

BOOK WORLD

Connecting stories of human loose ends

BY KEVIN ALLMAN

To the Pythagoreans, three was the first real number, because they saw it as having a beginning, a middle and an end," says a character early in Kate Atkinson's latest novel, the excellent "Started Early, Took My Dog." Atkinson goes on to introduce three characters and interweave meditations on other sets of three — particularly beginnings, middles and ends.

Recently retired policewoman Tracy Waterhouse, a 50ish woman with no particular attachments and no plans for the rest of her life, has taken a job as security director of a Leeds, England, shopping mall, more out of boredom than anything else. Leaving work one day, she runs into an old nemesis, Kelly Cross, a "prostitute, druggie, thief, all-round pikey." Kelly is dragging an abused toddler onto a city bus, and in a split-second Tracy finds herself asking, "How much for the kid?" An envelope changes hands, the bus pulls away, and Tracy is suddenly the guardian of Courtney, a solemn toddler she'd just purchased on impulse.

Meanwhile, former police inspector and private eye Jackson Brodie (returning from three of Atkinson's previous novels) is wandering the English back roads, looking at the endless ruins of British civilization, trying to decide if all roads lead to or away from home. His split-second decision arrives when he sees a man brutalizing a small dog in a park. Brodie finds himself with a dog he's not quite sure what to do with.

As Waterhouse and Brodie both get things they're not sure they want, an elderly character actress is losing the one thing that matters to her: her memory. Tilly Squires, currently playing the mother of a detective on a cheap-jack TV crime drama, is becoming known among her co-workers as "Ten-take Tilly" because of her failing faculties. When the producers finally decide to kill her off, sending her into retirement like Waterhouse and Brodie, it's all Tilly can do to remember that she's standing on a set and the woman aiming a gun at her is another actress.

How Atkinson interweaves these lives — in the past, the present and the uncertain future — is her particular gift as a writer,



STARTED EARLY, TOOK MY DOG

By Kate Atkinson
Reagan Arthur/
Little Brown, 371 pp. \$24.99

and her plot remains clear and straight even as she unfolds her stories at leisure. Along the way, she introduces threads from the past, including another lost toddler from a 1975 murder scene investigated by Waterhouse. All the tales tie together into a knot that's complicated, elegant and completely satisfying.

"Started Early, Took My Dog" — the first line of one of Emily Dickinson's simplest and most ambiguous poems — is as much an examination of the way we live as it is a suspense. Waterhouse and Brodie both inhabit a world of iPhones and a disappearing middle class, finding themselves stunned and adrift on the sidelines of life, obsolete at 50 with nothing ahead but decades of make-work menial jobs. Both have seen too

much to have faith in a world where the child abusers and dog torturers seem to be winning, and it has turned them slightly numb, with only occasional prickles of interest in being alive. When Waterhouse begins fantasizing about running away with her purchased child, reinventing herself as a proper mother and daughter named "Imogen" and "Lucy," it's a fantasy so tempting that she takes baby steps to make it happen, just to amuse herself. When she commits to the charade, she becomes Tilly's mirror opposite: a woman who wants nothing more than to retreat into a fantasy world.

Waterhouse is a marvelously original character. When another aging cop sighs and tells her it's a different world these days, "Tracy thought she must be missing something, it felt like the same world as ever to her. The rich getting richer, the poor getting poorer, kids everywhere falling through the cracks. The Victorians would have recognized it. People just watched a lot more TV and found celebrities interesting, that was all that was different."

Atkinson's dark wit and mastery at sketching connections — between people, places, times, things, emotions — are reminiscent of Ruth Rendell, and Atkinson shares that grand master's facility in balancing cynicism, compassion and pragmatism. The result is crime fiction that's also splendid modern literature.

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Allman is a writer and editor who lives in New Orleans.

MUSIC REVIEW

Torche at Jaxx: Afire with headbanging humor

BY DAVE MCKENNA

The best hard rock, like the best pro wrestling, is full of inside jokes. Torche, which played a short, pummeling and overall happy set at Jaxx on Sunday, gets it.

The Miami quartet had self-dubbed its 2008 record, "Munderthal," as the "album of the year" in its liner notes, thereby justifying using "follow-up to the album of the year" in the cover blurb on last year's EP "Songs for Singles."

