



Life After Life

Kate Atkinson

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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 to an 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 a variety of ways, while the young century marches on towards its second cataclysmic world war.

Does Ursula's apparently infinite number of lives give her the power to save the world from its inevitable destiny? And if she can — will she?

Darkly comic, startlingly poignant, and utterly original — this is Kate Atkinson at her absolute best.

Life After Life Details

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Author : Kate Atkinson

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From Reader Review Life After Life for online ebook

Banafsheh Serov says

I wanted to like this book. I wish I could enjoy it. I bought it with such enthusiasm, and couldn't wait to start reading it. But alas, I sensed almost at the very start that it wasn't going to be a happy relationship - a point confirmed by mid-way through the book.

The length, the repetitive scenes, the incredible number of times Ursula dies and is reborn, are all tedious and terrible torment to get through. 2/3rds in, I found myself offended for having my time wasted. Surely Atkinson could show the courtesy of not subjecting her readers to so many repetitive scenarios.

I cannot fault Atkinson's writing nor do I have any particular dislike for her characters (I rather liked Izzy the best). But the plot lost my interest fairly early on and by the end, I positively wanted to hurl it at a wall (I didn't. I'm rather fond of my walls).

My apologies for offending anyone with this review. I understand our tastes are subjective and many simply adore this book. But I'm not one of them.

John Herbert says

Oh dear dear dear dear!

Obviously I'm on another planet to all the other reviewers here, but try as I might, I simply had to give up on page 265...and call it a day.

The concept of constant re-births and lives was a good one but sadly, for me, the incidents throughout were so tame and tepid, and the characters that popped into Ursula's lives were so boring, I'm afraid the whole thing was like watching paint dry.

Remember that feeling of rushing to get back to a book to read what happens next? This was the exact opposite - dreaded picking it up, and trying to dredge up some interest in this conglomeration of non-entities!

Having paid £15.99 for this attractive looking hardback, I felt that I had to do the payment justice and at least give it a good try....but just over half way.....enough was enough!!!

If you want to really read a book that does this multi-life premise true justice, then read KEN GRIMWOOD'S book entitled REPLAY.
Now you're talking.

Tanya says

Ursula Todd is born in the midst of a blizzard in 1910, not once, but many times, during the course of her life - living only to die and be born again, repeatedly, traveling many paths until she lives the life she was meant to live.

Kate Atkinson's writing is superb, and lyrical enough that it carried me through to the end of this book. The plot, however, left me floundering for weeks, trying desperately to claw my way to the end of this depressing tale. While the premise - reincarnation and destiny - is interesting, the execution left me frustrated.

The early chapters of the book are very short, as Ursula is born, dies, and is reborn again with rapid succession. With each successive life, she lives longer (in most cases) and is developed more and more as a character. The choppy format of the early chapters make it difficult to get attached to Ursula, but as she lives longer, it becomes more and more apparent that she lives a sad, depressing life. In addition, as a result of her continued rebirth, it's difficult to become attached to her, or to feel any real regret or sadness at her passing. Also strange is that, as often as you meet them throughout Ursula's life, her siblings never really become fully realized characters. As they move in and out of her life, these siblings play important roles in the paths she follows, yet they remain rather one-dimensional, as though Atkinson couldn't be bothered to spend the time on them.

The book was also a bit too meandering in its plot. Lives that led no where interesting or important wandered on for far too long, while lives that seemed to be leading somewhere ended abruptly, only to pick up again to follow another pointless path. Perhaps this was Atkinson's exploration of the capricious nature of fate, but it made for some rough reading. About 100 pages of this novel could have been trimmed and it would only have improved the quality. Forty of those hundred pages should have been the last forty of the book - the last few "lives" lived by Ursula were confusing and unnecessary to the novel.

All in all, the writing was exactly what you'd expect from Atkinson (wonderful), but the story itself was confusing, lifeless, and somewhat empty. A hundred fewer pages, a different ending, and more fully fleshed-out secondary characters would have resulted in a 4 star book for me.

