

Behind the Scenes at the Museum Reading Group Guide

1. 'The book is never depressing. It is, in fact, outrageously funny', wrote Hilary Mantel in the *London Review of Books*. How does Kate Atkinson manage to write about the darkest of themes, and still make you laugh – or does she?
2. The chairman of the judges of the Whitbread (now Costa) prize, when awarding *Behind the Scenes at the Museum* the Whitbread Book of the Year prize, said in his speech that Atkinson had written a post-modern novel, even though she might not know it. Do you think that was true, or do you think Kate Atkinson was fully aware and in control of what she was doing?
3. *Behind the Scenes at the Museum* begins: 'I exist! I am conceived to the chimes of midnight' – as some have suggested, in tribute to Lawrence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*. Can you see what the narrators of the two books have in common, and what other fictional narrators spring to mind?
4. Hilary Mantel also wrote that the novel 'delivers to the populace its jokes and its tragedies as efficiently as Dickens once delivered his, though Atkinson has a game-plan more sophisticated than Dickens's.' What do you make of this comparison?
5. One of Kate Atkinson's innovations in this novel is her use of footnotes. Why do you think she adopted this nonfiction technique in a novel, and how do you feel it works?
6. In its treatment of the tragedy of two world wars, how does *Behind the Scenes at the Museum* remind you of Kate Atkinson's later book, *Life After Life*?
7. What do you think about the book's title? What does it mean for you?

8. What does *Behind the Scenes at the Museum* say about the changing nature of women's roles and opportunities in the family and in the world at large? What do the four generations of women in Ruby's family have in common?
9. Ruby goes through her childhood sleepwalking, and always looking for an unexpressed something she has lost. How do you feel the theme of memory and family secrets comes out in this novel, and were you surprised when you learned what Ruby's loss really consisted of? Did it change how you felt about Bunty as a mother?
10. A critic controversially called *Behind the Scenes at the Museum* 'anti-family'. How would you defend the book against this charge? What other novels, now considered classics, might have had to face this sort of accusation?
11. Kate Atkinson has said that she read *Alice in Wonderland* frequently at a young age, and that it formed her idea of what a good book should be – 'a sensible heroine adrift in a sea of eccentrics'. Can you see Lewis Carroll's influence in *Behind the Scenes at the Museum*?
12. Did you notice the way certain everyday objects seem to have a role connecting the different generations in the story, like a button, or a silver teaspoon? Any other objects?