
BACK BAY · READERS' PICK

READING GROUP GUIDE

One Good Turn

A novel by
Kate Atkinson



A conversation with the author of *One Good Turn*

Kate Atkinson talks with Margy Rochlin of *LA Weekly* about mystery, her new novel, and, of course, her hair

Were you always interested in the mystery form?

I think we're all drawn to that kind of a book. It's the unfolding, isn't it? So the idea of having a mystery at the heart of a book has always been very appealing to me. Now everyone says, "You've turned to the crime genre," and I kind of go along with it and say, "Yes, sure . . ." But to me, I still have all the constituents that I had in my previous novels—the characters, the plot, and the story. I don't feel like I'm writing anything different. It's disingenuous, but that's how it feels.

In One Good Turn, the body count doesn't start until page 96, when private detective Jackson Brodie discovers the corpse of a beautiful young girl. Was it part of your plan to carefully set the stage before the killing spree commences?

It was never going to be a book that was littered with bodies. [Discovering a dead girl] was more because Jackson was needing something to do. He had been very inert up until that. When I was doing the body count again, I thought, "Actually, there's a lot more than I ever intended . . ." They kind of stacked up.

From your experience, how do hardcore crime fiction writers treat those who don't play by the genre rule book?

They're polite to me. [Laughs.] They don't say to me, "This isn't a proper crime book." Nobody actually says that out loud. Crime

writers are always telling me how incredibly friendly they are. So I must presume this is true. But I do get the feeling that I'm regarded as an interloper in someone else's territory.

How much planning goes into your interlocking story lines?

I never plot or diagram anything and I never lose track. It's different from a reader's point of view than from a writer's point of view. You write one character and stop them at a certain point so you know they're in the same time frame, staying very aware of what day it is and what point in the day. That way, I kind of naturally track them all. They all have to be up in the air at the same time.

Or passed out on a hotel-room floor, as one character ends up after being slipped a mickey of pills, vodka, and something called Irn-Bru . . .

That is the most disgusting soft drink you ever tasted in your life. I shouldn't say that. It's popular. It's orange and they advertise it as "made from girders." It looks like rust. There are a lot of things in the Scottish cuisine that you should give a very wide berth. Like Scotch pies. God knows what's in them. The scrapings of the abattoir floor. Not good.

One of the funniest characters in One Good Turn is Martin Canning, a timid bachelor who pens bestselling, almost crazily jolly mysteries set in 1940s England. Was it enjoyable to come up with his substandard prose?

I did actually enjoy the writing part, but I don't think of him like that. I think Martin's become the worst kind of genre writer, but he's been pushed into it. He has a better book in him. There's a part of me that wants to actually write one of Martin's books. It could be in a new edition with the Martin Canning book collapsed inside.

You've written plays, TV scripts, short stories, novels. Where do you get all the energy?

I'm fifty-four. I've done lovers, husbands, children; I'm on to grandchildren and living on my own. I don't need to go through all that life stuff so much. There's a lot of messy stuff that's out of the way now.

I read that you started writing fiction in the '80s after you flunked the oral exams for your doctorate at the University of Dundee.

It was a very political thing that happened to me. It had very much to do with departmental politics and was very unfair. I say that from a cool distance. Only much later did I realize that I was totally devastated. Academic writing and study had been a very creative thing for me. That's where I put a lot of my energy. Somehow everything I had been doing just disappeared. That very same university offered me an honorary doctorate last year and I wrote an incredibly polite letter back saying, "Thank you very much. But actually I would like my real one." [*Laughs.*] I heard nothing back.

What happened after you left the university?

I moved back to England. I then had a baby and transferred for a second time into motherhood. I was incredibly domesticated; I knitted, sewed, baked, made jam and preserves, kept house, and wondered why I was getting so frustrated. I started writing very personal fiction, very "Oh, God. My life is awful" kind of pieces. My doctorate was in the history of the short story since the world began, ending in America in the '60s and '70s. Because of that I was very aware of what made a good story. Then the first thing I ever sent anywhere won a big magazine competition. That was how I became a writer, really. It was a very slow burn. That was

from first putting pen to paper around 1982 to winning that competition in 1986 to a novel accepted in 1994.

In your first week of college you formed the Dundee University Women's Liberation Society. But you once said, "There's no sisterhood. Women are their own worst enemies and behave very, very badly in some circles and in particular the media." What's up with that?

