



## A God in Ruins

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In *Life After Life* Ursula Todd lived through the turbulent events of the last century again and again. In *A God in Ruins*, Atkinson turns her focus on Ursula's beloved younger brother Teddy – would-be poet, RAF bomber pilot, husband and father – as he navigates the perils and progress of the 20th century. For all Teddy endures in battle, his greatest challenge will be to face living in a future he never expected to have.

## A God in Ruins Details

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Author : Kate Atkinson

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## From Reader Review A God in Ruins for online ebook

### Sue says

I regret so much that I never got back to write a review close to when I finished reading this book. It's unfair to my reading experience, the book and the author. But I didn't want to leave this spot empty forever so I will add a bit. For those who have read Life After Life, I definitely recommend this. For those who haven't, it likely will stand alone but will lose some of its meaning because of the inter-related stories.

I am going to include what I wrote in a late status update when I finished the book: What a ride Atkinson takes us on. One of my early text notes spoke to Teddy reliving his life figuratively while Ursula relived it in reality. Now I must amend this a bit. I see Ursula's life as integration and Teddy's as disintegration: so many forces at play on him. I won't go into that further but I will say this was a very satisfying novel, if not quite as spectacular as Life After Life.

Atkinson is one of my favorite authors. She takes risks with her characters and her readers. I will read her next book and have some of her backlog to catch up with (thankfully).

I rate this 4.5\*, just slightly behind Life After Life.

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### Katie says

Perhaps the element of this novel that most moved me was the arrogant dismissive way the young often view older generations, especially children with regards to their parents. This is highlighted in the relationship between the obnoxiously brilliant Viola and her father Teddy. Teddy is/was a Bomber Command pilot during WW2. Almost nightly he goes through the harrowing experience of flying over Nazi Germany; the repressed guilt of dropping bombs on "innocent" civilians; the awareness that his death is always a whisker away and that an entire city below is willing it; his friends are killed on a monthly basis. Yet the superbly self-centred Viola, on a constant self-sequestering quest to find a kind of hippy utopia, has no interest in her father's history, his inner life. She looks down on him as someone less enlightened, less intimate with the important goals of experience. Late in the novel, when Viola has become a writer and her father is suffering from dementia she regrets not asking him about his wartime experiences, not because she's interested, but because she realises it would be good material for a book. Her cynical self-interest knows no bounds.

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### Jenne says

I just cannot deal with Viola. Just no.

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### Will Byrnes says

**“A man is a god in ruins. When men are innocent, life shall be longer, and shall pass into the immortal, as gently as we wake from dreams.”** – Ralph Waldo Emerson – *Nature*

Thus opens Kate Atkinson's companion work to her much acclaimed *Life After Life*. While the earlier work focused on The Blitz, Germany's prolonged bombing of London and other English cities during World War II, this one looks at the Allied bombing campaign against Germany, first against strategic resources and later targeting civilians. As the Todd family was employed as our eyes on the earlier stages of the war, so, again, it is the Todds through whose eyes we experience war and its effects, just not the same Todds. Ursula, the star of *Life After Life*, is a bit player here. The focus this time is Ursula's beloved younger brother Ted. Not merely the good-hearted, kind-natured boy of the prior book, Ted is all grown up and a pilot, flying many bombing missions over the continent.

*Life After Life* was an adventure of imagining alternate possible outcomes from specific acts and trying each of them out, playing the same hand different ways. There is no fantasy element in this book, or at least not nearly to the same degree. But that does not mean that Atkinson has settled into a sequential narrative form. There are very non-sequential stops up and down the 20th century and even into the 21st. From 1925 when Teddy is still a kid, enduring the third degree from his writer aunt, to 1944 when he takes off on his last mission. From the immediate post war era to 1993 when he is packed off to a senior residence. From his early married life in 1951 to events in 2012.

#### **The Halifax** - from the Daily Mail

And, as with *Life After Life*, Atkinson offers us multiple viewpoints. While we primarily see events through Ted, we also see the world from the perspective of his daughter and grandchildren, from his aunt Izzie. Mysteries in one view are sometimes clarified in another. The time tracks, heard together, make a symphony. This event, in this time, impacts that result in another, which generates a further outcome in a third. Solo instruments joined to make a glorious sound.

It is not just the military struggle, and its collateral affect that Atkinson examines. She has a keen eye for change. The sexual revolution in permissiveness and acceptance that accompanies war, the development of sylvan fields into cookie cutter housing tracts, the counter-culture, or at least one manifestation of it, holding up images of diverse eras side by side.

Avian imagery permeates. The most poignant, for me, is when young Ted rues the loss to generations to come from his aunt having consumed a single skylark, a potent symbol for the lives extinguished in war, the lost possibilities, reminding us of *Spring and Fall* by GM Hopkins.

**It wasn't just the one lark that had been silenced by Izzie...It was the generations of birds that would have come after it and now would never be born. All those beautiful songs that would never be sung. Later in life he learned the word 'exponential', and later still the word 'fractal', but for now it was a flock that grew larger and larger as it disappeared into a future that would never be.**

A budgy with a clipped wing stands in for one character's feeling of imprisonment. There are plenty of ups and downs to accompany the feathered ones. As Ted is a pilot, he heads up into the air and down again as many times. At a Beethoven concert the elevation brought on by pure beauty is palpable.

#### **Kate Atkinson** - from the Telegraph

Another element that carries through is a consideration of nature, and our connection to it. Ted personifies this impulse, sensitive to beauty in the natural world since childhood. He writes a nature column for a local newspaper as an adult. Through his sad eyes we see the loss of much that was precious through the development of the post war era, and rue, with him the decline in appreciation. Ted, in his nature column, bemoans the near extinction of the water vole.