In a live setting, all the decibels and distortion required of a metal band can make the giggles harder to discern than a melody. But even while cranking out bombastic thrash with genre-appropriate titles like "Piranha" and "Face the Wall" (at volumes loud enough to peel the



LAUREN ROERO

HARD ROCK WITH A LIGHTER TOUCH: Jonathan Nunez, Rick Smith and Steve Brooks of the Miami band Torche.

paint off said wall), Torche kept up the good humor, and its hooks proved strong enough to pierce the din.

Bassist Jonathan Nunez often broke out of a standard wide-

stance headbanging pose to run to the edge of the stage and flash faux-menacing faces and fling forehead sweat onto the appreciative youngsters bunched up front.

Throughout "Olympus Mons," drummer Rick Smith kicked a leg up wildly in the air as if falling off his throne while pounding out a Sabbath-on-cough-syrup beat brutal enough to knock over anything or anybody that wasn't strapped in.

Founding guitarist Steve Brooks and just-added axman Andrew Elstner harmonized vocally and instrumentally on the grungy "Grenades."

The playing of Smith, who relied more on his snare and less on his kick drum than a typical metal backbeater would, was particularly stunning, and caused a fan in back of the dark club to yell, "Who's the drummer? He's awesome!" between more than one tune. It got laughs every time.

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MUSIC REVIEW

Master Chorale wraps up its season on a masterly note

BY CHARLES T. DOWNEY

Washington has too many choruses, a superabundance of amassed volunteers singing too many performances of overdone symphonic choral repertoire. The dire economic downturn began to cull the herd, but new groups continue to appear. Perhaps the best of these, the Washington Master Chorale, ended its first full season on Sunday afternoon at the National Presbyterian Church with a sterling spring concert of British choral master-

pieces.

Artistic Director Thomas Colohan founded the group as the National Master Chorale in 2009 but rebaptized it at some point this season. The combination of professionals and carefully chosen volunteers paid dividends in the group's warm, full-bodied but not overblown sound, particularly in unaccompanied motets by Charles Stanford and Edward Baird. David Lang gave virtuosic fire to Herbert Murrill's organ solo "Carillon," but he did not seem to have a clear sightline to the

podium. He was sometimes at odds with Colohan, accompanying the choir in Murrill's lively "Magnificat" and "Nunc Dimittis" and "Like as the Hart," that old Herbert Howells standby.

When the full choir of about 80 voices stood in mixed formation, rather than by vocal section, they had almost impeccable intonation and were seamlessly blended, while the 30 paid singers, performing alone on Renaissance motets by Thomas Tomkins and Orlando Gibbons, had a less unified sound. The second half featured rare per-

formances of Benjamin Britten's "The Ballad of Little Musgrave and Lady Barnard" and Ralph Vaughan Williams's "In Windsor Forest," accompanied with verve and sensitivity by pianist Mark Vogel and featuring a strong solo turn by soprano Laura Stuart. It is good news indeed that the group will survive to next season, when it will devote concerts to music by Alice Parker, Washington composer Lori Laitman and French composers.

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Downey is a freelance writer.

How to say goodbye to old latex paint

Dear Heloise:

I have some leftover latex paint and need to know the best way to dispose of it. Can I just put it in my trash can?

Heather, via e-mail

Heather, good question. The American Coatings Association says to never pour paint down a toilet, sink or storm sewer drain.

Look for an organization such as a school, church or theater group that would appreciate the donation of leftover paint. Many cities offer a solid-waste pickup day when paint can be taken for disposal.

If you can't do any of the above, small amounts of latex paint can be allowed to air out completely (some areas don't allow this, so you may need to check city regulations) by removing the lid and putting the open can somewhere away from children and animals. Large amounts of latex paint need to be added to an absorber

HINTS FROM HELOISE

material like sawdust, shredded newspaper or cat litter and allowed to completely dry, and then it can be put into a trash can.

Did you know that if you have a lot of leftover light-colored paint, you can take it back to the paint store, which might be able to tint it a darker color?

Dear Heloise:

A sure way to clean glass votive holders: Fill a votive cup about 3/4 full with water. Microwave on high for about 45 seconds. Carefully remove from the microwave, pour the water out and wipe clean with a paper towel. The glass will be clean as a whistle.

Marilyn Buzbee in Baton Rouge, La.

