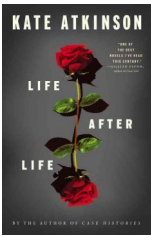


Life after Life



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Oh my, what happens when a novel's lead character dies on the fourth page? Alas, Dr. Fellowes never made it to Ursula's birth (at least not this time around)?he was busy treating a man trampled by a bull.

This novel made many "best book" of the year lists. On a cold winter's night in 1910, a baby girl was born to the Todd family, but alas poor Ursula was born blue. Then she is born again and the family cat, Queenie, smothers her (not necessarily on purpose.) She's born again and drowns while swimming in the sea with her older sister Pamela.

But in between all the births and deaths, (her younger brother Teddy, has his own run-ins with nasty accidents and reincarnation), a lot happens to the Todd family. Hugh, the father, is a banker, and his wife Sylvie, a rather uninvolved mother. In a style and format all her own, Kate Atkinson has reimagined the historical novel.

It's not your typical novel that follows a tight chronological sequence. In fact, the same dates appear again and again: 11 February, 1910; June, 1914; January 1915; June 1918; and 11 November 1918. Imagine my excitement when we finally and unexpectedly hit September 1923? In-between all these stops and starts a lot happens. The two oldest children Maurice and Pamela go to university, but Ursula, a middle child, has always been the odd one out. Her parents sent her to see a psychiatrist when she was only 10, quite a modern thing to do. And one of Maurice's college buddies?a tall American?raped Ursula when she was only sixteen and ignorant of the ways of sex. This and the resulting pregnancy changed the lead character in many ways.

All the while Atkinson captures the feel of the times. She provides a vivid portrait of the wild and emancipated Aunt Lizzie, a glamorous writer who occasionally takes Ursula or Teddy under her wing, usually for her own selfish reasons. She also shows the freedom the young men have, and conversely, the tight control and low expectations for women even of the upper classes.

Do you know how you feel when reading a novel and something bad happens? Do you sometimes do a quick rewrite in your head: no, don't let that bomb fall over their house, don't let that man hit Ursula, or get away with blindfolding all the typists in training? Well Atkinson does some of those rewrites for you. She writes another version of a scene that incorporates reincarnation in most cases, and suddenly, you see a spunky, knowledgeable Ursula rebelling against society to protect herself.

For a decidedly different historical novel that captures the feel of Britain during and between the world wars, this book is a sure bet. And if you like novels that playfully explore time, also see Audrey Niffenegger's *The Time Traveler's Wife* ..

Posted by Dory L. on February 21, 2014

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