Atkinson says, in the author's note that follows the text of the novel in the copy I read, that she is writing about *the Fall of Man from Grace*. There are, throughout the novel, as she notes, *a lot of references to Utopia, Eden, to an Arcadian past, to Paradise Lost and Pilgrim's Progress*. Ted's daughter lives with her kids and their father for a time, for example, at a commune called Adam's Acre.

**He felt relief when the overcrowded train finally pulled slowly away from the platform, glad to be leaving the dirty wreckage of London. There was a war on. After all and he was supposed to be fighting it. He discovered the little wrinkled apple [From Fox Corner] in his pocket and ate it in two bites. It tasted sour when he had expected it to be sweet.**

He returns to Fox Corner for a visit late in life, but it is now closed to him.

A lot of attention is paid to marriage and relationships, particularly to coping when the match looks perfect on the surface, pre-ordained even, but lacks the passion of great love. Wedlock that seems, whether in its inception or subsequent practice, more lock than wed. And alongside that is a look at parenting. Many of the parental sorts here are no better to their progeny than the powers that be were to their young soldiers. Parents do not come off all that well overall, as was the case in *Life After Life*. Ted's daughter Viola is an extremely poor excuse for a parent, selfish from birth and traumatized by a loss in her youth, she offers Ted none of the parental rewards his years of sacrifice should have earned him.

**Why did you have children? Bertie asked, later in their lives. 'Was it just the biological imperative to breed?'**

**'That's why everyone has children,' Viola said, 'they just dress it up as something more sentimental.'**

Atkinson dips into poetry more than a few times, sprinkling her attention around. GM Hopkins of course, with his vision of the eternal in the natural, is an obvious choice for relating to Ted's appreciation for and wonder at the beauty of nature. Keats, Blake, Wordsworth, Shakespeare and more. There is even a passage late in the book that joins lines from seven poems from six poets. Have your search engines warmed and ready.

**I think that all novels are not only fiction but they are about fiction too...Every time a writer throws themselves at the first line of a novel they are embarking on an experiment. An adventure.**

Atkinson, having set aside the fun *What if* of *Life After Life*, contains herself until the end when she offers commentary on authorial prerogatives, imagining different outcomes for her characters, imagining lives that might have been, the god of her created domain.

So, a lot on the mechanisms, but is *A God in Ruins* worth reading? Absolutely. Ted is a very engaging character and, even though his stiff upper lip may get in the way from time to time, he is a decent sort, a good man, easy to care about. Atkinson lets us peek past some of the outer armor on some of the less appealing characters to see what made them the way they are, and leaves you thinking that if you had known that information earlier you might have been more sympathetic to this one or that. And offers a chance to

consider how you might have acted faced with those circumstances. There is one particularly large reveal near the end that explains a lot about one character in particular. Yes, engaging, moving. You will learn a bit about the massive bombing of Germany that was going on during the war, and a bit about how the war affected life on the homefront. Atkinson shows us changes in English life from the war to now, changes in her people, and over the course of her narrative she changes how we see them.

*A God in Ruins* could easily be seen as *An Author in Triumph*. Most writers would be happy to have written one masterpiece. With *A God in Ruins* Kate Atkinson has written a second. If you don't read this book you may not be cast out of Eden, but you probably should be.

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#### =====EXTRA STUFF

Links to the author's personal and FB pages

Video of a Halifax bomber – ignition and liftoff

[Kate Atkinson Tells Book Club How She Crafts Characters At All Life Stages](#)-from NPR

Readers' group guide

A wiki on Kibbo Kift, a scouting alternative group noted in the book

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#### Elyse says

This is another case where I took a chance to read an author's book having not been a fan of a previous book. If you read my review of "Life After Life", you'll see, I wasn't 'ga-ga' over that book!!!

I didn't 'jump' for joy when this first book came out either. PASS were my first thoughts!

Overtime ... I heard and read a few things about this 'companion' novel to have me re-consider ... ( enough to enter a Goodreads give-a-way). No, I didn't win...

but my local thrift box had a 'like new' copy for a dollar. ( the universe was speaking).

Plus...I had remembered months before, Goodreads member, Violet Wells, said a couple of things in her review that had me up to 'seriously considering' giving Kate Atkinson another try. I never said Atkinson wasn't a good writer...it was just that the story in "Life After Life" drove me bananas. Nails-on-a-chalkboard experience...

( with me still stuck with the scene about Ursula -sex- the doctors office and not knowing where babies come from) ... I never recovered from that situation!

Moving into "A God in Ruins".....

WOW..... \*awesome\* reading surprise!!! I'm sincerely surprised by how fantastic this was.

Heartbreaking...real..

( so much to talk about).... Emotions FELT!!!

For me...it's all about TEDDY....( the cycle of a life)!

Teddy as a child

Teddy during the war

Teddy after the war.

Teddy is doing the storytelling. The best kind too. An adult man...telling us his life story.

I fell in love with him as a child. Funny dialogue conversations in the beginning with he and his aunt Izzy. ( I was laughing out loud)...

but soon things shifted and I felt sad for this growing young boy. Even before he was a full teen, it was easy to see this boy's integrity - his sense of purpose in life. His dreams were not just for his own adult life ...but his desires for 'his' children ... ( he was only 11 years old).

That feeling never left me, ( his young self), as we see him as a young man who is passionate for flying bombers. WE GET IT!!! Even if you don't like the nitty-gritty details of 'war'...there was something very moving about how war was described through Teddy.

Teddy is an enduring character. At the beginning he seems a little aloof...with a dry even key personality. I soon realized while he did not express exuberant emotion, I was feeling tons 'for' him.

