

Interview

Kate Atkinson: ‘I live to entertain. I don’t live to teach or preach or to be political’

Lisa Allardice

After the success of *Life After Life* and *A God in Ruins*, the novelist shares why she is enjoying writing more as she gets older – and the return of detective Jackson Brodie



Kate Atkinson, whose award-winning debut novel, *Behind the Scenes at the Museum*, was published when she was 43. Photograph: Helen Clyne

After nearly 10 years, Kate Atkinson’s much-loved detective Jackson Brodie returns in her 12th novel *Big Sky*. “The best mystery of the decade”, Stephen King wrote of *Case Histories*, Brodie’s first appearance back in 2004, but it looked as if he might have been retired for ever after his fourth outing in 2010. “Brodie did have a really long holiday,” the author says. During which time, Atkinson won the Costa best novel award twice, for her historical novels *Life After Life* and *A God in Ruins*, and wrote last year’s *Transcription*. But she always intended to bring him back, or she would have killed him off, “just to put that to bed”.

Big Sky started as a screenplay about a female detective, and was originally written for the actor and comedian Victoria Wood, who had appeared in one of the BBC’s Brodie adaptations starring Jason Isaacs. Wood did not see the manuscript before her death in 2016 so Atkinson put it aside, before eventually deciding it would work for Brodie, partly because it is set in Yorkshire, where the detective, like his creator, grew up.

The idea for the story began with another Yorkshireman, Jimmy Savile, who had a home in Scarborough, with a plaque – now removed – that read “Savile’s View” on the railings overlooking the bay. Although the DJ and TV presenter doesn’t feature in *Big Sky* directly, he casts a shadow over a sinister web of storylines that connects child abuse rings in the 1970s and 80s to present-day sex trafficking.

Atkinson began writing *Big Sky* the day after she finished *Transcription*, her second world war espionage novel. Because the idea had been lurking in her mind for so long, she says, it came really quickly, “and I thought, ‘Well I’ll just keep on.’” But it must have been a jolt to switch from 1950s spies to contemporary sleazebags overnight. “I need to change tack quite vigorously, quite often,” she says. After the initial run of Brodie books, she felt she “never wanted to write another one of these again”; then, following *Life After Life*, *A God in Ruins* and *Transcription*, she decided: “I must stop writing about the war. I go on a groove for so long and then I have to change.”

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The Brodie books always deal “with things that are happening now”, she stresses. This doesn’t mean writing a Brexit novel, she says, although that subject inevitably creeps in (as she points out, it even features in *Transcription*). For Brodie – of all Atkinson’s characters “the nearest to my kneejerk reaction to things” – Brexit is “the end of civilisation as we know it”. As he observes, “the world had grown darker”. Even by the standards of the series, *Big Sky* is bleak. Yet it retains the jauntiness that makes Atkinson so wickedly entertaining. “I know, it’s not right somehow,” she says, laughing (she laughs a lot). Since Brodie’s last appearance “the world is a darker place and it is an angrier place and it is a more bitter place,” she says. “That’s what the politics has done to us – everyone is now anxious all the time, because we don’t know what is going to happen.”

There are also echoes of the #MeToo moment as, one after another, the female characters dole out justice or revenge on a pile-up of bad men. Although she didn’t intend *Big Sky* to be a “strong women book” it inevitably became one, “because all these middle-aged white blokes have to have their comeuppance – and who is going to give it to them?” As Brodie reflects: “It was funny how so many men were defined by their downfall. Caesar, Fred Goodwin, Trotsky, Harvey Weinstein, Jimmy Savile. Women hardly ever. They didn’t fall down. They stood up.” She had to add names to the list as she was writing, she jokes, and if she were to write it now there would be even more to include.

The honourable exception is our man Brodie, “the last good man standing”, who always tries “to behave like a gentleman”, and although “knocking on a bit now”, is ready to dive into the sea or jump off a cliff to rescue someone. “He does have a sheepdog instinct,” Atkinson says. “He knows he’s got to protect women and children.” But he also “has such a strain of darkness in him that he is always going to be responding to the outer darkness”.

With his tragic childhood, string of divorces and melancholic outlook, he is the archetypal hard-boiled private eye; the only trait he is missing is a weakness for the bottle. “I like to take clichés and try and work with them,” she says. But when she first set him to work, she was nervous because she “hadn’t really written a male character of any substance before”, and she had no intention of writing a crime novel, let alone a detective series to sit alongside Ian Rankin’s Rebus or Colin Dexter’s Inspector Morse books. But “if you put a detective in a novel

it becomes a detective novel, there's no way round it". Where traditional crime fiction is "very narrative driven, like a trail", Atkinson's genius for plotting, combined with an acute sympathy for the inner lives of her characters, has created what she likes to call "a genre of Jackson Brodie" (her publishers plump for "literary crime novel"). Readers who would never pick up a crime novel are "the biggest Jackson Brodie fans now".

