



“To be honest if I write one good sentence in a day that’s a success for me.”
— Kate Atkinson*

Dear Faithful Reader,

I imagine you may have heard the story of the three bricklayers. It goes something like this:

A man came upon three workers laboring away in the hot sun, each with a huge pile of bricks and long trough of wet cement. The work looked grueling. The first two workers grunted and strained and appeared near the point of exhaustion — but not the third. This one seemed totally absorbed in his work, almost at peace, as if he could continue on for hours.

The man asked each one in turn, “What are you doing?”

“What does it look like I’m doing?” snapped the first worker. “I’m laying bricks.”

The second stopped just long enough to glare at the man with suspicion. “I’m earning a living so I can feed my family,” he said.

When the man asked the third worker his question the fellow paused, stepped back, looked up at his work, then back at the man, then smiled and said, “I’m building a cathedral.”

Typically the point of the story focuses on the idea of the cathedral and the importance of being part of something bigger than yourself.

Today, I’m thinking more about the bricks.

It’s easy to take bricks for granted. You just stack one on top of the other. No big deal. But what if some of those simple little building blocks come out uneven, if there are cracks or flaws in them, if you added too much sand into the mix or too little binding straw, forming a brick that doesn’t quite cohere when it’s put under tremendous stress?

Then what happens to your cathedral?

I didn't know much about brick-making, so I did a little googling. Apparently it was the Sumerians who first perfected the art, including how to boost the strength and durability of their clay bricks by firing them in a kiln. The Romans fired their bricks at temperatures of close to 1000° Celsius (over 1830° Fahrenheit), and the structures built therefrom — homes, castles, and, yes, cathedrals — could last for centuries.

My wife, Ana, likes to sit up in bed in the morning and read for a while. So every morning, I bring her a cup of piping hot tea, just the way she likes it. Some mornings she says, "You are so kind," or, "Thank you, you sweet mann." Sometimes she just smiles. But one way or another, she always thanks me.

Twenty-five years we've been together, and she still does this.

The tea-bringing is a brick; so is the thank-you.

My Navy SEAL buddy Brandon Webb once showed me his sniper school certificate; it was signed by a "Capt. William McRaven." Years later the captain became an admiral, then head of the entire Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC). This is one serious guy. Admiral McRaven gave a commencement speech in 2014 at the University of Texas that was so popular he turned it into a book, which later became a runaway bestseller. The theme of the talk was, "If you want to change the world, make your bed." The book is called *Make Your Bed*.

Making your bed every morning is a brick.

Perhaps you've heard the expression, "How you do anything is how you do everything." Of course, that's not entirely true. (There are things I do terribly, and I don't do *everything* terribly, at least I hope not.) But it's a *little* true.

Maybe more than a little.

Because every gesture, every act, every word, is a brick.

A question: What are the bricks of your life? (Hit reply if so moved; I would love to know.)

In [my coaching program, Writing Mastery Mentorship](#), we put a lot of time and focus into the crafting of good sentences. Not just the dramatic opening lines or closing lines of a book or chapter, those one-liners people know by heart ("It was the best of times, it was the worst of times..." "All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way," and so on) — but also the plain, workaday, brick-by-brick sentences that make up every paragraph that moves the story forward.

In his wonderful book *On Writing*, Stephen King argues that paragraphs are the basic building block of the book, "the place where coherence begins and words stand a chance of becoming more than mere words." I take his point.

To me, though, it's the *sentence*.

Hemingway, that master of clean, lean prose, writes in *A Moveable Feast* about facing those moments when he would get stuck:

“I would stand and look out over the roofs of Paris and think, ‘Do not worry. You have always written before and you will write now. **All you have to do is write one true sentence** [emphasis mine]. Write the truest sentence that you know.’ So finally I would write one true sentence, and then go on from there.”

What does that mean, “one true sentence”? And what does Kate Atkinson mean, in this month’s featured quote (drawn from [an interview in the LA Times](#)), when she talks about writing “one good sentence”?

To me, it means writing a sentence that exquisitely expresses some tiny, elemental piece of who you are and why you’re here.

One of my 9 “writer’s mantras” I teach in my program is this: *When you write, tell the truth*. In other words: *Be authentic*. Trust your own voice. Learn to strip away all the extraneous verbiage and writing gobbledygook that gets in the way of what it is you’re really saying.

Which is not as easy as it sounds. But oh so worth it. Because: those thoughts, those words?

Those are the bricks that build your life.

My June wish for you: that you find one thing each day you can do — an act, a communication, a gesture — that speaks to who you are and why you’re here, and let that one good sentence make your day a wholly satisfying success.

A handwritten signature in green ink, appearing to be 'J. D.', with a horizontal line extending to the left.

