

Case Histories by Kate Atkinson

About the Book

With a trio of compelling "cold case" mysteries at its core; with its wonderfully sympathetic and complex private detective hero; with its host of instantly endearing, lovably flawed characters; and with its effortlessly beautiful and intelligent prose, Case Histories is Kate Atkinson's breakout book - the most accomplished, most compulsively readable novel yet from a writer of the first rank.

CASE ONE:

Olivia Land, youngest and most beloved of the Land girls, goes missing in the night and is never seen again. Thirty years later, two of her surviving sisters, each achingly lonely in her own way, reunite when their cruel and distant father dies. There, among the clutter of their childhood home, they unearth a shocking clue to Olivia's disappearance.

CASE TWO:

All of Theo's happiness is tied to his devoted daughter Laura. He delights in her wit, her effortless beauty, her selfless love, and in the fact that she's taken a position at his prestigious law firm. But on her first day on the job, a maniac

storms into the office and turns Theo's entire world upside down.

CASE THREE

Michelle looks around one day and finds herself trapped in a hell of her own making. A very needy baby and a very demanding husband make her every waking moment a reminder that somewhere, somehow, she made a grave mistake and will spend the rest of her life paying for it-until a fit of rage creates a grisly, bloody escape.

As Private Detective Jackson Brodie investigates all three cases, startling connections and discoveries emerge. Jackson finds himself inextricably caught up in his clients' lives; their grief, their joy, their desire, and their unshakable need for resolution are very much like his own.

Kate Atkinson's celebrated talent makes for a novel that positively sparkles with surprise, comedy, tragedy, and constant, page-turning delight.

(from readinggroupguides.com)

About the Author

Kate Atkinson was born in York and now lives in Edinburgh. Her first novel, *Behind the Scenes at the Museum*, won the Whitbread Book of the Year Award and has been a critically acclaimed international bestselling author ever since.

She is the author of a collection of short stories, *Not the End of the World*, and of the critically acclaimed novels *Human Croquet*, *Emotionally Weird*, *Case Histories*, and *One Good Turn*.

Case Histories introduced her readers to Jackson Brodie, former police inspector turned private investigator, and won the Saltire Book of the Year Award and the Prix Westminster.

When Will There Be Good News? was voted Richard & Judy Book Best Read of the Year. After *Case Histories* and *One Good Turn*, it was her third novel to feature the former private detective Jackson Brodie, who also made a welcome return in *Started Early, Took My Dog*.

Kate was awarded an MBE in the Queen's 2011 Birthday Honours, for services to literature.

Reviews

Booklist

Like Donna Tartt in *The Little Friend* (2002), 1995 Whitbread winner Atkinson (*Behind the Scenes at the Museum*) here combines a compelling narrative drive with sophisticated psychological portraits and telling detail. Artfully exploiting the conventions of the detective novel while also sending them up, Atkinson gives us Jackson Brodie, the world's most empathic private eye, who seemingly channels his clients' grief while attempting to provide closure. Addicted to the plaintive songs of female country-and-western singers and heartsick over the breakup of his marriage and his separation from his daughter, Jackson becomes friend and confidant to the people who seek his aid. One of his cases involves the florid, bickering Land sisters, who, after cleaning out their father's house upon his death, are stunned to find the bedraggled blue bunny that was their sister's most prized possession before she went missing 30 years ago. Another case concerns lonely, obese Theo, who, out of concern for his daughter's safety, insisted that she work in his law office rather than as a bartender, only to find that he put her directly in harm's way. As Jackson methodically tracks down decades-old clues, Atkinson employs omniscient narration to step in and out of crime scenes both past and present. Playful humor, an impressive technique, and an offbeat detective with a penchant for weeping are the most obvious

pleasures of a page-turner that succeeds in being both brainy and thoroughly entertaining. — *Joanne Wilkinson*

Bookpage Review by Joni Rendon

Disparate family histories collide and long-buried secrets resurface in this ingeniously crafted modern-day suspense narrative that combines elements of a traditional detective novel with riveting psychological character studies. Kate Atkinson, award-winning British author of *Behind the Scenes at the Museum* and two other novels, artfully incorporates her gothic sensibility and keen observations on human nature into a compelling page-turner that explores the fine line between love and obsession, grief and recovery, guilt and redemption.

