

BACK BAY · READERS' PICK

Reading Group Guide

WHEN WILL THERE BE GOOD NEWS?

A novel by

KATE ATKINSON



A conversation with Kate Atkinson

Nancy Pearl talks with the author on the occasion
of the U.S. publication of *One Good Turn*.

I have to say first of all that I am a huge fan of your books. I think I began with your first novel, Behind the Scenes at the Museum, with that wonderful, wonderful opening line.

“I am conceived.”

“I am conceived”—right. It’s just been so gratifying to me as a reader to follow your career and see how you’ve gone in many different directions.

Thank you.

One Good Turn is a sequel to Case Histories, and it seems to me that in some ways in both books you’ve taken literary fiction and given it a little mystery twist. Is that accurate?

I never set out to do anything, I should say first. The question of genre has been much more prominent in America, I’ve noticed. I set out to write a book in the same way I always set out to write a book. I didn’t think, I’m going to write a book that’s a mystery or a crime novel.

Originally the characters in *Case Histories* were going on a boat. But they had such huge backstories that I realized they would never embark. So I went back to the backstories, and because they involved old cold crime cases, they needed someone to investigate them in order for those cases to be solved. That’s really how the detective figure came about. And once you put a detective into a book it becomes a crime novel. There doesn’t seem to be any way around that. Not that I wouldn’t want to write a crime novel but,

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you know, that's it, it's become one. I still don't think I write crime novels. But everyone else now does.

We do pay so much attention to that here in the States, partly because in libraries and bookstores we insist on shelving those separately. I can argue against our practice of doing that because then I think you sometimes lose out on other works by the author or you're so narrowly categorizing yourself and your reading.

In Britain, and on the continent as well, because I have a big established readership, they haven't changed anything, it's still a Kate Atkinson novel. They just sort of say, "Well, it's got crime in it," or "It's a crime novel"—but they don't really classify.

Whereas here, because I've had a new publisher for the past three or four years, and they have relaunched me, I've been "reborn." I get a lot of people in America saying to me, "I really liked your first book," and they mean *Case Histories*. I never say, "Well, actually, there's another four you could read." It's like I'm a new Kate Atkinson. That worries me a little, because . . . I'm not being called a crime writer so much as the books are being called crime novels. It worries me that now when I don't write a crime novel there's going to be this huge disappointment.

You kind of have to remain true to how you feel about your writing. Otherwise you get very confused because you'd be trying to please readers. And how could you possibly please readers? You can't. The only person you can please is yourself.

Do you think it's true that you write the novel that you want to read?

Yes, I think I do. Although really I'd prefer if someone else wrote it, because it would be much easier!

I am my best reader. I am the reader who understands the book completely, and I write to amuse myself. I mean I never feel that I'm

writing for other people. I am conscious of how the book will be read by other people, because that definitely modifies certain things, but they're to do with comprehension. You know: Will someone understand this? Does this dialogue make clear the tone that it's being said in? And things like that. So you are aware of a kind of universal—not so much a universal reader, but just how it reads.

I was so pleased when you just said you write to amuse yourself because one of the things that struck me especially about One Good Turn is how much fun you must have had writing it, because it's so clever—not clever in a show-offy way, but it's so intricate. It's a book that in some way keeps turning on itself.

I think the actual amusement or the pleasure that I get from that is in achieving it, because it's very nerve-racking. When you suddenly realize a hundred or so pages into the book you're writing that it's quite complicated, and it's going to get more complicated, then you begin to worry that you can't actually do it. That you can't get everybody into the right place, doing the right things, whatever it's going to be. Because I don't know what the characters are going to do, it's also a case of: What *are* they going to do? Why are they here? What am I doing with it? And that becomes not amusing at all, actually, more like a strain. So in a sense the amusement is in the characters—well, I suppose *amusement* is the wrong word. I am entertaining myself. I am pleasing myself, I suppose. And it's in the characters, that's where the pleasure is. The characters are easier to be inside than the plot is to control, in some ways, I think.

Is Jackson Brodie, who is the main character, the detective, in Case Histories and One Good Turn . . . do you have strong feelings for him? Are you in love with Jackson Brodie?

Absolutely not. I would really dislike having to live with Jackson, I have to say. I think he's a bit of a pain. In this book I think he's more depressive than he has been previously.

He's really a woman, I've decided. It's difficult to create a male character, I think, for a woman, because you're not sure, you're never very sure about it. And I think I just made him a woman with very manly attributes. You know, lots of women really like him and I'm sure that's the reason. Inside he's soft, and he likes women, and he wants to protect women. The fact that he wants to protect women is the reason women like him. He definitely has that type of sheepdog herding instinct which I think women really value.

