them from slightly different points of view. She does that here to the same smart, unnerving effect. And she frequently brings up the image of Russian dolls, each hidden inside another, to illustrate how her storytelling tactics work."

The third book of the series, *When Will There Be Good News?*, revolves around the murder of a mother and two children by a stranger with a carving knife. The only survivor grows up to be Joanna Hunter, a doctor who is married to a businessman, Neil, and who has a baby. She hires sixteen-year-old Reggie Chase, whose mother has recently drowned, to care for her child, a job that Reggie loves. Reggie, a bright girl, takes private lessons in Greek and Latin from born-again Christian Ms. MacDonald, and she never tells anyone, including Joanna, that she is an orphan.

On the same day that Andrew Decker, the man convicted of the murder, is being released from jail, Brodie, now married, is on a doomed train heading toward London, where he is living with his new wife, a curator at the British Museum. He is coming from Yorkshire, where he took two strands of hair from the head of a boy he believes to be his son. The boy's mother, former girlfriend Julia, denies that Brodie is the father. Detective Chief Inspector Louise Monroe, who in *One Good Turn* nearly became involved with Brodie, has informed him of Decker's release. When Brodie's train crashes, the result of Ms. MacDonald losing control of her car, he is saved by Reggie. The girl is also concerned about the disappearance of Joanna, whose husband insists she is visiting a sick aunt.

*Telegraph Online* reviewer Claudia FitzHerbert wrote: "Atkinson's genius is her sure control of plot." *Mostly Fiction* website contributor Mary Whipple wrote: "As one might expect from the large number of characters and plot lines, coincidence plays an important role in resolving the novel in dramatic fashion, and though no one will believe that these twists and turns are truly realistic, they are great fun and completely consistent with the ebullient story-telling that Atkinson has made her signature. After all, as Atkinson says, 'coincidence is just an explanation waiting to happen.'"

Brodie heads back to Yorkshire in *Started Early, Took My Dog*. He is helping Hope McMasters, a woman searching for her birth parents. Hope was placed with her adoptive parents in the 1970s when she was two. Brodie thinks the case will be simple, but there are no records of her parents or her adoption. Tilly Squires, the chief of security at a shopping mall in Leeds, also figures into the plot.

According to London *Guardian* reviewer Justine Jordan, "there's a rhetorical whimsy reminiscent of some of Atkinson's earlier books, a devil-may-care gesturing at the novel's own fictionality, which can leave the characters threatening to float free of our trust in them. But we follow their digressive, meandering voices avidly as they circle around their own particular loves and losses, all knitted together with Atkinson's extraordinary combination of wit, plain-speaking, tenderness and control." "As ever," stated Helen Brown in the London *Telegraph*, "Atkinson's prose is diamond-cut to twinkle and slice by turns. Her playful sense of humour dances round the darkness of her themes. She skips through the difficult steps required to balance the reader's need for satisfying (and surprising) resolution with a realist's view of human nature and the

messiness of real-life criminality."

*Life after Life*, Atkinson's 2013 novel, centers on Ursula Todd, who dies moments after she is born in 1910. The narrative starts again, and Ursula is born and lives, since the doctor arrived in time. She lives to age five and then drowns, only to start yet again. In this manner, Ursula lives and continually relives her life, unaware that she is starting over yet touched by a strange sense of déjà vu. In each subsequent attempt, a strong sense of dread steers her from the dangers of her past lives.

A *New Yorker* critic noted "a Tolstoyan sense of history's inexorable drive, but Atkinson pursues history's nuance, its many-peopled materiality." "In a lesser writer's hands, a novel that revisits its main character's birth twelve times would likely be tiresome, but each revision is fresh, often funny, and filled with new life," observed Jen Cutts in *Maclean's*.

"*Behind the Scenes at the Museum* and *Life after Life* both co-opt the family--its evolution over time, its exponentially multiplying characters and storylines, its silences and gaps in communication--and use it to show how fiction works and what it might mean to us," wrote Alex Clark in a review for the London *Guardian*. "But what makes Atkinson an exceptional writer--and this is her most ambitious and most gripping work to date--is that she does so with an emotional delicacy and understanding that transcend experiment or playfulness. *Life after Life* gives us a heroine whose fictional underpinning is permanently exposed, whose artificial status is never in doubt; and yet one who feels painfully, horribly real to us. How do you square that circle? You'd have to ask Kate Atkinson, but I doubt she would give you a straight answer."