Case Histories introduces us to a convincing mix of unconventional families and imperfect individuals whose lives are pockmarked by loss, abandonment and regret. Startling connections between them emerge when three different decades-old mysteries are thrust into the lap of private detective Jackson Brodie. First, there's the disappearance of three-year-old Olivia Land, whose aging sisters discover a disquieting clue among their deceased father's possessions; then the inexplicable stabbing of 18-year-old Laura Wyre by

a deranged stranger during a routine workday at her father's law office; and finally, the grisly ax murder of a hapless husband ostensibly by his young wife in a fit of despair and rage. The tragedy and horror of these bygone crimes is brought sharply into focus through the use of omniscient narration, which crisscrosses family histories and vividly allows us to examine the three crime scenes in both the past and present tense.

Although decades may have intervened and the tragic headlines are now forgotten by most, the family members affected by these traumas still crave closure, leading them to Brodie's doorstep in a final attempt to lay their ghosts to rest. The emphatic private eye absorbs the burden of their collective grief while attempting to track down new leads and piece together the missing links of the long-unsolved cases. Meanwhile, he struggles with his own host of personal problems including an acrimonious divorce, a daughter growing up too quickly, and the sudden appearance of a mysterious enemy who seems to want him dead. Increasingly, Brodie's own life takes a backseat as he becomes irreversibly entangled in the melancholic lives of his clients the quirky and spinsterish Land sisters, the lonely and grief-obsessed father Theo Wyre, and the enigmatic sister of the convicted ax murderess, who harbors

a dark secret. As he begins to unravel the threads of their seemingly incongruous cases, he uncovers subtle connections and painful truths that eventually help heal old wounds as well as bring his own troubles into sharp relief.

Featuring an engagingly offbeat private detectives and an equally intriguing cast of complex and lovably eccentric characters, *Case Histories* propels the reader forward with a rare intensity and compassion. With an unerring eye for domestic detail, Atkinson peels back the cozy trappings of family life to expose the imperfections that often lie beneath the favoritism, selfishness and jealousy that can form dangerous fault lines. Expertly laying bare human frailties and failings, the novel exposes the indelible bonds that connect individuals and the power of emotions to alter the course of family histories.

Atkinson has conjured a wonderfully inventive take on the classic detective novel that jolts readers out of complacency by combining ordinary settings with macabre twists. The result is a highly original and entertaining novel that is the author's best to date, successfully blending elements of comedy and tragedy with rich insights into the human heart.

KIRKUS REVIEW

After two self-indulgent detours, Atkinson proves that her Whitbread Award-winning debut, *Behind the Scenes at the Museum* (1996), was no fluke with a novel about three interconnected mysteries.

They seem totally unrelated at first to private detective Jackson Brodie, hired by separate individuals in Cambridge, England, to investigate long-dormant cases. Three-year-old Olivia Land disappeared from a tent in her family's backyard in 1970; 34 years later, her sisters Amelia and Julia discover Olivia's stuffed toy in their recently deceased father's study and want Jackson to find out what he had to do with the disappearance. Theo Wyre's beloved 18-year-old daughter Laura was murdered by a knife-wielding lunatic in 1994, and he too hires Jackson to crack this unsolved murder. Michelle was also 18 when she went to jail in 1979 for killing her husband with an ax while their infant daughter wailed in the playpen; she vanished after serving her time, but Shirley Morrison asks Jackson to find, not her sister Michelle, but the niece she promised to raise, then was forced to hand over to grandparents. The detective, whose bitter ex-wife uses Jackson's profound love for their eight-year-old daughter to torture him, finds all these stories of dead and/or missing girls extremely unsettling; we learn toward the end why the subject of young women in peril is

particularly painful for him. Atkinson has always been a gripping storyteller, and her complicated narrative crackles with the earthy humor, vibrant characterizations, and shrewd social observations that enlivened her first novel but were largely swamped by postmodern game-playing in *Human Croquet* (1997) and *Emotionally Weird* (2000). Here, she crafts a compulsive page-turner that looks deep into the heart of sadness, cruelty, and loss, yet ultimately grants her charming p.i. (and most of the other appealingly offbeat characters, including one killer) a chance at happiness and some measure of reconciliation with the past.

