



***Life After Life* by
Kate Atkinson.
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Reviewed by Jane
Orchard.**

Opening these pages takes us straight into the sort of gentle world we associate with Winnie the Pooh. For Pooh Corner we have Fox Corner. Instead of Pooh,

we have Ursula and her favourite brother Teddy – two little bears. They live in Pooh-like gentility where the children play tennis on the lawn and run inside eagerly for Mrs Glover’s plum pudding. Their father’s study is ‘the growlery’. They are surrounded by dogs and rabbits and almost everyone is just a little animal-like.

But the world outside is cruel and harsh, as we see from the fox who eats the baby rabbits and the vividly described meats that Mrs Glover will cook for the family. Then there’s the child Ursula and Teddy find dead in a ditch – the victim of a paedophile. The reality is that death and suffering wait at every corner, so **Atkinson** gives us the next-best option – the ability for Ursula to rewrite the past and change the direction of the family’s lives to protect them. Nasty realities can be tasted and then avoided. The novel opens with Ursula shooting Hitler dead in 1930. The chapter ends with her death. In the next chapter, she is born – and dies immediately. But the story has to be rewritten because she can’t die yet. She has to be born again. This time, Sylvie gives birth to “a bonny, bouncing baby girl”, her third child. Now the story can begin in earnest.

We visit the birth scene 10 times as Ursula explores the permutations of that snowy night, the doctor and midwife who did/didn’t attend, and what else they did. Each rebirth allows Ursula to go back a little from where she was when she died and reshape her experiences. From birth, Ursula is aware of the world around her – the seasons, the people, the trees. She has vague memories that others dismiss, but Bridget the maid recognises her ‘sixth sense’. Her sense of foreboding is so strong that she pushes

Bridget down the stairs to prevent her from going to London and catching the flu. The child is haunted by ‘the great dread’.

The fragility of life is felt everywhere. Ursula dies so often during the great influenza epidemic that she seems to drift inevitably from death to death.

But the comic is at hand in the children’s aunt Izzie who refuses to let life defeat her and in Ursula’s session with Dr Kellet, the psychiatrist, a man more used to working with the agonies of men returning from the war than with a 10-year-old girl. He comes alive for us in just a few strokes of Atkinson’s pen. We can almost taste the tobacco.

It is Dr Kellet who interprets one of Ursula’s drawings as a snake with its tail in its mouth, representing the circularity of the universe.

“Time is a construct,” he tells us, “in reality everything flows, no past or present, only the now.” His belief in reincarnation justifies Ursula’s rebirths and manipulations.

As Ursula and the novel draw to a close, alternatives nudge in with increasing urgency and brevity. Suddenly wrongs have to be revisited and set right. But does this power to produce alternative outcomes bring Ursula a happy and fulfilled life? We are left wondering beyond the pages.

And who exactly does the rewriting? Is it Ursula, who suffers so frequently from premonitions and a sense of déjà vu that her parents send the little girl to see the psychiatrist? We are led to accept that it is all her work. Or is it the author? Is all this a brilliant reproduction of the writing process that holds us enthralled as the writer works out the very best plot to run with?