Atkinson followed *Life after Life* with the novel *A God in Ruins*, which features Ursula's brother, Teddy. A frustrated poet who works in a bank, Teddy is relieved by the start of World War II because it offers an opportunity to leave his boring life behind. Teddy faces the grim reality of war with an unflinching eye, then returns and marries his childhood sweetheart, Nancy. The couple has a daughter, Viola, and the young girl blames Teddy for her mother's premature death. From there, the narrative follows Viola's unhappy life, exploring the pall that the war has cast on Teddy and his family.

"Taken together," wrote *New York Times Book Review Online* correspondent Tom Perrota, "*Life After Life* and *A God in Ruins* present the starkest possible contrast. In the first book, there's youth and a multitude of possible futures. In the second, there's only age and decay, and a single immutable past. This applies not only to the characters, but to England itself, which is portrayed over and over as a drab and diminished place. The culprit is obvious--it's the war itself." According to *Chatelaine* contributor Rachel Giese, "while this is a less showy novel than its predecessor, Atkinson doesn't forgo trickery altogether. She plays with expectations, shifting back and forth in time-sometimes between chapters, sometimes within a single paragraph." Offering a similar assessment in *New Statesman*, Erica Wagner remarked: "This is a hugely impressive and immensely moving novel. Somehow it feels effortless, although clearly that is not the case. But the reader cannot fail to sense how deeply embedded in this world Atkinson already was. The shifts in time, as the book moves back and forth between decades, are enticing rather than disorienting, the sections linked by Atkinson's technique of scattering crumbs from the future back into the past." Offering another take in the *Oregonian Online*, Natalie Serber advised: "*A God in Ruins* is not a novel of redemption; it's a novel about the long shadow war casts over generations. It's about what we lose and can never retrieve. Atkinson reflects that reality in a stunningly bold and playful about-face, which will leave you turning back the pages, wanting to live it again, mixing up past and present in a delightful bold manner. Yes, *A God in Ruins* is fiction, and it's about fiction. It's about the power of the imagination to sustain us."

Atkinson attended the University of Dundee, where she earned a master's degree, but her Ph.D. thesis on the American short story was refused. In an interview with Tim Teeman posted in the *Times Online*, Atkinson said that she does not regret not receiving the advanced degree: "If I had got my doctorate I wouldn't have become a writer. Had I continued I would probably be studying something like passivity and activity in the language of Jane Austen. ... If you have something in you that's creative and you're not creating and not aware what you should do to create, then that's my deep dark secret. ... It was one of the major things in my early life--not getting outside what was inside."

FURTHER READINGS:

## FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

## PERIODICALS

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### Three Beginnings, Reverse Chronology and A Novel That Starts Over in Every Chapter

Sarah Lyall

British Novelist ( 1951 - )

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Full Text:

Imagine having the gift (or the curse) of continually dying and being reborn, so that you relive segments of your life again and again, differently each time, going down various paths and smoothing out rough areas until you get it right and can move on. Imagine, too, that you are not conscious that this is happening, but experience it as intermittent *deja vu*, a sometimes-inchoate dread, an inexplicable compulsion at sudden moments to do one thing rather than another.

This is not an original artistic conceit, obviously. A century ago, the book "Strange Life of Ivan Osokin" depicted a young man who is given a chance to relive his life and correct his mistakes in 1902 Moscow. And in "Groundhog Day," Bill Murray is forced to repeat the same wretched day, and listen to the same wretched Sonny and Cher song, in Punxsutawney, Pa., until he becomes a better person and wins over Andie MacDowell. But in "Life After Life," her eighth and latest novel, the British writer Kate Atkinson has taken these notions -- what if practice really did make perfect, and what if we really could play out multiple alternate futures -- and put them through the Magimix, pumped them full of helium, added some degrees of difficulty and produced an audacious, ambitious book that challenges notions of time, fate and free will, not to mention narrative plausibility.

