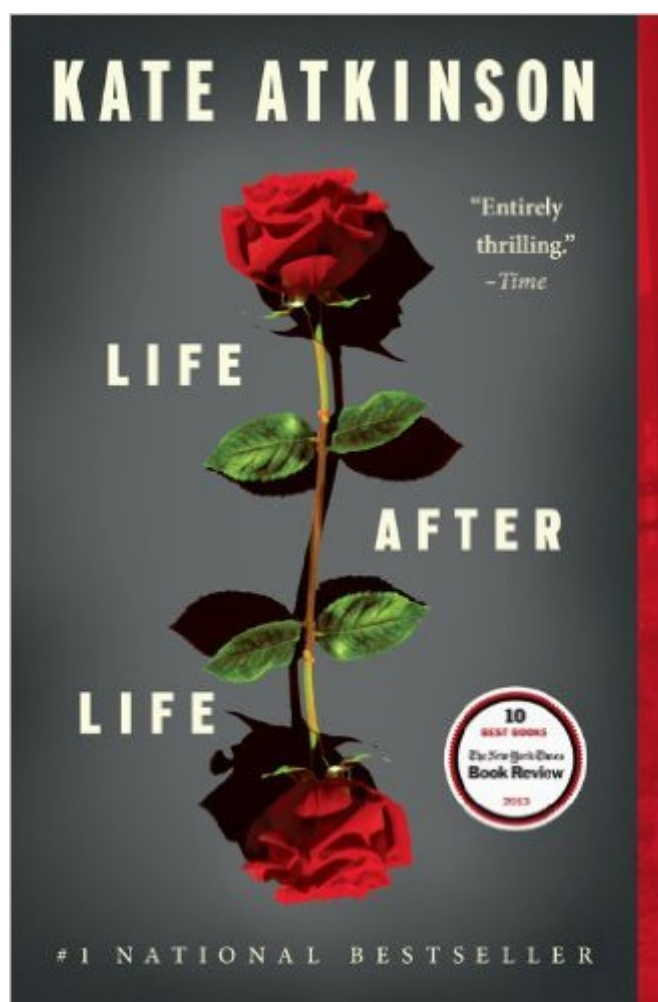


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Life After Life: A Novel



Synopsis

"One of the best novels I've read this century. Kate Atkinson is a marvel. There aren't enough breathless adjectives to describe *LIFE AFTER LIFE*: Dazzling, witty, moving, joyful, mournful, profound."--Gillian Flynn, author of *Gone Girl* What if you could live again and again, until you got it right? On a cold and snowy night in 1910, Ursula Todd is born, the third child of a wealthy English banker and his wife. 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. Ursula's world is in turmoil, facing the unspeakable evil of the two greatest wars in history. What power and force can one woman exert over the fate of civilization -- if only she has the chance? Wildly inventive, darkly comic, startlingly poignant -- this is Kate Atkinson at her absolute best.

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Customer Reviews

Last evening I finished Kate Atkinson's newest novel, *LIFE AFTER LIFE*, after two days straight of doing little else but reading it compulsively. I felt so utterly besotted by every 527 pages of it, that rather than close the book and put it on my bookshelf, I returned to the first pages and began reading the book all over again. Oh, what an extraordinary reading experience it is! The cover blurb provides a fair plot summary of the novel and I am sure other reviewers will rehash it over and over again as well, so I will spare you a plot summary here. Rather I want to remark on what makes this novel so brilliant for me - and it is not only the deep underlying philosophical and religious themes which will surely open wide this book to many interpretations - but its beautiful characters who break