The YING & the YANG... It was a pretty ugly relationship between Teddy and his daughter Viola. As a parent ..there are so many ways to look at this tragedy..

Does it help to be angry at Viola for being a such a selfish self- centered creature?

Her children are beautiful... But unfortunately and fortunately...we see them through the eyes of Teddy (Viola wasn't dishing out an ounce of touchy-feely love energy).

In the end... "A God in Ruins" can make you want to crawl back into bed for a day and pull the covers over you. I ached!

The depth and richness from the storytelling has added new breath to mine.

I could cry just thinking of this story! WONDERFUL!!!!

p.s. This makes 3 books in a row where they each Have been \*\*\*\*phenomenal\*\*\*\*

Bases are loaded!!!! ". ( hope I can keep this train running)

....The Yoga of Max's Discontent, by Karan Bajan

....The Signature of All Things, by Elizabeth Gilbert

... A God in Ruins, by Kate Atkinson

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## Marita says

### 4.5 stars

Having previously devoured Kate Atkinson's novels as soon as they were published, I don't know why it has taken me so long to get to A God in Ruins and Life After Life. I haven't read the latter yet; this one appealed more.

What a keen observer of human nature Kate Atkinson is, and how well she expresses her observations. She plays with ideas and writing styles, and manages to seamlessly weave them all together. For example, the Augustus scenes are written by her creation, Izzie, who obviously doesn't have the skills of her creator. Ms. Atkinson acknowledges: *"I'm sure that most readers will recognize that Augustus owes a debt to William Brown of Just William fame. Augustus is a poorly drawn shade of William, who remains for me one of the greatest fictional characters ever created. Richmal Crompton, I salute you."*

The author is constantly exploring as she writes, seeing where the story will go. It corkscrews through these pages pretty much like Teddy Todd's Halifaxes that he piloted during World War II. The plot focuses on Teddy, but we also get to know his family. What I particularly liked about Teddy was that he wasn't always perfect; at times he could be peevish or cantankerous. However, his humanity, common sense and compassion won the day. His clever, mathematician wife Nancy for the most part behaves as though she is Teddy's mum or school teacher, but later in the novel we get to know Nancy better and have a better insight into what makes her tick. Their only daughter, Viola, is a larger than life character, to the point of being a caricature. Initially a hippy (albeit a reluctant one), she eventually becomes a very successful author. She behaves monstrously towards her father and her son, Sunny, who may be sunny by name but not by nature. Ms Atkinson tells us what young Sunny thinks when his mother yells at him, she describes his indignation, and we follow his logic which after all makes perfect sense - if only to Sunny. At times I felt very sorry for Sunny.

This novel is often ironic, frequently mordantly funny, and at times very sad, even devastating. Ms Atkinson pays tribute to the many men and women who lost their lives during the war, but her novel also clearly highlights the futility of war. She remembers not only those who died whilst engaged with the enemy, but also the many young people who died in the course of training to be pilots, etc.

#### **A few quotes:**

(view spoiler)

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## Julie Christine says

"The whole edifice of civilization turned out to be constructed from an unstable mix of quicksand and imagination."

? Kate Atkinson, *A God in Ruins*

"It's still the same old story  
A fight for love and glory  
A case of do or die  
The world will always welcome lovers  
As time goes by"  
-Frank Sinatra, *As Time Goes By*

In the 2013 *déjà-vu* epic *Life After Life* Kate Atkinson played out "what if?" in a loop-de-loop plot that tossed narrative structure to the wind. It is a brilliant, confounding, playful and poignant novel. *A God In Ruins* returns us to Fox Corner and the Todd family of *Life After Life*, but aware that clever conceit is best eaten while warm, Atkinson returns to a more conventional structure for this "companion" novel. Sort of.

*A God In Ruins* plucks Teddy Todd from Ursula Todd's war and follows his life, from RAF bomber during WWII to his final days in a nursing home in the 21st century. The trajectory is not chronological—the narrative leaps back and forth between the skies over Hamburg to Teddy's prosaic, duty-bound post-war life, foreshadowing and reflecting back on itself—but unlike *Life After Life*, Teddy lives but one life (I feel it necessary to say that although *A God In Ruins* is a standalone novel, you'd be doing yourself a terrible disservice by not reading *Life After Life* first. Not only is it a phenomenal read, but you will enter *A God In Ruins* already knowing and loving these characters and appreciating the winks and nods blithely scattered in the text).

While still presenting the artifice of fiction—in the Author's Note, Atkinson states that fiction is essentially "how we must imagine what we cannot know"—*A God In Ruins* is about young men and war. It is an homage to the many who do not survive and the story of how it leaves in ruins those young gods who do. The novel is built on Teddy's flashes of memory and in this way, it carries forward the sense of *déjà-vu* that made *Life After Life* such a tour de force. But *Ruins* is quieter, except for the breathless scenes of bomber raids that Teddy leads. The reader never knows who will return alive (90 percent of the young men who joined the WWII Bomber Command did not) and the drama is rendered in extraordinary, fever-pitch detail.

Contrasting Teddy's Greatest Generation heroics is the ridiculousness of his daughter, Viola, who Atkinson writes in caricature, almost unfairly at times. It's impossible not to laugh or smirk at Viola's irrelevant, hapless life, except when you are bemoaning her tragic neglect of her children, son Sunny and daughter Bertie (and Atkinson indulges in some terrific metafiction moments, offered like sticky Turkish Delight—Viola shuffles from indulgent hippy to pampered bestselling writer, her chipped shoulder leading the way). In a quieter display of domestic heroics, Teddy steps in as dutiful, if not overtly tender, grandfather. There is a thick scar of tension running between Viola and her father, slowly revealed as the courtship and marriage of Teddy and Viola's mother, Nancy, unfolds.

