



Iona Iverson's Rules for Commuting

By Clare Pooley

Book Discussion Guide

Questions for discussion

1. Do you ever talk to strangers on public transportation? If not, why do you think that is? Which of the characters would you most—and least—like to share your commute with?
2. Iona feels that, at fifty-seven, she's gone from "It Girl" to "Past-It Girl." Do you think that society, and the workplace, undervalue women once they pass fifty?
3. The story is set in 2019—prepandemic. Do you think your experience of working from home has affected your view of the daily commute and your reading of the novel?
4. Each of the characters in the book make assumptions about one another, which often turn out to be wrong. What assumptions did you make about them, and who surprised you the most?
5. All the characters in the story are changed in some way, as a result of meeting one another. Who do you think are the most transformed?
6. Iona talks about having experienced sexism, ageism, and homophobia. We know that these factors work together to influence Iona's experience, but which one do you think appears to have an outsized impact on her life?
7. Iona loathes some of the "modern" ways of working—the brainstorms, beanbags, and corporate speak, for example. Do you agree with her? What are your least favorite aspects of corporate life, or the work world in general?

8. There are three married couples in the story: Iona and Bea, Piers and Candida, and David and Olivia. What does this story teach us about long-term relationships? Candida walks away from her marriage because she believes Piers changed the rules. Do you have any sympathy for her?
9. The characters in the novel span three generations. What do you think teenagers, millennials, and boomers can learn from one another?
10. Martha believes she is not a “normal teenager.” Is she right? What do we learn about the world when we see it through her eyes?
11. Iona spends her life helping people with their problems, yet she’s unable to ask for help herself. Do you think this is a common problem? Why is that?
12. Do you agree with Iona’s rules for commuting? What would your rules be?

Questions courtesy of the publisher.

About the Author



Clare Pooley graduated from Cambridge University, and then spent twenty years in the heady world of advertising before becoming a full-time writer. Her debut novel, *The Authenticity Project*, was a *New York Times* bestseller, and has been translated into twenty-nine languages. *Iona Iverson's Rules for Commuting* is her second novel. Pooley lives in Fulham, London, with her husband, three children, and two border terriers.

Source: <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/authors/2197506/clare-pooley/>

Q&A: Clare Pooley, Author of ‘Iona Iverson’s Rules for Commuting’

Elise Dumpleton Writer’s Corner June 8, 2022

Nobody ever talks to strangers on the train. It’s a rule. But what would happen if they did? From the *New York Times* and *Globe and Mail* bestselling author of *The Authenticity Project*, a heartwarming novel about unexpected friendships and the joy of connecting.

We chat with author Clare Pooley about her new release [Iona Iverson’s Rules for Commuting](#), along with writing, book recommendations, and more!

What inspired you to write *Iona Iverson’s Rules for Commuting*?

I spent many years commuting to work, by bus, rail, and London Underground. I’d often see the same people on my journey. I never spoke to them, obviously, but I’d give them little nicknames, and imagine what their lives were like away from our daily commute.

I never expected to miss those smelly, crowded journeys, but during the pandemic, I looked back on them with a sense of nostalgia, and I found myself wondering what magic might have happened if I’d ever had the nerve to chat to strangers on the train...

Did you find the writing process different from your first novel, *The Authenticity Project*?

Yes! Writing a second novel is, like the tricky second album, notoriously hard! I wrote *The Authenticity Project* primarily for myself, assuming that no one would want to publish it, but I found myself writing the second novel for other people – my publishers and my readers. I actually threw that novel away after a year of hard graft, and started again, writing this story – the one I really wanted to tell.

Throughout lockdown, many people have transitioned to WFH and said goodbye to their workday commutes. Are you ever nostalgic for that part of your day?

Yes, I am! I miss crowds of people, and I now realize how much of my energy and creativity comes from random everyday encounters and conversations. During the pandemic, I felt so physically and intellectually sluggish, and now, seeing the city come back to life, I’m feeling re-energized.

In keeping with traveling, everyone ends the book in a different place than they started– emotionally as well as physically. How did you approach each character’s journey?

