



A God in Ruins: A Novel

By Kate Atkinson

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The stunning companion to Kate Atkinson's #1 bestseller *Life After Life*, "one of the best novels I've read this century" (Gillian Flynn).

"He 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. Part of him never adjusted to having a future."

Kate Atkinson's dazzling *Life After Life* explored the possibility of infinite chances and the power of choices, following Ursula Todd as she lived through the turbulent events of the last century over and over again.

A GOD IN RUINS tells the dramatic story of the 20th Century through Ursula's beloved younger brother Teddy--would-be poet, heroic pilot, husband, father, and grandfather-as he navigates the perils and progress of a rapidly changing world. After all that Teddy endures in battle, his greatest challenge is living in a future he never expected to have.

An ingenious and moving exploration of one ordinary man's path through extraordinary times, A GOD IN RUINS proves once again that Kate Atkinson is one of the finest novelists of our age.

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A God in Ruins: A Novel By Kate Atkinson Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #71130 in Books
- Brand: Back Bay Books
- Published on: 2016-01-12
- Released on: 2016-01-12
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 8.38" h x 1.25" w x 5.50" l, .0 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 480 pages

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Editorial Review

Review

National Bestseller

A *New York Times* Bestseller

Winner of the 2015 Costa Novel Award

A *TIME* Best Book of the Year

A *Guardian* Best Book of the Year

An *NPR* Best Book of 2015

A *Telegraph* Best Book of 2015

A *Washington Post* Best Fiction Book of 2015

A *Kirkus* Reviews Best Book of the Year

A *Financial Times* Best Book of 2015

A *Seattle Times* Best Book of 2015

A *St. Louis Dispatch* Best Book of 2015

A *New York Times* Book Review Editors' Choice

"This book is particularly lovely and melancholy. . . . [Atkinson] is one of those writers that really can make you weep on one page and laugh on the next. . . . She just has such a vast humanity for her characters, this incredible empathy. . . . I don't think I could ever write like Kate." ?Gillian Flynn, author of #1 *New York Times* bestseller *Gone Girl*

"This is a gorgeous novel. . . . Atkinson [has a] marvellously vinegary sense of humour . . . [and] extraordinary grace and control over the story. . . . It is unsettling and exhilarating, and reminds the reader that while the past lives with us at every moment, the future does, too, in every decision made or unmade. . . . Splendid." —*The Globe and Mail*

"Kate Atkinson's *A God in Ruins*, a sprawling, unapologetically ambitious saga that tells the story of postwar Britain through the microcosm of a single family, [reminds you] what a big, old-school novel can do. . . . It's a masterly and frequently exhilarating performance by a novelist who seems utterly undaunted by the imposing challenges she's set for herself. . . . Atkinson's a sly and witty observer, with a gift for finding the perfect detail." ?Tom Perrotta, *The New York Times* Book Review

"Magnificent. . . . In *A God in Ruins*, she's written not only a companion to her earlier book, but a novel that takes its place in the line of powerful works about young men and war, stretching from Stephen Crane's *Red Badge of Courage* to Kevin Powers' *The Yellow Birds* and Ben Fountain's *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk*. . . . Atkinson's nonlinear storyline enhances the poignancy of time passing. . . . [She] elegantly executes these chronological loop-de-loops, leaving a reader to marvel at that most banal of epiphanies: how fast life goes by." ?*Washington Post*

"Only as the book unfolds is each character . . . fully revealed. Ms. Atkinson's artistry in making this happen is marvelously delicate and varied. . . . The main attraction is Teddy, and the way his glorious, hard-won decency withstands so many tests of time. Everything about his boyhood innocence is reshaped by his wartime ordeals, which are rendered with terrifying authenticity. . . . Just know that every salient detail in *A God in Ruins* . . . is here for a fateful reason." ?Janet Maslin, *The New York Times*

"Two years ago I fell in book love with Kate Atkinson's *Life After Life*. . . . [*A God in Ruins*] might be even better. *Life After Life* was a masterful book so you can imagine what Atkinson's done now." ?Elaine Lui, co-host of *The Social* and author of *Listen to the Squawking Chicken*

"Triumphant. . . . Such a dazzling read. . . . Possibly more authentic as an expression of how it feels to be alive [than *Life After Life*]. . . . [an] extraordinarily affecting book." ?*The Telegraph* (UK)

"Clarion prose that is graphic in detail and possessed of a singular melancholy. . . . Every one of Atkinson's characters will, at one moment or another, break readers' hearts." —*Booklist*, starred review

