

## Book Club Kit

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## Summary

*From the author of A Man Called Ove comes a poignant, charming novel about a crime that never took place, a would-be bank robber who disappears into thin air, and eight extremely anxious strangers who find they have more in common than they ever imagined.*

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 eighty-seven-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've got 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.

Rich with Fredrik Backman's "pitch-perfect dialogue and an unparalleled understanding of human nature" (*Shelf Awareness*), *Anxious People* is an ingeniously constructed story about the enduring power of friendship, forgiveness, and hope—the things that save us, even in the most anxious times. (*From the publisher.*)

## Fredrik Backman Biography



Image: goodreads.com

### Author Bio

- Birth—June 2, 1981
- Raised—Helsingborg, Sweden
- Education—no degree
- Currently—Stockholm

Fredrik Backman, Swedish author, journalist, and blogger, was voted Sweden's most successful author in 2013.

Backman grew up in Helsingborg, studied comparative religion but dropped out and became a truck driver instead. When the free newspaper *Xtra* was launched in 2006, the owner reached out to Backman, then still a truck driver, to write for the paper. After a test article, he continued to write columns for *Xtra*

In spring 2007, he began writing for *Moore Magazine* in Stockholm, a year-and-a-half later he began freelancing, and in 2012 he became a writer for the *Metro*. About his move to writing, Backman said...

*I write things. Before I did that I had a real job, but then I happened to come across some information saying there were people out there willing to pay people just to write things about other people, and I thought "surely this must be better than working." And it was, it really was. Not to mention the fact that I can sit down for a living now, which has been great for my major interest in cheese-eating. (From his literary [agent's website](#).)*

Backman married in 2009 and became a father the following year. He blogged about preparations for his wedding in "The Wedding Blog" and about becoming a father on

"Someone's Dad" blog. During the 2010 Winter Olympics, he wrote the Olympic blog for the Magazine Cafe website and has continued as a permanent blogger for the site.

In 2012, Backman debuted as an author, publishing two books on the same day: a novel, *A Man Called Ove* (U.S. release in 2014), and a work of nonfiction, *Things My Son Needs to Know About the World*. His second novel, *My Grandmother Sent Me to Tell You She's Sorry*, came out in 2013 (U.S. release in 2015). (Adapted from Wikipedia and the publisher. Retrieved 7/23/2014.)

(Adapted from Wikipedia and the publisher by Litlovers.com)

# Interview

## A Q&A With Fredrik Backman, Author of *September's* #1 Indie Next List Pick

- By Emily Behnke 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 [5].

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

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

**Fredrik Backman:** 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.

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



# Book Review

## Why Fredrik Backman's ANXIOUS PEOPLE is a 2020 Mood

[Courtney Rodgers](#) Dec 15, 2020

I haven't read a book in almost two months. Usually by this point in the year, I have surpassed my reading goal by 10–20 books. This year, I will be ending the year 30 books behind my annual goal. It's fine. I'm fine. Along with reading, I have found it difficult to concentrate on scripted television, movies, podcasts, and even music with lyrics. My yearly Spotify playlist is just going to be white noise and lo-fi. One of the books I did read this year was Fredrik Backman's [Anxious People](#).

*Anxious People* features suicide and mental illness as central themes, so please read with caution.

Reading *Anxious People* felt like some kind of experiment.

"Ah yes, here are the 2020 humans, in their natural habitat."

*Anxious People* is 2020. It's messy, convoluted, funny, heartbreaking, and full of people. That was one of the criticisms I saw over and over again, on social media and in traditional reviews: that *Anxious People* has too many characters. Backman's novels often feature an ensemble cast, all of a hockey village in [Beartown](#), the residents of an apartment building in [My Grandmother Asked Me To Tell You She's Sorry](#). Somehow, the eight strangers brought together in *Anxious People* felt too intimate, too much.

Here we were in the real world, stuck inside our homes, with our families or roommates, waiting out the hostile situation of a pandemic. Then, inside the world of *Anxious People*, these strangers who just wanted to look at a nice little apartment, a place to live and dream and be, are suddenly forced to stay there because they are being held hostage. The best thing, in both situations is just to stay put.