(I received a review copy from the publisher in exchange for a review.)

Trudi says

I'm pretty sure the idea of being forced to live my life over and over again is something plucked from my worst nightmares, but who among us hasn't been at least tempted to dream of it occasionally with a wistful sigh. Please, please, please, just one more chance to live the best moments again and when necessary, to make different choices? But I would imagine if any of us were actually tasked to unravel all the "right" and "wrong" choices from our life and to relive the bad with the good, we'd go screaming into the night like raving banshees.

For what is a perfect life? How many kicks at the can would it take for you to answer that question, if it is indeed answerable at all? Change one thing, change everything, change nothing, change all the good, change all the bad. Round and round and round. It's exhausting just thinking about it. What's the saying? If I only knew then, what I know now...what? What would you do different? And would different choices always translate into *better* choices?

Ursula is a normal British girl except she's pretty certain she's lived her life before, maybe many, many times. The older she gets, the stronger these feelings of *deja vu* become, hounding her like ghosts in the night. Her prescience is rarely crystal clear, more like moods or instinct. Do this. Don't do that. Run away. Run toward. Stay still.

Life After Life starts slow and unassuming. The story is teasing, the pacing a dawdling, scenic walk through

the English countryside. But from the very first page I was enthralled and little did I realize what a powerful spell Atkinson was casting on my reader brain. Because as you continue to read, the book picks up gravity and speed and texture. Each life after life reinforces the tender bonds you have been working on with each of the characters. Your acquaintance with them is not one brief life, but many, many lives. Like Ursula we are both cursed and blessed with the long view, the big picture. We come to know all the various permutations of death, cruelty, love and loss. We bear witness through two World Wars and how some forces, no matter how forewarned, are unstoppable, greater even than the hand of time.

This is a very *English* story, and is steeped in pre-1950 historical detail. Not ever having watched an episode of *Downton Abbey* I'll go out on a limb here and suggest fans of that show will love this novel for its acute sense of time and attention to detail. Atkinson is ruthless in her pursuit for authenticity. This is wartime England, no time to pussyfoot around. This has got to be *right*, and in her quest I believe she succeeds magnificently. The details are small but glorious, and paint such an intimate portrait you will feel absorbed into Ursula's quiet family life where there are disagreements and births, and jealousies and forgiveness. Yes, there is the rumble of the earth as the German bombs fall during the Blitz, but such terrible moments co-exist with the stark ordinariness of a life lived. Dinners, and picnics, and birthdays and games of cricket, and work, and gardening, and lots and lots of *tea*.

"Ow!" one of the evacuees squealed beneath the table. "Some bugger just kicked me." ...Something cold and wet nosed itself up Ursula's skirt. She hoped very much that it was the nose of one of the dogs and not one of the evacuees.

This knowledge of the ATS girl's background seemed to particularly infuriate Edwina, who was gripping the butter knife in her hand as if she were planning to attack someone with it-- Maurice or the ATS girl, or anyone within stabbing distance by the look of it. Ursula wondered how much harm a butter knife could do. Enough she supposed.

There is whimsy and humor laced throughout this novel and it makes for a beautiful contrast to the more serious components of tragedy and war. Life is a farce after all; if you can't find the humor in it you've been doing it wrong or have missed the point entirely. Atkinson has not missed the point. As readers, we are in capable hands. She has one helluva story to tell you, and trust me, you don't want to miss it.

This review can also be found at [Busty Book Bimbo](#).

Jason says

I'm rating this book two stars only on a technicality...which is that technically speaking, this book sucks.

Ursula Todd is an English-born nobody. Born into a large wealthy family, there isn't a whole lot about her that stands out. She shares a closeness with one or two of her siblings, but overall she has a pretty meek personality and remains largely invisible most of her life—with the caveat that “most of her life” in Ursula's case actually means “most of her *lives*” because this bitch keeps on dropping dead and coming back again.