"Like *Life after Life*, *A God in Ruins* contains grand themes about life and death and the fall of mankind. But it never sags under the weight of a moral lesson. Atkinson, who is also the author of the riveting Jackson Brodie detective series, is a practised hand at page-turners and sly humour." ?*Chatelaine*

"Gobsmacked—and in a good way—is the first word that comes to mind, rapidly followed by masterpiece. The minute I finished *A God in Ruins* . . . I started it again. The second time around it was even better, more interesting, more revealing. The details Atkinson has woven throughout this novel are incredibly intricate and crafted with expertise by an author who just gets better and better with each book. . . . A stunning achievement." ?*The Vancouver Sun*

"Atkinson constantly keeps us guessing. . . . A grown-up, elegant fairy tale, at least of a kind, with a humane vision of people in all their complicated splendor." —*Kirkus Reviews*, starred review

"As in *Life After Life*, Atkinson isn't just telling a story: she's deconstructing, taking apart the notion of how we believe stories are told. Using narrative tricks that range from the subtlest sleight of hand to direct address, she makes us feel the power of storytelling not as an intellectual conceit, but as a punch in the gut." ?*Publishers Weekly*, starred review

"An understated gracefulness . . . endows these pages with an assured, easeful sweep. . . . With her excellent new book, Atkinson reveals just how admirable . . . an ordinary man's life can be, and what heroism lies in living as decently as possible through times that are far from decent." ?*Financial Times* (UK)

"With *A God in Ruins*, [Kate Atkinson], once again, proves herself to be a writer of considerable talent. Her command of structure is extraordinary, as is the way she weaves echoes of one character's actions through the subsequent decades and generations. . . . She also shows off a brilliantly brittle sense of humour that on several occasions made me laugh out loud. . . . *A God in Ruins* stands as a magnificent achievement." ?*The Independent* (UK)

"Engrossing. . . . Convincing and moving. . . . I doubt that Atkinson's readers will be disappointed." ?*The Sunday Times* (UK)

"A novel so sublime I would nominate it to represent all books in the Art Olympics. The afterword deserves a literary prize all to itself. It is, as is claimed on the sumptuous proof, even better than *Life After Life*." —*The Bookseller* (UK)

"*A God in Ruins* has cautiously been dubbed a 'companion piece,' even though the book stands, often stunningly, on its own. . . . Atkinson writes the way LeBron dunks or Stephen Hawking theorizes; she can't help being brilliant, whether she's describing a sloshed bachelorette party or a midnight bomb raid over

Bergen." ?*Entertainment Weekly*

"The bombing raids are the heart of the new novel and the best thing in it, the scrupulous research and the technicalities absorbed inside the vivid realisation of the appalling, exacting, exhilarating moment-by-moment experience." —*The Guardian* (UK)

"Atkinson follows up her Costa Award-winning *Life After Life* with a dazzling novel about the genteel Todd family. . . . Compelling." —*People*

"Ms. Atkinson rises beautifully to the challenge of dramatizing the raids, capturing the virtually suicidal nature of these operations in muscular, unsentimental prose." ?*The Wall Street Journal*

"Atkinson's prose is as bright as gunfire. . . . I can't think of any writer to match her ability to grasp a period in the past. No, not even you, Booker-winning Hilary Mantel." ?*The Times* (UK)

"Atkinson is horribly funny. . . . every page has some vividly original phrase. . . . But the tour de force is her treatment of Teddy's experience as a bomber pilot. . . . She is deeply sympathetic to the emotional force generated in the crews, their rituals, superstitions and tender mercies to each other. It's a really affecting memorial to the huge numbers of bomber crew who died—more than half—but not in the least sentimental. . . . This book will stick like one of your own memories or dreams." ?*Evening Standard* (UK)

About the Author

Kate Atkinson is the internationally bestselling author of eight novels, including *Case Histories*, *One Good Turn*, *When Will There Be Good News?*, *Started Early*, *Took My Dog*, and *Life After Life*. She lives in Edinburgh.

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30th March, 1944

The Last Flight

Naseby

He walked as far as the hedge that signalled the end of the airfield.

The beating of the bounds. The men referred to it as his 'daily constitutional' and fretted when he didn't take it. They were superstitious. Everyone was superstitious.

Beyond the hedge there were bare fields, ploughed over last autumn. He didn't expect to see the alchemy of spring, to see the dull brown earth change to bright green and then pale gold. A man could count his life in harvests reaped. He had seen enough.

They were surrounded by flat farmland. The farmhouse itself stood square and immovable over to the left. At night a red light shone from its roof to stop them crashing into it. If they flew over it when they were coming into land and they knew they had overshot and were in trouble.