I still come across readers who have never heard of Atkinson (whaaaaa???) or dismiss her because of the supposed-genre Jackson Brodie series. I can press her books into the hand of the innocently ignorant; the

willfully ignorant don't merit the breath. Kate Atkinson is one of the finest, most versatile, humane and intelligent storytellers of our generation. Dismiss her at your own peril and loss.

If *Life After Life* is about beginning and beginning again, *A God In Ruins* is about our inevitable end. And speaking of endings, well, no, I won't. I can't. Just don't mind me for sinking to the floor, clutching at the pieces of my broken heart.

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### **Sandy \*The world could end while I was reading and I would never notice\* says**

EXCERPT: What *had* gone into the making of Teddy? Not slugs and snails, it was true, but generation upon generation of Beresfords and Todds, all coming to one singular point in a cold bed in the chill of an autumn night when his father had caught hold of the golden rope of his mother's hair and hadn't let go until he had hauled them both to the far shore (they had many euphemisms for the act). As they lay amongst the shipwreck of the marital bed they each felt slightly befuddled by the unexpected ardor of the other. Hugh cleared his throat and murmured, 'A voyage into the deep, eh?' Sylvie said nothing as she felt the seafaring metaphor had been stretched far enough.

But the grain had entered the shell (Sylvie's own metaphoric stance) and the pearl that would be Edward Beresford Todd began to grow until he was revealed into the sunshine that came before the Great War and lay happily for hours on end in his pram with nothing but a silver hare dangling from the pram hood for company.

THE BLURB: In *Life After Life* Ursula Todd lived through the turbulent events of the last century again and again. In *A God in Ruins*, Atkinson turns her focus on Ursula's beloved younger brother Teddy – would-be poet, RAF bomber pilot, husband and father – as he navigates the perils and progress of the 20th century. For all Teddy endures in battle, his greatest challenge will be to face living in a future he never expected to have.

MY THOUGHTS: This is a complex book. There seems to be no order to it. It randomly jumps from Teddy's childhood, to his old age, to his war years and back, interspersed with the lives of his one daughter, Viola, and her two children, Sunny and Bertie, and back again.

And yet, with her own inimitable style, Kate Atkinson pulls it off and rather splendidly at that. It is like sitting with a loved elderly relative, listening to them reminisce, where one memory leads to another, the tenuous thread that connects them known only to the narrator. And yet Atkinson draws you into this family. I laughed, I cried. I seethed at Viola's indifference to her children, her father. I flew with Teddy on his sorties over Germany, crossing my fingers to keep him safe. I applauded his rescue of Sunny (aka Philip Villiers) from the Villiers enclave, and his careful nurturing of Bertie. And I wept at his gentle decline in residential care.

This is both a heart-wrenching and heartwarming read.

All opinions expressed in this review are entirely my own. Please refer to my Goodreads.com profile page or the 'about' page on [sandysbookaday.wordpress.com](http://sandysbookaday.wordpress.com) for an explanation of my rating system. This review and others are also published on my blog [sandysbookaday.wordpress.com](http://sandysbookaday.wordpress.com)  
<https://wordpress.com/post/sandysbook...>

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## Phrynne says

I guess I just loved everything about this book except the cover but I won't knock any stars off for that. Kate Atkinson writes like a dream. The early parts of this book are slow but the prose is so good the slowness does not matter. And it needs to be read carefully anyway because at times the story flits backwards and forwards and the reader needs to be alert in order to keep track.

I enjoyed the fact that the book is set in the same world as *Life After Life* but focuses on Teddy instead of Ursula. She pops in and out but this is Teddy's story and Teddy's life. There is a wealth of historical detail about World War 2 and the part played by fighter pilots which would not usually be my cup of tea. However the author tells it so well and brings it all to life in such a way that you can imagine being up there in that tiny plane or worse, crash landing in the North Sea.

Teddy is a wonderful character who grows from boyhood to old man during the story and becomes someone you really care for. And then the ending absolutely stunned me. I did not see that coming and I will be thinking about it and replaying it for days. Thank you very much Kate Atkinson and what on earth are you going to write next?

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## Sharon Bolton says

“Despite the owl, which continued to hoot its unholy lullaby, he fell almost immediately into the deep and innocent sleep of the hopeful.”

First the confession. I didn't really like *Life After Life*. Oh, I admit, it was a very clever idea, beautifully written, but for me, something was missing. It was all a bit random and, at times, (I may as well be honest) a wee bit annoying.

Something of a mixed blessing, then, to be sent an ARC of the “companion piece”, *A God In Ruins*. It's a beautiful, limited-edition proof that will look great on the shelf, but did I really want to put myself through more of the same?

Well, I did, thank goodness, because *A God In Ruins* is one of the most extraordinary books I've ever read. It is the story of Ursula Todd's younger brother, Teddy, who becomes a fighter pilot in World War 2, is one of the relative few to survive and who goes on to marry, have a daughter and a couple of grandchildren, and live to a ripe old age.

So what? Yes, I know, I'd be tempted to say the same if the book was ‘sold’ to me in that way. It's difficult to explain quite why this is such an exquisite read, because there's precious little in the way of plot, but it is testament to the sheer brilliance of Atkinson's writing, that she can keep her reader so engaged without too much happening. Every incident, every character, is drawn with exquisite, sparkling colour, not a single detail seems superfluous and her dark, bitchy sense of humour weaves through the narrative like a glossy black ribbon.

The timeline jumps about a bit. The story is written from multiple points of view that occasionally leap up

and take the reader by surprise, but otherwise I couldn't fault this book. Well, maybe I could, just a tiny bit, because as I neared the end, I found myself thinking: 'It's a lovely book, but I'm not sure what the point of it is, other than the interest to be found even in very ordinary, common-place lives.' In fairness, I'd have been happy to leave it at that, I was enjoying the read so much.

