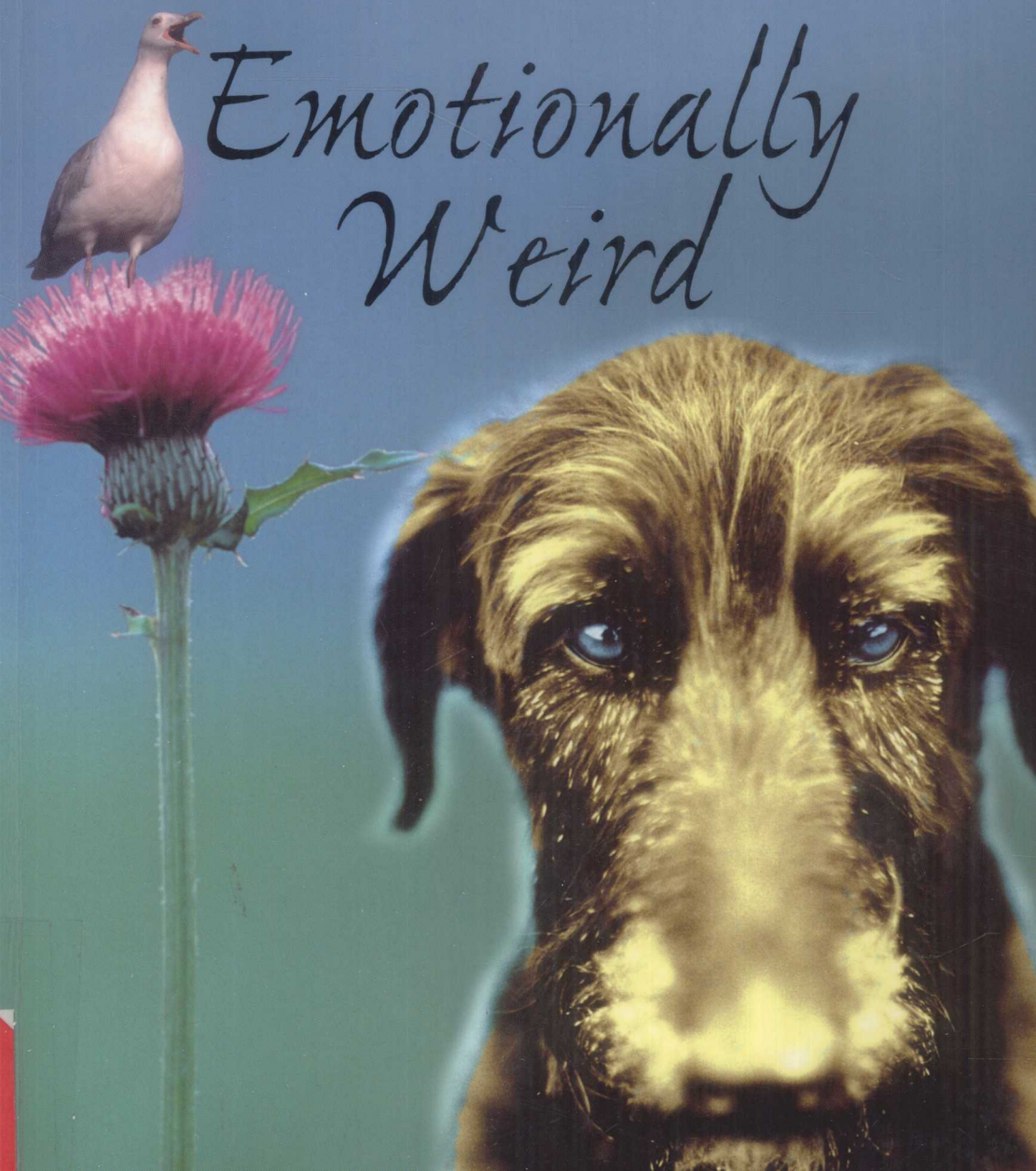


AUTHOR OF THE WHITBREAD PRIZEWINNER *BEHIND THE SCENES AT THE MUSEUM*

KATE ATKINSON

*Emotionally
Weird*



Emotionally Weird

A COMIC NOVEL

KATE ATKINSON



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For Lesley Denby, née Allison, with love

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The University of Dundee portrayed in this book (and especially the departments of English and Philosophy) bear little resemblance to real life, past or present. Neither are any of the characters portrayed based on anyone real, either living or dead.

‘That’s a great deal to make one word mean,’ Alice said in a thoughtful tone.

‘When I make a word do a lot of work like that,’ said Humpty Dumpty, ‘I always pay it extra.’

‘Oh!’ said Alice. She was much too puzzled to make any other remark.

‘Ah, you should see ’em come round me of a Saturday night,’ Humpty Dumpty went on, wagging his head gravely from side to side: ‘for to get their wages, you know.’