Throughout the novel, Backman introduces us to the ways anxiety and trauma can manifest in different people. He describes it as a hunger, a broken firewall, insecurity, an expense, an urge, and noise. Anxiety as a hunger, like Ro reaching for the bowl of decorative limes just to quiet the buzz of fear and panic. How many loaves of sourdough bread did we make this spring? How many fluffy coffees? For many, newly adjusting to being at home all the time, schedules have been thrown, food anxiety has been a prevalent part of this pandemic.

When the hostages are given pizza, it's a natural progression of events. They expect it. The police agree to send pizza, with the caveat that they'll negotiate the hostage release after everyone's had their pizza. Giving and receiving food is a sign of care; it's how many cultures welcome guests. During times of distress or trauma, food can provide immense comfort. More than once, the hostages contemplate heating up whatever's in the apartment freezer. Not particularly because people are hungry, but because everyone is experiencing something traumatic. Pizza, though, is preferred. What did we turn to when the pandemic began? Take out, learning to cook our favorite meals at home, our favorite snacks, and frozen pizza.

As 2020 progressed, we began to experience new kinds of burnout. It wasn't just that we couldn't go on vacation anymore, or had to wear masks everywhere; it was exhaustion from Zoom meetings, loneliness even though we were in constant contact with friends and family. Digital companionship doesn't have effect on us. Looking at our own bleak reflection in the computer screen is more difficult than it sounds. It's easy to get caught up in self-criticism. *Oh, did I talk too much in that call? Does my face really look like that?* Being overly self-critical, can

heighten anxiety, making skin feel like it doesn't belong on your body, as Backman describes. Being human hurts. Sometimes you have to have a good solid cry in the closet. Alone, or alone with a near-stranger, either works.

*Anxious People* is, in my opinion, as much about loneliness as it is anxiety. Each of the characters expresses feeling lonely, even in a crowded apartment. Jim is lonely because his son is grown up and doesn't need him anymore. Julia is lonely because things feel very difficult while she's pregnant. Zara is lonely because it feels like everyone else in the world is living their lives just fine. They're all coping with being people.

The truth is, they're not. We're all terrible at being people, at being adults. This is a reoccurring theme in *Anxious People*, how difficult it is to be an adult, just to know what to do all the time. We cultivate these beautiful little portraits of our lives, making us look well-traveled, well groomed, funny and intelligent, even during a pandemic. What we see on Instagram is the 2020 version of the Christmas letter. It's just the highlights, baby.

Even the bank robber is a faker. *Wait! This isn't how life was supposed to turn out!* Oh, you didn't plan for a pandemic to sweep in a force you to stay at home for an entire year? When the pandemic is declared over, how long do you think it will be before you feel safe in a large crowd again? Two years? Five years? For many of us, the pandemic has been a real loss of security.

Ro and Julia are seeking the perfect apartment for their family and cannot settle on one because it's not 100% perfect. How do you know what's perfect? That's anxiety about security. It's not about buying a security camera or alarm system. It's about the relationship, their family's future, their home. How do we make sure that this home is *ours*? What happens when disaster strikes? Well, we stick out. Julia calms Ro's fears because Julia loves Ro. Security in oneself and in one's home is knowing you have a place to go when disaster strikes. Julia and Ro found theirs in *Anxious People*, as did the Bank Robber and Estelle.

*Anxious People* is a big 2020 mood because of these three things:

- Anxiety manifests differently in different people
- Being a human is hard, and we all fake a bit
- We're all stuck here, we might as well talk to each other

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<https://bookriot.com/why-fredrik-backmans-anxious-people-is-a-2020-mood/>



## The Nerd Daily book review

You'd think at this point I wouldn't be shocked by how much I love every single book I pick up by Fredrik Backman. Yet, I was once again that meme of that one dude holding his hand up to his mouth looking scandalised when I started *Anxious People* and immediately could tell it was going to be one of my favourites of the year. But I digress.

