

SUNDAY BOOK REVIEW

Kate Atkinson's 'A God in Ruins'

By TOM PERROTTA MAY 4, 2015

In recent years, a number of talented novelists have experienced a sudden and alarming loss of faith in their chosen literary form. David Shields thinks most novels are boring and disconnected from reality. Nicole Krauss is “sick of plot and characters and scenes and climax and resolution.” Rachel Cusk has decided that conventional fiction is “fake and embarrassing.” Karl Ove Knausgaard goes even further, dismissing the entire enterprise: “Fictional writing has no value.”

This distaste for the clunky machinery of traditional narrative fiction has spread quickly. Some of the most interesting “novels” of the past few years — Teju Cole’s “Open City,” Jenny Offill’s “Dept. of Speculation,” Ben Lerner’s “Leaving the Atocha Station,” not to mention Knausgaard’s epic, “My Struggle” — are barely novels at all. They read more like memoirs, or a series of lightly fictionalized journal entries, recounting the mundane lives and off-kilter ruminations of their first-person narrators, who are either postgraduate students or blocked writers. There’s a bracing smallness to these books — even those of Knausgaard, who’s a miniaturist on a gargantuan scale — and a serene indifference to what has long passed for ambition in the novel. There’s no plot and barely any action, very few characters, no shifting points of view or tricky chronologies, no attempt to recreate a distant era or illuminate the inner workings of a particular society at a particular moment in time. There’s just the writer, eating his omelet, putting her child to bed.

4 And the thing is, they're all terrific books — fresh, unpredictable, intellectually stimulating and often quite funny (especially Offil" It's enough to make one the most committed advocate of conveyer if Shields and company are on to something: Maybe the realistic novel has outlived its usefulness. (God knows we've all read some boring ones.) Maybe it's time to wean ourselves off plot and character and scenes and conflict and all the rest, just leave those things to television. Maybe the most we can hope for on the page is a pinpoint focus on the writer in front of us, the adventures of a single consciousness at play.

But then you read a novel like Kate Atkinson's "A God in Ruins," a sprawling, unapologetically ambitious saga that tells the story of postwar Britain through the microcosm of a single family, and you remember what a big, old-school novel can do. Atkinson's book covers almost a century, tracks four generations, and is almost inexhaustibly rich in scenes and characters and incidents. It deploys the whole realist bag of tricks, and none of it feels fake or embarrassing. In fact, it's a masterly and frequently exhilarating performance by a novelist who seems utterly undaunted by the imposing challenges she's set for herself.

"A God in Ruins" is especially impressive because it's a sequel of sorts — a "companion volume," in the words of the publisher — to "Life After Life," Atkinson's fascinating 2013 novel, which introduced readers to the Todds of Fox Corner, a well-to-do British family whose lives intersect in various ways with the major historical events of the first half of the 20th century. "Life After Life" employed an unusual storytelling strategy — important characters sometimes die and then resume their lives on a different narrative trajectory — infusing what would otherwise have been a fairly conventional historical novel with a playful sense of uncertainty and almost infinite possibility. In some of her various incarnations, Ursula Todd, the main character, dies immediately after being born, drowns in the ocean, is raped by a friend of her brother's, becomes an alcoholic, suffers through an unhappy marriage, shoots Hitler, and endures the Blitz in London as a plucky single gal with a complicated romantic life.

Readers enchanted with this device — and there are many — may be disappointed to learn that Atkinson shelves it in the new novel. Characters in "A God in Ruins" have only one life, usually a pinched and diminished one that they're

looking back on with melancholy or regret. Every now and then, Atkinson winks at the reader, reminding us of what she's renounced. Here's Teddy Todd, Ursula's golden-boy brother, examining a painting in the home of a rich woman with whom he's having a wartime fling:

“He lifted the veil on a small Rembrandt every time he passed it on the staircase. No one would miss it. . . . If he took the Rembrandt his life would be quite different. He would be a thief, for one thing. A different narrative.”

One could easily imagine the Atkinson of “Life After Life” devoting an entire chapter to Teddy's criminal career. But here it's just a passing thought, quickly deflated: “In later life he wished he had appropriated the painting. . . . The London house was hit by a V-2, the Rembrandt lost forever.”

The god mentioned in the title of the new book is none other than Teddy himself, a kindhearted, almost saintly man who improbably manages to survive more than 70 bombing runs over Nazi Germany as an R.A.F. pilot in World War II. The book is split between chapters recounting Teddy's heroic and often harrowing wartime exploits, and those that map out his placid, mostly uneventful postwar existence as a provincial journalist and lonely widower. Along the way, we also get to know his wife, Nancy; their sour and unlovable daughter, Viola (an ex-hippie turned popular novelist, “almost as good as Jodi Picoult”); and Viola's long-suffering children, Bertie and Sunny.

Unlike “Life After Life,” which begins at a full sprint — Ursula shoots Hitler and dies twice in the first 30 pages — “A God in Ruins” takes its time getting started. The novel opens with a series of seemingly random jumps: a quick glimpse of Teddy the pilot, followed by a long chapter set at Fox Corner in 1925, and suddenly it's 1980 and Viola's raising her kids on a commune with an unstable jerk named Dominic. These episodes are never dull — Atkinson's a sly and witty observer, with a gift for finding the perfect detail — but the reader can't help noticing a lack of narrative momentum that begins to feel deliberate. There's no mystery in the book, no drive toward discovery, no evolving story lines. Important events are telegraphed hundreds of pages in advance. The main characters seem frozen, locked inside themselves. Teddy makes no effort to change his life — never travels, experiences no

sexual desire after the death of his wife, simply accepts his inevitable decline into old age. By the time we meet Viola the famous writer, she's already disillusioned with success and resigned to unhappiness:

“But it didn't seem to matter how many new beginnings she had, Viola always somehow found herself in the same place, and no matter how hard she tried, the earliest template of herself always seemed to trump later versions. So why bother?”

Both Teddy and Viola seem to be experiencing the same insight Nancy does when she finally accepts the certainty of her own untimely death: “Now it was settled, now there were no more possibilities.”

Taken together, “Life After Life” and “A God in Ruins” present the starkest possible contrast. In the first book, there's youth and a multitude of possible futures. In the second, there's only age and decay, and a single immutable past. This applies not only to the characters, but to England itself, which is portrayed over and over as a drab and diminished place. The culprit is obvious — it's the war itself, “the great fall from grace.”

And yet “A God in Ruins” is by no means an antiwar novel. If anything, it's a love letter to the men and boys who fought on the British side, infused with an attitude closer to “The Greatest Generation” than to “Catch-22.” Atkinson doesn't romanticize the war — there are stomach-turning scenes of horror, and an acknowledgment that the R.A.F. bombers targeted civilian populations — but she, like Teddy, never questions its necessity, or minimizes its costs. For Teddy, these costs include the loss of his future, the possibility of becoming a different sort of man: “The truth was there was nothing else he wanted to do, could do. Flying on bombing raids had become him. Who he was.” He's trapped forever in his Halifax bomber, fighting the good fight against impossible odds, raining destruction on the guilty and innocent alike, a god already ruined, always about to fall.

A GOD IN RUINS

By Kate Atkinson

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Tom Perrotta's most recent books are "Nine Inches" and "The Leftovers."

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