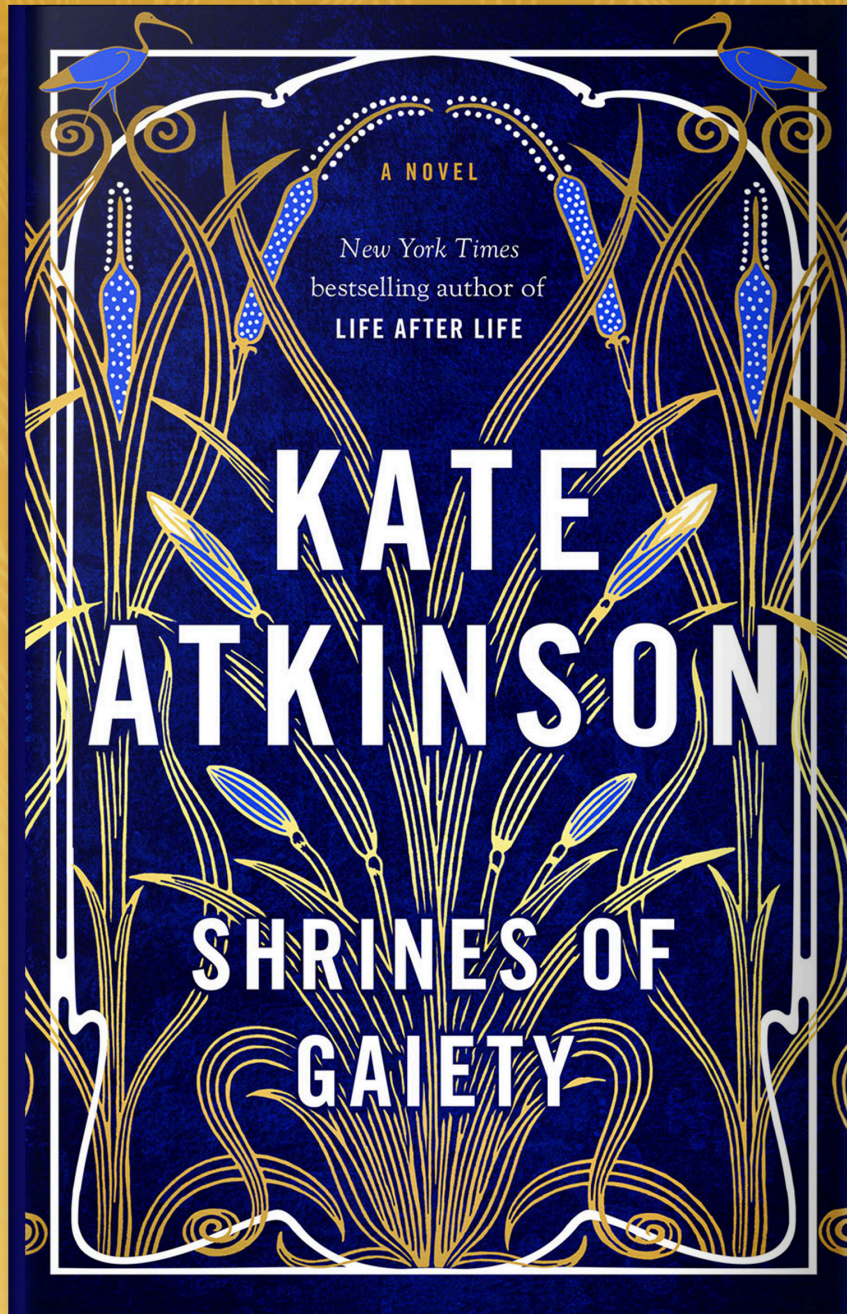


BOOK CLUB KIT



Immersing us in the dazzling world of London during the roaring twenties, bestselling storyteller Kate Atkinson has created a captivating tale of seduction and corruption in *Shrines of Gaiety*—an homage to the glittering nightclubs of Soho and the colorful cast of characters who passed through their doors.

At the center of the novel is the notorious club owner Nellie Coker, recently released from Holloway women's prison and eager to return to the helm of her empire. Her endless responsibilities include negotiating with gangsters and protecting her family from the dangers of the city; lately, unidentified drowned girls have been washing up on the banks of the Thames. Chief Inspector Frobisher is on the case, which leads him directly to a runaway who also happens to be one of Nellie's newest hires. At night, it's easy to forget the grittiness, when Nellie's legendary hotspots are packed with glittering starlets and political power brokers—and, of course, occasional spies.

The questions that follow are designed to enrich your book club's discussion of *Shrines of Gaiety*. We invite you to cue up a Tin Pan Alley playlist, pour yourself a vintage cocktail from the author's recommended compendium [available here](#), and enter the world of Nellie Coker . . . grande dame of earthly delights.

Questions & Topics for Discussion

1. Nellie Coker is a purveyor of gaiety, although she herself is more interested in turning a profit than she is in having fun. What makes her successful in business? Do those traits also make her a good mother? To what extent do her six children (Edith, Niven, Betty, Shirley, Ramsay, and Kitty) share her priorities and her approach to life? In her household, is it easier to be a son or a daughter?
2. As a woman in the early twentieth century, Gwendolen is often at a disadvantage. How does she turn the tables on those who try to undermine her? How do her vulnerabilities and secret strengths compare to Edith's?
3. What sustains Frobisher's marriage to Lottie? Does Lottie's addiction mean that she always receives more from Frobisher than she gives, or do they have a marriage of equals, in a way?
4. Freda and Florence come from very different backgrounds but share similar dreams. What does the novel show us about the nature of innocence, and about the nature of evil? When Freda is harassed and attacked by Owen Varley, how is her sense of self shaken? Was Freda in some ways more naive than Florence?
5. In a novel packed with characters who are leading double lives, what did you discover about the ability to deceive and the performances we all must give in order to participate in the world? What determines whether deception leads to corruption, especially in Maddox's case?
6. From Gwendolen's point of view, what are the fundamental distinctions between Niven and Frobisher? Which man would you have chosen? Does the underground realm of Nellie's clubs, where physical pleasure is paramount, leave much room for love and romance?