In my own family I have a son-in-law who's a herder, he's a sheepdog, and we always say—as a family we're all girls—if we got stuck on this hillside and we couldn't get back because we'd all broken our legs and nobody knew where we were in the whole world, *he* would find us. I think that's the kind of paradigm of a guy—the guy who will find you. That for me is Jackson's great attribute. But, actually, as a man—I don't know—I think he'd get on my nerves.

Do you then feel that it's easier for you to create your women characters? Because your other books were about mothers and daughters, for example, and those kinds of female relationships.

I think it's much easier for me to get into the head of a woman, yes, because there are so many things I don't have to think about, which I have to be conscious of with male characters. So in this book the two women, Gloria and Louise—I never had to think twice about how they would feel about their families, their partners, their lives. It just came naturally. Whereas with the men I had to think, Well, how would a man feel about this? The other man in the book is a wimp, he's a nerdy kind, not a manly man at all, and in a way that's easier. It's when you come to the more heterosexual males that you have to think.

One of the reasons I now realize that I didn't approach men as characters is that I had no brothers, and I've had no sons, so I've never seen how little boys develop. I've never seen boys grow into

men. I don't know what forms the male psyche, because I've never witnessed it at close hand. Now I have a grandson, and my attitude is quite different because I observe him. I'm kind of terrible, really, because I watch him and I go to my daughter, "Why is he doing that?" And she's going, "I don't know." There's a sense that they're so different.

But your characters are not in any way based—or are they?—on real people.

No, not at all. A lot of people always think we writers base our characters on real people or we use real people as inspiration. There are moments when you look at people—usually when you don't know them, and you observe in airports or in restaurants or something—and you think: That would be a good character. I can see what he's like, I can see what she's like—that'll be a character. You either forget, of course . . . that's the other thing I do, I'm not one of those writers who carries notebooks around. But when it comes to the book, the necessities of plot and structure are such that they will always dictate what has to be done with the characters. So that you may start with this idea for a character, but it will be changed almost immediately, because you can't use real people like that. Characters are always either entirely imaginary or they have bits of people or things you've observed.

Sort of mosaics . . .

But, really, they're mostly imaginary.

Do you start then with your characters?

I don't know how I start.

I start with a feeling. Not my feeling, but how I want the book to feel. I have this sense, and I don't know what it is and I can never

describe it, but it's like an ambience. You know, you kind of know how it would feel if you were reading it. And in a way that is voice. You know, that mysterious thing that people always talk about—"Find your voice"—and you think, what does that mean? But in a way each book has its own voice and it's finding what that voice feels like that's important. Once you've got that, you're OK. Sometimes it takes a long time to get the feeling of a novel. But characters come with it.

In *Case Histories* I had these characters before they had a book. With this book a couple of the characters actually started off in another book, so they came quite fully formed. Characters in a way occupy their own little microcosm, and sometimes they can be just slotted into the book, which is very handy.

How much do you have on hand, say, about a character—I mean, you talk about the backstory. So how much of that do you actually write before you begin? Or is that mostly in your head?

Oh, nothing. I never do all those character notes. They just come. It is an act of creation. You know, one minute nothing, the next minute character. I find it fascinating. I find creating characters a really interesting puzzle. People don't really talk about that much. I'm sure there are people who sit down and think, Well, she's going to be in her fifties and have green eyes and . . . but that's not how characters are. I never really know how they look.

Really?

And I never really describe much how they look. Just occasionally a character gets a little bit more of a description than another, but generally speaking, to me they're pretty amorphous. It's their interior lives that are interesting. And once I've got the feeling—again—of what they're like inside, then that's it. I can slip into them, and I know them, and that makes them very easy to write.

Are there any characters in your books who have surprised you, who have demanded in their own way to do something that you didn't expect?

There's a character in *Human Croquet*, to go way back, called Vinny, who is an old woman, a sort of dried-up stick of an old woman, who I always meant to be nasty and vicious. But I grew very fond of her and she got infinitely more mellow and likable. So she surprised me. I thought the book would dictate that she would have to have this certain character and she didn't. Also, in the same book, I killed off my favorite character, and I didn't think I would do that. That was Eliza, the mother, and I was quite surprised that I killed off a character I liked so much and indeed gave her so little room in the book and so little time on the page.

There are always things that characters do that I don't know they're going to do, and that again is part of my entertaining myself in a book. In this book, without giving any of the plot away, I never knew the ending. I could have gone a different way. And that was a very large part of a particular character. So there are always things I hold in reserve for myself. Not because I wanted to surprise myself, but I'm never really sure how the book will go and how things need to be done. Sometimes characters have to do surprising things because the book needs them to do surprising things. Which is always quite interesting.

