

Intelligence in Public Media

Transcription

Kate Atkinson (Little, Brown, 2018), Kindle edition.

Reviewed by John Ehrman

I'll start with a confession. Reviewers are supposed to be at least somewhat informed about the authors whose books they set out to assess. Until now, however, I had never heard of Kate Atkinson and, with a Kindle's lack of cover blurbs, it wasn't until I did some Googling that I learned she is an English writer of prize-winning literary novels and best-selling detective stories, a Big Name in the worlds of both high-class and popular lit. Next, a check of Proquest revealed that Atkinson has built enough of a reputation to become the subject of unreadable scholarly analyses. Finally, a look at her bio revealed that in 2011 the queen made her a Member of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire for her services to literature. Does it get any better than this?

I did none of this research, however, until after I finished Atkinson's first effort at spy fiction, *Transcription*, and can therefore say, with all the honesty that comes of ignorance, that this book is a treat, and well worth your time.

Transcription is the story of Juliet Armstrong, a young woman hired by MI5 as a clerical at the start of World War II. Soon she is assigned to a listening post next to an apartment where a case officer meets and debriefs pro-German Brits—would-be fifth columnists who believe they are providing information to a genuine Gestapo officer. (This is loosely based on a true MI5 operation.) Juliet's job is to transcribe the recordings of the meetings, and the point of the operation is to keep their information from going to the Germans. "Let them flourish—but within a walled garden from which they cannot escape," her boss, Perry, tells her. By the spring of 1940 Juliet has moved up again, working in the alias of Iris Carter-Jenkins to infiltrate a group of pro-Nazi women, with the goal of obtaining a list of their contacts and other would-be traitors. Then, suddenly, something goes badly wrong.

In the second half of the book—considerably darker, as it takes place in 1950, in the dreary near-poverty of postwar Britain—Juliet is working at the BBC as a pro-

ducer of educational radio programming and occasionally lending her apartment to MI5 as a safehouse. She runs into the case officer from the wartime apartment, but he pretends not to recognize her, which sends Juliet on a quest to resolve mysteries left lingering at the end of the war and come to grips with the past. There is, of course, a twist at the end that comes as a complete surprise—it's not entirely believable, but it works well enough.

The plot, I should note, does not move as linearly as the above summary suggests, but that matters little as atmosphere and characters are where *Transcription* shines. Atkinson does a fine job of conveying the amateurism and improvisation of MI5 in the early days of the war, and in Juliet, she gives us a memorable personality. On the surface, she's an Everywoman—18, from a modest background, on her own following the deaths of her parents, and trying to adjust to life in a service where her peers and new friends are far more worldly than she (one is the daughter of a duke). At the same time, however, Atkinson draws Juliet as a complex, multilayered figure, one who grabs the reader's interest and affection from the start.

Juliet is smart and keenly observant of people and her surroundings. She looks at the world with skepticism and a sly sense of humor that makes her perfectly suited to intelligence work. Dolphin Square, the apartment block housing the listening post, Perry tells Juliet, is "quite Soviet in its conception and execution," leaving her to wonder if the "Russians would have named their housing towers after legendary British admirals . . . Beatty, Collingwood, Drake, and so on."^a At another point, Juliet is sitting in an aristocratic home, listening to Mrs. Scaife, the head of the group she's been sent to infiltrate, drone on about how the Jews and Bolsheviks, not the Germans, are England's true enemy. "It seemed unlikely to Juliet that the Jews were brewing 'world revolution.' Although really, why wouldn't you? It seemed like an excellent idea

a. Dolphin Square was the site of the true MI5 operation and figures as well in two of John LeCarre's novels, *The Spy Who Came in From the Cold* and *Legacy of Spies*.

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from where Juliet was, drowning amongst the salmon damask cushions.”

Juliet also has an innocent charm. Virginal and knowing no more about men than what was told in a brief school lesson on female anatomy or picked up from romance novels, Juliet longs to be seduced. She develops a crush on Perry and desperately hopes that he will see she is “ripe for the plucking . . . the apple beckoning on the tree.” Alas, in a hilarious passage Perry turns out to be uninterested (yes, for exactly the reason you think) and the disappointed Juliet concludes that while “sex was something you had to learn and then stick at until you were good at it . . . an initial lesson would be helpful.”

The fifth columnists are lesser players in *Transcription*, but Atkinson draws them, too, as complex people. Rather than caricature the wannabe Nazis, she portrays them as sad cases, isolating themselves in a bubble of their own illusions and talking treason with no idea of what the consequences truly could be. Mrs. Scaife, Juliet notes, was “doing what Englishwomen did best wherever they were in the world—taking tea and having cozy chats, albeit . . . the topic of conversation . . . was treason, not to mention the destruction of civilization and the British way of life, although no doubt Mrs. Scaife would have claimed to be a vigorous defender of both.” MI5’s operation is nothing if not effective, and Juliet gradually realizes that almost everyone in Mrs. Scaife’s circle is, like her, either an MI5 officer or informant. When Mrs. Scaife is arrested and learns the truth, Juliet sees that she looks “suddenly old and helpless,” and is not entirely without sympathy.

Amidst the spy games, Atkinson has some serious points to make. The fluidity and ambiguity of identity is her main theme, which she explores through the double-agency and deceptions at the heart of the story. “The mark of a good agent,” Perry tells Juliet, “is when you have no idea which side they’re on.” One rather mysterious character tells her that nothing is as it appears; rather, “there can be many layers to a thing,” like in the spectrum of light, and that he exists “you might say, in one of the invisible layers.”

From there, Atkinson moves on to consider what intelligence work does to the sense of self. As Juliet prepares to work as Iris, Perry tells her that her false biography (which includes a fictitious fiancée, Ian, serving as an officer on HMS *Hood*) has been designed make Iris appealing to her target but that she needs to avoid identifying too closely with her avatar. “Iris isn’t real, don’t forget that,” he says as he warns her not to “get the two confused—that way madness lies, believe me.” As it turns out, Juliet finds it liberating to be Iris—the new identity brings adventure and relieves her of having to put up with people throwing *Romeo and Juliet* quotes at her—but eventually does begin to confuse her two identities and, when the *Hood* sinks in 1941, finds herself saddened by the thought of Ian’s death.

Flexible identity merges with another theme, that no one leaves the intelligence world once they are in it. In 1950, Juliet faces off with the man who brought her into MI5, telling him that she’s finished and walking away. “Oh, my dear Juliet,” he tells her. “One is never free. It’s never finished.” A few pages later, Juliet realizes “she would never escape from any of them.” It turns out that she’s right, and disillusion follows. Juliet admits that she used to believe in something, “and that, for once, was the truth. And now she no longer believed, and that was another truth. But what did it matter? Really?”

None of these musings about identity, the impossibility of escape, and lost ideals are new territory for a spy novel—Graham Greene, Len Deighton and, especially, John LeCarré, have worked it for decades—and Atkinson, to be honest, makes the points a couple too many times. Juliet, however, saves *Transcription* from descending into cliché. Through her protagonist’s shrewd observations and rich interior life, Atkinson freshens these familiar ideas, making them lighter and more enjoyable than in most such tales.

Ultimately, this is *Transcription*’s strength. Atkinson takes her story and characters seriously, but not so seriously that they (or the reader) lose sight of the humor and absurdities of their lives and work. It makes for a book that is fun and thoughtful, and sure to leave the reader hoping for more spy stories from Atkinson.



The reviewer: John Ehrman is a frequent and award-winning reviewer for *Studies in Intelligence*; his primary job is to serve as an analyst in CIA’s Directorate of Analysis.