

Kate Atkinson: *Case Histories: A Novel* (Doubleday), R150

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It is tempting to think of dysfunctional families as a peculiarly modern fictional phenomenon, as witness the success of novels like Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections* and Toni Morrison's *Love*. By this theory, the novelist turns to the family as source of discord only when the large themes are played out.

But dysfunctional families are at least as old as Cain braining Abel, or, in a different tradition, Electra and Orestes killing their mother because she had killed their father because he had killed her daughter ... in short, dysfunctional families are about as old as fiction itself.

Of course, it happens on a different scale now, messy divorces rather than messy murders, inter-generational squabbles rather than incestuous couplings.

Or does it? Meet the cast of Kate Atkinson's latest novel: a young mother of eighteen who is sent to prison for killing her husband with an axe; an eight-year old girl who disappears mysteriously, probably murdered by her father, who has been molesting her twelve-year old sister; a nephew who plans to kill his aunt because she wants to leave her money to somebody else. And all of this amidst the green meadows of Cambridge.

But *Case Histories* is not your standard Tales of College Life: rather, it is in effect a detective novel, with a private investigator, Jackson Brodie, holding on to such strands of the narrative as he can get his hands on.

In her first novel *Behind the Scenes at the Museum*, Atkinson turned her sardonic eye on, mainly, mothers. Here it is father's turn: all the case histories involve some variant or complication of the father-daughter relationship, from the deeply loving father whose daughter is inexplicably murdered in his office, to the sinister Cambridge mathematics don who abuses his twelve-year old daughter. Jackson himself, divorced, is deeply concerned about his eight-year old daughter; it is given to him to reflect on one of the novel's main emotional conundrums, "what it was like to love a child, how you would give your own life in a heartbeat to save theirs, how they were more precious than the most precious thing."

Another character, who in fact does lose a daughter, reflects that "you had to give them all the love you could, even though giving that much love could cause you pain and anguish and horror and, in the end, love could destroy you. Because they left, they went to university and husbands, they went to Canada and they went to the grave."

There is more than enough scope for tragedy here, and *Case Histories* certainly has its share of that; but it is also at times achingly funny, with the humour that only a dark imagination can contrive. Both the sadness and the humour are encapsulated, for instance, in Amelia, a neglected daughter who grows up into a neglected adult: "She had been to a Tupperware party once, at the invitation of a woman who was a tutor in the beauty and hairdressing department, and had bought a very useful cereal dispenser. It was the only party of any description she had been to in five years."

Amelia's sister, Julia, leads an ostensibly more glamorous life as an actress, but it turns out that her most successful role to date has been as a dog in a pantomime: "It seemed

suddenly very sad to Amelia that the best role of Julia's career was as a dog. And that she didn't need a wig to play a poodle."

Sad? Yes, of course, but also very funny.

In between all this, the novel keeps a brisk line in suspense going. The epigraph to the novel is from John 8: "Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." Much of the novel is dedicated to showing how difficult it in fact is to know the truth, and how few people are set free by it.

But unlike standard detective novels, where the reader gets to share the detective's mystification and eventual enlightenment, Atkinson gives us access to knowledge Jackson does not have; indeed, by novel's end we have the pleasure of knowing more than he does.

Early in the novel, one of the novel's several disillusioned characters reflects on a youth misspent on reading novels: "Novels gave you a completely false idea about life, they told lies and they implied there were endings when in reality there were no endings, everything just went on and on and on."

The surprising thing is, though, that *Case Histories* does give us a quite satisfying sense of an ending, with most of the loose threads tied up and most of the characters ending up more or less with what they wanted, or with what they did not know they wanted. Even Amelia graduates from Tupperware parties to being cunnilingued by the female secretary of the Cambridge branch of the Conservative Party. And yes, perhaps this is one of those lies that novels do tell; but do we seriously want the truth and nothing but the truth?

For all its extravagant plotting, *Case Histories* is meticulously placed in its physical setting, though there is nothing particularly affectionate about Atkinson's recreation of Cambridge. She gives us some heartfelt descriptions of the horrors of the town in July, its narrow streets clogged with rude Italian teenagers ostensibly there to learn English but in fact spending their time drinking and shagging. Jackson, needless to say, cannot abide Cambridge (like Atkinson herself, he is from up North), and his life's ambition is to retire to the South of France.

Without revealing too much of the plot, it can be divulged that Atkinson grants Jackson his dream, in a neatly wrapped-up ending. It's a pity, in a way, because it's difficult to see Jackson ever returning from Paradise to take on another case, which is a huge loss to Atkinson's readers.