Atkinson's work suffers from a bit of brand confusion, which partly explains why it hasn't caught on in the U.S. as it has in Britain. She does not write about vampires or werewolves or women exploring their inner goddesses with a little sadomasochistic sex. Nor does she continually produce variations on a theme or even variations within a genre. Her writing is funny and quirky and sharp and sad -- calamity laced with humor -- and full of quietly heroic characters who offer knowing Lorrie Moore-esque parenthetical asides. ("I think in brackets; I do my own asides to myself," Atkinson said.) She writes critically admired family sagas that are not really family sagas; crime novels that are not really crime novels; and now, in "Life After Life," to be published in the U.S. next month, a science-fiction novel, in the loosest possible sense, that is nothing of the sort.

Atkinson's true genius is structure. Her books wend forward and backward, follow multiple stories from multiple points of view, throw dozens of balls up in the air -- but always conclude with loose ends tied up, so that everything makes sense. Her first novel, "Behind the Scenes at the Museum," published in 1995, intersperses the linear narrative of the heroine's life with a series of chapter-long explanatory "footnotes" that fill in the back stories of various glancingly mentioned relations and events, painting an intense portrait of a big, messy British family in the first three-quarters of the 20th century. The book seemingly came from nowhere to win a major literary prize in London, instantly establishing Atkinson as a singular voice while generating grumbling among more established (male) writers. The novel also displayed what have become staples of her work: big complicated plots and joyful experimentation with form. One of Atkinson's novels has three different beginnings. Another, set over three days, has four main characters. A protagonist in another spends a good portion of the book in a coma.

Atkinson cannot really articulate how she creates these elaborate structures. Although she used a Moleskin storyboard to keep track of the acrobatic chronology in "Life After Life," she generally does not formally map out her plots. Instead, many of her books start as ideas, or as challenges to herself -- characters or thoughts that dare her to put them in stories. Sometimes they begin with the title itself, as in "Started Early, Took My Dog" (2011), which came from an Emily Dickinson poem and which required only that she include a dog and make her hero a Dickinson fan. With "Life After Life," Atkinson knew she wanted to write about the London Blitz, but she also wanted to experiment with a protagonist who constantly dies and is reborn, and she wanted to examine whether someone in that predicament could actually alter the course of history. Could her heroine -- brave, tragic Ursula Todd, born in 1910 to an ordinary family in an ordinary English county -- somehow stop World War II?

In the process, "Life After Life" takes the concept of alternate universes and lets it run riot. Characters die in some sections, survive in others. In one chapter, Ursula is raped, becomes pregnant, has an abortion and, disgraced, marries an abusive monster of a man; in another, she shoves the rapist into the bushes, embarks on an important government job and has an affair with a senior government official. In yet more versions, she lives with her married lover, or moves to Berlin, marries and has a child with a German man, or stays in London, remains childless and helps dig bodies out of the Blitz rubble. Each version is entirely and equally credible.

In this way, Atkinson gets to indulge in what might be the ultimate novelist's fantasy: producing a never-ending story in which any past, any future, even any present, is possible. By leaving things open-ended, she offers herself the chance to erase and restore and rewrite and then try it all over again. It's easy to see why Atkinson, with her capacity to play out narratives as 3-D chess games, finds the prospect so alluring. After all, for her, nothing is really as simple it seems.

Atkinson lives in Edinburgh, well away from London's book-party circuit and sharp-clawed literary scene. She does not



hang out with other novelists, except Ali Smith, her best friend, who lives in Cambridge. She is extremely private. She had two husbands early on but is not married now, and does not like to talk much about her living arrangements, except to say that she spends a lot of time with her two adult daughters and her grandchildren. She refused, apologetically, to discuss even where her house is.

We met at the Palm Court at the Balmoral, a fancy hotel downtown, where we ordered cups of coffee and split a cheese sandwich. Atkinson, 61, is small and girlish, with a mobile, quizzical face and a tendency to talk quickly and let her sentences drift off into laughter. Her blondish hair is piled messily onto her head and kept back with a pair of glasses. Her accent is difficult to parse -- there are Scottish inflections, but also traces of Yorkshire, where she grew up. And to this day, she remains wary of the news media. She rarely gives interviews to British reporters after what happened to her in 1996, when "Behind the Scenes at the Museum" unexpectedly won the Whitbread Book of the Year prize in London.