And then, oh my lord, the point!

The point of the book hit me like a blow from a sledgehammer. It made me cry. It made me feel like a complete fool. It left me in awe of Atkinson's brilliance. It made me want to read *Life After Life* again. I cannot say more, just by mentioning that there is 'something to come' I may have already spoiled the surprise to some extent, and for that I apologise, but without referring to 'the point' it would be almost impossible to explain why I think this great, glorious heartbreak of a book will come to be considered one of the defining novels of our time.

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PS: I did re-read *Life After Life*. I get it now. The rest of the world was right and I was wrong.

## **Hugh says**

This has been described as a sequel to *Life After Life*, but as Kate Atkinson says in her Author's Note at the end, "I like to think of it as a 'companion piece' rather than a sequel". It is similarly audacious and if anything even more moving, and I devoured it in three days.

This time centre stage is taken by Teddy Todd, the younger brother of Ursula, the heroine of *Life After Life*. The core story tells of his life as a bomber pilot in the Second World War, which is vividly described and emotionally powerful. This only accounts for about a third of the book, as Teddy's struggles with civilian life before and after the war are also described in detail, and the chapters are chronologically scattered. Even within chapters and sentences Atkinson often can't resist throwing in asides about how the perceptions and expectations of her characters are confounded, with allusions to events several decades later. This is a bit like listening to an aged relative - descriptions of the distant past interspersed with comments about more recent events. Some events are described several times in different levels of detail.

Some chapters tell the story of Teddy's daughter Viola, who is a self-centred child of the sixties who becomes a writer of popular fiction, and her relationship with her children Sunny (a boy) and Bertie (a girl). Viola is a comic caricature, and provides much of the light relief which leavens the more serious material. Viola's character is partly shaped by the early death of Ted's wife Nancy from brain cancer, and her role in the story demonstrates how quickly history is forgotten by younger generations.

It is difficult to describe the ending without resorting to spoilers, and although this is a book which would reward re-reading I won't say too much here, except that although I felt it was cleverly handled it might have been even better to end with the devastating penultimate chapter. This is a minor quibble, and overall I was greatly impressed by the range of ideas, the variety of narrative styles and the way the whole thing coalesces.

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A fine book, and possibly even better than *Life After Life*.

## Jill says

In Kate Atkinson's time-bending novel, *Life After Life*, the author toyed with time and created several different timelines and narratives for her main character, Ursula Todd. Now, in this companion piece, the focus is on Teddy, Ursula's brother, and his life as an RAF Halifax pilot and under-the-radar hero.

Atkinson holds the magical power to shape time to fit her story and this one moves seamlessly from Teddy's last treacherous flights (fewer than half of RAF pilots actually survived World War II) to the 20th and 21st century, where Teddy is a husband, father, and grandfather. We get to meet his daughter Viola, who blames him for her mother's premature departure and makes a mess out of her own life...and subsequently, the lives of her two children.

But the key to this story lies in his title, which comes from Ralph Waldo Emerson: "A man is a god in ruins. When men are innocent, life shall be longer, and shall pass into the immortal, as gently as we awake from dreams." Wartime is, the author argues, man's greatest fall from grace and so she walks a fine tightrope: revealing the amazing heroism and self-sacrifice of the men such as Teddy and his crew yet showcasing how (in her own words) "whether our war on savagery did not, in the end, become itself savage as we attacked the very people – the old, the young, women – that civilization is supposed to defend." When Ursula asks Teddy, "and how do you define 'innocence' anyway?", attention must be paid.

The postwar scenario occupies every bit as large a part as the war narrative; Viola never does understand the forces that shaped her father or the fabric of the man he became. As a result, she cannot be called innocent and her own life is often in self-defined ruins.

Anyone who suspects that this book is less – well, inventive – than its predecessor will be suitably satisfied with Kate Atkinson's sleight of hand. *A God In Ruins* is also the philosophical sibling of the earlier book; everything in life can change quickly – in a heartbeat – and life is little more than a single breath. That breath is particularly precarious during wartime ("All the birds who were never born, all the songs that were never sung and so can only exist in imagination.")

The bottom line (again in the author's words) is that "War is savage. For everyone. Innocent or guilty." It dehumanizes us and in too many cases, it takes away our story. And THAT Is the brilliance that lies behind this work.

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## Helle says

This novel is why I read.

I first met Kate Atkinson in *Life after Life*, which, while not quite being a five-star read for me, made me want to explore her work further. *A God in Ruins*, a companion to *Life after Life*, revisits the same characters and adds layers of story and understanding to the lives of the Todd family. (You do not have to read *Life after Life* first; they are not chronologically sequenced).

The heart of this novel is Teddy, an RAF bomber pilot in World War II, the sister of Ursula in *Life after Life*, the father of Viola and grandfather of Sonny and Bertie/Roberta. They are our central players in this novel which weaves back and forth in time, letting a scene in the future unfold here, going back into the past and filling in a bit of backstory there – like a giant patchwork gradually taking shape.