On the surface, *Anxious People* chronicles a crime that never took place. The book opens to a bank robbery that isn't really a bank robbery and follows that with a hostage situation that really isn't one. Rather, it's a meeting of eight anxious strangers who all happen to be at an apartment viewing for vastly different reasons (yes, it's a wonder any one of the eight is actually there to, you know, check out the place) and the spot where one would-be robber and would-be hostage taker kind of vanishes. As we follow the police trying to piece together the clues and interviewing all the glorified hostages, we also get to see those eight people unravel while at the apartment viewing until there's only one question left. Would you rather face the police and admit to your crimes or stay locked up in an apartment with the weirdest, most eclectic and kooky people in the world?

I wonder if I will ever pick up a book by Backman and not be completely baffled at the synopsis only to fall in love with the book on the very first page (chances are slim, to be honest). Backman excels in *Anxious People* the way he has excelled in all his previous releases and it's because of one thing: the way he writes the most painful truths, the way he uncovers what we all think sometimes, but would never dare speak aloud. It's like he's hiding in our brains, snagging our worst nightmares and most hopeful daydreams and shoves them into characters that will then make you question why you haven't robbed a bank yet or gone into the real estate business (okay maybe that's going a bit too far but you get my point, right?).

Backman has a way with words that always leaves me reeling. He somehow manages to make everything sound hilarious while also creating moments and characters that change the way you view the world because you're seeing other people's perspectives. And even if you don't agree with them, you at least understand. And you realise that every story has two sides to it – or rather, eight. Or ten, if we count the police officers as well.

I remember being flabbergasted about how Backman could make me care about hockey in his outstanding novel *Beartown*; in this, I found myself invested in real estate, which I can honestly say I never saw coming. Backman manages to make the ordinary feel extraordinary, imbuing seemingly drab topics with passion and fervour and it works every single time to leave me absolutely entranced. And it's one hundred percent because of the characters. At its root, *Anxious People* is about connections between individuals, a father and a son who are unable to bridge the distance between them created by the absence of a woman and snap at each other while, really, they are only searching for a way to bond. An old married couple that doesn't get a lot right in life but love each other ferociously even if it sometimes translates in weird ways. A pregnant woman who would like to strangle her fiancée while simultaneously knowing that she would do anything for her and vice versa. And so many more characters that will tug at your heartstrings and make you want to reach out to that person you haven't called in ages but still feel tied to.

Backman knows how to capture all the little moments in life we never really think about, the connections we make and take for granted instead of seeing them as the blessings they are, the kindnesses and cruelties that have become the norm when really, they should stand out, for better or for worse.

With that being said, what I loved most about this book was how it made me question how far I would go for the people I love. As the reader learns, the would-be bank robber had a pretty

profound reason for robbing the bank and as we slowly learn why the robber thought this was the only viable option left, we also get to ask ourselves how much we take for granted in this world and how much we need to look out for others. And that paying kindness forward is never wasted.

Riveting and jovial while not shying away from the hard truths of life, *Anxious People* demonstrates Backman's ability to make even a would-be hostage situation one of the most entertaining and profound encounters to read about. May this man never stop writing.

<https://thenerdaily.com/review-anxious-people-by-fredrik-backman/>

## Discussion Questions

1. Why are these people anxious? About what?
2. (*Follow-up to Question 1*) In what way is *Anxious People* really about relationships rather than a hostage crisis? Talk about the many human connections in this book—those that existed before the story began and those that developed during the course of the novel. Which were most surprising, or perhaps most improbable?
3. (*Follow-up to Question 2*) Why is everyone at the open-house in the first place? What is everyone's overt reason for attending (house-flipping, for example), and what is the underlying (i.e., psychological or emotional) reason?
4. What makes these people "the worst group of hostages in the world"? Of all the characters, including the father and son police duo, whom did you most connect with?
5. Backman's novel is a comedy but also a commentary of societal issues such as global capitalism, parenting, and marriage. How are those issues explored?
6. How would you describe *Anxious People*—mystery, comedy, drama, social commentary? All of the above ... or something else?

<https://www.litlovers.com/reading-guides/fiction/11826-anxious-people-backman?start=3>

## Additional Information

Swedish Series ANXIOUS PEOPLE is Coming to Netflix

The series will be produced by FLX, the production company behind Quicksand.

