

KATE ATKINSON – LIFE AFTER LIFE

AUTHOR NOTE AND LIST OF SOURCES



I was born at the end of 1951 and grew up feeling that had I just missed the Second World War, that something terrible and tremendous had occurred and I would never know it. Looking back this strikes me as odd for as a child I was never aware of those around me talking about it. It was almost as though it had never happened, for although my family experienced the war they rarely mentioned it. It's only recently I've come to realize - and understand - that once it was over and people faced the grim reality of the peace, all they wanted to do was to forget - not just the destruction wrought on us but the greater destruction that we rained down on Europe. We had reduced Germany to rubble and we were not necessarily proud of that, nor of the endless moral compromise that war necessitates. People move on, history remains.

My home town, York was bombed, albeit in a much tamer fashion than the big industrial cities, and was a lively social hub for the crews from the many Yorkshire airfields. I had uncles serving in each of the three services and my favourite aunt sailed off to the unknown country of Canada as a war bride. My grandfather, having survived the First World War relatively intact, was killed by a stray bomb in 1941. (My other grandfather was killed in the Bentley Pit disaster of 1931. In *Behind the Scenes at the Museum*, Ruby voices her fear that perhaps she too is genetically predisposed to being blown up, a thought that crossed my mind too.)

My own father was persuaded out of the Merchant Navy by his mother on the eve of war (one of her few acts of kindness) and returned to the mines where he served out the next six years of the war in the same pit that his father died in. I've always recalled my father telling me how he came up from the coal-face in the dark dawn of December 1940, having done a double shift and saw a great glow in the sky 'and that was Sheffield burning.'

And then the war was put away, consigned to history, on the personal if not the public level. Throughout my teens, twenties and thirties it was the threat of the future - of nuclear war - that exercised me, I 'embraced the base', I was arrested for civil disobedience at Upper Heyford, I was reasonably convinced that world would end with a bang not a whimper. Those fears receded, rightly or wrongly, and it was only when I came to write *Behind the Scenes at the Museum* and started looking at my family's history that my fascination with the Second World War was rekindled.

We are all intrigued by 'What if?' scenarios, and one of the most potent and familiar is 'What would have happened if Hitler had been prevented from coming to power?' I've long harboured a desire to write something around the topic, worried too, that it would simply turn into a cliché, as the over-familiar usually does. Originally, my idea was to write about what would have happened if Hitler had been kidnapped when he was a baby - an idea that Ursula touches on in the book - but when I explored the possibilities it seemed more of a short story than a novel. I knew that I wanted something more complex than that, something downright trickier, something multi-layered and slightly fractal (if something can be deemed *slightly* fractal).

The Blitz may be the dark beating heart of the novel but it isn't all about the war, I begin it - again and again - in 1910, the ghost of Forster always at my back. There was something hypnotic and dreamlike in returning endlessly, remorselessly, to what seems to us now (quite wrongly) to have been that prelapsarian period before the First World War - an Arcadian scene viewed through the lens of nostalgia (and Merchant Ivory films), before mechanized slaughter descended on the world. (The greatest 'What if', of all, of course, the staying of Princip's gun hand at Sarajevo).

And, Ursula goes to the Berg too, into the heart of the enemy and lives out one of her lives in Germany. The Germans' suffering was so much greater than ours that it seemed necessary for her own understanding (and motivation) to experience more than one way of looking at the cataclysm.

People always ask you what a book is 'about' and I generally make something up as I have no idea what a book is about (it's 'about' itself) but if pressed I think I would say *Life After Life* is about being English (on reflection perhaps that's what all my books are about). Not just the reality of being English but also what we are in our own imaginations.

During the war we were weighed in the balance and not found wanting. The more I have read about the war the more I think that - putting aside the propaganda, and there was much and we are still subject to it - we really were at our best then and I would like to have known that. When my father watched Sheffield burning in the distance he was in his own way bearing witness. Miss Woolf, the moral centre of the Blitz chapters tells Ursula that 'we must all bear witness' for 'when we are safely in the future.' I am in that future now and I suppose this book is my bearing witness to the past.

And somewhere in that past, in the ethereal world of fiction, it is always a snowy night in February 1910 and Mrs Haddock is always settling down to her third tot of rum.

To research the background of this book I read as much as possible before beginning and then tried to forget as much as possible and simply write. As a reader I dislike historical novels where I am continually stumbling over an excess of facts although I readily understand the compulsion to include all the fascinating stuff that you've spent so much time reading about, but there are few things more uncomfortable for the reader than to be constantly stumbling over the pathologically recondite research of an author. (My family did question my - rather lengthy - obsession with Eva Braun.)

For me, I find it difficult to create an authentic atmosphere or narrative credibility if continually constrained. Fiction is fiction, after all. That doesn't mean that I don't check things afterwards (and it goes without saying that all mistakes are mine), but sometimes to find the truth at the heart of a book a certain amount of reality falls by the wayside. I am not aware, for example, of any bombs having dropped in the real Argyll Road. And I glibly attributed stained glass galleons to the front doors

of Wealdstone when in fact I have never been there. I have no idea if there were leafcutter ants in London zoo before the war (I suspect not). And Ursula's occupation during the war in the Intelligence Department of the Ministry of Home Security is something of a conflation and modification of aspects of that work (not hard to fudge – as time goes by it is more difficult to tell exactly what people did in a time of chaos).

I have appended a list of sources that I found helpful or inspiring and that readers may find interesting. Some of the most valuable for me were those accounts or memoirs that were published shortly after, or, in some cases, during the war. Some of these (the Sansom and the lightly fictionalized Strachey) are wonderful examples of elegant and moving prose from front-line workers in the Blitz. Ursula's own mound is directly based on that in Strachey's *Post D* and when she is caught in a bomb blast standing on the pavement in Argyll Road I based the description on an anonymous account ('a Londoner') in *Front Line 1940-1*, published by the government in 1942.

Stanley Rothwell's *Lambeth at War* is a lively account of the life of a rescue worker and the Mass Observation diaries of the time are compelling for their direct insight into how people from all walks of life were thinking. I would also like to pay tribute to Rosemary Horstmann's *Half a Life Story*. Rosemary was a former neighbour of my mother's in Edinburgh and I have drawn on her robustly innocent experience of hiking with a BDM troupe in Germany in 1939 for Ursula's own sojourn which takes place slightly earlier.

I have ordered these sources by the area of interest that they cover.

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