



# Anxious People

By Fredrick Backman

## About the Author

Fredrik Backman is the #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *A MAN CALLED OVE*, *MY GRANDMOTHER ASKED ME TO TELL YOU SHE'S SORRY*, *BRITT-MARIE WAS HERE*, *BEARTOWN*, *US AGAINST YOU* and *ANXIOUS PEOPLE*, as well as two novellas: *AND EVERY MORNING THE WAY HOME GETS LONGER AND LONGER* and *THE DEAL OF A LIFETIME*. His books are published in more than 40 countries. He lives in Stockholm, Sweden, with his wife and two children.

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## About the Book

Looking at real estate isn't usually a life-or-death situation, but an apartment open house becomes just that when a failed bank robber bursts in and takes a group of strangers hostage. The captives include a recently retired couple who relentlessly hunt down fixer-uppers to avoid the painful truth that they can't fix their own marriage.

There's a wealthy bank director who has been too busy to care about anyone else and a young couple who are about to have their first child but can't seem to agree on anything, from where they want to live to how they met in the first place. Add to the mix an 87-year-old woman who has lived long enough not to be afraid of someone waving a gun in her face, a flustered but still-ready-to-make-a-deal real estate agent, and a mystery man who has locked himself in the apartment's only bathroom, and you have the worst group of hostages in the world.

Each of them carries a lifetime of grievances, hurts, secrets and passions that are ready to boil over. None of them is entirely who they appear to be. And all of them --- the bank robber included --- desperately crave some sort of rescue. As the authorities and the media surround the premises these reluctant allies will reveal surprising truths about themselves and set in motion a chain of events so unexpected that even they can hardly explain what happens next.

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## Discussion Questions

1. The man on the bridge tells the boy, “Do you know what the worst thing about being a parent is? That you’re always judged by your worst moments.... Parents are defined by their mistakes.” Do you think this statement is true? Does social media make it more likely to be the case these days? In what ways are people critical of other’s parenting choices? Is the bank robber a bad parent?
2. In ANXIOUS PEOPLE, the author writes, “If you want to make God laugh, tell Him your plans” and “The worst thing a divorce does to a person isn’t that it makes all the time you devoted to the relationship feel wasted, but that it steals all the plans you had for the future.” Do you make plans for your life, or do you let life guide you? Even if our plans often don’t turn out as we’d hoped, is there a benefit to our making them? Discuss these questions with your group.
3. Zara tells her psychologist, “your generation don’t want to study a subject, they want to study themselves.” Is she speaking of millennials? Why are boomers and millennials so critical of each other? How do they see the world differently?
4. Nadia (the psychologist), James (the police officer), Zara and Estelle all have stories tied in some way to the bridge. What does the bridge represent to each of them? Has the bridge’s meaning changed for them by the end of the book? If so, how?
5. Anna-Lena compares her and Roger’s marriage to a shark that can’t breathe unless it is moving the whole time: “People need a project...if we didn’t keep moving, our marriage wouldn’t get any oxygen. So we buy and renovate and sell.” Why does Anna-Lena think that a project is the one thing keeping their marriage from falling apart? What surprised you about their history as individuals and as a couple? How have they underestimated each other, despite having been together for so many years?
6. How did you feel when the identity of the bank robber was revealed? Were your assumptions challenged? How does the author manage to keep this a surprise?
7. Zara appears to be very cold and distant to other people. Is Zara’s attitude toward people a defense mechanism? Do you agree with the psychologist that Zara isn’t depressed, just lonely? What is it that Zara can’t forgive herself for?
8. Estelle says her book-swapping moments with her neighbor were “an affair.” Do you agree? What counts as an affair if there’s no physical relationship involved? What book would you give as a present to a crush?
9. While on the apartment balcony, Zara starts to open up to Lennart. Why is he the person to whom she is able to open up?
10. At the start of ANXIOUS PEOPLE, the author tells us, “This story is about a lot of things, but mostly about idiots.” In what ways are these characters acting like idiots? At

the end of the book, do you think that's still a fair description of them? Are we all, by virtue of being human, inclined to act like idiots from time to time?

**11.** Jim and Jack, the father and son policemen, have a difficult relationship that is made worse by their working so closely together. What is it that annoys them about each other? What did you make of Jim's role in resolving the bank robber's predicament? Should he have told Jack what he was doing sooner? Why didn't he?

**12.** ANXIOUS PEOPLE is very much a character study. How did your feelings about these characters change over the course of the book? Who is your favorite character and why? Which character surprised you the most and why?

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## Author Interview

Independent booksellers across the country have chosen *Anxious People* by Fredrik Backman (Atria Books) as their number-one pick for the [September 2020 Indie Next List](#).

Backman's latest book follows a group of eight strangers who are viewing an apartment when a failed bank robber bursts in and takes them all hostage. Stuck in an unexpected situation, these strangers find they have more in common than they ever could have imagined.

"This book made me feel all the feels! It was sad, it was funny, it was hopeful, it was everything," said Lisa Driban of [Hockessin BookShelf](#) in Hockessin, Delaware. "The character development is incredible at revealing what's inside each of the characters, and the way their stories link and interconnect is genius. It's a story about sadness and hope and human connections. I couldn't put it down and barreled to the end, but now I am sad it's over. *Anxious People* is truly the best thing I've read in a long time!"

Here, *Bookselling This Week* and Backman discuss his writing process.

