



Heads and Straights: The Circle Line

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From Lucy Wadham, the bestselling author of *The Secret Life of France*, an autobiographical tale of bohemians, punk, the King's Road in the 1970s and family - part of a series of twelve books tied to the twelve lines of the London Underground.

Lucy is a Chelsea girl, brought up off the King's Road in the seventies when punk was in full bloom. Her family comes in the wonderful tradition of English eccentrics. In *Heads and Straights*, she creates a funny, moving account of a family eager to escape the confines of class. Through interlocking tales of their extravagant and often self-destructive journeys away from the Circle line stops of Sloane Square, South Kensington and Gloucester Road, Lucy evokes the collision between conformism and bohemian excess and the complicated class antipathies that flourished in that particular time and place. In the end we are left wondering - is it ever possible to escape, or do we, in our travels, simply loop back on ourselves?

Heads and Straights: The Circle Line Details

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Author : Lucy Wadham

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Darryl says

This is another of the books in the Penguin Underground Lines series, written in celebration of the 150th anniversary of the London Underground. In keeping with many of the books in this collection, the author does not discuss the Circle Line at all, but she has written an interesting and readable book about her experiences growing up in a posh family in Chelsea in the 1970s, at a time when the neighborhood changed to a bastion of the upper middle class to one divided into Heads, the young people like Lucy and her older sisters who smoked marijuana and took heroin, attended hard rock and punk music concerts and partook in promiscuous sex, and Straights, the mostly older residents who maintained a staid 1950s lifestyle. Waldham describes her sisters and parents, but she mainly writes about her maternal grandmother, a free spirit who was influenced by her neighbor Virginia Woolf and, in turn, had both negative and positive impacts on her granddaughters. This book was just the right length to hold my attention, although I would have liked it more if she had included something about the Underground in it.

Larissa says

I found this book—along with two other installments of the Penguin series celebrating the 150th anniversary of the London Tube—on a £1 bookshelf in Brixton on a recent visit and picked it up for the sheer novelty of the series and the esoteric back cover. What a delightful surprise. Waldham's thinly-veiled autobiographical memoir is funny and candid, offering rich portraits of various family members in a way which feels real and unadorned. These are splendid characters, but she presents them, and herself, as nevertheless flawed and biased and very, very interesting. It's not actually about the Tube (or specifically, the Circle Line, as advertised) but it hardly matters: this is a tightly written, vibrant, and revealing portrait of a complicated and fascinating family living in London in the 1970s.

Genevieve says

Great quick read--good accompaniment to Viv Albertine's memoir *Clothes, Clothes, Clothes. Music, Music, Music. Boys, Boys, Boys.*--though there's less of all three in this, which is really just a snapshot of a time and place.

Niklas Pivic says

Short, funny and sweet, by an author that I did not know of until this book kind of fell into my lap. It's a middle-aged person's recollection of her childhood and adolescence, growing up with weird parents (aren't everybody's) and a bunch of sisters, experiencing and thinking a lot about sex, drugs, family, relationships and some about the Circle Line in London, as this is, after all, a book that is part of the big London subway project that Penguin issued a bunch of books on in 2013.

All in all: sweet, heartfelt, made with sensibility and a lot of humor. One of the better in the bunch, so far.

T P Kennedy says

It's an enjoyable light read. It's part of a series of books published by Penguin to mark the 150th anniversary of the London underground. Each book honours a particular line - in this case the circle line. It's a great concept though Seamus Heaney has probably honoured that line more fittingly with this District and Circle Line poem.

The book itself is an autobiographic account of growing up in Chelsea as part of a very diverse family. It's engaging and enjoyable but not particularly memorable. It's ideal for reading on a flight or on holidays

Gavin Felgate says

I've never heard of the author Lucy Wadham before; however, this book is her vivid autobiographical account of growing up in Chelsea, and I found myself compelled to keep reading. The book is part of a series celebrating 150 years of the London Underground, although this one makes very little reference to it, aside when she talks about her trips from Gloucester Road to King's Cross.

This book paints a vivid picture of Britain in the 70s and 80s, discussing typical counter-culture attitudes and the impact of Thatcherism, and I got the impression that Wadham is somewhat left-wing in her political views, mostly from her anger at the late Margaret Thatcher. The title comes from the views that there are two types of people - heads (good people) and straights (bad people). The fact that the heads are the ones who smoked marijuana should give some idea of the typical attitudes in the time when Wadham was growing up.

The story focusses mainly on Wadham's family, including her controlling Grandmother who decided to commit adultery in order to be granted a divorce, and also talks at great length about her sister's heroin addiction. While I found it to be an interesting read, I felt that there wasn't enough exploration of the author's own feelings and times it felt like she was just observing her family from the outside. One chapter, regarding her family's life in colonial Africa, felt almost like filler.

