

Elements of crime writing: Text overview – *When Will There Be Good News?*

This resource is an explanation of some of the ways this text can be considered in relation to the genre of crime. This overview is intended to provide a starting point for teachers in their thinking and planning about how the text can be considered through the lens of the genre. There are some brief comments on how some elements of the genre can be linked to the text, although teachers and students may well think of other relevant ideas. We haven't covered every element of this genre. Instead, we hope this guide will provide a springboard to help you plan, and to get you and your students thinking about the text in more detail.



'Run, Joanna, run,' she said and Joanna ran into the field and was lost in the wheat.

Overview

In many ways it is obvious why *When Will There Be Good News?* is in a category that explores elements of crime writing since it is about murder, violence, kidnapping, drug-dealers, victims, criminals and detectives of various types. Atkinson herself has called her novel crime fiction and it is part of a series of novels featuring the character of ex-army, ex-police turned private investigator, Jackson Brodie.

The novel starts with a crime of shocking violence and ends with the solving of the novel's main mystery, the kidnapping of Joanna Hunter, after which there is a happy resolution for its two main victims. It is important to note the nature of Atkinson's text. It is not a typical crime novel. The *New York Times* calls her novels "literary hybrids" and she certainly pushes the boundaries of the crime writing genre in this text. What she does here is carefully interweave the crime story with the love story (though even as a love story, she does not offer a straightforward take on the genre). There is little mystery about who commits the crimes in this text, though there is mystery and attendant suspense about what happens to Joanna Hunter. Atkinson seems particularly interested in the effects of crime in this text, how individuals cope with crime in modern Britain and how the grim world can be softened and redeemed by love. In spite of the

numerous crimes committed, this is not ultimately a dark text like *Brighton Rock*: it is buoyed up by its humorous narrative voices and focalisations, its coincidences and improbabilities, and its canine heroes. In this respect and in a way that typifies the crime fiction genre, *When Will There Be Good News?* is an entertaining read.

Crimes and criminals

The novel begins in a time frame thirty years before the main narrative with a shocking crime which recalls the real life crime of the Chillingden murder of Lin and daughter Megan Russell and their pet dog. A second daughter, Josie Russell was brutally attacked but survived the crime. In Atkinson's novel, Joanna is the child who survives, though unlike Josie she is not attacked but hides in a field of wheat while her sister, baby brother and mother along with their dog are violently stabbed to death by loner Andrew Decker wielding a carving knife. Rather unusually for crime fiction, this crime is given little further prominence in the narrative in terms of investigation. Atkinson takes the story thirty years forward, and gives attention to the imminent release of the man convicted of the murders and the impact this release might have on the now adult Joanna Hunter. But this is only one thread. As the story progresses, in a somewhat piecemeal narrative structure, the focus shifts to a number of other crimes and events: the search for murderer David Needler, on the loose having shot the mother and sister of his estranged wife at one of his children's birthday parties, whose wife and children live in terror of his return; the shady business arrangements of Neil Hunter; the drug dealing and intimidating acts of Billy and his connections; the sudden disappearance of Joanna; and the Edinburgh train crash which draws together a number of different incidents and characters through a volley of coincidences, all of which are part of Atkinson's complex plotting. There is certainly no single crime or event that dominates the narrative of *When Will There Be Good News?* nor is there one obvious criminal who is being sought.

Instead, there are plenty of criminals and plenty of acts of crime – some minor and some major. There are also: betrayals (Jackson's wife fakes an identity and defrauds him of his money); desperate and violent acts of self defence (Joanna stabs one of her kidnappers in the eye with a pen and another in the carotid artery with a knife); some cover ups (Jackson burns the building where Joanna has been kept and where the dead bodies lie so that Joanna will not be known for the rest of her life as the woman who killed her kidnappers) and Andrew Decker, it is suspected, is 'encouraged' by Joanna to commit the ultimate Catholic sin of suicide (he blows the top of his head off in Jackson's flat).