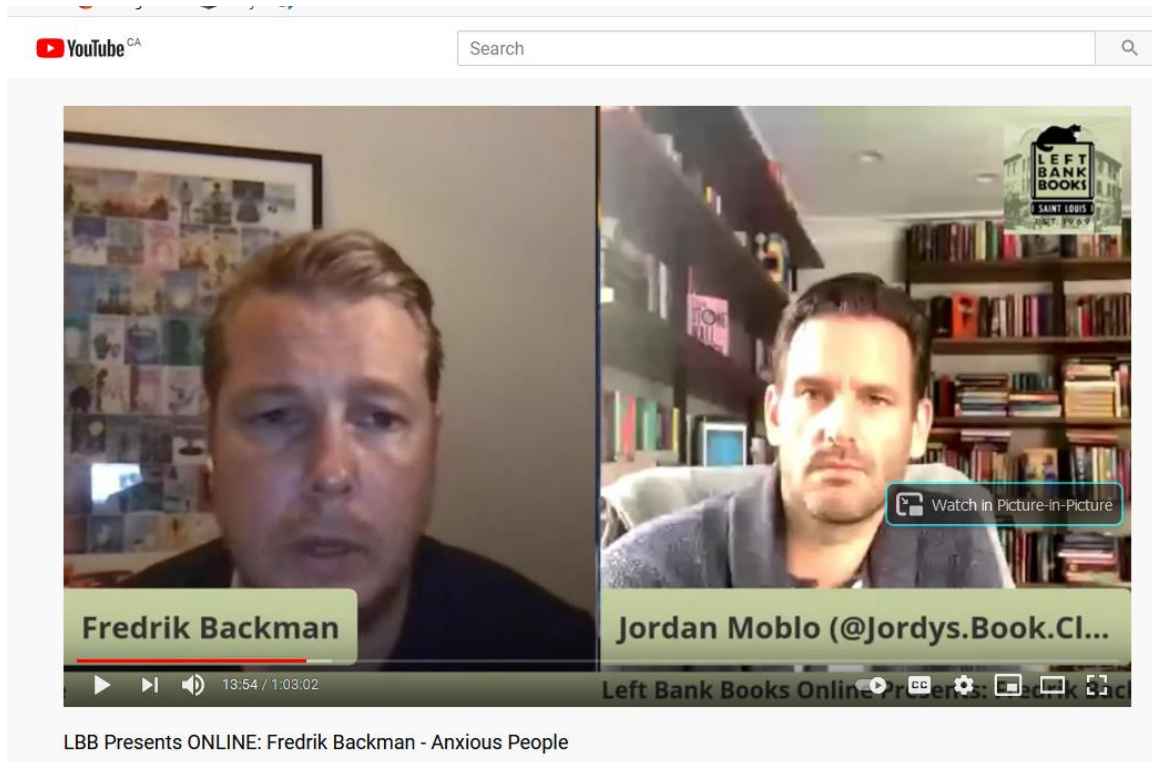
In October 2019 it was announced that *Anxious People*, the novel by bestseller author Fredrik Backman, will become a Swedish [Netflix](#) original series. The series will be produced by FLX, the production company behind *Quicksand* and newly released *Love & Anarchy*.

Production has recently started and today [Netflix](#) announces the cast. Alfred Svensson (*The 100 Year-Old Man Who Climbed Out the Window and Disappeared*, *Sunny Side*) will play the lead role as Jack and his dad, Jim, is played by Dan Ekborg. The rest of the ensemble consists of: Leif Andréé, Sascha Zacharias, Carla Sehn, Petrina Solange, Marika Lagercrantz, Anna Granath, Per Andersson, Sofia Ledarp, Shima Niavarani, Lottie Ejebrant and Vera Henggren.

*Anxious People* is an unreasonably riotous comedy about a hostage drama during an open house. A failed bank robber locks himself in with an over-enthusiastic real estate agent, two bitter IKEA-addicts, a pregnant woman, a suicidal multi-millionaire and a damn rabbit. In the end the robber gives up and lets everyone go, but when the police storm the apartment it is...empty.

<https://www.broadwayworld.com/bwwtv/article/Swedish-Original-Series-ANXIOUS-PEOPLE-Coming-to-Netflix-20201112>

## On Youtube: Interview with Fredrik Backman



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BV3XOhI2KGc>