The British media is foul—there's no way around that. After [I won] the Whitbread there was a lot of really snotty stuff. It's very difficult for people to put me in a box. The worst was the *Express*. There was a female reporter and she was very nice and pleasant and was wanting to ask me about my family and my childhood and all that crap. My mother used to help out part-time in my parents' [surgical supply] shop. [The reporter] said to me, "Did you feel that because your parents worked that you were neglected in any way?" I kind of went, "No," because it never even crossed my mind as a child. In the written interview it comes out, "I asked her if she felt neglected as a child and, though she denied it, a pained expression crossed over her features." [Laughs.] It was like, "FUCK YOU, LADY!"

At the *Guardian*, which is our most intellectual newspaper, [the reporter] was talking about my hair, my nails, and my clothes. She came up with a great line: "Meeting Atkinson is like expecting to eat Yorkshire pudding and instead getting sushi." Many of these lines are burned into my brain. They were just bitchy, really. In France, I'm just a writer. But in [the U.K.], I'm treated as a woman rather than a writer. There's a lot of gender politics here that people don't notice because it's so subtle. You don't take it. You're given it. You do an interview and everything is about your hair.

Margy Rochlin's interview with Kate Atkinson originally appeared in LA Weekly on November 1, 2006. Reprinted with permission.

Questions and topics for discussion

1. Kate Atkinson has said that Gloria “is the moral center of the book.” Did you find this to be true? Do you think that a novel with so many irreverent characters requires a moral center?
2. During Gloria’s discussion with Tatiana she realizes, “It was strange how something you weren’t expecting could, nonetheless, turn out to be no surprise at all” (page 78). To what extent are the characters in *One Good Turn* expecting the predicaments that befall them?
3. Atkinson writes, “Once, the eye of God watched people, now it was the camera lens” (page 28). How does technology figure into Jackson’s investigation? How does the “camera” compete with religion as a deterrent from illegal behavior?
4. Early on, Martin Canning, an innocent bystander, successfully stops the road-rage assault only to become the assailant’s next target. Do you agree with Martin’s decision? Would you do the same if you were in his position?
5. At the beginning of *One Good Turn*, we meet a changed Jackson Brodie—instead of working as a private detective in England, as he did in *Case Histories*, he lives in France as a retired millionaire and is dating Julia. How does this sea change affect Jackson’s outlook? What about him would you like to change in Kate Atkinson’s next novel?
6. While Jackson and Julia first appeared in *Case Histories*, Atkinson introduces several new characters in *One Good Turn*. Which new character did you enjoy the most?

7. Discuss the novel's title. Do you think the adage from which it is derived influences the characters' behavior?

8. Jackson is described as a man who “had money and behaved as if he hadn't,” while Julia “never had any money, yet she always behaved as if she had” (page 36). Do all the characters share this complicated relationship with money? How does greed affect their actions?

9. *One Good Turn* is set during the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, one of the largest arts festivals in the world. How does this unique setting serve as a backdrop for the events that transpire?

10. Several unexpected friendships are forged during the novel—Jackson and Martin, Gloria and Tatiana. How important are these new friendships to the story? Are there two characters in *One Good Turn* who did not meet and whom you hoped would cross paths?

A B O U T T H E A U T H O R

Kate Atkinson is the author of four previous novels—*Behind the Scenes at the Museum*, which won the Whitbread Award for Book of the Year; *Human Croquet*; *Emotionally Weird*; and *Case Histories*—and a collection of short fiction, *Not the End of the World*. She lives in Scotland.

. . . A N D H E R M O S T R E C E N T N O V E L

Kate Atkinson's next novel featuring Jackson Brodie, the detective hero of *Case Histories* and *One Good Turn*, will be published by Little, Brown and Company in fall 2008. Following is an excerpt from the novel's opening pages.

I



The heat rising up from the tarmac seemed to get trapped between the thick hedges that towered above their heads like battlements.

“Oppressive,” their mother said. They felt trapped too. “Like the maze at Hampton Court,” their mother said. “Remember?”

“Yes,” Jessica said.

“No,” Joanna said.

“You were just a baby,” their mother said to Joanna. “Like Joseph is now.” Jessica was eight, Joanna was six.

The little road (they always called it “the lane”) snaked one way and then another, so that you couldn’t see anything ahead of you. They had to keep the dog on the leash and stay close to the hedges in case a car “came out of nowhere.” Jessica was the eldest, so she was the one who got to hold the dog’s leash all the time. She spent a lot of her time training the dog, “Heel!” and “Sit!” and “Come!” Their mother said she wished Jessica were as obedient as the dog. Jessica was always the one who was in charge. Their mother said to Joanna, “It’s all right to have a mind of your own, you know. You should stick up for yourself, think for yourself,” but Joanna didn’t want to think for herself.