Life After Life is a book that focuses on Ursula's slow build-up, over the course of multiple lives (because it takes her hundreds of tries to get it right), to assassinating Adolf Hitler. This is not a spoiler, by the way. The assassination occurs on page one. The hundreds of lives it takes for her to get to that point occur on pages two through five hundred twenty-nine. And that includes the following exits, stage left (spoiler alert if you're a *Final Destination* fan): umbilical cord strangulation, asphyxiation by natural gas, blunt force trauma by a falling brick wall, blunt force trauma by a homicidal husband, suicide by cyanide capsule, stroke (or whatever the hell that was on the park bench), falling off a roof, Spanish flu, drowning, Blitz bombing. Some

of these happen repeatedly because it takes Ursula several lives to figure out that she's doing something wrong and needs to adjust her strategy. She can't exactly *remember* her previous deaths, but she does know something is amiss and can occasionally execute a modification to her preordained path and avoid that outcome...only to have a different mortal outcome occur in its stead, of course. (But truthfully, most of the time the modification occurs on its own without her having to do anything at all. Magic!)

And that is what is most bothersome to me, I think (besides her dull personality). It is exhausting to read about a woman dying over and over again only to be reborn right back where she started, and all without seeming to have any input into anything whatsoever. She just goes along with the program, a plastic bag beaten about by the wind. All the dumb things she has done along the way, all the idiots she enters into relationships with, it all starts over, and then you start to get confused as to who's alive and who's dead in this new life of hers and is she still with this person? Is she a mother this time around? A spinster? And then you start to realize that who cares. It doesn't matter. She'll just die again anyway. In fact the only time she ever starts to make real decisions is toward the end of the novel after she has lived a ludicrous number of lives, and are we supposed to be at this point rooting for her? What most of us have just one lifetime to figure out she gets hundreds, and even so it's *still* not enough? One of my favorite of Ursula's decisions is that after dying a bunch of times in the Blitz, she decides to spend her next life somewhere safer and moves from London to fucking Munich.

Good grief.

Also, the character interactions, which is something I usually enjoy in novels, is pretty nonexistent here. Characters don't have meaningful interactions in *Life After Life*; they merely quip and provide one-liners before the narrative moves onto the next scene (which is often just as dull). Reading this book ultimately became tiresome to me, which is not really how you want your reading experience to go.

Looking at the ratings for this novel it's clear I'm in the minority, which is why I felt a certain pressure to isolate the components of it that irritated me or caused me to dislike it, but the truth is I don't really know for sure if it was any of these things in particular or if it was the whole package to blame, but the bottom line is that this book was just not for me.

Melissa says

This book is so painfully fantastic, I'm going to kind of ignore the fact that it stops making sense at the end. Is there a word that simultaneously means achingly lovely & frustratingly confusing? Ursula Todd is born in 1910 with her umbilical cord wrapped around her neck & dies without ever drawing breath. Ursula Todd is born in 1910 with her umbilical cord wrapped around her neck. The doctor cuts the cord & Ursula grows to age five, when she drowns in the ocean on holiday. Ursula Todd is born in 1910 with her umbilical cord wrapped around her neck. The doctor cuts the cord. Ursula grows to age five, when she almost drowns in the ocean on holiday. A man on the beach saves her. She falls out the window of her house that winter. Ursula Todd is born in 1910 with her umbilical cord wrapped around her neck. It turns out that Ursula Todd has an infinite number of lives lined up for her after her death, but what's the reason for her many reincarnations? Could a little event like World War II have anything to do with it?

As a book about the life of Ursula Todd, this succeeds brilliantly. I could read an entire 500+ pages more about Ursula, her parents, siblings, and her adventures in England & Germany around the advent of WWII. Most of what happens to Ursula is appalling; (view spoiler) It's so beautifully written, so mesmerizing & heart-breaking, it's impossible not to stop everything else you're doing & devour this like a fat cake as fast as you can. In fact it lends itself particularly well to those times when you're reading & you just trail away

late into the night, a personal favorite situation of mine.

