

Kate Atkinson

Life after Life

This book looks at the events of the 20th century through the eyes of a woman born in 1910 whose life is to be significant in changing history. But how is her life to be so significant in a world in which death comes so easily and unexpectedly?

Warning: spoilers

The answer is that in the novel Ursula Beresford Todd is born again and again and begins to live the same life. Yet each time death intervenes before she has acquired the skills, languages and contacts she needs to bring her to her greatest achievement, the killing of Hitler, with which the book opens. As the book unfolds and Ursula dies at birth, strangled by her umbilical cord, or as a child, killed in an accident or from disease, we encounter a whole cast of characters whose lives reconfigure each time Ursula dies and begins again. In one of Ursula's life trajectories she has a child, in another she is killed by a violent husband, yet, as she begins her life over, lessons are learned and she seems to have carried over memories which lead her away from past mistakes. For example, she pushes a member of the household down the stairs which wrecks her ankle and prevents her from going away and catching the Spanish flu which killed Ursula in a previous life. In some of her lives characters we have learned to care for are lost, while others are saved. Mysteries about murderers and barely sketched characters are revealed in other of Ursula's lives.

This is a book about life and the precariousness of life and also about death and whether lives taken senselessly, tragically, as during the great wars, have any meaning. What does it take to stop such meaningless death if not life lived for a purpose, to change the world? Important questions are asked: what is life for? What is a life well lived? When we fight and die for a country, what does that mean? Some of the most harrowing scenes are of Ursula's time helping recover the dead and wounded from London during the Blitz.

Yet love also powerfully permeates the novel and remains the solid bedrock of Ursula's relationships with her family. Love, grief, friendship and compassion remain enduring colours in Ursula's lives which never disappear. If Ursula is living in a multiverse in which all things can and will happen, that multiverse is connected by enduring relationships and by love.

The novel is therefore driven by a sense of purpose, of what Ursula might be for as a person as a gift of human life. What purpose do any of us have? And for a woman born in 1910, the odds are stacked against her that in a male dominated and male-driven world, a woman can penetrate to the heart of a struggle for world domination and rip its heart. Yet even Ursula with her talent for death and rebirth needs help. Towards the end of the novel, when Ursula is born apparently strangled by the umbilical cord, it is her mother who produces the sharp scissors which will get her past that hurdle. As the novel says, practice makes perfect. Ursula has a powerful destiny and a death which will mean the saving of so many lives. Accident, fate or the perverse nature of human wickedness cannot in the end, stop her from becoming who she is meant to be.

Some questions for discussion

- How did the novel make you feel about human history?
- What does the novel make you think about the themes of life, love and death?
- Which of Ursula's lives particularly affected you?
- How do you think reading this novel helps us think about ideas such as reincarnation, karma, predestination, fate, and the purpose of human life?
- What do think the word 'salvation' might mean to Ursula or to members of her family?
- Suppose you had the chance to start your life again where would you like it to take you?