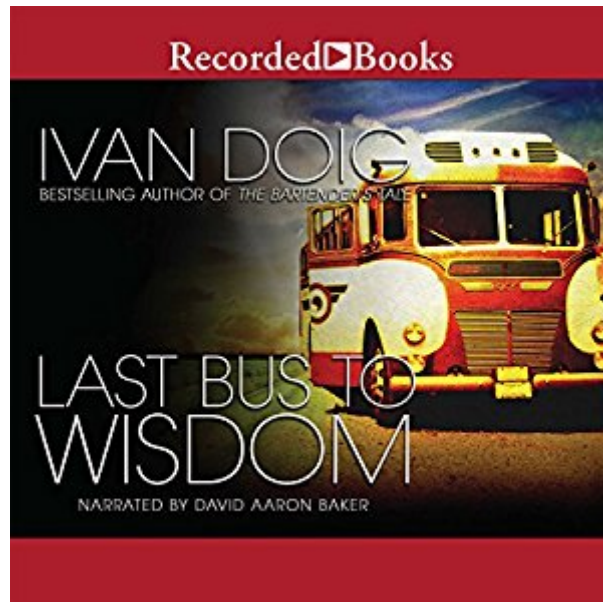


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Last Bus To Wisdom: A Novel



Synopsis

The final novel from a great American storyteller. 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 11-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 people.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

For decades, I avoided Ivan Doig's writing because I knew it would be too good. Intense, that is, dead-on true to life except for the occasional bit of deliberate exaggeration designed to underscore a point. Now that the author has left the planet, though, I've run out of excuses and run into *Last Bus to Wisdom*, reading his last novel first. And I was right; the lead protagonist, eleven year old

Donal Cameron, will live with me forever. When Donal begins his journey east from Montana to Wisconsin on the dog bus, or Greyhound--what we in our part of the Treasure State called the big grey dog at that time--the reader has no idea of the ever expanding universe that is about to open for the boy. Neither does Donal; the emotional highs and lows that are part and parcel of being eleven in uncertain circumstances are more than enough to keep his mind spinning and desperately focused by turns. In 1951, however, I was growing up on a ranch in western Montana, just four years younger than Donal. I've ridden the big grey dog more than once, our family knew hoboes and sometimes hired them during the haying season, and I can say with absolute certainty that Doig nailed both the characters and the times. The voices are authentic. There is not a single false note, not one comma out of place. If you read this book, you will live it. Guaranteed. That said, the vision of the book expands exponentially as the pages proceed. From the limited awareness of a youngster concerned only about his own summer and his grandmother's health, Donal finds himself suddenly aware of larger and larger issues. Thieves on the bus. Good Samaritans on the bus. A small time Sheriff with Little Man Syndrome. The plight of a German draftee from World War I who fled illegally to America rather than serve Hitler in World War II. A vengeful rancher and rodeo stock contractor as well as a gracious World Champion Saddle Bronc Rider who was on his own from Donal's age or close to it. Hoboes both good and bad. And always, the struggle to survive with some sort of honor as well as a quick-thinking willingness to break a few rules in the name of survival. There's more, a lot more, but a review has to stop somewhere. In closing, I will simply say that *Last Bus to Wisdom* captures the essence of the struggle to survive in early 1950's Montana as well as anything I've read, complete with utterly believable villains, heroes, and a fair bit of true to life humor.

I received this book as part of the Penguin First to Read program for an honest review. This is my second book by Ivan Doig and much better than the first one. The story is simple, an eleven-year-old boy is sent on the "dog bus" (Greyhound) to live with his Great Aunt Kate while his Gram recuperates from a "woman's troubles" operation. I was reminded of a modern (set in the 1950's) Huck Finn and Donal Cameron has some exciting adventures on the bus and beyond. When he makes it to Manitowoc, Wisconsin and realizes that Aunt Kate is nothing like his Gram, she is too bossy, opinionated and stingy to make anyone happy. He does make friends with her husband Herman the German and before too long they are back on the bus high tailing it out of there for the great western experience. I grew up in the next decade but a lot of what Donal experienced I can identify with. I never rode a dog bus but I

remember taking the train across the country and the fun I had and I still remember the nice porter who allowed us to bring food on to the train against the rules. He also pointed us to the best places to eat whenever there was a layover of longer than an hour. I don't remember his name, but his face and smile are clear in my mind. These are the kind of experiences that Donal and Herman have on their "Last Bus to Wisdom". This book is beautifully written and evokes the time when hoboes rode the rails and worked as harvesters, where the Crow Fair and rodeos were big deals and where life was simpler and easier to get lost in the shuffle. I highly recommend this book to anyone who enjoys a good coming of age tale with no worries that things will come out all right in the end. This one's a keeper!

A feisty 11-going-on-25-year-old narrator takes us on the mother of all cross country (and back again) bus trips in the early 1950s. Young Donal (with no "D") has already faced too much trauma in his young life, but now he must hunker down and take it as his beloved Gram has to have serious surgery for "female trouble" and Donal is sent from the Double W Ranch in Montana to a small town in Wisconsin to spend the summer with an unknown great aunt and her husband. Aunt Kitty bears an uncanny resemblance to the famous Kate Smith, but her selfishness and unkindness make life tough for Donal. Luckily, her husband Dutch, also known as Herman the German, becomes young Donal's safety net. As the two escape "the Kate's" clutches, another bus journey comes into play. In both directions, good old Greyhound, the dog bus, becomes a character in itself. First Donal, and then Donal and Herman together, meet a wide and wild cross section of Americans: a pretty girl, a famous author, soldiers, petty criminals and even pettier law enforcement, senior citizens, kids on the way to camp, and "the Johnson family" on the way to the hayfields. Each has a story to tell and most willingly oblige Donal with a signature and some words of advice for his cherished autograph book. There are several fortuitous coincidences that help rescue our two intrepid travellers and keep the story moving, and the last 20% or so of the narrative gets a little too far-fetched, but mostly this is a lively, enjoyable road trip story -- I wonder how the people at Greyhound liked this book? The beautiful details and loving references to Indian and ranch life in the West of the 1950s are quite believable, and it is sad to know that this is the last book written by author Ivan Doig. It is a fitting epitaph.

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