### ***Bookselling This Week: Where did the idea for this story come from?***

**Fredrik Backman (FB):** My usual process is that I have 10 ideas in my head at any given time. Seven of them are really bad or not thought through and three have some potential, maybe. So when I've figured out which three that is, which in itself is a process that can take a long time and a lot of weird writing that amounts to absolutely nothing, they often melt together into one hopefully decent idea. In the case of *Anxious People*, I had a few themes I wanted to write about: The first was how ordinary people live with ordinary anxiety. Not rock stars or presidents or astronauts, but just...people. How a group of strangers would share that feeling of waking up and noticing that everybody else in the whole damn world seems to know what the hell they're doing all the time except for me. The second thing I wanted to do was to write a straightforward comedy about a hostage situation at an open house, because my wife and I were going around looking at new apartments a couple of years ago, and after we'd looked at 20 or 30 of them, I guess my mind wandered and I started looking at the people going in and out instead. The thing is that everyone at these things, including me, are on edge and annoyed and stressed out and a little rude, because we're all kind of enemies and

competitors for the same home here. And I remember thinking: This would be a great setting for a hostage situation. The third thing I wanted to do was try to write a kind of classic “locked-room mystery” and the police investigation afterwards trying to find out what happened. And so...here we are. It got out of hand.

**BTW: *Anxious People* features an ensemble cast, rather than one or two main characters. How did you craft their dynamic? Did any of the characters come to you before others?**

**FB:** I don’t exactly remember at what point each and every one turned up in my head. The robber/hostage taker was probably the first character I thought about but the last one I really figured out the inner emotions of. The robber had a purpose but no personality, so to speak. Anna-Lena, one of the hostages, is, on the contrary, the first character whose emotions I really knew and understood, but it wasn’t until I was deep into writing the story that I figured out her real purpose in it.

My usual process is that I start out with way more characters than the story really needs, or can even cope with, and the longer I write the more of these characters will disappear until only the ones I truly believe in and care about are still there. It’s not a matter of finding “good” or “bad” characters; to me it’s not even a matter of finding “believable” characters. The only thing I care about is if I’m *feeling* something for them. If I don’t care, you won’t either. So the ones that I can’t get out of my head, the ones I feel like I have met and understand and whose stories are really getting to me, they’re the only ones who make it into the book. They can’t stay characters to me; they have to become people. I have to want to defend them. And if the question is “How do you craft characters?” I think my only answer is: through their relationships. Who is this person in other people’s eyes? Who was hurt by this person and how? Who is laughing with this person? Who loves this person? In *Anxious People*, everyone is described first and foremost by their relationship with others, I think.

**BTW: The narrative works around the truth in a lot of ways, with characters sharing their own perspective in a way that obfuscates what’s actually happening. It reminds me of the way anxious thoughts and assumptions can sometimes control the way we evaluate the world around us. Did you want to evoke that feeling with the structure of your book?**

**FB:** Honestly: No. I never thought about it quite like that. But, of course, the point of telling the story the way I did, with describing something that happens from different people’s viewpoints, was to keep the reader guessing what actually took place. I think that idea came in part from a discussion I had with a friend who has three siblings. She said, “In a big family, one sibling often becomes the official storyteller, and the way that sibling remembers an event becomes the official family story and everyone else just adapts.” It wasn’t until she was an adult and went to therapy and started talking about her childhood that she realized “Oh, wait, that wasn’t what happened at ALL!” She had just heard the story at the dinner table a million times and her mind kind of decided to choose to remember the story over the actual memory. I tried to use that in the way these people tell the story about the hostage situation in the novel: Sometimes it feels like we’ve SEEN something happen, when in fact all that’s happened is that someone TOLD us about it.

**BTW:** This book really asks readers to challenge their assumptions about the people around them, which is a theme that comes up often in your work. What draws you to this idea?

**FB:** I’m interested in people who seem uncomplicated and ordinary but are in fact incredibly complex, I guess. Much more so than the people who go out of their way to seem special and original, but are actually the very opposite.

**BTW:** As the story progresses, the narrator is deciding what exactly the book is about, saying that it’s about a man standing on a bridge and it isn’t. Did you feel this way while writing?

**FB:** Well, it goes back to one of your first questions: This was three different ideas for novels that melted into one. Since one of the ideas was to write a “locked-room mystery” it was useful to go back and forth, telling the reader what kind of story they’re really reading, since this is a way of using smoke and mirrors. If I distract you enough with the emotions of the people in the room, you might not figure out what I’m doing in the background.

**BTW:** This story explores the differences between generations, in addition to an in-depth conversation about parenting and what being a good parent means. Is any of this informed by your own experiences?

**FB:** I don't really know how to write anything without using my own experiences. The only way I know how to connect to another person who's in all other ways different from myself is to find one basic feeling that we have in common: it might be loneliness, it might be anger, it might be the fact that we both love our kids. Whatever it is, that's where I start.

**BTW:** Is there any one thing you hope readers take away from this book?

**FB:** That's entirely up to the reader. I just tell stories. As soon as the book is in your hands, it belongs to you. Your feelings about it, good or bad, are your own. And if you at least don't feel like it was a total waste of time at the end...that's good enough for me.

Retrieved from: <https://www.bookweb.org/news/qa-fredrik-backman-author-septembers-1-indie-next-list-pick-578091>

## Other Links and Resources:

Interesting Quotes from Anxious People:

<https://www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/67840009-folk-med-nigest>

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DATE: \_\_\_\_\_

BOOK CLUB: \_\_\_\_\_

BOOK TITLE: \_\_\_\_\_

As a group we rated this book:

1	2	3	4	5
Ugh!		It was OK...		Loved it!

Would we recommend this book to other book clubs?

Yes      No      Undecided

Why/why not?

Our discussion: