

# READING GROUP GUIDE

## *Human Croquet*

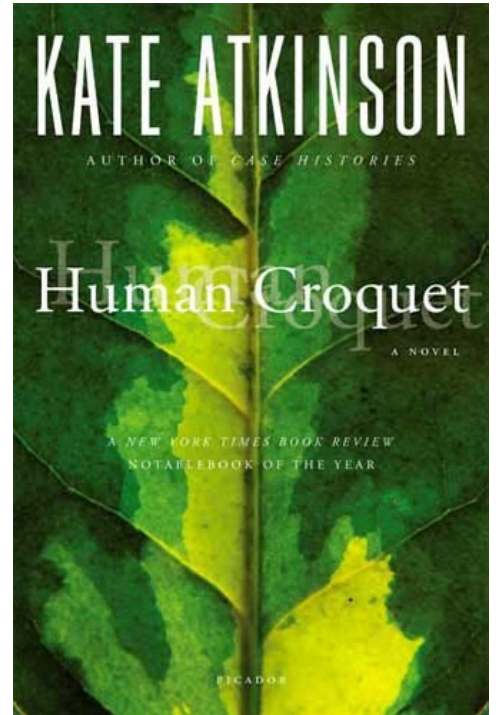
*A Novel*

*by Kate Atkinson*

*A New York Times* Notable Book of the Year

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### About this Guide

The following author biography and list of questions about *Human Croquet* are intended as resources to aid individual readers and book groups who would like to learn more about the author and this book. We hope that this guide will provide you a starting place for discussion, and suggest a variety of perspectives from which you might approach *Human Croquet*.

### About the Book

From the bestselling author of *Behind the Scenes at the Museum* comes a wildly inventive, deeply moving, darkly comic tale of a young girl's exploration of her past.

As her sixteenth birthday unfolds, Isobel Fairfax is pulled into brief time warps and extended periods of omniscience, hurtled into the distant past where she meets the first Fairfax, to the roaring '20s, to World War II. Along the way she gradually learns the truth about her strange family, and about her mother, whose disappearance is part of the secret at the heart of the nearby forest.

At once a fairy tale, a mystery, and a family saga, *Human Croquet* is a stunning feat of imagination and storytelling, a novel rich with the disappointments and possibilities every family shares.

## Praise for *Human Croquet*:

"A literary tour de force."—*San Francisco Examiner & Chronicle*

"*Human Croquet* offers further proof that Kate Atkinson is off and running in quite a fantastic direction of her own devising."—Katharine Weber, *The New York Times Book Review*

"[Kate Atkinson] writes such fluid, sparkling prose that an ingenious plot almost seems too much to ask, but we get it anyway."—*Salon.com*

"A novel which will dazzle readers for years to come."—Hilary Mantel, *London Review of Books*

## About the Author

**Kate Atkinson** was born in York, and earned her master's degree in English at Dundee University. While raising her two daughters, she held a variety of jobs, from university tutor to welfare benefits administrator, and always wrote, publishing

## Discussion Questions

1. What is the significance of the title? Human croquet is a game in which a blindfolded player is directed through human hoops. Who or what is directing Isobel, and what hoops must she navigate?
2. Objects and people are frequently lost or misplaced throughout the novel, sometimes for good, sometimes just temporarily. What are some examples of this, and what do you think is the point of these goings and comings?
3. Many fairy tales share common character types, settings and situations. What are some of the classic fairy tale motifs that appear in *Human Croquet*?
4. Isobel observes on page 27 that "absence of Eliza has shaped our lives," and later states that "we are all misshapen in some way, inside or out" (p. 41). What is the significance of shape and physicality to the story?
5. On their way to a fateful picnic, the family "sat on the deck of the bus, on the front seats, and watched the streets of trees go sailing by below. The big branch of a sycamore snapped unexpectedly against the window in front of them, rattling its dead leaves that were like hands, and Eliza said, It's alright, it's just a tree and lit a cigarette" (p.107). What does this foreshadow? What is the significance and role of trees throughout the novel?
6. Consider the various kinds of mothers in the book: Eliza, Debbie, Mrs. Potter, Mrs. Baxter, and the Widow. What, if anything, do they have in common? While none of them

is perfect, what does *Human Croquet* seem to say about motherhood and the role of mothers in children's lives?

7. While its opening line ("Call me Isobel.") is a play on *Moby Dick*, that novel's influence is less evident throughout *Human Croquet* than other books, plays, and movies (Kate Atkinson said in an interview that one of her two favorite films is "'Groundhog Day,' which you can probably tell if you've read *Human Croquet*"). What other references and allusions do you find in the novel?

## Kate Atkinson, In Her Own Words

### How much of your fiction is autobiographical?

"With *Behind the Scenes at the Museum*, people were always saying, 'Is it autobiographical?' It is in some of the details—the toys and games are my toys and games; when Ruby learns to read, that's me learning to read—but not in the plot. This relentless 'it has to be autobiographical' always seems like an insult to me, as if you can't actually write fiction. So for *Human Croquet* I wanted to write something that was purely a product of the imagination. To me, the imagination is crucial. Perhaps because I was an only child and an avid reader, I had a very active imagination. I don't know what sort other people have, because we never talk about our imaginative lives, but I always presumed that mine was psychopathically active."

### How do you set out to begin a new novel?

"I love structure; I'm the kind of sad person that likes lit crit. The thing that makes it very difficult for me to write is that I can't plan at all; the book has to grow out of each sentence, and I'm always on the rolling edge of where I never really know what will happen next. At the same time, I generally start off with structure: I know how I want a book to feel; I know how I want it to be; I don't know how to get there. So I'm constantly structuring and restructuring as I go along, trying to get it to that place."

### Who are some of your favorite writers?

"I'm a big Kurt Vonnegut fan; I think *Slaughterhouse-Five* is just the best book, because he does what I most admire in '60's writers like Donald Barthelme and Robert Coover: he invests structure with emotion, he gets the balance—which is something I think Jane Austen does, too; I think she's a more structured writer than we give her credit for, because we end up reading her on TV...I think possibly Joseph Heller does it in *Catch-22* as well...And I think *The Great Gatsby* is just a transcendent sort of book."

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