

The Telegraph

A writer's life: Kate Atkinson

Helen Brown



An author known for her dark, funny stories of domestic life tells Helen Brown why she has now written a crime novel with a male hero.

"Perfect weather for the snails," despairs Kate Atkinson, as she corrals cookies on a plate and the electric murk intensifies beyond her cosy Edinburgh kitchen. "I thought I had it cracked with them – just chucking them over the back." Not into the neighbours' gardens, obviously. Just into the back, an uncertain gravel realm. "Though I'm not sure..." She glances out with mock suspicion, seemingly concerned that these relentless gastropods may somehow be making their way back into her green beds.

In Atkinson's fiction, something is always lurking juicily out the back, the equivalent of Stella Gibbons's "something nasty in the woodshed". Open any of her books, and you sense it chewing away at the roots of the story. Behind the privet hedges of domestic drudge and humour, you can feel something slimy and with a potential crunch waiting to ooze back into the lives of her characters. It's there in the title of her first novel *Behind the Scenes at the Museum*, which won her the Whitbread Book of the Year Award in 1995. In that novel the heroine's story begins in the womb – about as far behind the scenes as it's possible for a narrator to be. Clouds loom over the unconventional families in her second and third novels, *Human Croquet* (1997) and *Emotionally Weird* (2000). You can't predict their endings, although in retrospect you realise that you have been unfurling your emotional wet-weather gear in readiness.

What Atkinson didn't expect was the reaction of the literary boys' club to her success. The sparkly-eyed daughter of a Yorkshire shopkeeper, writing about domestic life, was not meant to trump Roy Jenkins and Salman Rushdie to the Whitbread. Andrew Neill said her novel was "simply further confirmation of why the chattering classes deserve to be held in such contempt". She shakes her head and wriggles deep into one of the richly upholstered plum chairs in her sitting room. "I think it was because I'm a woman," she says. "And there were some comments I made about the family... that it's a closed book, that we don't know how other people bring up their children, that nobody can be sure of how it's done. But people thought I was 'anti-family'." She grips the arches of her fuschia socks with a comforting hand. "I think that *Behind the Scenes* is actually a very strong book about the family. Practically the only people I ever see are my family."

Her publishers had stressed, prior to our interview, that I was not to ask Atkinson about her family. So I don't. Not even when a high chair is delivered. But the potted biographies reveal that she has been married twice. Once, when she was a student, to the father of her first daughter Eve, and later to the father of her second daughter Helen. She talks cheerfully about visiting her mother in hospital, and about enjoying days out at open gardens with her "middle-aged" children. But I don't ask her about marriage, not even when she complains about the tabloid hacks who tried to track down her spouses. We do talk a little about men and women. She seems to enjoy delineating differences between the genders. "My current bugbear is the news. I saw a report about the floods in Boscastle the other day, and the reporter said that the crew 'tenderly airlifted a woman to safety'. I mean, would you 'tenderly' airlift a man? It's that kind of complete random assertion of emotion into fact... God!"

Although her work has focused on the relationships between women, her new novel, **Case Histories**, has a male hero, a private detective called Jackson. Did she find it difficult to write from a man's perspective? "Well, they are different, aren't they? We don't necessarily understand them. And I wanted to write about a man man, who's interested in cars... you know? A man man. It's been said that the men in my books have been absent, or weak, or creepy. Jackson is 'the last good man standing'." He may note the makes and models of the vehicles he tails, and fancy some of his female clients, and punch his ex-wife's partner, but he still makes time to visit a mad old cat lady and consider the plight of the homeless.

"I've always loved mysteries," says Atkinson, who devours crime novels indiscriminately. "The something there that you didn't know, and with **Case Histories** I just decide to make that more up-front." So the novel begins with some unsolved cases: a child missing, a young husband axed, a lost cat and a teenager with her throat slashed by a mysterious man in a yellow golfing jumper.

A private detective is the perfect vehicle for a writer like Atkinson. The old-fashioned storyteller in her loves to rummage through the interior psychology of her characters. She wrote a PhD on "The post-modern American short story in its historical context" and takes delight in jolting readers from the cosy world of one life into another. Considering the intimate details of other people's lives for a living is something Jackson and Atkinson have in common. Although the writer, of course, gets to play God – whom Jackson doesn't believe in. "The great thing about writing compared to life is getting to tie things up," she admits, "although with the short story collection I wrote before this [Not the End of the World] I learned to leave some characters without endings." So not all of Jackson's clients get a conclusion, or a bill.

Hilary Mantel has said that Atkinson's complex plotting proves her to have "a game plan more sophisticated than Dickens". But she tells me that she never knows in advance where all the bodies are buried. "I used to worry about that. But then I found out that a lot of writers don't know where the plot is going. So now I can just relax and write into it."

If Atkinson had her way, she would write in a bland hotel, shut down the decisions of real life to sink more deeply into fiction. "When I'm writing," she says, "my neural pathways get blocked. I can't read. I can barely hold a conversation without forgetting words and names." It's as if her brain is a computer, running a writing programme that demands more and more memory until all other operations are left sluggish. "I wish I could wear the same clothes and eat the same food each day," she sighs. And as talk of food and the mind coincides, she tells me that a psychologist friend told her recently that all her books are "about cannibalism". Are they? I ask. "Well," she muses, "there's a lot of flesh, taking it in..." Family members certainly absorb one other. Nobody's skin can keep others out.

We both glance down at the stuffed leopard between our big chairs that has a baby leopard sewn onto its back. Things have become a little gloomy, and I worry that this interview won't necessarily reflect the comedy that scuttles through Atkinson's prose to lift her darker vision. "Dark vision?" she laughs, "well, the world is going to end, isn't it! Crazy to think it won't." As the marcasite clips in her hair scatter a sudden shard of sunlight, she launches into a catalogue of possible catastrophes. Tidal waves, sewage and things in the atmosphere.

It's funny. Menacing. Clever. Slightly hysterical. And just out the back.