This book is very short and can be read quickly; overall I thought it was decent and would like to read other books by the same writer.

KOMET says

Lucy Wadham offers here a rich and spicy recollection of her life among her parents, colorful sisters, eccentric grandmother, and uncles in Britain during the 1970s and 1980s.

One of the passages that I delighted in reading was the following:

“Eileen’s [the author’s maternal grandmother, who was a free spirit and a feminist] love of Virginia Woolf was all-encompassing. It embraced not only the woman’s work but also her prejudices: the championing of Art above Commerce and the belief in Beauty as a portal to Truth. She passed on Woolf’s love of nature to us, teaching us the names of trees and flowers, an old world knowledge that would make us ridiculous to future boyfriends. Her cure for birds that fell from their nests was a short spell in her bra. I’ll never forget the

sight of a revived baby blackbird flying out of her bosom.

“... Our grandmother’s Edwardian English made us squeal with laughter. When we were with her, pronunciation seemed to be a constant trap lying in wait for us. However you thought something should be pronounced, for Gran it was the opposite. The mountain range should be pronounced ‘Himarlias’, with the accent on the second syllable. You were supposed to pronounce necessarily and customarily and all the ‘airily’ words with the stress on the first syllable and when she read to us, she would roll her ‘r’s’, say nardays for nowadays and whenever for whenever.”

This is the second Lucy Wadham book that I've read and enjoyed. She has a knack for crafting the well-turned phrase that conveys so much to the reader in terms of a person's emotional state, her older sister Fly's struggles with a heroin addiction, the atmosphere in a club in Chelsea, or the large house in Kensington where Wadham lived with a host family whose head was a peer in the House of Lords.

At 95 pages, "Heads and Straights" represents one of the most satisfying and quickest reading experiences I've had thus far this year. **HIGHLY RECOMMENDED.**

Matty says

What a wonderful book - goodness she writes well. By the time I'd read about 10 pages I was on amazon ordering some of her other books. Wonderful account of growing up in Chelsea in the late 70s, early 80s and a beautiful memoir of family relationships.

Sian Lile-Pastore says

really enjoyed this little book that is part of the 'Penguin Lines' series which makes links with different london underground lines - this one is about the circle line (kind of).

the author writes about growing up in chelsea with her four sisters and one brother and they are slightly posh, slightly bohemian and kind of intellectual. there are great bits about her sisters (the sisters made me think of The Virgin Suicides) and also about her grandma (who knew virginia woolf), her crazy uncle who did too much acid in San Francisco and about marrying french men.

lovely writing style that reminded me a bit of Esther Freud, and the design and cover photo are great too.

Lou Robinson says

Enjoyable tale of a girl's memory of growing up in London with her rebellious sisters. Docked a star for not REALLY having much to say about the circle line. And quite a rushed/abrupt ending.

Tom says

Has there ever been a generation before the Baby Boomers who took such delight in recounting, during late middle age, their sexual and drug-addled adventures? Lucy Wadham does a nice job of succinctly capturing the ways in which she and her older sisters broke their parents' hearts, won their grandmother's admiration, and stirred their boyfriends' gonads through rebellion, drugs, and sex. Spoiler alert: Although this is part of the Penguin Underground Lines series, the Tube gets exactly one sentence in this book--in keeping, no doubt, in Wadham's upper-class standing: The only time she used the subway was to break a parental taboo. (And she was able to break a multitude of taboos without having to resort to the subway.)

Bookshire Cat says

Prijemne cteni, ale co to melo mit spolecneho s metrem, netusim.

Roxy says

(spoiler imminent!)

There's not really very much mention of the tube at all in this book, but it still provides an interesting insight into a vibrant family of eclectic characters within various generations. The main geographical focus of the book is the family house in Chelsea, just off the King's Road, and there are some particularly great anecdotes on Wadham's particularly rebellious older sister getting involved in the area's punk scene. Generally this is a story of free-spirited, independent, rebellious women finding their place in the world. In terms of relevancy to the Underground as you might expect, I feel like there could have been plenty of potential to relate these tales to the Circle Line itself, and I guess there are parallels in terms of generational cycles and homecomings, but if you're looking for tube trivia, you won't find it here.

David Bernstein says

If you are between 40 and 60 and spent any of your youth in London, do read this very short memoir.

Marnanel says

A lovely little book that follows the author's family tree; I read it at one sitting, in a Costa in Staines, and the excursion to 1970s Chelsea was very welcome. Heavy on anecdotes which made me want to read them aloud to friends, and plenty of characters who are indeed characters, but no plot to speak of, other than the unrolling of time. Less like the Circle Line than the Metropolitan in the way it wanders around the place. Recommended.

