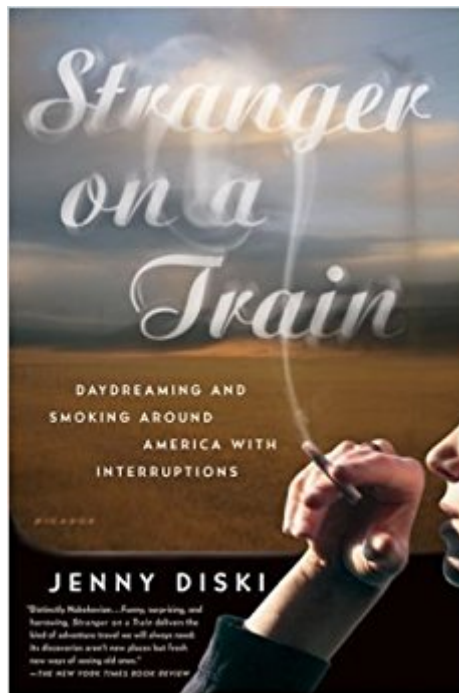




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Stranger On A Train: Daydreaming And Smoking Around America With Interruptions



Synopsis

Using two cross-country trips on Amtrak as her narrative vehicles, British writer Jenny Diski connects the humming rails, taking her into the heart of America with the track-like scars leading back to her own past. As in the highly acclaimed *Skating to Antarctica*, Diski has created a seamless and seemingly effortless amalgam of reflections and revelation in a unique combination of travelogue and memoir.

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Customer Reviews

"I am not a travel writer in any reasonable sense of the word," Diski confesses. "I do not feel compelled to bring the world to people, or meet interesting characters, or enlarge my circle of acquaintance. I just want to drift in the actual landscape of my destination." Despite the disclaimer, the British novelist (*Only Human*) does all of the above in this eloquent exploration of the psyche America's and her own. The work is divided into two parts. Journey One begins aboard a transatlantic cargo ship where Diski is among a handful of passengers en route to Savannah, Ga. From there, she takes Amtrak to Arizona. Journey Two takes place a year later as Diski circumnavigates the U.S. from New York's Penn Station to Portland, Ore., and back, stopping in the suburbs of Albuquerque to stay in the backyard trailer of a friend from the first sojourn. As in the Hitchcock thriller of (almost) the same title, strangers whom Diski befriends in the smoking sections, or "sin bins," of the trains divulge the details of their lives; Diski, however, plays it close to the vest, sharing intimacies with readers only about her difficult childhood, struggles with substance abuse and more. "I became remarkably unhappy at having been chosen to survive," she recollects after

her first trip, comparing the experience of saying goodbye to her travel mates to leaving the psych ward of England's Lady Chichester Hospital at age 14. As she did in *Skating to Antarctica: A Journey to the End of the World* (1998), Diski again blurs the borders between travelogue and memoir to create a transcendent work. Copyright 2002 Cahners Business Information, Inc.

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English novelist Diski (*Only Human*) mixes memoir and travelog in a sharp, vivid, but ultimately disappointing narrative written around two train journeys, one across the southern United States and the other around its perimeter. She begins each journey with seeming enthusiasm, but before long, she starts feeling that she has opened herself up too much to strangers. She then panics and withdraws, needing to hide away in her tiny cabin on the train. A short visit to the home of a woman she meets on the first journey ends in paranoid terror when Diski becomes convinced that the family won't let her leave. Intermittently, she flashes back to other times in her life, including an unhappy childhood and several episodes of severe depression. The places she visits (Phoenix, Chicago, Jacksonville) are entirely incidental to the story, the scenery is best seen through a train window, if at all, and the people she meets are unremarkable. In the end, Diski seems happiest when exiled to a dingy smoking car puffing desperately on a cigarette, heading home. Not a priority purchase.

Linda M. Kaufmann, Massachusetts Coll. of Liberal Arts Lib., North Adams Copyright 2002 Cahners Business Information, Inc.

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I love traveling by train. At night, when I'm having trouble sleeping, I listen to recordings of train sounds. So it's not surprising that I look for movies set on trains (the original "Narrow Margin" is one of the best) and I look for books about train travel. Without a doubt, this is the best work--film or book--I've encountered about what it's like to travel in the U.S. using Amtrak. But the book is much more than a travel story. Diski is an amazing essayist--making connections between subjects that seemed absolutely unrelated. Added to her brilliant way of thinking is a stunning prose style. It's no spoiler that the author has a lot to say about smoking--and all of it positive. Now I'm not the least bit in favor of smoking. I'm a lifelong non-smoker. Smoking has killed several of my friends. I'm angry about the recent disclosure that the U.S. Chamber of Commerce has been promoting the smoking industry world-wide. And still, I found myself intrigued by the author's homage to her habit, which we recently learn has likely caused her own cancer and impending death. Nothing Diski writes will make anyone want to smoke, yet--like Dante--she creates a smoke-filled world that few readers will turn their backs on. Smoking is hell, but in her hands--and imagination--absolutely fascinating. More

often than not, I find myself wishing that a book ended sooner--even a book that I admire. But I was truly sad when I reached the end of STRANGER ON A STRANGER. I wanted more of Diski's philosophy, observations of the human comedy, anecdotes about sexual intrigue, vignettes about the London underground, and--yes--about smoking.

... of considerable talent and depth. Ms. Diski also writes regularly for the London Review of Books and saves that august but sometimes dull publication from complete dryness. She has a very interesting personal background that allows her to both identify with some of her more unlikely fellow-travellers and smokers and to observe them at the same time. A trip around the States - literally - she circles the country, insofar as Amtrak will now allow, and we are privy to all that is interesting about the people and the journey without having to go!

Brilliant writer. More than unlikely unknown by most Americans

I was a little reluctant to order and read this book, fearing that it might be less of a travel and train account, and instead be just a touch "Chick-lit". On reflection it so proves, or at least the book shows that the author has attitudes and feelings towards the people she met, travelled and stayed with "most of whom I think the rest of us would have carefully avoided" that reflect to her credit as a member of the more caring and nurturing gender. There is perhaps, as another reviewer notes, rather too much on the author's many periods in mental-care hospitals, and the recounting of these multiple stays seemed almost nostalgic as though they proved strangely more enjoyable, or at least more comfortable for her, than the train journeys in this book. Given the state of Amtrak these days this may well be true of course. As a former smoker (or "gasper") I can empathize with the author's difficulties with finding somewhere in America where she could still smoke, and I recognize the importance that smoking has in giving pleasure and comfort. It is those malodorous smoking cages that the author meets the people she writes about as the puff and chat she notes the details of their lives and offers us each of those "stories". Not the book I wanted, but overall an interesting perspective on America and travel.

Daydreaming and smoking... Not much else to say really. Wonderfully observed and beautifully written portrait of life

Nabakovian in elegant writing -- but a dark view of Americans. Which is what the British are great at!

A militant solitaire with a quirky passion for traveling in circles (literally) being "entertained" by strangers as if they were coin-operated. Some great quotes in this book about Alone Time. Ended without an end, however...like a train just seemed to run out of steam.

This is a wonderful author. Her books are entertaining, valuable and insightful. Highly recommended. This book in particular gives one the pleasure of a train trip without suffering through Amtrak delays. A must-read to train travel fanciers.

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