(Through the Looking-Glass, Lewis Carroll)

The Hand of Fate

(First Draft)

Inspector Jack Gannet drove into Saltsea-on-Sea along the coast road. Today's sun (not that he believed it to be a new one every day) was already climbing merrily in the sky. It was a beautiful morning. Shame it was about to be spoilt by the *Lucky Lady* and her cargo - one very unlucky lady. One very dead lady. Jack Gannet sighed, this job didn't get any easier. Jack Gannet had been in the force longer than he cared to remember. He was a straightforward, old-fashioned kind of detective. He had no strange tics or eccentricities - he didn't do crosswords, he wasn't Belgian, he certainly wasn't a woman. He was a man suited to his profession. What he wasn't, was happy. He didn't want to be dealing with a dead body on a glorious morning like this. Especially not on an empty stomach.

Madame Astarti didn't know about the dead body yet. She was having some trouble opening her eyes. They were glued shut by sleep and mascara and one too many gins in The Crab and Bucket last night with Sandra and Brian. Madame Astarti sighed and groped blindly around on her bedside table for her lighter and a packet of Player's No.6 and inhaled deeply on a cigarette. She loved the smell of nicotine in the morning.

Seagulls were clog-dancing on the roof above her head, heralding a brand new day in Saltsea-on-Sea. Through a gap in the curtains she could see that the sun was the colour of egg-yolks. Sunrise, she thought to herself, a

little daily miracle. It would be funny, wouldn't it, if it didn't happen one morning? Well, probably not very funny at all really because everything on earth would die. The really big sleep.

* 1972 *

Blood and Bone

MY MOTHER IS A VIRGIN. (TRUST ME.) MY MOTHER, NORA – A FIERY CALEDONIAN beacon – says she is untouched by the hand of man and is as pure as Joan of Arc or the snow on the Grampians. If you were asked to pick out the maiden in a police line-up of women (an unlikely scenario, I know) you would never, ever, choose Nora.

Am I then a child of miracle and magic? Were there signs and portents in the sky on the night I was born? Is Nora the Mother of God? Surely not.

On my birth certificate it states that I was born in Oban, which seems an unlikely place for the second coming. My beginning was always swaddled in such mist and mystery by Nora that I grew up thinking I must be a clan-destine princess of the blood royal (true and blue), awaiting the day when I could come safely into my inheritance. Now it turns out that things are more complicated than that.

I am twenty-one years old and I am (as far as I know, for we can be sure of nothing it seems), Euphemia Stuart-Murray. Effie, for Nora's sister, who drowned in a river on the day that I was born. Nora herself was just seventeen when I entered the material world. A child looking after a child, she says.

These Stuart-Murrays are strangers to me, of course. As a child I had no kindly grandfather or playful uncles. Nora has never visited a brother nor spoken wistfully of a mother. Even their name is new to me, for all of my life Nora and I have gone by the more prosaic 'Andrews'. And if you cannot trust your name to be true then what can you trust? For all she has acknowledged her family – or vice versa – my mother may as well have washed ashore on a scallop shell, or sprung fully formed from some wrathful god's head, her veins running with ichor.

The closest Nora ever came to talking about any family until now was to claim that we were descended from the same line as Mary Stuart herself and

the dead Scottish queen's flaws had followed us down the generations, particularly, Nora said, her bad judgement where men were concerned. But then, I doubt that this is a trait exclusive to Mary Queen of Scots, or even the Stuart-Murrays.

I have come home – if you can call it that, for I have never lived here. My life is all conundrums. I am as far west as I can be – between here and America there is only ocean. I am on an island in that ocean – a speck of peat and heather pricked with thistles, not visible from the moon. My mother's island. Nora says it is not her island, that the idea of land ownership is absurd, not to mention politically incorrect. But, whether she likes it or not, she is empress of all she surveys. Although that is mostly water.

We are not alone. The place is overrun with hardy Scottish wildlife, the thick-coated mammals and vicious birds that have reclaimed the island now that the people have all left it for the comfort of the mainland. Nora, ever a widdershins kind of woman, has made the journey in reverse and left the comfort of the mainland to settle on this abandoned isle. When we say the mainland we do not always mean the mainland, we often mean the next biggest island to this one. Thus is our world shrunk.

Nora, a perpetual deracine, the Wandering Scot, a diaspora of one (two if you count me), spent the years of my childhood in exile from her native land, flitting from one English seaside town to the next as if she was in the grip of some strange cartographical compulsion to trace the coastline step by step. Anyone observing us would have thought we were on some kind of permanent holiday.

I used to wonder if, long ago, Nora began her journey in Land's End and was trying to get to John o'Groats, although for what reason I couldn't imagine – unless it was because she was Scottish, but then many Scots live their whole lives without ever finding it necessary to go to John o'Groats.

Now she says she will die here, but she is only thirty-eight years old, surely she is not ready to die yet? Nora says that it doesn't matter when you die, that this life is nothing but an illusion. Maybe that's true, but it doesn't stop the cold rain from soaking us to the skin or the gales blowing in our hair. (We are truly weathered here.) Anyway, I don't believe that Nora will ever die, I think she will merely change state. It has begun already, she is being transformed into an elemental creature, with tidal blood and limestone bones. She is unevolving, retiring into the ancient, fishy regions of her brain. Perhaps soon she will crawl back into the watery realm of Poseidon and reclaim her Saurian