Did you have a feeling when you were writing Case Histories that you would bring back Jackson and Julia?

I felt I would revisit Jackson at some point, but I didn't think it would be straight away. But when I finished *Case Histories*, I thought, I'll carry on, because it had written very easily, and I thought, Well, I've still got, you know, the feeling of that book.

But then I thought, No, don't do that, you don't want to write a sequel. And I stopped for a year and then came back to it and I

approached it in a very different way. So although it's got two of the same characters in it, it's got a very different feel. *Case Histories* is very sad and melancholy with a very emotional heart, whereas this book has a much more playful heart, I think—even though the body count is quite high.

After having messed about a bit for a year, thinking, What am I going to do next? I am now kind of drawn back to thinking, Well, it would be more balanced to have a trilogy here, just to do another one and then say, OK, I'm leaving that for a while because I've done enough of that. I find the rule of three quite powerful. So I think that's probably what I will do. Because I will leave the character in a bettered state. You know, I don't actually like the way I've left Jackson at the end of this book entirely.

Oh. See, I thought the ending in a way opened the door for . . .

It opens the door, certainly. But it doesn't quite leave me happy with Jackson as a character. And I feel that he has a journey to go on that he may as well go on now as opposed to waiting a couple of years, so I think I will send him on that journey.

That's so interesting.

This is a very complicated plot, and it's told from different points of view. To me it's a sign of an enjoyable read—I'm really getting into the book—that when I came to the end of one person's section I wanted to go on with that person. And then there was this new person and I wondered, Oh, what's going to happen? I kept thinking about what it must have been like juggling a lot of balls.

Because it's in a very tight time frame—it's four days, mostly three days, in fact, which is what I had wanted to do—and because there are four main characters, and you don't often stray beyond those four main characters, I found that as long as I knew where

they were I was all right with them. I would think, It's morning, they're all going to wake up, basically, they're all going to have early morning, so where is Martin when he wakes up? And then I would sort of do his morning and then I would think, Where was Jackson when Martin was doing all that? So I always sort of had them level pegging, and I write sequentially nearly always, so I just would move from one character to the next and think, OK, it's lunchtime now and he's over at Northbridge, so where is she going to be at lunch? And that way I kept track of them and it was actually easier than I thought it was going to be.

Do you enjoy writing more in the first person, or do you think each book just says, "This is how I need to be written"?

Well, my first three books are in the first person, I think, aren't they? Gosh, I can't even remember. I'm pretty sure they are first-person narratives. I really wanted to move away from that, because I thought, Enough's enough.

That's really one of the reasons I wrote a volume of stories at that point, because I wanted to get out of the "I" narrative and also because I wanted to discover a kind of more spontaneous joy in writing. In the course of those stories I discovered the interior monologue, which I never really explored before. It kind of looks as if I did in those first three books because I'm writing in the first person. But it's not true. I think that was a great liberation—to be able to explore inside a character and not really have any strictures on you. You know, the parameters are quite wide once you move inside a character's head.

So I'm no longer in the first person, but I'm not really in the third person either. I was just thinking that today. You know, when you're on a plane—I've just flown in here—you think a lot about what it is you're writing back home that you're not getting the chance to actually write. And I was thinking: I find it very hard

to move into a straight third-person, omniscient kind of narrator, and I think it would be a nice challenge for me perhaps in another book to really do that. But then I think I'd become an overly omniscient narrator, perhaps.

Interior monologue is absolutely my favorite form at the moment, because I find it so easy. Once you're inside that character's head you just somehow know. You know what they would do, how they would behave, what they would think. It involves much less *authorial* thinking.

Do you look for that in other books—not that you've written, but books that you've read and enjoyed?

I don't look for anything in another novel. No, really. I'm just always amazed that anyone can write. I just think writing is . . . what astonishes me is that there are so many books. There are so many people who can write, I just find that amazing. I'm delighted by books even when I dislike them.

Do you think you write comedies of manners?

I think that's a lovely phrase, *comedies of manners*. In fact, I should start saying that, because whenever you're in a cab the cabdriver says, "What do you do?" and you say, "I'm a writer," and they go, "What do you write?" and I always kind of go, "Books." So I shall start saying, "Comedies of manners."

I think that's great, because that's how I would describe your books.

And that is how I shall describe them in the future.

Good. If somebody was going to ask you to describe your books, what adjective would you use to describe your fiction?

Funny. Well, *humorous* perhaps would be a better word. *Dark.* What else? *Entertaining.*

See, I would say—

What would you say? Now three words from you.