The bus dropped them on the big road and then carried on to somewhere else. It was “a palaver” getting them all off the bus.

Their mother held Joseph under one arm like a parcel and with her other hand she struggled to open out his buggy. Jessica and Joanna shared the job of lifting the shopping off the bus. The dog saw to himself. “No one ever helps,” their mother said. “Have you noticed that?” They had.

“Your father’s country fucking idyll,” their mother said as the bus drove away in a blue haze of fumes and heat. “Don’t you swear,” she added automatically. “I’m the only person allowed to swear.”

They didn’t have a car anymore. Their father (“the bastard”) had driven away in it. Their father wrote books, “novels.” He had taken one down from a shelf and shown it to Joanna, pointed out his photograph on the cover and said, “That’s me,” but she wasn’t allowed to read it, even though she was already a good reader (“Not yet, one day. I write for grown-ups, I’m afraid,” he said with a laugh. “There’s stuff in there, well . . .”).

Their father was called Howard Mason and their mother’s name was Gabrielle. Sometimes people got excited and smiled at their father and said, “Are you *the* Howard Mason?” (Or sometimes, not smiling, “*that* Howard Mason,” which was different, although Joanna wasn’t sure how.)

Their mother said that their father had uprooted them and planted them “in the middle of nowhere.” “Or Devon, as it’s commonly known,” their father said. He said he needed “space to write” and it would be good for all of them to be “in touch with nature.” “No television!” he said, as if that was a something they would enjoy.

Joanna still missed her school and her friends and *Wonder Woman* and a house on a street that you could walk along on your own to a shop where you could buy the “Beano” and a licorice stick and choose from three different kinds of apples instead of having to walk along a lane and a road and take two buses and then do the same thing all over again in reverse.

The first thing their father did when they moved to Devon was to buy six red hens and a hive full of bees. He spent all autumn

digging over the garden at the front of the house so it would be “ready for spring.” When it rained the garden turned to mud and the mud was trailed everywhere in the house; they even found it on their bed sheets. When winter came a fox ate the hens without them ever having laid an egg and the bees all froze to death, which was unheard-of, according to their father, who said he was going to put all those things in the book (“the novel”) he was writing. “So that’s all right, then,” their mother said.

Their father wrote at the kitchen table because it was the only room in the house that was even the slightest bit warm, thanks to the huge temperamental Aga that their mother said was “going to be the death of her.” “I should be so lucky,” their father muttered. (His book wasn’t going well.) They were all under his feet, even their mother.

“You smell of soot,” their father said to their mother. “And cabbage and milk.”

“And you smell of failure,” their mother said.

Their mother used to smell of all kinds of interesting things, paint and turpentine and tobacco and the Je Reviens perfume that their father had been buying for her since she was eighteen years old and that he said was a message to her, but neither Joanna nor Jessica knew what the message was. Their mother was “a beauty” according to their father, but their mother said she was “a painter,” although she hadn’t painted anything since they moved to Devon. “No room for two creative talents in a marriage,” she said in that way she had, raising her eyebrows while inhaling from the little brown cigarillos she smoked. She pronounced it *thigariyo* like a foreigner. When she was a child she had lived in faraway places that she would take them to one day. She was warm-blooded, she said, not like their father, who was a reptile. Their mother was clever and funny and nothing like their friends’ mothers.

The argument about who smelled of what wasn’t over, apparently. Their mother picked up a blue-and-white-striped jug from the dresser and threw it at their father, who was sitting at the table

staring at his typewriter as if the words would write themselves if he was patient enough. The jug hit him on the side of the head and he roared with shock and pain. With a speed that Joanna could only admire, Jessica plucked Joseph out of his high chair and said, “Come on,” to Joanna, and they went upstairs, where they tickled Joseph on the double bed that Joanna and Jessica shared. There was no heating in the bedroom, and the bed was piled high with eiderdowns and old coats that belonged to their mother. Eventually all three of them fell asleep, nestled in the mingled scents of damp and mothballs and Je Reviens.

When Joanna woke up, she found Jessica propped up on pillows, wearing gloves and a pair of earmuffs and one of the coats from the bed, drowning her like a tent. She was reading a book by flashlight.

“Electricity’s off,” she said, without taking her eyes off the book. On the other side of the wall they could hear the horrible animal noises that meant their parents were friends again. Jessica silently offered Joanna the earmuffs so that she didn’t have to listen.