Unfortunately, once this book tries to figure out what it all means, it gets a little muddled. (view spoiler) I'm not sure what it's all supposed to mean, but in the end, I'm willing to let the pleasure lie in the journey. It's the sort of book I would re-read in a week or so to gather all the inevitable a-ha moments in my little basket if I wasn't so sure that it would break my heart all over again. I need a little distance first.

karen says

kate atkinson has written a lovely, accordion-fold of a novel here.

this is not a jackson brodie novel, which are always much better than your typical detective novels, (even though i haven't read the last one yet - merp), but this one is just so much more ambitious in scope and style than even those gems.

it is sublime.

at its most simplistic, it is about ursula, a character who will be born and die all in the first two pages. (excluding what i am considering to be a prologue) and then again. and again. she will die from falling off a roof, from drowning, from gas-inhalation, but she will be reborn again to live a collage of different lives, but always as ursula, and always surrounded by the same family. sometimes she can remember her past go-rounds, in hazy half-memories, and sometimes she can remember more, but this is not some hippy-dippy exploration of spiritual reincarnation. i have never read a book that is more human, more terrestrial. it is not necessarily about "getting it right" although you cheer inside every time she manages to avoid the decisions that led to some of her more horrifying deaths. it is more about our possible paths, about family, about history. it is about ripples and traps and the horrors of war.

and, oh, war. i have read many books about england during wartime, whether it be I or II. but never have i read one with more immediacy than this one. she does such a fantastic job with this particular material. not just the parts that you would think i would respond to, being of a ghoulish bent. the "recovery of the bodies" scenes were very graphic and haunting and shivery, yes, but i found myself responding not to the shocking descriptions, but more to the quieter scenes, the ones which are focused on the national character during wartime.

the englishness of this novel is just brilliant. there is such a pervading sense of "one does as one must and then one has tea" throughout.

On the way back from lunch, Sylvie said she wanted to visit Oberpollingers and buy a present for Hugh. When they reached the department store they found the windows daubed with anti-Jewish slogans and Sylvie said, "Gracious, what a mess." The shop was open for business but a pair of grinning louts in SA uniform were loitering in front of the doors, putting people off from entering. Not Sylvie, who had marched past the Brownshirts while Ursula reluctantly trailed in her wake into the store and up the thickly carpeted staircase. In the face of the uniforms, Ursula had shrugged a cartoon helplessness and murmured rather shamefacedly, "She's English." She thought that Sylvie didn't understand what it was like living in Germany but in retrospect she thought that perhaps Sylvie had understood very well.

i love that passage, on at least three different levels. the brisk insouciance of a mother accustomed to living in an imperial nation, the shame of a transplanted daughter living in a changing country whose climate she is

becoming a part of, but doesn't yet fully understand, and the latent judgment passing as ignorance.

and this, which perfectly sums up the english spirit:

"No point in thinking," she said briskly, "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*."

i loved that about this book. it is practical, unhysterical perfection. there is a determination to these characters in the face of horrors and lives lived always on the brink of destruction that is admirable and almost uplifting. you know, if it weren't for all the bombs.

this book killed me, it really did. and then i was reborn, as a reader. it is such a labor of love; you can feel how much thought atkinson put into it, with all of its carefully-sprinkled echoes from former life-plots, and how lovingly-rendered are even the smallest supporting characters (mr. emslie!! ♥).

obviously, i love izzie, the free-spirited drunken floozie of an aunt, even though she is such a selfish character. but that's kind of what this book is about - how when we are living our lives, we miss a great deal of what is happening around us, and if we had a chance to step back, to see the bigger picture, we might make different decisions, and in some cases, we could change the course of history. which sounds trite, but kate atkinson is a much more accomplished writer than i am, and this book is an absolute triumph.

you will have to wait until april to read this, unless you are greg, and are getting it friday, and then it will be mailed off to canada to bill. and it is a beautiful-looking arc:

so i am sad to see it go, but one does as one must.

