‘I loved *The Authenticity Project*. It has such an intriguing premise, wonderful characters and is utterly truthful about the lies that we all tell. It’s a clever, uplifting book that entertains and makes you think.’

Sophie Kinsella

‘One of the best books I’ve read in a long time. Original, engaging and unforgettable.’

Sarah Morgan

‘A quirky cast of characters you can’t help but root for.’

*Woman & Home*

‘Beautifully written, thought provoking and uplifting, *The Authenticity Project* is a warm and endearing tale about truth, friendship and the power of connection. Pooley’s characters will stay with you long after you turn the final page. It was a joy to read.’

Mike Gayle

‘It’s full of life’s truths, funny, poignant and ultimately uplifting. I thoroughly enjoyed it.’

Fanny Blake

‘*The Authenticity Project* cracks the facades that people present to the world and shows what happens when you’re willing to share your true self. This is a story of love, of community, of found family, and of forgiveness. A beautiful book with a poignant message, perfect for our time.’

Jill Santopolo
‘This book has a great concept and follows it through with warmth and heart . . . If you’re a fan of *Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine*, read this!’

*Fabulous*

‘Reading the book was like hanging out with a rowdy, affectionate bunch of friends where you don’t want the party to stop. A joyous, funny read that leaves you all warm inside.’

*Beth Morrey*

‘Reminded me of classic Richard Curtis films. Wonderful characters and the perfect balance of warmth, wit and weepy moments.’

*Rachel Marks*

*The Authenticity Project* is a rich roast of great characters, even better relationships, wonderful entanglements, and a few surprises along the way. If Monica’s Café were a real place, I’d stop by every day.’

*Laurie Frankel*

‘Fans of Fredrik Backman and Gail Honeyman – make room on your shelves for Clare Pooley. *The Authenticity Project* is a stunning debut and it left me inspired to share more of myself with the world.’

*Steven Rowley*

‘A charming and heart-warming tale about the importance of friendship and reaching out to others.’

*The Bookseller*
The Authenticity Project

Clare Pooley

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Penguin Random House is committed to a sustainable
future for our business, our readers and our planet. This book
is made from Forest Stewardship Council® certified paper.
For my father, Peter Pooley, 
who taught me to love words
Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering
There is a crack in everything
That’s how the light gets in.

LEONARD COHEN
She had tried to return the book. As soon as she realized it had been left behind, she’d picked it up and rushed after its extraordinary owner. But he’d gone. He moved surprisingly swiftly for someone so old. Maybe he really didn’t want to be found.

It was a plain, pale-green exercise book, like the one Monica had carried around with her at school, filled with details of homework assignments. Her friends had covered their books with graffiti of hearts, flowers and the names of their latest crushes, but Monica was not a doodler. She had too much respect for good stationery.

On the front cover were three words, beautifully etched in copperplate script:

**The Authenticity Project**

In smaller writing, in the bottom corner, was the date: *October 2018*. Perhaps, thought Monica, there would be an
address, or at least a name, on the inside so she could return it. Although it was physically unassuming, it had an air of significance about it.

She turned over the front cover. There were only a few paragraphs on the first page.

_How well do you know the people who live near you? How well do they know you? Do you even know the names of your neighbours? Would you realize if they were in trouble, or hadn’t left their house for days?_  
_Everyone lies about their lives. What would happen if you shared the truth instead? The one thing that defines you, that makes everything else about you fall into place? Not on the internet, but with those real people around you?_  
_Perhaps nothing. Or maybe telling that story would change your life, or the life of someone you’ve not yet met._  
_That’s what I want to find out._

There was more on the next page, and Monica was dying to read on, but it was one of the busiest times of the day in the café, and she knew it was crucial not to fall behind schedule. That way madness lay. She tucked the book into the space alongside the till with the spare menus and flyers from various suppliers. She’d read it later, when she could concentrate properly.

Monica stretched out on the sofa in her flat above the café, a large glass of Sauvignon Blanc in one hand and the abandoned exercise book in the other. The questions she’d read
that morning had been niggling away at her, demanding answers. She’d spent all day talking to people, serving them coffees and cakes, chatting about the weather and the latest celebrity gossip. But when had she last told anyone anything about herself that really mattered? And what did she actually know about them, with the exception of whether they liked milk in their coffee, or sugar with their tea? She opened the book to the second page.

My name is Julian Jessop. I am seventy-nine years old, and I am an artist. For the past fifty-seven years I’ve lived in Chelsea Studios, on the Fulham Road.

Those are the basic facts, but here is the truth: I AM LONELY.

I often go for days without talking to anyone. Sometimes, when I do have to speak (because someone’s called me up about payment protection insurance, for example), I find that my voice comes out in a croak because it’s curled up and died in my throat from neglect.

Age has made me invisible. I find this especially hard, because I was always looked at. Everyone knew who I was. I didn’t have to introduce myself, I would just stand in a doorway while my name worked its way around the room in a chain of whispers, pursued by a number of surreptitious glances.

I used to love lingering at mirrors, and would walk slowly past shop windows, checking the cut of my jacket or the wave in my hair. Now, if my reflection sneaks up on me, I barely recognize myself. It’s ironic that Mary, who would have happily accepted the
inevitability of ageing, died at the relatively young age of sixty, and yet I’m still here, forced to watch myself gradually crumble away.

As an artist, I watched people. I analysed their relationships, and I noticed there is always a balance of power. One partner is more loved, and the other more loving. I had to be the most loved. I realize now that I took Mary for granted, with her ordinary, wholesome, pink-cheeked prettiness and her constant thoughtfulness and dependability. I only learned to appreciate her after she was gone.

Monica paused to turn the page and take a mouthful of wine. She wasn’t sure that she liked Julian very much, although she felt rather sorry for him. She suspected he’d choose dislike over pity. She read on.

When Mary lived here, our little cottage was always filled with people. The local children ran in and out, as Mary plied them with stories, advice, fizzy pop and Monster Munch. My less successful artist friends constantly turned up unannounced for dinner, along with the latest of my artist’s models. Mary put on a good show of welcoming the other women, so perhaps only I noticed they were never offered chocolates with their coffee.

We were always busy. Our social life revolved around the Chelsea Arts Club, and the bistros and boutiques of the King’s Road and Sloane Square. Mary worked long hours as a midwife, and I crossed the
country, painting the portraits of people who thought themselves worth recording for posterity.

Every Friday evening since the late sixties, at 5 p.m. we’d walk into the nearby Brompton Cemetery which, since its four corners connected Fulham, Chelsea, South Kensington and Earl’s Court, was a convenient meeting point for all our friends. We’d plan our weekend on the grave of Admiral Angus Whitewater. We didn’t know the Admiral, he just happened to have an impressive horizontal slab of black marble over his last resting place which made a great table for drinks.

In many ways, I died alongside Mary. I ignored all the telephone calls and the letters. I let the paint dry solid on the palette and, one unbearably long night, destroyed all my unfinished canvases; ripped them into multi-coloured streamers, then diced them into confetti with Mary’s dressmaking scissors. When I did finally emerge from my cocoon, about five years later, neighbours had moved, friends had given up, my agent had written me off, and that’s when I realized I had become unnoticeable. I had reverse metamorphosed from a butterfly into a caterpillar.

I still raise a glass of Mary’s favourite Baileys Irish Cream at the Admiral’s grave every Friday evening, but now it’s just me and the ghosts of times past.

That’s my story. Please feel free to chuck it in the recycling. Or you might decide to tell your own truth in these pages, and pass my little book on. Maybe you’ll find it cathartic, as I did.

What happens next is up to you.