From here he could see the farmer's daughter in the yard, feeding the geese. Wasn't there a nursery rhyme in there somewhere? No, he was thinking of the farmer's wife, wasn't he – cutting off tales with a carving knife. A horrid image. Poor mice, he had thought when he was a boy. Still thought the same now that he was a man. Nursery rhymes were brutal affairs.

He had never met the farmer's daughter nor did he know her name, but he was disproportionately fond of her.

She always waved them off. Sometimes she was joined by her father, once or twice by her mother, but the girl's presence in the farmyard was a constant for every raid.

She caught sight of him now and waved. Rather than return the wave, he saluted her. He imagined she would like that. Of course, from this distance he was just a uniform. She had no idea who he was. Teddy was just one of the many.

He whistled for the dog.

1925

Alouette

'See!' he said, 'there - a lark. A skylark.' He glanced up at her and saw that she was looking in the wrong place. 'No, over there,' he said, pointing. She was completely hopeless.

'Oh,' she said at last. 'There, I see it! How queer - what's it doing?'

'Hovering, and then it'll go up again probably.' The skylark soared on its transcendental thread of song. The quivering flight of the bird and the beauty of its music triggered an unexpectedly deep emotion in him. 'Can you hear it?'

His aunt cupped a hand to an ear in a theatrical way. She was as out of place as a peacock, wearing an odd hat, red like a pillar-box and stuck with two large pheasant tail-feathers that bobbed around with the slightest movement of her head. He wouldn't be surprised if someone took a shot at her. 'If only,' he thought. Teddy was allowed - allowed himself - barbaric thoughts as long as they remained unvoiced. ('Good manners,' his mother, counselled, was 'the armour that one must don anew every morning.')

'Hear what?' his aunt said eventually.

'The song,' he said, mustering patience. 'The skylark's song. It's stopped now,' he added as she continued to make a show of listening.

'It might begin again.'

'No, it won't, it can't, it's gone. Flown away.' He flapped his arms to demonstrate. Despite the feathers in her hat she clearly knew nothing about birds. Or any animals for that matter. She didn't even possess a cat. She was indifferent to Trixie, their Lurcher, currently nosing her way enthusiastically through the dried-up ditch at the side of the road. Trixie was his most stalwart companion and had been by his side since she was a puppy when she had been so small that she could squeeze through the front door of his sisters' dollhouse.

Was he supposed to be educating his aunt, he wondered? Was that why they were here? 'The lark's known for its song,' he said instructively. 'It's beautiful.' It was impossible to instruct on the subject of beauty, of course. It simply was. You were either moved by it or you weren't. His sisters, Pamela and Ursula, were, his elder brother, Maurice, wasn't. His brother, Jimmy, was too young for beauty, his father possibly too old. His father, Hugh, had a gramophone recording of The Lark Ascending which they sometimes listened to on wet Sunday afternoons. It was lovely but not as lovely as the lark itself. 'The purpose of art,' his mother, Sylvie, said - instructed even - 'is to convey the truth of a thing, not to be the truth itself.' Her own father, Teddy's grandfather, had been a famous artist, dead long ago, a relationship that gave his

mother authority on the subject of art. And beauty too, Teddy supposed. All these things – Art, Truth, Beauty – had capital letters when his mother spoke about them.

‘When the skylark flies high,’ he continued, rather hopelessly to Izzie, ‘it means it’s fine weather.’

‘Well, one doesn’t need a bird to tell one if it’s good weather or not, one simply looks about,’ Izzie said. ‘And this afternoon is glorious. I adore the sun,’ she added, closing her eyes and raising her painted face to the skies. Who didn’t, Teddy thought? Not his grandmother perhaps, who led a gloomy drawing-room life in Hampstead, with heavy cotton nets drawn to prevent the light entering the house. Or perhaps to stop the dark escaping.

‘The Knights’ Code’, which he had learned by heart from Scouting for boys, a book he frequently turned to in times of uncertainty, even now in his self-exile from the movement, demanded that ‘Chivalry requireth that youth should be trained to perform the most laborious and humble offices with cheerfulness and grace.’ He supposed entertaining Izzie was one of those occasions. It was certainly laborious.

He shaded his eyes against the sun and scanned the skies for the skylark. It failed to make a reappearance and he had to make do with the aerial manoeuvres of the swallows. He thought of Icarus and wondered what he would have looked like from the ground. Quite big, he supposed. But Icarus was a myth, wasn’t he? He was going to boarding school after the summer holidays and he really must start getting his facts in order. ‘You will need to be a stoic, old chap,’ his father advised. ‘It will be a trial, that’s the point of it really, I suppose. Best to keep your head below the parapet,’ he added. ‘Neither sink nor float, just sort of paddle about in the middle.’