Above all, the detective is a great device for bringing together multiple storylines and huge casts – Hilary Mantel once wrote that Atkinson must have "a game plan more sophisticated than Dickens". "There are a lot of characters," she concedes. Does her study resemble a procedural room in a TV police drama, covered with sprawling spider diagrams? "It is your working world and you know where everybody is and what everybody needs to do," she says. "I can do it while I'm writing it, afterwards I can't even remember anyone's name." She loves an ending (hence the seemingly endless endings of *Life After Life*), somehow managing to tie everything up with forensic neatness. "Everybody gets their just deserts."

The question of justice recurs throughout Atkinson's fiction, which always operates according to its own morality (the bodycount in a Brodie novel often rivals that of an episode of *Game of Thrones*). In *Big Sky* "everyone is breaking the law", or taking it into their own hands in one way or another. Brodie fans will welcome the reappearance of Reggie, last seen as a 16-year-old nanny in 2008's *When Will There Be Good News?*, now a young policewoman. "What else would she become?" Atkinson asks. "Now she's never going to be allowed to be happy. Because she's always going to be seeing bad things. She will be fulfilled."

Atkinson has said that "you can't write a novel about happy people having happy lives". "There is so much misery around, I never seem to get round to it." But the author herself always seems remarkably cheery, in a no-nonsense Yorkshire way. "I am, on the whole," she agrees, with that laugh. "If I was really gloomy would I write different books? Maybe this is the place for it – it frees you up, because then you don't have to dwell in it."

She was, however, a very fearful, anxious child, something she attributes to being "illegitimate" and not having a sibling (her parents were together, but her mother was unable to get divorced following a disastrous wartime marriage). "There was a lot of suppressed emotion." Born in 1951 and growing up above her parents' shop in York, she was left largely to her own devices. She also wonders if she might have been "tainted" by her father's own miserable childhood – one of poverty, violence and random accident – which she only discovered after his death, and which reads like the backstory of one of her characters. (His grandmother, with whom he lived until he was 10, died falling from a table trying to get a fly paper down – "a wonderful little story: 'Imagine the fly!'"")

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Until her early 30s she never thought about becoming a writer: "I was a reader, that was my part in the whole book process." But she won the Women's Own short story competition – "the best moment of my life" – for "the very first thing I wrote that had nothing to do with me". This led to an apprenticeship in magazine stories: "getting everything in there in a very short space ... that was how I learned to write."

She published *Behind the Scenes at the Museum* when she was 43. "Everyone said, you are quite old to have your first novel published, and I'd think, 'Well, now I can get on with it, I've

done all the difficult things ... living.” She had been married twice and has two daughters and now granddaughters. *Behind the Scenes* won the Whitbread book of the year award in 1995, beating such big literary beasts as Salman Rushdie, which caused a bit of a brouhaha, with headlines such as “Unknown chambermaid wins prize” (she had once worked in a hotel). The whole experience “tainted me for ever”, she says now, and she has been wary of interviews ever since. “I always feel as if I want to live as if I have a monastery inside me ... I don’t want to be giving away all the time.”

Although “Yorkshire will be written on my heart for ever”, she has spent most of her writing life in Edinburgh, which “cuts you off. I am beyond the wall.” She doesn’t enjoy parties or networking, “stuff that I always presume is happening in London all the time”. Although the day after we meet she is having lunch with her longtime friend Ali Smith – “she’s literally the only writer I know”, and they never talk about writing, “Never!” They will be celebrating their joint No 1 positions in the hardback and paperback bestseller lists (for *Transcription* and for Smith’s *Spring*).

Atkinson has never suffered from “blank-page syndrome” and is already at work on two novels simultaneously – “It wakes me up a bit” – one of which is another Brodie. “Yes, he’s coming back in a very funny book”: an Agatha Christie homage. She’s had the beginning and the title for ages – “I’ve got titles to sell” – and has already written the ending. “I’m in Jackson Brodie mode, so I may as well do it now as opposed to putting it on the shelf of ideas I have.” Next on the shelf is her “Big Book”, a return to York and to the second world war, called *The Line of Sight*.

As she has got older, she enjoys writing more. But “it has really bad moments. A lot of the time it is completely tedious, but one good sentence can pay off for many, many years of tedium or hell.” When the novel is completed, “it’s done for ever. It’s in the world”, and she’s “happy just to lie there and watch Netflix all night long, because I need to just empty all that stuff out.”

She has always felt “a certain confidence” in her writing, “but you are not allowed in this country to be confident; women aren’t allowed to say ‘I think this is really good’.” While readers and critics were dazzled by the formal ingenuity of *Life After Life*, it is its sequel, *A God in Ruins*, that she believes to be her best work, “and will remain so”, she says emphatically. “That’s the book I always wanted to write. People are always telling me how they cried at the end.” But she has never made the Booker shortlist (perhaps because she is perceived to be a “genre writer” – “there’s no hope for me”), and won’t be on any future longlists as she has asked her publishers not to submit her work for prizes any more: “As long as I meet my own standards, that’s enough.”

“To have moved someone to tears and to move to them to laughter is great,” she says. “I live to entertain, I don’t live to teach or to preach or to be political. If I have a job to do it is to entertain myself first and then everyone else afterwards.”

• *Big Sky* by Kate Atkinson is published by Doubleday (£20). To order a copy go to guardianbookshop.com or call 0330 333 6846. Free UK p&p over £15, online orders only. Phone orders min p&p of £1.99