Michael says

What if you had the chance to live your life again and again, until you finally got it right?

Ursula Todd is born in a snowstorm in England in 1910 but dies before she can take her first breath. During that same snowstorm she was born again and lives to tell the tale; again and again. *Life after Life* tells the story of Ursula's lives, as with each new life she makes small changes that send her on a completely different path.

I feel like I'm the only person on the planet that thought this book was overhyped and over rated. Sure Kate Atkinson has this trippy ability to create this bleak world while still managing to add some wit and compassion but it wasn't the writing that was at fault. The premise of the book makes it sound really good but let's face it; it is just Groundhog Day in disguise. The book is clever, but it tries too hard to be clever and it didn't really turn out the way it should have; for me anyway. This book is getting so many rave reviews, I feel like I am a black sheep just telling people it did not work.

As I said before, there is nothing wrong with the writing; Kate Atkinson has created this lyrical narrative and I did find myself being swept away in the words. I even felt like at times I was reading this book without

thinking about what was happening; a few times I had to stop and process before continuing. I almost found myself not noticing a death and Ursula's life starting again and that could have got me completely lost. I did feel like Kate Atkinson did however overdo the twists and it turned out to be a roundabout way to retell the same story over and over again with different outcomes. This could have worked; and it sounds like it worked for many people but I sadly wasn't one of them.

I wonder if Kate Atkinson was trying something different and experimental where she could play with the character's death and life, explore the concept of life's choices and their consequences but because there were no real penalty to Ursula's life I wonder if it really worked? Do you ever have déjà vu? (I don't think so, but I could check with the kitchen) Life after Life just seems to repeat the same scenes, some readers might gain a sense of familiarity and for me it just felt like I wasn't getting anywhere.

Life after Life is the kind of book you should probably read in a real cold climate; the snowy, dark and sometimes bleakness of the novel seems to call for it. Maybe read snuggled up on a dark winters night and don't forget your booties 'cause it's coooold out there today (It's coooold out there every day. What is this, Miami Beach?). It is just the book that would work better in the cold; though it is never cold here in Townsville, maybe that's why it didn't work for me.

I really wanted to enjoy this book; I will try another Kate Atkinson novel because I really think she has a great style. Just so happened Life after Life was not for me and I know people loved this book and will probably complain about this review but at least it was just an excuse to put some Groundhog Day quotes into something. This book has had so many positive reviews so maybe it is just me, if the book sounds like something you'd like then don't let this review stop you, is it too early for flapjacks?

This review originally appeared on my blog; <http://www.knowledgelost.org/book-rev...>

Melissa says

I'm embarrassed to say I didn't really understand this book. I'm a huge Kate Atkinson fan and I think she's one of the most creative writers I've ever read. And I loved the idea of this book: Ursula is born, dies, and is born again, living different -sometimes very different - versions of her life over and over again. One of my problems is that there didn't seem to be any "rules" like there usually are in books about time travel and other magical occurrences. Sometime Ursula seems to remember the past versions of her life, sometimes she seems not to. Sometimes things change drastically, sometimes not so much. I found that confusing and sometimes hard to follow. And the unfortunately at the end I lost track of which life she was in and totally didn't understand what happened! I'm going to have to go read some of the other reviews and see if they can shed any light on it for me!

Fabian says

What I expected to be Borgesian, absolutely meta, actually turned out a tad gimmicky and, no joke, choose-your-own-adventure-like. But no problem. It has a huge heart & employs a super witty use of parentheticals, of asides. It is optimistic in the face of oblivion. W.W.II. And, even though I know I insult discerning readers when I say that this is like Ian McEwan's Atonement, Redux; but... this novel is "Atonement Redux."