If there is a crime which drives the story in the narrative present, it is the mysterious disappearance of Joanna and her son, which is investigated first by Reggie and then Brodie and Munroe. It isn't immediately clear that Joanna has disappeared against her will, and it would be easy to concur with Munroe that there is nothing unusual about her going away and that the doubts are just those of a school girl's active imagination. But as the narrative and the

investigations develop, Atkinson is able to create suspense and a real sense of danger. The rescue of Joanna is held off until the end of the novel when Brodie and Reggie find her in an isolated house after a classic crime fiction car chase.

Victims

There are obvious victims in the novel, many of whom are murder victims, for example Gabrielle, Jessica and Joseph Mason, the mother and sister of Alison Needler and the young policeman, Marcus, who is shot by Needler. There are also victims of accidents – Reggie's mother, Ms Macdonald and Jackson Brodie and there are many instances where dogs are victims (though they are also heroes). Brodie is also a victim of identity theft by Andrew Decker and embezzlement by his wife.

Joanna Hunter is a victim in a number of different ways. First she is the six year old who is witness to the actions of a violent psychopath who kills her mother, sister, brother and dog. She is also the victim of a father who does not love her and who does little to aid her recovery and assuage her loss and her guilt of being a survivor. Later, she is the victim of her husband whose corrupt actions lead to her kidnapping. Yet for all this, although readers are encouraged to sympathise with her, Joanna does not arouse pity. Atkinson does not create her heroine as a helpless victim. Instead she is a "warrior queen" with strength and determination, seen not only in the way she takes control of her life and forges a career, but also in the way she finds a solution to her kidnapping ordeal by planning her escape, killing her captors and saving herself and her baby. She also secures revenge of a sort on the crime of the past by visiting Decker in prison before his release and persuading him to commit suicide (seemingly with the Makarov she mysteriously acquires from Billy).

Reggie is also a victim of life's vagaries. Like *Oliver Twist* she is an orphan and an innocent. Yet like Joanna, she is a survivor. She finds a route out of her poverty and the toughness of her young life by pursuing education (tutored in the classics, history and English Literature by Ms Macdonald) and finding herself work as a nanny with Dr Hunter. Her attempts at self-improvement are often frustrated by the behaviour of her thieving, drug taking brother and she is intimidated and beaten by both Billy and his pursuers, Ginger and Blondie, who want payment and want to know where Billy is. They also torch her flat, destroying her books and A level notes. Yet she is no Oliver depending on the intervention of others to save her. Never is Reggie maudlin or self-pitying. Atkinson's text is optimistic and Reggie's intelligence, resilience and determination are ultimately rewarded.

Detectives

Jackson Brodie is one of three detective figures within the novel. His character and heritage have already been established in Atkinson's earlier detective novels *Case Histories* and *One Good Turn*. In this novel he is still a maverick and somewhat comic, working as a private investigator at a tangent to the police and

not always having respect for or receiving respect from them. As a detective, though, he is decisive, quick thinking and brave. When he and Reggie reach the house where Joanna is believed to be held hostage, he tells Reggie that she must stay in the car and when Joanna is found and he sees the dead bodies of her captors, he instinctively sets fire to the house, getting rid of the whole crime scene.

Reggie, who teams up with Brodie in an attempt to find Joanna, is the second detective figure. The way that Jackson and Reggie work as a pair is a typical element of crime fiction, following in the tradition of Holmes and Watson, Poirot and Hastings and Morse and Lewis. However, Reggie is not a conventional sidekick whose purpose is to simply and slightly comically point up the skills of the senior detective. Although she is a 16-year-old orphan with a string of issues of her own, it is Reggie who is the impetus behind the investigation. Reggie is exceptionally well read and educated (thanks to Ms Macdonald) and she knows how to read for meaning and how to ask telling questions. She first becomes suspicious of Joanna Hunter's abnormal disappearance, reading the clues expertly, knowing that Dr Hunter, the woman she admires and whose baby she cares for, would not voluntarily leave her beloved dog Sadie, to visit her sick aunt. Reggie is in fact given more prominence in the text as a detective than Jackson Brodie himself. (Atkinson actually labels one chapter: "Reggie Chase, Girl Detective"). She is interesting, intelligent, resourceful, and tenacious and she saves Brodie's life after the fateful train crash.

