

Book Report:
Behind the Scenes at the Museum by Kate Atkinson

Behind the Scenes at the Museum is British Writer Kate Atkinson's first novel. Published in 1995, the novel won that year's Whitbread Book of the Year Award, among other numerous recognitions. The story centers on Ruby Lennox, and follows her from conception to middle age while also telling the sprawling story of her family, including her sisters, cousins, parents, grandparents, and great-grandparent. Relying on a distinctive narrative voice, the story skips lightly from one family disaster to the next, and along the way it examines the many ways in which our family determines who we grow up to be. The interwoven storylines come together to tell a touching story about what it means to grow up as part of a family.

The basic plot of the novel is fairly simple: the book opens with the narrator, Ruby Lennox, declaring "I exist!" (p. 11) at the moment of her conception, then follows her as she grows up as one of three daughters of the unhappily married owners of a pet store. Her parents, Bunty and George, along with her sisters Patricia and Gillian, endure all manner of trials, including the death of Gillian in a car accident, a fire that destroys the pet shop, and Patricia's unplanned pregnancy. Interspersed with the story of Ruby's immediate family are vignette's about Ruby's extended family. The reader meets Bunty's mother and siblings along with Ruby's great-grandmother and gets a glimpse of the "behind the scenes" people that created the Ruby who narrates the book. The novel ends with Ruby, now a mother herself, burying Bunty.

Ruby's narrative is told linearly, from her conception through the death of her mother. Interwoven within this narrative are "footnote" chapters that tell the story of Ruby's extended family. The footnotes are referenced by Ruby in her chapters. For example, the first footnote we see referenced is in chapter 1: "She's playing with her grandmother's button box and chooses a button, a pink-glass, flower-shaped one (see *Footnote (i)*)" (p. 23). These footnotes highlight themes and symbols that tie together the myriad family storylines, like the button mentioned above. This style also helps build tension in the story as the author slowly doles out details in the main chapter, then fleshes out more of the stories in the interspersed footnote chapters. This design moves the story along swiftly and creates a complicated network of interrelated stories.

The main theme of *Behind the Scenes at the Museum* is family and the role that family plays in shaping who we grow up to be. In particular, the author is interested in showing how our family history can seem to act like fate, forcing us down paths in ways we can't recognize from inside our own lives. Ruby, the all-knowing narrator, can see those patterns in herself and in her family, and she points them out to the reader throughout the novel. The tendency of her family members to get blown up or mowed down is a fate that takes Gillian and several cousins; another common thread is that all the women in the Lennox family, from their great-grandmother Ada down to Ruby, choose terrible partners. Ada hates her husband and the man she runs away with, while Bunty is miserable with George and Ruby leaves her no-good Italian husband. Ruby's overarching narrative tells us that these women had no real choice: their family's history led them to this inevitable conclusion.

Ruby's voice is the mechanism that holds the novel together. In the tradition of *Tristram Shandy*, Ruby is an excitable, wordy narrator. She tells her story in a peppy, conversational tone with lots of asides to the reader and jokes about her family. She is also clearly narrating the story with knowledge that spans into the past and the future. While this voice is certainly both entertaining and appealing, the situation of the narrator is sometimes confusing. This is most notable as Ruby grows up and Atkinson struggles to balance the jaunty, all-knowing narrator Ruby with the little girl who's maturing and learning about the world around her. Atkinson is not always successful at balancing the worldly narrative voice of Ruby with the depiction of Ruby growing up and learning hard lessons about her family. The wide-eyed wonder that characterizes Ruby as a child is odd and strained when Ruby deals with grown-up problems like Patricia's pregnancy and her own marriage. In fact, this voice is almost dropped entirely near the end of the novel when Ruby discusses her present day situation. This makes the final chapters of the book feel somewhat flat compared with the rest of the book and also a bit rushed, since Ruby marriage and motherhood are handled in just a few pages.

Another problem readers may have with the novel is the sheer number of characters. As with any novel that attempts to span so many generations, the novel introduced a dozen or more interrelated characters quickly. In particular, the footnote chapters deal with characters who don't appear in the longer narrative, which means Atkinson sometimes only has a few pages not only to completely flesh out several characters, but also to clearly delineate the relationships between them. Sometimes this is successful: for example, the character of Ada is very well drawn. But sometime it falls flat. The many aunts and uncles who wonder through the stories are easily confused and it can difficult to determine who's who.

These issues with character and narrative voice, however, do little to effect the quality of the novel. The early chapters in particular, in which we meet Ruby and get a feel for her voice, are particularly enjoyable, and the final plot twist, while somewhat contrived, is handled delicately. Overall, the novel is an exciting introduction to a new fiction writer who manages to adeptly interweave the family dramas of several generations using a funny, engaging narrator.

Works Cited

Atkinson, Kate. *Behind the Scenes at the Museum*. New York: Picador, 1995. Print.