Wonderful fun and very moving: it's a pleasure to see this talented writer back on form.

Discussion Questions

1. It's quite clear to the three eldest Land girls that their baby sister Olivia is their parents' favorite child. Do all parents have a special affection for a particular son or daughter? How does Victor and Rosemary's fondness for Olivia affect the personalities and lives of her sisters?

2. Theo idealizes Laura and he is protective of her to a fault --- it's as if he is amazed that such a perfect woman could be the product of a man as

imperfect as he. How do Theo's insecurities about himself distort his perception of Laura? How is her untimely death more devastating to Theo and the reader because of her apparent flawlessness? How would Theo's tragedy be different if Laura were different?

3. Michelle derives very little pleasure or joy from motherhood. For her, playing wife and mommy is an almost unbearable burden. Is Michelle a bad mother? Is her attitude toward parenthood any different from Victor and Rosemary's, or does she only manage it more poorly?

4. When we first meet Jackson, he's sitting in a used sports car, smoking a cigarette, listening to a ladies' radio program, thinking about his beloved daughter and his selfish ex-wife, all while spying on a woman. What kind of first impression does he make on the reader? Is the complexity of his personality endearing, perplexing, or off-putting? How does this first encounter make more sense as the novel progresses?

5. While Amelia and Julia think Olivia might still be alive, poor Theo knows for certain that Laura is dead. At one point, Jackson R admires Theo, thinking: "Just carrying on living required a kind of strength and courage that most people didn't

have." Do you agree? Is not knowing the fate of a loved one preferable to being aware of his or her death simply because it allows room for hope? Or does not knowing present a new kind of grief that precludes any opportunity for closure and healing?

6. Amelia can't bring herself to tell Julia about the night she caught Victor molesting Sylvia. How might sharing this knowledge change their pursuit of Olivia? How might it change their relationship?

7. At times, *Case Histories* can be quite gruesome, the tragedies its characters face quite devastating --- and yet Kate Atkinson maintains a sense of humor throughout the book. Is this humor inappropriate, or is there an element of the comic in even the most traumatic of human experiences? How does the humor affect the suspense and mystery?

8. In many ways *Case Histories* follows the rules of the mystery genre, but it also subverts them. How does the novel differ from other mysteries you've read? How would you classify it: mystery or family drama? Why?

9. *Case Histories* deftly weaves three plot lines into one narrative. Which of the three, if any, do you think could have been its own novel? Which

characters would you like to know more about?
Why?

10. Jackson Brodie will return in Kate Atkinson's next novel. Can you predict how his life might have changed after the events of *Case Histories*? What would you like to see him doing? With whom?

Read Alikes

Origin A Novel By Diana Abu-Jaber

Fingerprint expert Lena is reminded of her own mysterious childhood as she investigates a series of crib deaths that may actually be the work of a serial killer.

Missing By Karin Alvtegan

After being provided with a free dinner by a wealthy business man, a young homeless girl from Stockholm is considered the prime suspect after his dead body is discovered the following morning.

Daddy's Little Girl by Mary Higgins Clark

At seven years old, Ellie was instrumental in the conviction of her 15 year old sister's murderer. During 22 years in prison he insisted he was

innocent and now he's being released on parole. Ellie is still convinced the right man went to jail, but could she be wrong?

Faithful Place by Tana French

Young Frank Mackey planned to run away with his sweetheart to escape Dublin's impoverished inner city for a new life in London. When she didn't show up the night they planned to leave, he believed she went ahead without him. Twenty-two years later, her suitcase shows up and he must find out the truth.

Faceless Killers A Mystery By Henning Mankell

Responding to a routine call, Inspector Wallander is astonished when he arrives at a farmhouse and finds a man's tortured body lying next to his dying wife. With her last breath, the woman gives Wallander his only clue and his investigation begins.