all stereotypes and its structure which is a masterpiece of narrative architecture. Yes, many themes do permeate the story of Ursula Todd - everything from Plato's "Everything changes and nothing remains still," Buddhist principles of fate and reincarnation, Nietzsche's "amor fati" (Love of Fate), to Jungian explanations of "synchronicity" and "collective unconsciousness," and that's just to name a few - but what really makes this novel stand out, what really makes it so amazing is how lightly, even unassumingly, and yet so impeccably Kate Atkinson treats such sophisticated and intellectual subject matter. *LIFE AFTER LIFE* is the enthralling story of Ursula Todd, born to Hugh and Sylvie Todd in their home at Fox Corner, England on a bitterly cold, snowy night in February 1910. Ursula Todd also died on that very night before she could even draw her first breath. But her story does not end there - her death is not an ending but a new beginning, a beginning to another chance at life. And so it goes in Ursula's story of life after many deaths - a loop of lives so to speak, or the continuous circle of destiny, the karmic wheel of fate... life after life, after life. Early in the novel we recognize Ursula as an "old soul" and in Kate Atkinson's strategy for telling the story of Ursula's multiple lives and deaths, the narrative progression through history will certainly resonate with readers familiar with the themes of reincarnation. Actually, I think every reader will be able to find resonance with this terrifically engaging narrative, regardless of the philosophical or religious subtexts. It is the intricate plotting through actual historical events which takes on an excitingly different cast - not the usual suspense of "What happens next?" but, to quote Ursula's brother Teddy; "What if you had the chance to do it again and again, until you finally got it right? Would you do it?" This is a superb narrative tactic which leaves out the typically heavy handed authorial exposition of ordinary historical fiction and challenges us, the readers, while reflecting on Ursula's infinite lives, to discover and piece together for ourselves the puzzle of the social, emotional, psychological, and spiritual dynamics that governs all human experience and history. Ursula is truly a remarkable character of depth whom we take interest in for her own sake as an individual and not for anything she might symbolize as a literary heroine. We are able to connect with her viscerally (and we do many times over). The other primary characters who populate her story are no less remarkable than she. Her family, her friends, her lovers, and even her Zen master-like psychiatrist are all highly believable individuals with whom we can easily identify. *LIFE AFTER LIFE* is crafted impeccably with a language rich in stunning metaphors and poetic imagery. Its abundant literary allusions work well in the service of the emotions. At the same time the narrative manages to be unpretentiously intelligent, effortlessly witty, and deeply touching. Each episode in the many lives of Ursula produces an intense and lasting effect for the reader. They are tales of tenderness and poignancy, horror and outrage, pity and fear, laughter and jubilation, sorrow

and grief. Few novels succeed in accomplishing as much. Oh, my dear reading friends, how truly marvelous Kate Atkinson's *LIFE AFTER LIFE* is! Read this novel, please! I promise you that once you begin reading this book you too will find it difficult to put it down. And once you read it through to the last pages, I'm sure you too will want to turn back to its first pages to rethink the whole novel through again. To be sure, this is a masterpiece which deserves to be read again and again.

This is a tricky book to review: easy to enjoy, but curiously empty. Its five hundred pages flew by like the wind; this is the kind of writing I have been reading since childhood, literary comfort food. As a British expatriate, it feels very close to home: these are my kind of people leading lives I understand, if not always in actuality then at least from books. I felt it was all rather vapid at first, but I became increasingly impressed with Atkinson's ingenuity as I read on; a veteran puzzler myself, I raise my hat to anyone who can do something this clever. But to what end? I look to a novel of this scale to do more than merely keep me amused. Yet there was never a time in the book when I felt truly touched or even much surprised. The total, I felt, was less than the sum of its many parts. Much less. But I had better explain. Atkinson's conceit here is that her heroine, Ursula Todd, is immune from death, at least in a literary sense. If she dies at the end of one chapter, the author simply winds back the clock and starts again. So in the earliest chapter, dated February 1910, a baby is born with the cord twisted around her neck, dead. In the next, the scene is repeated, but the doctor makes it through the snow in time, and the child is saved. Some chapters later, however, a cat settles in the baby's cradle, smothering her. And so on. It is like a maze; if you come to a dead end, you retrace your steps a little and try a different route. The plethora of short chapters and frequent restarts soon became tedious. But then the novel opened out in the interwar years and especially in some gripping scenes set in the London Blitz, as we spent more time with Ursula as a young woman and adult. Atkinson builds up a very full life (or lives) for her, with a rich family structure (three brothers, a sister, and a black-sheep aunt), a career in the civil service, and a variety of romantic entanglements that appear or vanish in the various incarnations. The structure now seems to be less a maze than a set of overlapping transparencies, different stories happening in different layers, with a few common elements drilled down through them. But you begin to suspect that there will be no one definitive version; these are all possible directions in which the author can develop a relatively simple series of facts, trying one thing and then the other, and never having to choose among them. In this sense, it is a kind of allegory of the writing process: this is what a novelist can do; isn't it exciting? Intermittently yes, but ultimately self-indulgent. Fiction, to engage me, must involve me with its characters and make me care about their fates. I certainly liked Ursula; but once