Anne says

So much great writing and characterization. Such an interesting premise and structure. Wonderful use of humor and irony (thank you, Teresa) throughout. Remarkable depictions of The Blitz. I want to give this book 5 stars. But I can't. A bit of editing would have helped. but that's a quibble. It's very difficult to go back over the same territory over and over again and keep it interesting. Atkinson did this amazingly well, tho there were moments of, "oh not this again." The real blooper for me was Ursula (view spoiler)

Also, I didn't love the way the book ended. Reading the book was like jumping out of an airplane and enjoying the ride (most of it), trusting that the landing will be a good one. Well, the parachute opened, but very late. The landing was abrupt. I think I still feel concussed. I just closed the book and I'm wondering, "what just happened?" Like Ursula, I'd like to go back up and try that again. Maybe the outcome would be better the second (or third or fourth) time around.

4 1/2 stars.

Emily May says

“What if we had a chance to do it again and again, until we finally did get it right? Wouldn't that be wonderful?”

Life After Life is a novel I probably wouldn't have chosen for myself. And how sad it is to think that I might have passed this novel over and never known these characters and relationships.

It often seems like I am the only person in the world who hasn't watched *Downton Abbey* (definitely the only Brit who hasn't) but the favourable comparisons I keep seeing between the show and this book make me want to drop everything and go watch it. I imagine it has similarities. All the drama of wartime England combined with a soft, often quiet story about family life and just... people.

So many people come and go in this novel, but each one is lovingly-crafted and leaves their own personal mark. I adore it when authors do this - and so few do - when they make sure every single character becomes a human being with a life and personality beyond pushing the plot in a certain direction.

The story centres around Ursula Todd who is born one snowy night in 1910 and dies that night from strangling on her own umbilical cord. On that same night in 1910, Ursula is born and lives. What follows is a strange life full of many deaths that were, at the same time, also avoided. Somehow, in the hands of this extremely talented writer, a concept as trite as second chances becomes original, beautiful and so so moving.

I would not sell this as a fast-paced adventure; it's pacing is relatively slow and it takes a while for the reader to realise that this book has far more depth than they first imagined. It bobs along at a steady pace, full of dazzling wit, humour and charm. It has an unmistakable old-fashioned Englishness about it - all tea time and "goodness gracious" - which works very well with the time and setting. But still, it was far from boring. It is too charming and well-written to be boring, and I could hardly put it down once I became absorbed in the characters' stories (which didn't take long at all).

This novel seems to gather layers as it goes. One minute you're sipping tea and enjoying the relationship dynamics, and the next you suddenly look back and realise that this quiet little wartime story has become steeped in philosophical detail, without seeming pretentious or too try-hard.

Such a wonderful read and highly recommended.

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Paul Bryant says

DECEMBER 2013

Paul Bryant had really only just started driving back home, was still trying with his left hand to jam the seat belt buckle into its lock, and – multitasking like mad - he was thinking about how to review *Life After Life*, and probably getting too caught up in the various amusing ways it could be done, so that he simply didn't notice the car poking far too far out of the side street. When finally he did, he had to swerve like crazy, right into the oncoming traffic. What with his seatbelt not being properly secured and the 30 ton lorry, darkness fell rapidly.

DECEMBER 2013

Paul Bryant had really only just started driving back home, was still trying with his left hand to jam the seat belt buckle into its lock, and – multitasking like mad - he was thinking about how to review *Life After Life*, but wasn't so caught up in the various amusing ways it could be done that he didn't notice the car poking far too far out of the side street. Stupid boy racer! He thought as he made a violent emergency stop. When he did finally get home he parked as usual round the corner, got out of his car and was delighted to be confronted with one of the urban foxes which visited Sherwood occasionally. Such elegant raffish creatures. But there seemed to be something agitating this particular one. It was moving side to side and then turning right round in some distress. What was wrong with it? Suddenly it lunged towards him, nipped him on the ankle and rushed away. He thought about the disturbing incident later that evening as he sat at his computer and began his review. But then he began to feel most peculiar. He suddenly hated all the people who had written sniffy reviews of *Life After Life* comparing it to *Groundhog Day* (as if – that may be a totally great movie but Bill Murray is *aware* of reliving his endless day, and Ursula is not aware of reliving her life, and it's her whole life – it's not even *Groundhog Life*, please, don't get me started); but also his mouth was dripping saliva, he had a high temperature, he was sweating like crazy, and his hair was standing straight up. Urgggghh.....he lapsed into a coma. Darkness fell – again.