When the spring finally came—a spring they were indeed more than ready for—instead of planting a vegetable garden, their father went back to London and lived with “his other woman”—which was a big surprise to Joanna and Jessica, although not, apparently, to their mother. Their father’s other woman, Martina was her name—the *poet*—their mother spat out the word as if it were a curse. Their mother called the other woman (*the poet*) names that were so bad that when they dared to whisper them (*bitch-cunt-whore-poet*) to each other beneath the bedclothes, they were like poison in the air.

Although now there was only one person in the marriage, their mother still didn’t paint.

They made their way along the lane in single file, “Indian-file,” their mother said. The plastic shopping bags hung from the han-

dles of the buggy, and if their mother let go, it tipped backward onto the ground.

“We must look like refugees,” she said. “Yet we are not downhearted,” she added cheerfully. They were going to move back into town at the end of the summer, “In time for school.”

“Thank God,” Jessica said, in just the same way their mother said it.

Joseph was asleep in the buggy, his mouth open, a faint rattle from his chest because he couldn’t shake off a summer cold. He was so hot that their mother stripped him to his diaper and Jessica blew on his thin-ribbed little body to cool him down until their mother said, “Don’t, you’ll wake him.”

There was the tang of manure in the air, and the smell of the musty grass and the cow parsley got inside Joanna’s nose and made her sneeze.

“Bad luck,” her mother said, “you’re the one that got my allergies.” Their mother’s dark hair and pale skin went to her “beautiful boy,” Joseph, her blue eyes and her “painter’s hands” went to Jessica. Joanna got the allergies. Bad luck. Joseph and their mother shared a birthday too, although Joseph hadn’t had any birthdays yet. In another week it would be his first. “That’s a special birthday,” their mother said. Joanna thought all birthdays were special.

Their mother was wearing Joanna’s favorite dress, blue with a pattern of red strawberries. Their mother said it was old, and next summer she would cut it up and make something for Joanna out of it if she liked. Joanna could see the muscles on her mother’s legs moving as she pushed the buggy up the hill. She was strong. Their father said she was “fierce.” Joanna liked that word. Jessica was fierce too. Joseph was nothing yet. He was just a baby, fat and happy. He liked oatmeal and mashed banana and the mobile of little paper birds their mother had made for him that hung above his cot. He liked being tickled by his sisters. He liked his sisters.

Joanna could feel sweat running down her back. Her thin summer dress was sticking to her skin. The dress was a hand-me-down

from Jessica. “Poor but honest,” their mother laughed. Her big mouth turned down when she laughed so that she never seemed happy even when she was. Everything Joanna had was handed down from Jessica. It was as if without Jessica there would be no Joanna. Joanna filled the spaces Jessica left behind as she moved on.

Invisible on the other side of the hedge, a cow made a bellowing noise that made her jump. “It’s just a cow,” her mother said.

“Red Devons,” Jessica said, even though she couldn’t see them. How did she know? She knew the names of everything, seen and unseen. Joanna wondered if she would ever know all the things that Jessica knew.

After you had walked along the lane for a while, you came to a wooden gate with a stile. They couldn’t get the buggy through the stile so they had to open the gate. Jessica let the dog off the leash and it scrambled up and over the gate in the way that Jessica had taught him. The sign on the gate said “Please Close The Gate Behind You.” Jessica always ran ahead and undid the clasp, and then they both pushed at the gate and swung on it as it opened. Their mother had to heave and shove at the buggy because all the winter mud had dried into deep awkward ruts that the wheels got stuck in. They swung on the gate to close it. Jessica checked the clasp. Sometimes they hung upside down on the gate and their hair reached the ground like brooms sweeping the dust and their mother said, “Don’t do that.”

The track bordered a field. “Wheat,” Jessica said. The wheat was very high, although not as high as the hedges in the lane. “They’ll be harvesting soon,” their mother said. “Cutting it down,” she added, for Joanna’s benefit. “Then we’ll sneeze, the pair of us.”

The dog ran into the field and disappeared. A moment later he sprang out of the wheat again. Last week Joanna followed the dog into the field and got lost and no one could find her for a long time. She could hear them calling her, moving farther and farther away. She didn’t realize she could have called back. The dog found her.

They stopped halfway along and sat down on the grass at the side of the track, under the shady trees. Their mother took the plastic carrier bags off the buggy handles and from one of bags brought out some little cartons of orange juice and a box of chocolate finger cookies. The orange juice was warm and the chocolate cookies had melted together. They gave some of the cookies to the dog. Their mother laughed with her downturned mouth and said, "God, what a mess," and looked in the diaper bag and found wipes for their chocolate-covered hands and mouths. When they lived in London they used to have proper picnics, loading up the trunk of the car with a big wicker basket that had belonged to their mother's mother, who was rich but dead (which was just as well, apparently, because it meant she didn't have to see her only daughter married to a selfish, fornicating waster). If their grandmother was rich, why didn't they have any money? "I eloped," their mother said. "I ran away to marry your father. It was very romantic. At the time. We had nothing."