Three words from me. I would say intelligent . . .

Oh, that's not—I can't say that. That would be hubris, you see.

I think they're extremely intelligent in the sense that the plots are complex. I can't imagine, as a reader, how you manage to bring it all around to a satisfactory ending. I think that that complexity is something I always appreciate as a reader. So I think intelligent, I think complex plots, and I think humorous. And not funny, because I don't think these are laugh-aloud, but they are comedies in that kind of social comedy sense.

But I'm thinking, when you said darkish, I'm thinking about Hilary Mantel, who I think is very dark indeed. And I don't know that I would say you're quite as dark.

Well, I suppose because I do dark and light. I'm a dualist at heart. I have tried to write seriously, without any humor, and it doesn't work because the humor, such as it is, always comes out naturally. So I cannot write an entirely serious piece. It just doesn't work. I can't do it. Physically I can't do it. Nor can I write a completely comic piece. When I write, it's just . . . they seem to roll over each other naturally.

And don't you think that that's like a definition of a comedy of manners in a sense? Because the humor in your books arises from the human condition.

It arises from behavior, yes.

Which is intrinsically human behavior.

And it's dark and light as well.

Exactly. One last question: If someone said, "I've never read a Kate Atkinson book. What should I read?" which one would you say?

I would say the stories, *Not the End of the World*, because, to me, that's my best writing. Also because I enjoyed writing them, so my attitude to them is one of great friendliness.

Well, I guess I have one more quick question, too. What about reviews?

I don't like reviews.

Good or bad, you don't like them.

Good or bad, I don't like them. Some of my best friends are reviewers, but I never review, because I just couldn't write about someone else's writing. But that's from a writer's point of view, obviously. I don't like reviews because I don't like being out there, being—generally speaking, always, at some point—misunderstood. And you have no comeback. It's not a discussion, it's not a dialogue, it's one person saying what they think about you, and you never get to say what you think about them, which is very irritating.

Adapted from the interview with Kate Atkinson that originally aired on Book Lust with Nancy Pearl on the Seattle Channel on December 4, 2006. To view the entire interview, visit www.seattlechannel.org/videos/watchVideos.asp?program=booklust. Reprinted with permission.

Questions and topics for discussion

1. Many of the characters in *When Will There Be Good News?* have lost family members: Joanna loses her mother, sister, and baby brother in the novel's opening pages; Reggie's mother has recently drowned; and Jackson lost his mother, brother, and sister in the course of a year when he was twelve. In view of these tragedies, compare Joanna's, Reggie's, and Jackson's respective outlooks on life with those of the other characters in the novel.
2. The question of Nathan's paternity haunts Jackson Brodie. Why? How might Jackson's life change if he discovered he was Nathan's father? Is Jackson a good father to Marlee?
3. With *When Will There Be Good News?*—and previously also in *Case Histories* and *One Good Turn*—Kate Atkinson introduced elements of the traditional crime novel into her fiction. Other than the “crime,” what elements make up a crime novel? What crime-fiction conventions can you discern in this book?
4. *When Will There Be Good News?* has three central female characters: Joanna, Louise, and Reggie. Discuss the ways in which these three central characters are similar. Which of the three would you most like to encounter again in a subsequent novel by Kate Atkinson?
5. Of Jackson Brodie, Atkinson writes, “How ironic that both Julia and Louise, the two women he'd felt closest to in his recent past, had both unexpectedly got married, and neither of them to him” (page 90). What are the chances that Jackson will ever have a successful romantic relationship? Why do you

think he has been unlucky so far, even though he is such an appealing character?

6. Discuss the idea of “good” characters and “evil” characters in *When Will There Be Good News?* Do you think the novel’s central characters are either essentially “good” or essentially “evil,” or are they a combination of both? How do Louise, Reggie, and Jackson—each of whom breaks the law to achieve the “right” result—figure into your viewpoint? What is the moral code at work in the novel?
7. Death, violence, and hardship seem to stalk Reggie, yet she remains remarkably resilient. What do you think sustains her?
8. Discuss the institution of marriage as it is portrayed in the novel. Consider Louise’s marriage, Joanna’s marriage, Jackson’s marriage, and Julia’s marriage. Are there any characters in the novel who are happily married?
9. Jackson Brodie believes that “a coincidence is just an explanation waiting to happen” (page 319). Discuss some of the coincidences in *When Will There Be Good News?* Do they make the story seem more real? Or less real?
10. Despite the novel’s title and the early statement that “everything was bad. There was no question about it” (page 10), there are many instances of humor in the story. Do you think *When Will There Be Good News?* is essentially a humorous novel with tragic events or a tragic novel with moments of levity?