The truth is, I wasn’t entirely sure when I started writing this story where each of the characters would end up! I gave each of them an issue to deal with then, as I started to get to know them better, I began to see how they might deal with that issue, and how it might be impacted by their interactions with their fellow commuters.

Iona Iverson is an iconic character, a woman who thinks she’s a “Past-It Girl” but ends up having a triumphant second act in your novel. What inspired Iona and all of her many wonderful quirks?

Emmie quotes a line from a poem: *When I am old, I shall wear purple.*

I have always wanted to be that type of older woman. An individual and an eccentric. So Iona is, in many ways, the woman I aspire to be. But she's also inspired by her namesakes.

For many years, I had a wonderful friend called Iver. He was a farmer and a builder – strong, creative, and immensely kind. He loved people, threw the most extraordinary parties, and dressed in fabulous brightly colored velvet jackets. About four years ago he went to Tanzania with a charity, to help local people build affordable, practical housing. While he was there, he died of a massive heart attack.

Iver's daughter, Iona, is my Goddaughter, and Iona Iverson was named after her and her father, who both inspired her character.

When the characters start to see beyond their first impressions of each other, they discover struggles, secrets, and even unexpected gifts. What surprises new friends when they get to know you?

What a wonderful question! I come across as extremely confident, I think, but I actually suffer from terrible imposter syndrome. I always assume that any success is just good luck and that sooner or later I'm going to be 'found out.'

I just hope it's not yet....

The new friends also discover unique ways to help each other through transitions and tough times. How do their abilities start to work together?

Generally, our closest friends tend to be around the same age as us and share similar views and life experiences, which means that the help and advice they give you in tough times is probably advice you'd give yourself. I'm fascinated by friendships that transcend age, background, and experience because I feel that they can add a whole new dimension to that relationship. That's what I tried to demonstrate with this story.

One of the commuters that Iona becomes close to throughout the novel calls her "Magic Handbag Lady" because of the seeming unending provisions Iona carries with her each day on the train. What's one item you never leave home without for your commute?

A notebook! I find that journeys are, along with 3 am, the time when inspiration is most likely to strike. I'll suddenly see the answer to a plot-hole, discover a new character quirk or an entire story idea. Then I'll grab my notebook and scribble these thoughts down. Often, I'll revisit these scribbles and they'll seem crazy but, just once in a while, they are little nuggets of magic.

Article courtesy of The Nerd Daily <https://thenerddaily.com/clare-pooley-author-interview/>

Summary

Seven people's lives intersect as they commute to and from London each day.

Iona, at 57, is a one-time it girl and current eccentric lesbian who's an advice columnist for the staid *Modern Woman* magazine. Piers is a middle-aged mansplainer, manspreader, and impeccably tailored futures trader. Sanjay is a young, empathetic—yet anxious—nurse on the oncology ward at a London hospital. Emmie is a pretty, red-haired bookworm in her late 20s who works in digital advertising and feels underwhelmed with her career arc. Martha is a teenager dealing with all the angst, drama, bullying, and social ostracization that runs rife in school. Jake is a personal trainer who owns the coolest gym around. And David, a lawyer in his late 60s, is the kind of nondescript commuter no one really ever notices or remembers. All seven travel back and forth on the same train; over the years, they've noticed, nicknamed, and studiously avoided talking to one another. But when Piers chokes on a grape one morning, his seatmate Emmie doesn't know what to do, Iona calls for help, and Sanjay swoops in to the rescue. They begin talking to one another, and eventually others enter their circle. As she did in *The Authenticity Project* (2020), author Pooley has created a cast of individual characters whose lives intersect around a focal point. As the story unfolds, readers learn about the complexities that make each character tick: their hopes, dreams, fears, and flaws. Job struggles and loss, money problems, panic attacks, and love all have their places in this story, as do the problems of dealing with homophobia, ageism, poison-pen missives, divorced parents, a nude picture accidentally becoming public, and an emotionally abusive relationship. But each character still triumphs by the end.

A soothing story where bad things happen yet are overcome, and friendship leads the way to personal acceptance and rebirth.

Courtesy of Kirkus Reviews: <https://www.kirkusreviews.com/book-reviews/clare-pooley/iona-iversons-rules-for-commuting/>