DECEMBER 2013

Paul saw the idiot boy racer trying to edge out of the side road and slowed down to let him out. Why not? Let him cause a fatal crash somewhere else. When he got home, as he opened the car door he was confronted with one of the urban foxes who visited Sherwood occasionally. But this one looked a little strange. Thinking it might possibly be rabid, he gave it a blare on the car horn and it ran off. Later that evening, sat at his computer, he was trying to marshal his thoughts on Kate Atkinson's pitch-perfect contemplation of our little lives and their infinite forking paths (Ursula's main problem was that she couldn't change the fact that she was born in 1910 – Hitler was always waiting for her) and how this gimmicky pop-philosophical soft-science fiction not-quite-alt-hist novel morphs into a terrifying war story, one of the best descriptions of life during the Blitz ever – but his thoughts were interrupted by the roar of a police helicopter. They fly around

Sherwood sometimes, always en route to St Ann's, which is gangster territory. This one seemed to be right above his house. What a racket. Suddenly, the noise stopped. Peace! That was not such a good thing however, as the helicopter's engine had cut out and the helicopter was descending rapidly through his roof. Darkness fell quite quickly.

DECEMBER 2013

Paul – didn't crash – wasn't bit by rabid fox – didn't have police helicopter fall on his house - made it to his computer in one piece and thought for a moment. Yes. The review. How about this.

DECEMBER 2013

Steve says

Chances are you've already heard about the device Atkinson used to tell this remarkable story. It was February of 1910 when baby Ursula died at birth, but she was granted a narrative do-over. Next time the doctor made it through the snowstorm to sever the umbilical cord that was strangling her. She also got another chance after tumbling from the roof trying to reach a doll her malignant older brother had thrown there. Similar life after death sequences played out after a seaside drowning, the Spanish flu, and various war-time atrocities. Some might call this a gimmick, but that seems too pejorative a term to me. In Atkinson's capable hands it was a wonderful tool that allowed her to play "what if", to explore subtle changes with far-reaching consequences (though butterflies and chaos were never mentioned), as well as to evaluate moral trade-offs where alternative scenarios improve the lot of some to the detriment of others.

The way I've described this so far you might imagine that Punxsutawney Phil and a very resigned Bill Murray would feature at every turn. But it wasn't really like that. For one thing, the story didn't always revert back to square one (where the Sonny and Cher equivalent might have been playing on the gramophone). Plus, there were exogenous differences in each scenario, separate from Ursula's actions. A better analogy might be how we navigate our way through a maze, proceeding until we reach a dead end and backtracking to the point where we can follow a different path. But even that's not quite right. With the maze, we know where the decision points are. At best, Ursula had dim recollections of previous paths taken – a vague sense of déjà vu. Atkinson scored literary points for the artful abstractions of these foggy memories.

Before I get too carried away with the device, which I suspect had to do with a huge inventory of ready-to-use death scenes Atkinson wanted to employ ;-), I should mention what I consider to be even better selling points: the story, the characters and the setting. As fans of her Jackson Brodie books will attest, Atkinson is a master of crime drama. She was not about to short-shrift us on plot. Each snippet of Ursula's life (or, more appropriately, lives) had plenty going on including creative avoidance of paths we knew from before wouldn't work. Her relationships with men got appreciably better in later iterations once she got past her teenage naivety and some very unwelcome advances. Many of the most poignant storylines derived from the hardship of the setting – England spanning the two world wars. You might imagine that air raids, deprivation, and loss of loved ones would leave little time for character development beyond a collective stiffness of upper lips, but you'd be wrong. Ursula herself was insightful, empathetic, philosophical and

poetic. Her family members, including a larger-than-life aunt who struck it big with a children's book series, had memorable traits as well; all of them recognizably human. Friends and co-workers were given enough personality to be interesting, too. That was even true of the German ones.