It was a great upset, and such was the blow to the fragile egos of some male writers that they practically collapsed onto their fainting couches in shock. Several expressed incredulity that a "woman's book" like "Behind the Scenes," written by a 44-year-old first-time novelist, could have beaten Salman Rushdie's clearly superior "Moor's Last Sigh." And since Atkinson had mentioned to her publisher that she worked as a chambermaid during college, the London papers went for the "unknown chambermaid wins prize" angle. Even those who praised her seemed to do it backhandedly. "I don't know if Kate Atkinson knows she was being very postmodern," Richard Hoggart, chairman of the judges, declared.

"I spent four years doing a doctorate in postmodern American literature," Atkinson said as she sipped her coffee, amused but still irritated, even after all this time. "I can recognize it when I see it."

Atkinson's life has its own postmodern aspects, which she looks at with a novelist's eye. She was born in York, to parents who grew up poor but bettered themselves with a successful medical-supplies shop. One turning point in her own life came when Atkinson got a B instead of an A on her final high-school history paper, which caused her to lose out on her first-choice college, the University of Aberdeen, which meant she went instead to the University of Dundee, which meant she met her two husbands there, which meant she had her two daughters. Another occurred when (because of the antipathy between her adviser and her department head, she said) she failed the oral part of her doctoral thesis, on the topic of postmodern American short stories, which caused her to abandon academia and take up fiction.

It was some years after college that she began to write professionally. A single mother with two young children, she earned money various ways, including as a tutor at Dundee and a home aide for elderly people, most of them women ("the men were all dead, basically"). She formed a "housework cooperative" with some friends and wrote short stories "about love, romance, adoption" for women's magazines. "It taught me to write," she said. "You have to have everything -- character, plot, resolution, a beginning, middle and end. You have to have your own voice. You learn how to turn a story around on a sixpence."

In 1993, a story that would eventually become a chapter in "Behind the Scenes at the Museum" was named first runner-up in a short-story competition. "I went to the prize ceremony and took my friend Maureen with me and said, 'We have to find an agent,'" Atkinson recalled. "This woman came up and said, 'Do you have a novel in the drawer?' and I said, 'I've got a few chapters,' and I sent them to her." The agent sent them to publishers, an auction ensued and Atkinson ended up getting a two-book deal. "I thought, Really? Just like that?" She bought a new sofa and devoted herself to writing.

Atkinson's prose and experimental plots -- featuring orphans, parents harboring shameful secrets and people haunted by long-ago events no one will explain -- are informed by books she admires ("Alice in Wonderland," "Slaughterhouse-Five," "Tristram Shandy" and the works of Donald Barthelme and Jane Austen) but also by the mysteries in her family history. Her paternal grandfather died in a colliery explosion in 1931, and her father was given up by his young parents and raised until he was 9 by his grandmother. His many siblings did not even know he existed until she died (falling off a table while changing flypaper), and he showed up at the family's door, announcing, "I'm your brother Jack" to the astonished multitudes.

When Atkinson applied for a passport at age 30, she inadvertently discovered that her parents were not married when she was born, and that her mother had a previous husband, something of a scandal in 1950s England. She confronted her mother. "It was during the royal wedding of Charles and Diana, and I was sitting with a baby on my knee," she recalled. "I thought, I'll just be casual, and I said, 'Oh, you never told me you were married before.' I thought it was a good, offhand, conversational way to introduce that I was illegitimate." Atkinson's mother's response could have come from one of her books. "She turned to me and said, 'I was going to tell you, but you left the room.'" And that was it. "They came from a generation where nobody talked about their past."

The awkward reality under the carefully arranged facade is a theme that Atkinson often returns to in her plots. The title for "Behind the Scenes at the Museum" came to her after she dreamed about walking around the York Castle Museum looking at exhibits representing Britain at different points in its history. "I woke up and thought, This is what this book is about," she said, "behind the scenes at the museum."

Part of the pleasure and the difficulty of "Life After Life" is that you invest fully in each narrative and feel disoriented and sometimes bereft (also sometimes relieved) when, time and again, you are reminded that you have to start over. It feels a



bit like reading Italo Calvino's mind-bending "If on a Winter's Night a Traveler," which serves up story after tantalizing story but leaves out their endings. It also feels like Ian McEwan's "Atonement," and that sickening moment when it becomes clear -- do not read the rest of this sentence if you still want to read that book -- that the middle section was invented by the book's main character, a novelist herself, and that it never happened. "I don't want to spoil the magic," Atkinson said of her ability to create the characters in these multiple realities, "but it's a very curious thing that honestly baffles me. It's the nearest we'll ever get to playing God, to suddenly produce these fully formed creatures. It is a bit odd. Other aspects you work out more -- you rework sentences, you rework imagery. But not characters. They're not deciding their own fates, clearly, but once you have them, that unconscious process is at work."