The novel is above all rich, and there is so much to love in it. Here is my incomplete list (which includes both ‘items’ from the story and the author’s tools):

Teddy’s love for Sonny

The dogs

The depiction of Sonny’s childhood (raw, ruthless but oh, so honest)

Teddy’s interlude with Julia and her family’s art (and the loss of a Rembrandt)

The relationship between Teddy and his flight crew

Viola’s regrets, ultimately

Atkinson’s sardonic comments sprinkled throughout a narrative that is fundamentally warm

Her knowing insights into family dynamics

Her allusions and direct references to numerous other works of literature, incl. *Bleak House*, *Anna Karenina*, *Little Women*, *Anne of Green Gables*, Hans Christian Andersen’s *The Wild Swans*, *A Room with a View*, *Barchester Towers*, *The Pilgrim’s Progress*

But most of all the novel’s holy trinity of humour, heart and intelligence; or plot, prose and characters – plausible, flawed and multifaceted characters – all serving the higher purpose of a narrative whose themes and images are set in motion by the same characters. Like Teddy’s bomber itself, character and theme are sent spinning into the air and only gradually (in the beginning, the lack of chronology was confusing) form a pattern, the jigsaw finally forming what was – (view spoiler) - a life.

What I didn’t like:

The cover. It doesn’t half measure up to the beautiful cover of my copy of *Life after Life* and, more importantly, belies the richness of the book itself. But I suppose that is a detail. And it was the only thing I didn’t like.

There were times when the way Atkinson uses language reminded me of Julian Barnes’s writing, for instance in her repetition of images and thematic phrases like *The dead were legion. (The gods had their own secret agenda) + (...) and so they continued throwing the birds against the wall, and still the wall stood*, the latter a recantation of the act of killing during the war – and its hopeless contribution to a solution. (Another repeated, concrete symbol was a small, silver hare with an ivory teething ring attached to it, which touches several of the Todd’s lives and which Teddy carries with him as a talisman when he is on his ‘tours’ (bombing raids). This touched me because, incredibly, I had one such silver hare with an ivory teething ring when I was a baby).

The novel is about the devastations of wars, of World War II on its participants; of growing up and growing old, of joys and disappointments, but ultimately it is about fiction, the fiction of stories, the fiction of our lives and what we make of them in the face of atrocities – war, illness, family disillusionment. There were scenes that nearly broke my heart, and there were episodes that made me laugh out loud. As the publishers might have described Kate Atkinson on the cover of the book: a writer at the height of her powers. I loved this book.

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## Steve says

I hope this doesn't sound conceited, but you might crow, too, if you had just written one BILLION reviews. I have the magic of combinatorics to thank. There are nine different fill-in-the-blank sections in this review that allow ten separate candidates each which in the end will embody the text. That makes 10 to the 9th power (1,000,000,000) possible outcomes. If you want your own individualized version, take the digits of your Social Security Number or any other 9-digit sequence of your choosing, and reveal the corresponding numerical choice under the spoiler tag at each juncture.

First of all, let me apologize to my friends here who may have thought I was 0 (view spoiler) 1 (view spoiler) 2 (view spoiler) 3 (view spoiler) 4 (view spoiler) 5 (view spoiler) 6 (view spoiler) 7 (view spoiler) 8 (view spoiler) 9 (view spoiler). My inactivity was due instead to 0 (view spoiler) 1 (view spoiler) 2 (view spoiler) 3 (view spoiler) 4 (view spoiler) 5 (view spoiler) 6 (view spoiler) 7 (view spoiler) 8 (view spoiler) 9 (view spoiler).

This book is a companion to Atkinson's celebrated *Life After Life*, one I liked a lot for the 0 (view spoiler) 1 (view spoiler) 2 (view spoiler) 3 (view spoiler) 4 (view spoiler) 5 (view spoiler) 6 (view spoiler) 7 (view spoiler) 8 (view spoiler) 9 (view spoiler). Ursula, the often recreated character in *Life After Life* had a younger brother, Teddy, who was the focus here. Teddy was an RAF pilot who was also defined by his 0 (view spoiler) 1 (view spoiler) 2 (view spoiler) 3 (view spoiler) 4 (view spoiler) 5 (view spoiler) 6 (view spoiler) 7 (view spoiler) 8 (view spoiler) 9 (view spoiler). Unlike *Life After Life*, Ursula and her many iterations were not a big part of this story. The lens this time focuses squarely on Teddy and those closest to him, extending from boyhood to the "Care" Home, with temporal zigzags throughout. Among the other P.O.V. characters, several were fleshed out quite fully. For instance, we saw with Teddy's 0 (view spoiler) 1 (view spoiler) 2 (view spoiler) 3 (view spoiler) 4 (view spoiler) 5 (view spoiler) 6 (view spoiler) 7 (view spoiler) 8 (view spoiler) 9 (view spoiler).

Beyond the exceptional character development, I really liked 0 (view spoiler) 1 (view spoiler) 2 (view spoiler) 3 (view spoiler) 4 (view spoiler) 5 (view spoiler) 6 (view spoiler) 7 (view spoiler) 8 (view spoiler) 9 (view spoiler). I've now read enough Kate Atkinson to know she's 0 (view spoiler) 1 (view spoiler) 2 (view spoiler) 3 (view spoiler) 4 (view spoiler) 5 (view spoiler) 6 (view spoiler) 7 (view spoiler) 8 (view spoiler) 9 (view spoiler).

I'm rating this somewhere in the vicinity of 0 (view spoiler) 1 (view spoiler) 2 (view spoiler) 3 (view spoiler) 4 (view spoiler) 5 (view spoiler) 6 (view spoiler) 7 (view spoiler) 8 (view spoiler) 9 (view spoiler) stars. The only thing I'm counting off for is that it occasionally felt just a bit long. If I'm honest, though, that may reflect more on me than the book. With my old commute I'd get hour-long chunks of reading time. Until I tweak my routine to find those chunks again, my status as a *Goodreader* will be threatened. Despite my delay in finishing, the book truly was a pleasure. Atkinson proved her ascendancy again.