*** ABOUT THE WRITER**

Those of you who know me may already know this, too: Kate Atkinson is my favorite writer.

I’m the first to admit: she’s not for everyone. Her distinct Britishness can make her a bit less accessible for some American readers, and her distinct literateness (is that a word?) a little challenging for the casual reader of any nationality ... but man oh man, is every ounce of effort it takes worth it. I don’t know of another writer, dead or alive, who has so much flat-out *fun* with the English language — not Douglas Adams, not Neil Gaiman, not Ogden Nash, hey, not even George Carlin.

Nor, for that matter, do I know of another writer who so poignantly captures the tragicomic human condition. Her capacity for empathy and insight is second to none.

There, I've raved enough.

Now, a brief bio; a brief where-to-start intro in case you want to enter her world; and then a personal story.

The bio: Daughter of a shopkeeper, Atkinson was born and raised in York, a city steeped in history and jammed with historical sites — British, Roman, Viking, the whole tapestry. (Both the shopkeeper part and the tapestry part figure richly in her writing, especially in her first novel.) A voracious reader from the start, she pursued graduate and post-grad studies in English and American literature, then began writing for women's magazines, winning a handful of minor awards.

Then she did something the male-dominated British writing establishment neither expected nor appreciated: she "came out of nowhere" (their perspective, not mine) to beat the literary giant Salman Rushdie by winning the prestigious Whitbread Book of the Year Award (these days renamed the Costa Book Awards) with her first novel, *Behind the Scenes at the Museum*. The media tut-tutted on about how a "single mother," nay, "a chambermaid" (she had once been employed as such) who lived far from London (gasp) could have had the temerity to take the coveted prize.

One of the Whitbread judges, even while praising the book, gave it this left-handed compliment:

"I don't know if Kate Atkinson knows she was being very postmodern."

Considering that Atkinson had written her doctoral thesis on postmodern American literature, it seems pretty likely that, yeah, she knew.

A few decades later she won the Whitbread twice more, for *Life After Life* and its sequel *A God in Ruins*. (Take that, critics.)

Along with her disdain for media attention, Atkinson is an intensely private person. She has suffered from bouts of agoraphobia and prefers to live far from the spotlight. Which is okay with her fans: as long as she shows up in our homes on the page.

The where-to-start: Atkinson's first novel, *Behind the Scenes at the Museum*, is my personal favorite but it's a lot of work to read and not what I'd suggest to pick up as your introduction. Atkinson first garnered a greater popular audience with her Jackson Brodie detective series, which opens with *Case Histories*. That's where I'd start, and if you like it, go from there to the other Brodie books. (There are five, a sixth coming in September, and a BBC series.)

But it was her *Life After Life* (2013) that blew the world's mind — a tour de force about a woman who is born, dies in childbirth, is born again, and again, and again, fulfilling the book's tagline: "What if you could live your life over and over again until you got it right?" But this is no *Groundhog Day*: "getting it right" means, among other things, breaking someone's legs so they don't go into town and succumb to the influenza epidemic; avoiding getting raped and having her life ruined by kicking a hearty American chap in the nuts; and eventually, moving to Germany in the runup to WWII so she can preemptively kill Hitler. (That's not a spoiler; she does it on page 2.)

So yeah, you could start with that one, too.

And now, the story:

On June 10, 2015 — exactly nine years ago yesterday — Ana and I traveled to New York for business. I and my coauthor Bob Beckel had a book meeting with our editor at Hachette, a publisher I'd never worked with before.

I'd brought an Atkinson with me to read. *A God in Ruins* had just come out, and I was eagerly looking forward to it, but I'd decided that first I wanted to reread *Life After Life*, and I was still working through that one.

At the appointed hour I went into my meeting, but halfway through Bob felt ill and couldn't go on, so we broke the meeting a half-hour early. I wandered the halls of Hachette for a few moments, then found myself in a large room with people milling about, drinking champagne from little plastic flutes. "What's going on?" I asked.

"It's an event for employees," someone said. "A signing." The woman told me as a Hachette author, I was welcome to join.

Someone put a book in my hands, and I found myself at the end of a line. Everyone in the line had a copy. It was a book-signing. The line moved ahead ... and there sat Kate Atkinson.

Hachette was her publisher, too.

It was a private signing for *A God in Ruins*.

I handed my favorite author my copy for her to sign and said, "I have to tell you, *Museum* is my #1 favorite book of all time."

She smiled and said that was delightful to hear.

It was delightful to say.

What I didn't tell her was that June 10 is my birthday. Or that I'd never been to Hachette before, and that if my editorial meeting hadn't been scheduled on that exact day at that

exact time, and my coauthor hadn't suddenly felt ill and left early, I'd have never even known this event existed.

Five minutes later, the room was empty.

Best. Birthday present. Ever.

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