The police are primarily represented by detective Louise Munroe, who thinks that police are just "the obverse of being criminal". She also has a previous life and history with Brodie in Atkinson's earlier novels and although she is looking for a different missing person from Brodie and Reggie, mass murderer David Needler, she becomes involved in the Joanna Hunter case by a different route (she has to inform Joanna that Decker has been released from prison and, in a separate case, is investigating her husband for an arson attack on his amusement arcade). Munroe is the official detective who is committed and professional, showing skills of deduction in the solving of crimes.

Coincidence

One common feature of the crime fiction genre that Atkinson uses extensively is that of coincidence – which according to Brodie is "an explanation waiting to happen". While it could be argued that she overuses this element, it is also true that Atkinson uses it deliberately to make a point about the significance of destiny and fate in human lives. Ms MacDonald is the cause of the Musselburgh train crash in which Brodie nearly loses his life; Reggie, who is house-sitting for Ms MacDonald and is Joanna Hunter's nanny, saves him; Andrew Decker happens to be on the same train and changes identity with the unconscious Brodie; when Joanna Hunter goes missing Reggie enlists the help of Brodie, who used to be in love with Louise Munroe, who is the police officer who tells Joanna that Andrew Decker is being released from prison and who also investigates the

suspicious fire at Neil Hunter's arcade. And so it goes on, with a final coincidence that links Brodie and Joanna being revealed in the last pages.

Punishment

Consistent with the crime genre, Atkinson ensures that those who murder are punished. Needler and Decker both commit suicide by shooting themselves. The two kidnappers of Joanna Hunter are also dead by the end of the novel and although Anderson, the mastermind behind the plan, is not punished, he does not get his money from Hunter. Neil Hunter is charged with arson and for submitting a false insurance claim; he is also declared bankrupt. He gets his moral deserts when Joanna turns him out: she cannot forgive or love a man who did not do everything to rescue his wife from the ordeal of kidnapping.

Billy's punishment is interesting and less clear cut. He is not arrested for his crimes and there is no sense that he will reform. Reggie believes that he will inevitably turn up again like a bad penny. But he loses his stash of heroin, which Reggie finds and places in Ms Macdonald's coffin, and both Reggie and Jackson believe that he is "hurtling at breakneck speed towards a bad end". He cuts a lonely figure as he slopes off at the end seemingly to another town. It is Christmas, he is alone and he has no friends.

Punishment is therefore an important element in Atkinson's world and a moral framework is in place, even if it is a little hazy around the edges. The novelist leaves it to readers to make their own judgements about some actions and their consequences. For example, is what Joanna does to her captors acceptable given she is protecting herself and her son? Should Jackson have covered up the evidence by setting fire to the building in which Joanna kills her kidnappers? Is it right that she should persuade Decker to kill himself, especially given his Catholic belief that suicide means he will be eternally damned?

Resolution and the importance of love

At the end of the novel, most of the loose ends are tied up and there is a sense that good has triumphed over evil at least for the time being. There is nothing of the haunting emptiness that exists at the end of *Brighton Rock* even though the grim world still exists. What presides over Atkinson's novel is an overwhelming sense of love and how it is a redeeming force. Flawed as they are, Jackson and Munroe realise the depth of their feelings for each other, and although there is no happy ending for them in terms of the love story, the fact that they do feel is a positive (and leaves open the possibilities of the next Jackson Brodie story, perhaps).

Love is also celebrated by Joanna Hunter and by Reggie Chase. Joanna tells Reggie at the start of the novel that "When everything else has gone, love still remains" and at the end she tells Munroe "Love is the important thing". Joanna and Reggie are both motivated by love, Joanna by her love for her son and Reggie by her love for Joanna. It is therefore fitting that Christmas Day is shared by a group who know what love is: Joanna, Reggie, the baby and Sadie. Reggie is

the chief winner in this text. Not only is she the beneficiary of Ms Macdonald's will, ensuring that she can go to college, but she comes within Joanna Hunter's "warm circle" of loved ones. As they sing nursery rhymes to the baby at the end, they both clap their hands in joy "and the baby laughed and clapped his hands too".

Acknowledgement of copyright-holders and publishers

© SandraKavas / istock.com