Let's see if I know what you're thinking after a sample of one billion reviews. 0 (view spoiler) 1 (view spoiler) 2 (view spoiler) 3 (view spoiler) 4 (view spoiler) 5 (view spoiler) 6 (view spoiler) 7 (view spoiler) 8 (view spoiler) 9 (view spoiler)

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### **karen says**

man, this book. chills, i tell you, everywhere chills. this is a companion book to *Life After Life*, and technically, it is "teddy's story." teddy, you will recall from *life*, is ursula's little brother. if you have not read *Life After Life* - what the crap is wrong with you?? go!! read!! meet us back here when you're done!

i say "technically," because although teddy is definitely the center of this book, we are still treated to the stories and perspectives of some of our other friends from *life*, as well as some new additions: sylvie, izzie, nancy, hugh, sunny, viola, bertie. and just a dash of ursula. who does not spend this book dying on every other page, lucky girl.

the two things about *life* that resonated with me long after i closed the book had nothing to do with its structural playfulness, which seems to be "the thing" about the book that most people wanna talk about. and it *should* be talked about because it was risky and well-handled. but for me, that was more or less cosmetic. the things that shattered me were her writing about war and her glorification of english stoicism. and while this book doesn't have the same structure as *life*, it most definitely has these two focal points.

and they are just as good here as they were in *life*. i'm not big into wartime narratives, but atkinson has a gift. she takes the english experience during world war two and just dissects the crap out of it. whether it be in long chapters about teddy's experiences as a fighter pilot (sometimes TOO long, which is my sole complaint about this book, but that complaint is tied to my own tastes which balked at the very detailed descriptions of planes which are no doubt fascinating to people with an interest in military history), or in smaller stories about the way the war changed people - their sexual permissiveness, social restructuring, and - my second ♥ - that stiff upper lip.

if you're reading this review, you probably know me, and know my tastes. and a lot of what i enjoy, from steinbeck to hardy to grit lit are stories of endurance and adaptability in unforgiving circumstances. the triumph of the human spirit and man's struggle against forces of nature and hardship & yada. and this entire book is resting on the sturdy foundation of stoic forbearance. on doing what needs to be done. on making do and not making a fuss.

a perfect example of this:

*It was when she had come down from the walls at Monkgate Bar and was waiting to cross the road at the traffic lights that a black curtain suddenly descended and covered her left eye... If she had gone completely blind she would have called for help, but the loss of only one eye didn't seem cause enough to involve complete strangers.*

i mean, COME ON! that is stellar.

and also:

*... instead he had stayed and plodded on, because something told him that this was the life that had to be lived out...He preferred solitary pursuits, and being a member of a group seemed rather dutiful, but he could do dutiful and somebody had to or the world would fall apart.*

and the book is just FILLED with that, same as in *life*. and it is also filled with stories, stories, stories, each one a soulhurting gem. three words: do.mi.nic.

i said that the book wasn't as structurally playful as *life*, but it does do a couple of things. we bounce around back and forth in time and voice: prewar, wartime, postwar, post-post war, with an overarching omniscient narrator casually inserting facts and fates that will happen in the future, which may or may not be fleshed out in later chapters. details will occur, and then recur in a different context, with different import. we will revisit meaningful objects through the eyes of several characters, who may not know what they are looking at. oh, and there's this one other thing. about which you will hear nothing from me. except that it's more reader-jarring than anything that happens in *life*.

don't read too many reviews of this book. i have been careful, but others may not be. go in cold and prepare to be blown away again by this woman's phenomenal storytelling abilities and her ability to write characters for whom you will care very deeply. and fear for, because we are at war, and you can be killed while sunbathing on a roof.

please, more, ms. atkinson!! jimmy!! izzie! maurice!! anyone!

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this is only a four-star from me because it is not *quite* as good as *Life After Life*, which is like saying camembert is not *quite* as good as brie. it's practically a meaningless distinction, as i would eat either of those anytime, anywhere. for all intents and purposes, this is a five-star book.

come to my blog!

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### **Kim says**

"A man is a God in ruins. When men are innocent, life shall be longer, and shall pass into the immortal, as gently as we awake from dreams" - Ralph Waldo Emerson

In this companion piece to *Life After Life* Atkinson writes about Teddy Todd: beloved younger brother of Ursula, would-be poet, husband, father, grandfather, World War II bomber pilot. In it, she breathes life into themes that are both extraordinary and mundane: the shortness and fragility of life, the certainty of death, the fall from grace that is war, the redemptive power of love, the artifice and reality of fiction. All are dealt in Atkinson's intelligent and quirky style.

I fell in love with Teddy and I wept for all young people whose lives are ruined by war and who miss out on what otherwise could have been. Atkinson made me laugh and she made me cry. She made me think and she left me profoundly shaken. How could I ask for anything more from a novel?

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## **Gary the Bookworm says**

Teddy Todd is a character from Kate Atkinson's earlier novel *Life After Life*. He is the beloved baby brother, and favorite son at Fox Corner, the Todd family home in the London suburbs. He grows up to be a bomber pilot in World War II and is either killed on a risky mission toward the end of the war or goes on to live a long life as a husband, father and grandfather. Atkinson considers both scenarios, but this novel focuses on the latter. She calls this a companion piece to *Life After Life*, which is about Ursula, Teddy's older sister, and her multiple lives. I fell in love with all the Todds, so I approached this with high expectations.

Whereas, *Life After Life* is about life's possibilities, this is fundamentally about making the best of the vicissitudes of the ordinary. Teddy "had been reconciled to death during the war and then suddenly the war was over and there was a next day and a next day and a next day. Part of him never adjusted to having a future." If he was powerless to shape his future, he was determined to live his life with integrity and "he resolved that he would try always to be kind. It was the best he could do. It was all that he could do. And it might be love, after all."