Speaking of Germans, there was one in particular that authors of do-overs consistently wish dead. Atkinson was no exception (which I don't consider a spoiler since it was taken up in the first two pages). It is a fascinating question, even if over-asked. What if he had been killed before he had influence? How many lives would have been spared? What would our culture be like had there been no Holocaust? Or, as Ursula wondered, what if the US had not spent its way out of the Depression during the war and become the dominant purveyor of goods and lifestyles. (Cheeky lady, implying it would be better. But I have to ask: how fast would her food be now? And how much reality would her TV feature?)

I really liked this book. Typically I'm suspicious of devices that quantum physics, even at its strangest, can't explain. But this one felt right. In a time when life was too easily lost, in a place where the war seeped into too many homes, it seemed appropriate that a work of fiction would offer some therapeutic revamping. All the more so after Atkinson personalized it for us, putting a likable lady with multifold potential in the middle of it all. And if one of the goals of personal development is to choose optimal paths, it's helpful to see a template where repeated trials over similar circumstances lead to better decisions and an older soul.

twitterbug (Betsey) says

The snake devouring its tail is an ancient symbol of wholeness, infinity, renewal, and eternal return. It symbolizes the cyclic nature of the universe, creation out of destruction, life after death. Likewise, the famous Swiss psychologist, Carl Jung, advanced the concept of the Shadow self, the parts of your self that are hidden from society. The process of becoming whole, psychically, is to integrate the unconscious (Shadow) and conscious selves, through deep meditation, dreams, or long journeys that build awareness.

If this seems too much of an academic introduction to the brilliantly epochal novel by Kate Atkinson, it is also a reference to the finely calibrated structure and themes of *Life After Life*. Atkinson time travels her narrative back to Feb 11, 1910, repeatedly, so that her protagonist, Ursula Todd, can return again and again to rebirth and renewal. Right from the beginning, Ursula dies quickly after birth. Then she returns. Dies rather quickly again. In subsequent lives, she may take longer to die. But through each of these lives, we learn a lot more about Ursula. And, so does Ursula learn more about herself. For example, after a tragedy in one life, Ursula tends to feel a sense of something, or a chill, when the tragedy is coming close in the next life, and can often do something to prevent its recurrence, even though she is not quite sure why she is doing it.

Atkinson did it with such holographic clarity that I wondered how it had not been done a thousand times before in literature. If I searched for similarly structured movies, however, *GROUNDHOG DAY* and *BUTTERFLY EFFECT* would come to mind as cousins, perhaps.

There is certainly a purpose to this structure, but it isn't mechanical or expeditious. You may be scratching your head, wondering as you read, but you will settle in before long. The novel is so dynamic, and initially winsome (and subtly tongue-in-cheek), that you feel in the bosom of it, not at arm's length or outside the story. Is it a gimmick? No, it is the anchor. It doesn't seem segmented or choppy; rather, it all integrates, like Jung's concept.

Ursula's darkness penetrates to a metaphysical undertaking, and the reader is side by side with her odyssey.

The author captures Ursula's moments of life-to-death-to-life enchantingly, yet poignantly, and the cycles nourish the theme of the story. Those in-between moments of life and death pique reader understanding, too. Her frequent returns don't feel repetitive, because Atkinson brings acuity and new observations for the reader to ponder.

"...she could feel the shining, luminous world beyond calling, the place where all mysteries would be revealed. The darkness enveloped her, a velvet friend. Snow was in the air, as fine as talcum, as icy as the east wind on a baby's skin..."

The author also weaves in penetrating allusions to the unconscious mind within the chaos, destruction and detritus of war. The settings(s) of the novel preside like a primary character, one in which repeated experience manifests deeper understanding. Like Ursula, I am inclined to return, time and again, and let the pages encircle me into the "black bat of darkness" and the snow blazing white of day.

"Time isn't circular. It's like a...palimpsest."