‘All the men in the family’ went to the school, his Hampstead grandmother said (his only grandmother, Sylvie’s mother having died long ago), as if it were a law, written down in ancient times. Teddy supposed his own son would have to go there too, although this boy existed in a future that Teddy couldn’t even begin to imagine. He didn’t need to, of course, for in that future he had no sons, only a daughter, Viola, something which would be a sadness for him although he never spoke of it, certainly not to Viola who would have been volubly affronted.

Teddy was taken aback when Izzie unexpectedly started to sing and – more startling – do a little dance. ‘Alouette, Alouette, gentille Alouette.’ He knew no French to speak of yet and thought she was singing not ‘gentille’ but ‘jaunty’, a word he rather liked. ‘Do you know that song?’ she asked him.

‘No.’

‘It’s from the war. The French soldiers sang it.’ The fleeting shadow of something – sorrow, perhaps – passed across her features, but then just as suddenly she said gleefully, ‘The lyrics are quite horrible. All about plucking the poor swallow. Its eyes and feathers and legs and so on.’

In that inconceivable yet inevitable war still to come – Teddy’s war – Alouette was the name of 425 Squadron, the French Canadians. In the February of ’44, not long before his last flight, Teddy made an emergency landing at their base at Tholthorpe, two engines on fire, shot up as they crossed the Channel. The French boys gave his crew brandy, rough stuff that they were nonetheless grateful for. Their squadron badges, something Teddy hadn’t known before he met them, showed a swallow above the motto *Je te plumerai* and he had thought about this day with Izzie. It was a memory that seemed to belong to someone else.

Izzie did a pirouette. 'What larks!' she said, laughing. Is this, he wondered, what his father meant when he said Izzie was 'ludicrously unstable'?

'Pardon me?'

'What larks,' Izzie repeated. 'Great Expectations. Haven't you read it?' For a surprising moment she sounded like his mother. 'But, of course, I was making a joke. Because there isn't one any longer. The lark, I mean. Flown orf. Gorn,' she said in a silly Cockney accent. 'I've eaten lark,' she added in an offhand way. 'In Italy. They're considered a delicacy over there. There's not much eating on a lark, of course. No more than a mouthful really.'

Teddy shuddered. The idea of the sublime little bird being plucked from the sky, of its exquisite song being interrupted in full flight, was horrible to him. Many, many years later, in the early Seventies, Viola, discovered Emily Dickinson on an American Studies course that was part of her degree. In her scrawly, untamed hand she copied down the first verse of a poem she thought her father would like (too lazy to transcribe the whole of the short poem). 'Split the lark – and you'll find the Music, bulb after bulb in silver rolled'. He was surprised she had thought of him, she rarely did. He supposed literature was one of the few things they held in common even though they rarely, if ever, discussed it. He considered sending her something in return, a poem, even a few choice lines – a means of communicating with her – 'Hail to thee, blythe spirit! Bird though never wert' or 'Hark how the cheerfull birds do chaunt their lays and carol of love's praise' or 'Ethereal Minstrel! Pilgrim of the sky! Dost thou despise the earth where cares abound?' (Was there a poet who hadn't written about skylarks?) He supposed his daughter would think he was patronizing her in some way. She had an aversion to learning anything from him, possibly from everyone, and so in the end he simply wrote back, 'Thank you, very thoughtful of you.'

Before he could stop himself - the armour of good manners falling away - he said, 'It's disgusting to eat a lark, Aunt Izzie.'

'Why is it disgusting? You eat chicken and so on, don't you? What's the difference, after all?' Izzie had driven an ambulance in the Great War, dead poultry could do little to ruffle her emotions.

A world of difference, Teddy thought, although he couldn't help but wonder what a lark would taste like. Thankfully, he was distracted from this thought by Trixie barking extravagantly at something. He bent down to investigate. 'A slow worm,' he said appreciatively to himself, the lark temporarily forgotten. He picked it up gently in both hands and displayed it to Izzie.

'A snake?' she said, grimacing, snakes apparently having no charms for her.

'No, a slow worm,' Teddy said. 'Not a snake. Not a worm either. It's a lizard actually.' Its bronze-gold lusted scales gleamed in the sun. This was beauty too. Was there anything in nature that wasn't? Even a slug demanded a certain salutation, although not from his mother.

'What a funny little boy you are,' Izzie said.

Users Review

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