The title comes from Ralph Waldo Emerson: "A man is a god in ruins. When men are innocent, life shall be longer, and shall pass into the immortal, as gently as we awake from dreams." Flight is a recurring theme. When Teddy and Ursula attend a performance of Beethoven's Ninth in war-torn London, "Teddy resolved to simply feel the music and stopped searching for words to describe it, and by the time the fourth movement came around and Roy Henderson, the baritone, began to sing ( *O Freude!* ), the hairs on the back of his neck were standing up. In her seat beside him, Ursula was almost quivering with the power of emotion, like a coiled spring, a bird ready to rise from the ground at any moment. Towards the end of the final movement, when the magnificence of the Choral becomes almost unbearable, Teddy had the odd sensation that he might actually have to hold on to his sister to prevent her rising into the air and taking flight."

Passages like this suggest to me that Atkinson has been touched by the divine. If she never wrote another word, this novel should assure her place in the pantheon of World Literature.

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<http://www.npr.org/2015/06/08/4116967...>

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## **Teresa says**

Shortly before I finished this book last night, I read of the death of Nicholas Winton, aka Britain's Schindler, at the age of 106. He lived through the same time period, with a few years' difference on either side, as Atkinson's fictional Teddy, the favorite sibling of Ursula from *Life After Life*. While I was immediately captured by the latter book, this companion novel took a while for me to get into as I wondered where it was going. The ultimate destination is a spoiler and I'll address my issue with that in a spoiler comment below for anyone who's curious.

Atkinson's prose style is as engaging as ever (though she must hate semicolons: see my review of *One Good Turn*); she's a great storyteller; and she clearly loves her characters, even the most unlovable one. The characters come by their personalities honestly as their backgrounds reveal, something that's not done

slowly. Once Atkinson has you wondering about something, it's explained rather quickly, through a different time period and a different point of view.

I would've liked the book to have ended ten pages sooner. As I read the last sentence of "my" ending, my mind immediately went to the ending of D.M. Thomas's *The White Hotel* -- same theme but Thomas' rendering had much more of an impact on me. Following Atkinson's ending (and I understand why she chose it) is an "Author's Note". I don't usually mind these notes, but this detailed one both explained too much and seemed superfluous. I wonder if criticism to *Life After Life* prompted it.

I am of two minds about this book and not sure how to rate it. I enjoyed it for the most part and I agree with the theme, but the ending was deflating.

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### **BrokenTune says**

I DNF'd this book last night.

I was so bored with *A God in Ruins* that I skipped the second half of the book and advanced to the end of the book.

There is a twist at the end of the story, but it was too little and too late, and I had kind of predicted it anyway.

As with *Life After Life*, it was not the writing that put me off. Kate Atkinson clearly has a talent for writing beautiful prose. My problem was again with the plot.

I found it very hard to get invested in the story of Teddy, the brother of Ursula from *Life After Life*.

*A God in Ruins* is not one of those books that is driven by plot, and so it relies on its characters being interesting enough to keep reading. While Teddy's daughter, Viola, could have provided this interest, Teddy didn't. I get that Teddy was a representation of the many WW2 pilots who returned from the war to lead very ordinary lives without fuss and much excitement, and I appreciate that Teddy is a tribute to those men. However, I would rather read about these men from non-fiction sources than in a fictional environment.

As for the point of the book that events and lives are interlinked and a change in one results in a ripple effect that will change others, I believe this came across quite well in *Life After Life* and did not need the additional elaboration of Teddy's story in *A God in Ruins*.

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### **Violet wells says**

The second novel about a Bomber Command pilot I've read in the space of as many months and both *A God in Ruins* and *The Way Back to Florence* have turned out to be fabulous enthralling if very different novels. The pilot in this novel is Teddy, brother of Ursula in *Life After Life*. The novel spans his long life and offsets and hones it with the lives of his daughter and his two grandchildren.

As ever with Atkinson there are layers of artifice in this novel – on one level, her novels are generally about fiction itself - but unlike *Life after Life* whose tricks I found gimmicky the artifice here is subtle and as such

has greater artistry. Once again we have a family saga spanning four generations with a central figurehead acting as a kind of cypher through which the history is decrypted. And once again Atkinson's brilliant command of structure is in evidence. She deftly shifts the narrative from one decade to another and back again without sacrificing the dramatic tension.

A God in Ruins exudes a similar nostalgia for the pre-war past as *Brideshead Revisited*. Atkinson clearly feels a great deal of affection for the old world modesty and self-effacement of Teddy – brilliantly offset by the bullying egotism and blinkered narcissism of his gloriously obnoxious daughter Viola (one of the best literary villains of past few years!). The war is depicted as a time of simple and stolen pleasures, of camaraderie and even excitement (Atkinson gives her characters very glamorous wartime occupations: Teddy's wife Nancy is a codebreaker at Bletchley Park, a sister is an ATA pilot and a friend a female SOE agent); post-war, all the way to today, is depicted as a muddle of self-indulgence and misguided pursuits of utopia. Fox's Wood, Teddy's childhood home, is the utopia of the novel – everything eventually seems to lead back there as if all that followed, most obviously the war, was a fatal cosmic error in navigation. “The war had been a great chasm and there could be no going back to the other side, to the people they were before.”

Atkinson has a habit of being very hard on her female characters, especially on her mothers. Rarely do they like their children, let alone love them. Viola is her most monstrous mother to date. And as such provides most of the book's best humour. At times we're left asking ourselves if the sacrifice of all those young men was worth it if it spawned monsters like Viola. She also pokes fun at many contemporary pursuits (care homes, marketing jargon, courses in self-discovery, dietary fads) and includes some self-satire when Viola becomes a successful novelist.

Right, I'm on the Eurostar to Paris and we're about to enter the tunnel so I've leave it at that...

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