

Reading Group Guide / Feb 2020

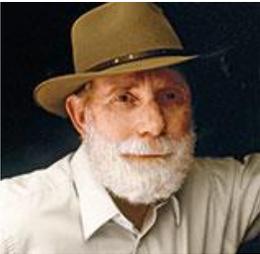
[Last Bus to Wisdom](#) by [Ivan Doig](#)

ABOUT THE BOOK

Donal Cameron is being raised by his grandmother, the cook at the legendary Double W ranch in Ivan Doig's beloved Two Medicine Country of the Montana Rockies, a landscape that gives full rein to an eleven-year-old's imagination. But when Gram has to have surgery for "female trouble" in the summer of 1951, all she can think to do is to ship Donal off to her sister in faraway Manitowoc, Wisconsin. There Donal is in for a rude surprise: Aunt Kate—bossy, opinionated, argumentative, and tyrannical—is nothing like her sister. She henpecks her good-natured husband, Herman the German, and Donal can't seem to get on her good side either. After one contretemps too many, Kate packs him back to the authorities in Montana on the next Greyhound. But as it turns out, Donal isn't traveling solo: Herman the German has decided to fly the coop with him. In the immortal American tradition, the pair light out for the territory together, meeting a classic Doigian ensemble of characters and having rollicking misadventures along the way. Charming, wise, and slyly funny, *Last Bus to Wisdom* is a last sweet gift from a writer whose books have bestowed untold pleasure on countless readers.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ivan Doig, the award-winning and beloved author of 16 books, died at his Seattle home in April 2015, of multiple myeloma. During the 8 years of his illness, he wrote his 4 final novels, including



Last Bus to Wisdom, which was inspired by a cross-country trip he took as a boy in the summer of 1951.

Ivan believed that ordinary people deserve to have their stories told, and he did that in fact and fiction, beginning with *This House of Sky*, a memoir of his own upbringing in Montana; it attracted a wide readership and was a finalist for the National Book Award. He later wrote a second memoir and another book of nonfiction, but it is for his novels that he became enduringly read. The Two Medicine Country, an imagined region based upon the Montana landscape where he came of age, is the setting for the majority of his novels, including the so-called McCaskill trilogy (*English Creek*, *Dancing at the Rascal Fair*, and *Ride with Me, Mariah Montana*) and the New York Times-bestselling *The Whistling Season*, which debuted a favorite character, the itinerant charmer Morrie Morgan.

Ivan's work earned him comparisons to Wallace Stegner, from whom he inherited the informal title "dean of Western Writers." The Center for the American West awarded Ivan the prestigious Wallace Stegner Award in 2007, and he was the recipient of the Western Literature Association's lifetime Distinguished Achievement award. He was the recipient of more awards from the Pacific Northwest Booksellers Association than any other writer, among numerous other honors.

FOR DISCUSSION *The suggested questions are intended to help you find new and interesting angles and topics for discussion. May these ideas enrich your conversation and increase your enjoyment of the book.*

1. The opening chapter of *Last Bus* begins with grown-up Donal reflecting on the cross-country adventures he had as a boy—the adventures he’s about to relate. What role does memory play in the novel? So much of *Last Bus* is picaresque and even fantastical, from Herman’s version of the wild, wild West to Donal’s constant “storying.” Is memory at all conflated with imagination? In what ways?
2. Doig was a master wordsmith known for his colorful descriptions, pitch-perfect ear for dialogue, and larger-than-the-page characters. Discuss the role that language plays in the novel. How does Doig bring his cast of characters to life?
3. Doig writes, “It’s funny about imagination, how it can add to your peril even while it momentarily comes to your rescue.” How are Donal’s “storying” and the adventures and misadventures he gets into throughout the novel indicative of this?
4. Doig’s fictional Two Medicine Country, based on the Montana landscape that was so formative for him in his youth, features prominently in almost all of his novels—it’s as much a part of his books as any flesh-and-blood character. How does Doig evoke this hardscrabble, big-hearted, even mythic world?
5. *Last Bus to Wisdom* was inspired in part by a trip Doig made to Wisconsin via Greyhound to stay with his aunt and uncle in the summer of 1951 while his father recovered from stomach surgery and his grandmother from an operation for “female troubles.” Other similarities to Doig’s real life abound, from Donny’s bright red hair and penchant for “storying” to his being raised by a ranch-hand grandmother. Do these autobiographical elements affect your reading of *Last Bus*? How? Why do you think Doig disavowed autobiographical components to his earlier novels—why would that be important to a writer?
6. *Last Bus* is filled with nontraditional family units, from Donny being raised by his grandmother to the odd coupling of Aunt Kate and Uncle Herman to Highpockets and the hobo crew. What do you think is Doig’s take on companionship, love, and community? How is this shown in the novel?
7. Historically, the American West has been a place to start over, to hide out, to create a better life. What were the various influences that drove people to the West? Did they find community there? Why do you think movement is such a big part of *Last Bus*?
8. *Last Bus* is set in 1951, but its characters are still shadowed by the trauma of the World Wars. In what ways do we see this?
9. Donal’s identification with Native Americans is integral to the novel, from his obsession with an arrowhead found on the Double W ranch to his nickname of Red Chief to his determination to get to Crow Fair—where he disguises himself as a Native American dancer to avoid capture by the police. Why do you think Donny so powerfully identifies with Native Americans? How are Native Americans depicted through Donny’s eyes?
10. From Herman the German shielding his true identity for years, to Aunt Kate, who isn’t actually the superstar singer Donny believed she was, to the Greyhound passenger who swindles Donny out of his money, the perceptions Donny has about others are frequently upended—for better and worse—throughout the novel. What do you think Doig is saying about authenticity, identity, and the gap between expectation and reality? How do we come to understand others? What’s gained and what’s lost when we do?