Over sandwiches, however, Atkinson talked about her characters as means to an end, as if they were pawns in a board game. She writes about families, she said, not because she is preoccupied with domestic drama (far from it) but because "it gives you a very handy cast of characters." Anything can become a story, she said. Then she put down her coffee and looked out on the Balmoral's tearoom and rified about how she could set a novel here, or across the street, or anywhere, as long as there was an excuse for her characters to be there. Similarly, she said that Jackson Brodie, her recurring, magnet-for-trouble detective, was also "a very handy device." Atkinson mentioned casually that she had moved on from Brodie anyway, that his eventual fate was not so important to her. "I've finished with him for a while," she said. "He's having a really good holiday somewhere."

I started to feel sad that Brodie -- a character so vivid and deeply sympathetic -- could be dismissed so easily. But it must be annoying to have readers banging on about your characters as if they were real people, especially when your imagination is always full of other characters and other situations beyond the ones you've already written. Stephen King, who declared Atkinson's "Case Histories" to be "the best mystery of the decade," likes to speak of "the boys in the basement," the unconscious forces at work even when he is not actually writing. Atkinson has her own version. "I think of it like a pan at the back of a stove, simmering away," she said. "I always have books backing up." (I imagine airplanes queuing on the runway.) There are three, at the moment. "One isn't working, so we'll just ignore that," she said. The second, which is to be called "Death at the Sign of the Rook," is a homage to Agatha Christie set at a country-house hotel hosting a murder-mystery weekend, where the guests are stranded by a snowstorm. As of now, at least, it's not going to be a crime novel, with "bodies littering the whole place," she said, but rather something amusing, with characters who appear to be stock characters -- the military man, the vicar -- but who really aren't. The third novel, "A God in Ruins" (the title comes from Emerson), is a sequel, or a companion, to "Life After Life." It is to star Ursula's brother Teddy, who dies in a bombing raid in one section of "Life After Life" but survives in the final one. She is considering starting "A God in Ruins" at Teddy's eventual deathbed, late in the 20th century, and then moving chronologically backward.

As we sat there, Atkinson started, essentially, writing the next book -- or what might be the next book -- out loud right in front of me. For one thing, she said, forget the notion that Teddy is safe. "He's still a victim of history," she said. "The next time Ursula's born, Teddy might die. Anything might happen." She has also been thinking about his wife, the lovely and sympathetic Nancy, who dies a few times early on in "Life After Life," but is herself eventually saved by one of Ursula's intuitive interventions. "I think Nancy's doomed," she said suddenly. "I'm thinking that quite early on in the marriage she's killed by the crazy guy who strangles her." This is all quite arbitrary, she admitted. "It might be more interesting for them to have to endure a marriage and see what happens. But I don't know." If she had her way, she said, all her books would have endless permutations, with characters going down multiple paths. "You never finish with something, really," she said.

After Atkinson left the hotel and returned home (wherever that is), I found myself continuing to worry about her seemingly aloof attitude toward characters like Jackson Brodie. Then I remembered something she mentioned in passing -- that her plots are influenced by the fairy tales she grew up on, stories that are logically preposterous but have very structured moral universes. So I went back to my notes to find what she said, and I felt relieved. "The legacy of the fairy story in my brain is that everything will work out," Atkinson had said. "In fiction it would be very hard for me, as a writer, to give a bad ending to a good character, or give a good ending to a bad character. That's probably not a very postmodern thing to say."

#### CAPTION(S):

PHOTO (PHOTOGRAPH BY GARETH MCCONNELL) (MM23) CHART: Kate Atkinson's Shrewdest Plot Tricks: A brief history of the author's narrative schemes, from time travel to dreaming up an entire novel from the title of a favorite Dickinson poem. (MM24); DRAWINGS (DRAWINGS BY ANDREW RAE) (MM24; MM25)

By SARAH LYALL

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