Questions & Topics for Discussion

7. *Shrines of Gaiety* brims with dark humor. How does Kate Atkinson so effectively balance the raw brutality of the novel's plotlines with moments of sheer comedy, even poking fun at fiction writing itself (through Ramsay's cocky approach to becoming a novelist)?
8. In what way do the five nightclubs in Nellie's empire—the Amethyst, the Foxhole, the Pixie, the Crystal Cup, and the Sphinx—reflect varying aspects of her personality? What does her showdown with Azzopardi reveal about her strengths and weaknesses?
9. At the novel's core is a murder mystery. What were your theories about the identity of the girls' killer and the motivation behind these tragedies?
10. As you observed the path of the bluebird brooch, from Mr. Ingram to his wife and then to a pawn shop, and finally to Lottie, what did you also observe about the way money changes hands in the novel—and the shifting value of jewelry (and beauty) depending on the circumstances?
11. Although *Shrines of Gaiety* is a work of fiction, the author's note describes the real-life Kate Meyrick and other figures who inspired this novel. What is special about the cultural history of London in the 1920s, in the aftermath of war and the introduction of women's suffrage? In what ways was this simultaneously a time of liberation and oppression?
12. As you read about the characters' fates, how did you react to the ironies and just deserts? Whose ending surprised you the most? Which characters exemplified your definition of a life well lived?
13. Kate Atkinson is known for her highly inventive storytelling style. How does *Shrines of Gaiety* extend those unconventional approaches even further, compared to her other novels that you have read?

Q&A with Kate Atkinson

What was the inspiration behind *Shrines of Gaiety*?

I began by thinking that I would like to write about the First World War, but then I realized that what I actually wanted to write about was the aftermath, the terrible scars—physical, mental and emotional—that were papered over so quickly by both individuals and society. The First World War was the first war that took place in the age of the machine, and it was a brutal affair. Those who fought witnessed unbelievable horror, yet when they came home, they barely spoke about their experiences to anyone. We didn't know about the effects of PTSD then, and everyone was simply expected to get on with living in the aftermath of a bloodbath.

Soho in the 1920s seems almost a counterpoint to the war.

We all know the clichés about the jazz age and society going slightly crazy for fun as an antidote, and much of that “fun” was concentrated in London and particularly the clublands of Soho. The licensing laws forged during the war were strict, which led to a good deal of illegal drinking, and drugs, particularly cocaine, were rife.

The novel focuses on Nellie Coker and the Amethyst. Nellie is based on a real figure called Kate Meyrick, who owned the infamous 43 Club in Gerrard Street. She was a very interesting woman, and the more I read her autobiography, the more

I realized how extremely fictionalized a life can become. There are many other characters in *Shrines of Gaiety*, and they are all—in some way—products of the war. They've fought in it, or they've nursed in it, or they've avoided it. Or they were too young. I like dealing with lots of characters and with lots of different stories. The trick was to make them all come together in this particular—very short-lived—niche society.

The novel exudes such a strong sense of time and place. What was the most interesting detail you discovered while doing the research?

The most interesting thing I discovered was the Dead Man's Hole, which is basically steps and a concrete landing point at Tower Bridge. Tower Bridge occupies a particular corner on the River Thames, where the currents sweep by, and where many dead bodies used to find land. There was a man whose job it was to hook them out each day. The bodies were taken down into a makeshift mortuary, and then sent off, often unidentified, to other mortuaries. There were a lot of suicides at the time. Some murders, I suppose. Some accidents. Who knows? You can still visit it, if you know what you're looking for.

What's the one book you wish you could read again for the first time?

The Ladybird Book of Puppies and Kittens. It's the first book I ever read. I remember

Q&A with Kate Atkinson



I was four years old. It was winter. I can see myself sitting at the dining-room table with the fire lit. I was still in nursery school and we had the alphabet pinned up around the wall. So, every day I would see "A is for apple, B is for ball," and so on, the same thing every day for many months, but I didn't know how you put them together. And then at home I read the first line of the book, "This puppy sees a frog," and it was like a light went on. I thought, "This is how it works. This is how the letters works. This is how the alphabet works. This is reading." And then, subsequently, "This is writing." It was a really big moment in my life. I re-created it for Ruby in *Behind the Scenes at the Museum*.

What would you like readers to take away from your books?

Every single person is going to get something different from a novel, and, as much as you would like to, you can't legislate for their response. As soon as a book leaves your desk, it's not yours anymore. It's gone. It belongs to anybody who reads it. And everybody will interpret things differently. For me, personally, books are entertainment, although I suspect my definition of entertainment is fairly broad. I want to stir emotions in a reader, I suppose—across the whole spectrum. You can't ask for more than that.

Recommended Reading

*Madam: The Biography of
Polly Adler, Icon of the Jazz Age*
Debby Applegate

The Personal Librarian
Marie Benedict and
Victoria Christopher Murray

The Dain Curse
Dashiell Hammett

Miss Aldridge Regrets
Louise Hare

*Agent Josephine:
American Beauty, French
Hero, British Spy*
Damien Lewis

The Paris Bookseller
Kerri Maher

Death with a Double Edge
Anne Perry

The Perfume Thief
Timothy Schaffert

The Paying Guests
Sarah Waters

Still Life
Sarah Winman