

BOOK CLUB To Go!

Behind the Scenes at the Museum

By Kate Atkinson

Introduction

From the moment Ruby Lennox announces her own conception ("I exist!"), it is clear that she is a narrator who will leave no stone unturned in her account of family life above a pet shop in England. Not content simply to describe her own circumstances, Ruby investigates the lives of the women in family both past and present, from her great-grandmother's affair with a French photographer to her mother's unfulfilled dreams of Hollywood glamour. Hurtling in and out of both World Wars, economic downfalls, the onset of the permissive '60's, and up to the present day, Ruby paints a rich and vivid portrait of heartbreak and happiness, and from it draws a rare understanding of the shared secrets, hopes and failures that unite every family.

(readinggroupguides.com)

About the Author

Kate Atkinson was born in York in 1951, she earned her master's degree in English literature at Dundee University, and did further graduate work in American literature. While raising her two daughters, she held a variety of jobs, from university tutor to welfare benefits administrator, and always wrote, publishing short stories in British magazines and finally her first novel, *Behind the Scenes at the Museum*, in 1995 in England and 1996 in the United States. The critical response in both countries was overwhelming, and Atkinson's talent was justly celebrated when *Behind the Scenes at the Museum* was named England's Whitbread Book of the Year.

(readinggroupguides.com)

Author Interview by Picador USA

Q: How would you summarize *Behind the Scenes at the Museum*?

A. Atkinson: "Almost impossible to do (it has a very complex structure). It's the story of Ruby Lennox from birth to the age of 40, her family, and the secrets hidden in the family's story. It also contains flashbacks to other members of the family -- in the past -- and so builds up a story/family tree that spans four generations. It's about history, time, loss, coincidence, self-knowledge. (It's also about cupboards -- but no one seems to notice that!)"

Q: What was the inspiration for your book?

A. Atkinson: "A photograph of my great-grandmother. The silver teaspoon (an event that really happened)."

Q: Who are your favorite authors? What authors have most influenced your work?

A. Atkinson: "Anne Tyler, Jane Austen, Kurt Vonnegut, Alice Hoffman, Margaret Atwood, Henry James, Donald Barthelme, Robert Coover, F. Scott Fitzgerald. Most influential -- Jane Austen and Kurt Vonnegut."

Q: What did you do before your novel was published?

A. Atkinson: "University tutor, legal secretary, welfare benefits administrator, home help, creative literature tutor, supervising home visit service to the homebound and elderly, chambermaid, community education tutor -- anything and everything!"

(barnesandnoble.com)

Reviews

"Stunning...out-Copperfields David *Copperfield*....The power has such storytelling, a treasure chest bursting with the painful, pitiful, sad, always fascinating details of the most ordinary of lives." - *The Los Angeles Times*

"Delivers its jokes and tragedies as efficiently as Dickens once delivered his, though Atkinson has a game plan more sophisticated than Dickens....will dazzle readers for years to come." - *The Long Review of Books*

"Remarkable...full of the grimness, grit, and grandeur of Yorkshire life...one of the funniest books to come out of Britain in years." - *The New York Times Book Review*

(barnesandnoble.com)

Further Reading

The Seven Sisters by Margaret Drabble

White Teeth by Zadie Smith

Loverboy by Victoria Redel

The Bookshop by Penelope Fitzgerald

The Orchard on Fire by Shena Mackay

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Possible Discussion Questions

1. What does every generation of women in this family have in common?
2. What does the title mean?
3. *Behind the Scenes at the Museum* was called "anti-family" by some critics after its publication. Do you agree? Is it possible to defend the novel against this charge?
4. Why are cupboards important in this story?
5. Would you characterize the novel as comic or tragic? Which tone predominates?
6. Who's happy in this novel? What do the women in each generation of Ruby's family need to do to be happy?
7. Why isn't Ruby's marriage more prominent in the story?
8. What did you make of the ending? Does the story end on a positive note?
9. More than one reviewer compared *Behind the Scenes at the Museum* to *Tristram Shandy* and to the works of Marcel Proust and Charles Dickens. What might these novels have in common? How does Kate Atkinson update or expand upon the earlier books' use of narration and history?
10. One of Atkinson's innovations is her use of footnotes. Why do you think she adopted this non-fiction technique in a novel?

(NoveList.com and readinggroupguides.com)