I realized that any setbacks in her life would immediately be replaced by another version, it became difficult to care about her. But I admit to being amazed how often Atkinson could draw me back in. In the latter half of the book there are half-a-dozen versions of the near-destruction of a London street, involving Ursula variously as an Air Raid Warden, or a victim trapped in a cellar, or the brave rescuer of a frightened dog. Almost any one of these, in a straight novel of the 1950s, would have been a tear-jerker; you can see the film treatment written all over them. But their plurality reminds you that they are mere artifacts; you may be impressed, but you also know you are being manipulated. In addition to reserving the right to present multiple versions of Ursula's story, Atkinson gives her a dim sense of her own multiplicity. She is subject to déjà vu, which is understandable and effective. She is occasionally frightened by a faint awareness of something happening in a parallel life. And to some extent she can see the future. It is this last that gives me the most trouble, because Atkinson uses it as a thread linking prologue and epilogue with a number of scenes set in Germany between the wars. It is a relatively minor thread, and much less interesting than Ursula's life in London, but I suspect the author intends it as a serious armature around which the other stories can be gathered. If so, it fails; the what-ifs of history pale beside the real thing. I couldn't shake the impression that Atkinson was practising the art of recycling, not just the various repeated episodes within the complex story, but also the styles and tropes of an earlier type of fiction. What I referred to as "comfort food" is the style I associate with the romantic novel of sixty years ago. Here, for example, are Ursula's parents discussing what to call the house they will eventually christen Fox Corner: "'We should give the house a name," Hugh said. "The Laurels, the Pines, the Elms." "But we have none of those in the garden," Sylvie pointed out. [...] "Greenacres, Fairview, Sunnymead?" Hugh offered, putting his arm around his bride.' It's an affectionate parody of nice middle-class people saying amusing things to one another, and the vaguely comic tone continues for some time thereafter, in knowing little parentheses and clever comments. Atkinson has used this tone before in her first novel, *Behind the Scenes at the Museum*, to devastating effect as the comedy suddenly turns serious. But there is no devastation here. Although the tone does become more serious towards the middle of the book, there is always that knowing detachment to undercut the emotional impact. Fun to read (4.5 stars), but ultimately so trivial (3).

POSTSCRIPT: Is it a recent trend of British writers to recycle the styles of popular novels to postmodern effect? Especially writing about one or other of the World Wars. The most recent example was *Sweet Tooth* by Ian McEwan, who starts in almost a parody of the "plucky girl gets involved in important war work" genre, but uses it for his own clever ends. The war story is only one genre used by Sebastian Faulks in *A Possible Life*, but his whole book depends upon the recasting of established

narrative types. I suppose this goes back to David Mitchell in *CLOUD ATLAS* (2004), although he so transcends his borrowed forms as to make them something new. But even relatively straight books about this period seemingly cannot help borrowing the romance-adventure style that goes with it. Simon Mawer, in *TRAPEZE*, cannot seem to decide between the plucky-girl romance and realism. William Boyd in *WAITING FOR SUNRISE* writes a saga of similar scope to Atkinson's, where the various tropes float just below the surface, giving a surely-deliberate sense of role-playing. Alan Hollinghurst covers exactly the same period as Atkinson in *THE STRANGER'S CHILD*, playing a clever game with literary expectations throughout -- but the novel is held together by his own superb sense of style, and there is nothing recycled about that. Then, finally, there is Penelope Lively, who has long been writing clever books about unexpected consequences in the lives of middle-class people, though her contrivances are all of the traditional variety; no post-modernism with her!

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