"You had the picnic basket," Jessica said and their mother laughed and said, "You can be very funny, you know."

Joseph woke up and their mother undid the front of her strawberry-covered dress and fed him. He fell asleep while he was sucking. "Poor lamb," their mother said. "He can't shake off this cold." She put him back in the buggy and said, "Right. Let's get home. We can get out the garden hose and you can cool off."

He seemed to come out of nowhere. They noticed him because the dog growled, making an odd, bubbling noise in his throat that Joanna had never heard before.

He walked very fast toward them, growing bigger all the time. He was making a funny huffing, puffing noise. You expected him to walk past and say "Nice afternoon" or "Hello" because people always said that if you passed them in the lane or on the track, but he didn't say anything. Their mother would usually say "Lovely day" or "It's certainly hot, isn't it?" when she passed people, but she didn't say anything to the man. Instead she set off walking fast,

pushing hard on the buggy. She left the plastic bags of shopping on the grass, and Joanna was going to pick one up, but their mother said, "Leave it." There was something in her voice, something in her face, that frightened Joanna. Jessica grabbed her by the hand and said, "Hurry up, Joanna," sharply, like a grown-up. Joanna was reminded of the time their mother threw the blue-and-white-striped jug at their father.

Now the man was walking in the same direction that they were, on the other side of their mother. Their mother was moving very fast, saying, "Come on, quickly, keep up," to them. She sounded breathless. Then the dog ran in front of the man and started barking and jumping up as if it were trying to block the man's path. Without any warning he kicked the dog so hard that it sailed into the air and landed in the wheat. They couldn't see it, but they could hear the terrible squealing noise that it was making. Jessica stood in front of the man and screamed something at him, jabbing her finger at him and taking great gulps of air as if she couldn't breathe, and then she ran into the field after the dog.

Everything was bad. There was no question about it.

Joanna was staring at the wheat, trying to see where Jessica and the dog had gone, and it took a moment for her to notice that her mother was fighting the man, punching him with her fists. But the man had a knife, and he kept raising it in the air so that it shone like silver in the hot afternoon sun. Her mother started to scream. There was blood on her face, on her hands, on her strong legs, on her strawberry dress. Joanna realized that her mother wasn't screaming at the man, she was screaming at her.

Their mother was cut down where she stood, the great silver knife carving through her heart as if it were slicing butcher's meat. She was thirty-four years old.

He must have stabbed Jessica too before she ran off, because there was a trail of blood, a path that led them to her, although

not at first because the field of wheat had closed around her, like a golden blanket. She was lying with her arms around the body of the dog, and their blood had mingled and soaked into the dry earth, feeding the grain, like a sacrifice to the harvest. Joseph died where he was, strapped into the pushchair. Joanna liked to think that he never woke up but she didn't know.

And Joanna. Joanna obeyed her mother when she screamed at her. "Run, Joanna, run," she said and Joanna ran into the field and was lost in the wheat.

Later, when it was dark, other dogs came and found her. "Not a scratch on her," someone said. A stranger lifted her up and carried her away. The stars were bright in the cold black sky above her head.

Of course, she should have taken Joseph with her, she should have snatched him from the buggy, or run with the buggy. Jessica would have done that. But she never even thought about Joseph, she just did as she was told. "Run, Joanna, run," her mother commanded. So she did.

It was funny but now, thirty years later, the thing that drove her to distraction was that she couldn't remember what the dog was called. And there was no one left to ask.

Also by Kate Atkinson

Case Histories

“Not just the best novel I read this year, but the best mystery of the decade. . . . I defy any reader not to feel a combination of delight and amazement.” —Stephen King, *Entertainment Weekly*

“*Case Histories* is so exuberant, so empathetic, that it makes most murder-mystery page-turners feel as lifeless as the corpses they’re strewn with.” —Jacqueline Carey, *New York Times Book Review*

Not the End of the World

“Atkinson’s clever, funny prose makes a believer of the biggest skeptic. Her offbeat stories merge myth and human experience to provide a great escape from the duller world of everyday life.”

—Jillian Dunham, *Chicago Tribune*

“A marvelously loopy story collection. . . . Clearly a practitioner of writing as bewitchment, Atkinson casts a dazzling spell with her mostly befuddled figures, whose loves and loathing surface in equal measure and surprising ways.” —Lisa Shea, *Elle*



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