What a bright idea! However, please don't pour the liquid down the drain. Dispose of it

safely.

Dear Heloise:

With our electricity going off several times throughout the year, I found that if you have yard solar lights, you can bring some of them into the house, where they provide enough light for you to see. We also have candles and lanterns, but until you find and get them lit, the solar lights provide enough light.

Ruby, via e-mail

Dear Heloise:

I live in an area that experiences frequent thunderstorms, and therefore occasional power outages. When I go on vacation, I place four or five ice cubes in a dish in the freezer. When I return, if the ice cubes have evolved into a pond of ice in the dish, I know that the

power was off for several hours, and that I should be leery of anything in the freezer/refrigerator.

A.P. in Texas

Dear Heloise:

I have severe allergies and wash my bed linens frequently. I always turn my pillowcases inside out before reaching for the pillow to place inside, because that makes it easier to get the case on the pillow. I also realized that if I store my pillowcases inside out when not in use, it keeps them clean and makes them easier/faster to use when I need them.

Teri Z. in Chicago

Send a hint to Heloise, P.O. Box 795000, San Antonio, Tex. 78279-5000, fax it to 210-HELOISE or e-mail it to Heloise@Heloise.com. Please include your city and state. © 2011, King Features Syndicate

She gave up sons' custody, and now can't get them to visit

Dear Amy:

I was married for 10 years and have two beautiful boys with my ex-husband. We split up about five years ago, and I gave him custody of the kids because he was stalking me and obsessed with me and would not leave me alone. He is good to the kids, and I needed time to myself to get over the 10 years of punishment of living with him.

I see now that that was a big mistake. He took the kids and moved away. He does not say good things about me to them. I call every weekend to talk to the boys. They talk to me, but he won't pick up the phone or talk to me. He says

ASK AMY

that when we talk all we do is fight. This is basically true.

I asked him if he would send the kids to visit me. I said I would pay half of the expense so the kids could see my family and me.

He refuses. He says he thinks I'm going to run off with them. He says he doesn't mind my going to where they live to see them, but my family wants to see them too.

The boys are almost old enough to make their own decisions (they are 14 and 15). A lawyer told me that since the kids live with their dad, I have to settle things in court.

I miss them so much and just want them to visit me here. Should I go to visit? Or should I wait until they are old enough to make their own decisions?

Miss My Kids!

Fighting with your ex-husband while you wait for the kids to age out of the household is no solution. You should visit your children. Take a family member with you.

You received either no or very poor legal advice when you gave up all your parental rights to the children.

Your ex-husband is the custodial parent. When you relinquished custody you basically turned over these decisions to him. His proposal for you to visit sounds sensible. After you visit the boys, you will be in a better position to judge what would be in their best interest.

Dear Amy:

I am an agnostic and have a friend, also agnostic, who is dying of cancer. My sister is very Christian, and I spoke with her about my dying friend.

My sister sent me an e-mail to forward to this friend about accepting God and Jesus. She said it's like an insurance program — if it's true and the friend converts, then she goes to heaven, and if it's not true and she converts, it doesn't matter anyway.

I have not forwarded the e-mail to my friend yet. My friend has enough on her plate to worry about and probably would not welcome the e-mail.

The second problem is that I told my sister I would send the e-mail. If

I don't send it I'm lying to my sister, just to keep her happy. Should I send this e-mail to my friend?

Bicoastal Sister

It is not your sister's job to proselytize and propose solutions regarding a dying stranger's salvation. Nor do you have to lie to your sister.

You can tell her that you thought about it and decided not to burden your friend with this particular insurance plan.

If your sister must impose her religious beliefs on this situation, you could invite her to pray for your friend and have faith that her prayers will find their mark.

Dear Amy:

In response to the "Cranky Colleague" letter: I once worked for a boss who refused to listen to a complaint about a co-worker unless both the complainer and the co-worker were in the room together.

This made employees work hard to settle differences without going to the boss to complain, and it prevented the boss from being in the middle of alternating accusations.

All bets are off, though, where the boss doesn't have the skill to manage conflict.

Reader in Virginia

This is an excellent solution to workplace conflict. Thank you.

Write to Amy Dickinson at askamy@tribune.com or Ask Amy, Chicago Tribune, TT500, 435 N. Michigan Ave., Chicago, Ill. 60611.

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