



# Human Croquet: A Novel

By Kate Atkinson

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### *A New York Times Book Review Notable Book of the Year*

Part fairy tale, part mystery, part coming-of-age novel, this novel tells the story of Isobel Fairfax, a girl growing up in Lythe, a typical 1960s British suburb. But Lythe was once the heart of an Elizabethan feudal estate and home to a young English tutor named William Shakespeare, and as Isobel investigates the strange history of her family, her neighbors, and her village, she occasionally gets caught in Shakespearean time warps. Meanwhile, she gets closer to the shocking truths about her missing mother, her war-hero father, and the hidden lives of her close friends and classmates. A stunning feat of imagination and storytelling from Kate Atkinson, *Human Croquet* is rich with the disappointments and possibilities every family shares.

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**Human Croquet: A Novel** By Kate Atkinson Bibliography

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## Editorial Review

### Amazon.com Review

Human Croquet is a game in which some people act as hoops while others propel a blindfolded "ball" around the course. Though the game is never actually played in Kate Atkinson's remarkable novel, *Human Croquet*, the parallels between plot and pastime are undeniable. Atkinson, winner of the 1995 Whitbread Award in Britain, tells the story of Isobel Fairfax and her older brother, Charles. The children's parents vanished when they were young, leaving them to the care of their grandmother, now dead, and their Aunt Vinny. Recently their father has returned with "the Debbie-wife" in tow, and they all live in Arden, the family's ancestral home built on the foundations of the original manor house that burned to the ground in 1605. According to family legend, the first Fairfax took a wife who mysteriously disappeared one day, leaving in her wake a curse on the Fairfax name. More than 300 years later, Fairfax descendants are still struggling with this painful legacy.

Atkinson's novel is obviously not rooted in dull reality. Narrator Isobel has an uncanny knowledge of past and future events; Charles is obsessed with the concept of parallel universes and time travel; and a faery curse hangs over everybody. Fortunately, Kate Atkinson is a masterful writer who manages to keep her world of wonders in check. *Human Croquet* is no ordinary novel, and readers who venture into the Fairfax universe are in for a magical ride.

### From Library Journal

This ambitious and unusual novel concerns the nature of time, memory, and, most poignantly, identity. Young Isobel and her brother, Charles, are abandoned by their parents to the loveless care of a sour aunt, stern grandmother, and evil schoolmaster. They spend seven years yearning for the truth about their parents' disappearance and for their mother's return. It is their father, however, who returns with a new young wife. The home of the protagonists is built on a site where, in the late 16th century, parallel events took place, and the novel warps and wends from past to present to future. British author Atkinson (*Behind the Scenes at the Museum*, St. Martin's, 1995) here focuses on Isobel's 16th year in 1960. Doppelgangers abound; people long-dead manifest themselves to the living. As the fantastic and the mundane combine almost seamlessly, incest, puppy love, and dysfunctional families mix to darkly comic effect. For most fiction collections; get Atkinson's first book, too. Judith Kicinski, Sarah Lawrence Coll. Lib., Bronxville, N.Y.  
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### From Kirkus Reviews

Atkinson's follow-up to her Whitbread-winning *Behind the Scenes at the Museum* (1996) is a self-consciously smart and mildly amusing family saga. Isobel Fairfax, age 16, narrates the busy goings-on at Fairfax Manor, an ostensibly cursed mock-Tudor in a suburb in northern England--although the events she describes may well be fantasies, embellished with tidbits from Shakespeare and Ovid and whatever else she's reading in school. The Fairfax family, as Isobel presents them, is a wildly dysfunctional cast of caricatures: There's sour Aunt Vinnie, who's always draped in cats; brother Charles, who's obsessed with alien abductions; and ineffectual dad Gordon and his plump second wife Debbie, who imagines that the sausages she's about to barbecue are moving about on their plate. When Isobel is not deep in lustful thoughts about Malcolm, the local gynecologist's son, she time-travels and has brief and remarkably uneventful interludes in earlier eras. And both she and Charles desperately miss their long-disappeared mum, Eliza. World War II hero Gordon plucked glamorous Eliza from the rubble of a London bombing, then brought her home to the Manor, where his widowed mother and Vinnie criticized her every move. Although besotted with his wife, Gordon couldn't break with his mother, and the marriage was strained. During a picnic, Charles and Isobel

were left alone, only to toddle upon the body of their mother: Did Gordon kill her before disappearing for seven years to avoid the law, leaving his kids to repress the memory and get brought up by Vinnie? This is only one of many hyperventilating mysteries that Isobel sifts through: violent deaths, stolen babies, and sexual peccadilloes galore crowd Fairfax family history. Isobel's semi-jaded wisecracking serves up some mild laughs, but this exercise in over-deliberated cleverness, while never dull, is ultimately more exhausting than engaging. (Author tour) -- *Copyright ©1997, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved.*

## **Users Review**

### **From reader reviews:**

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