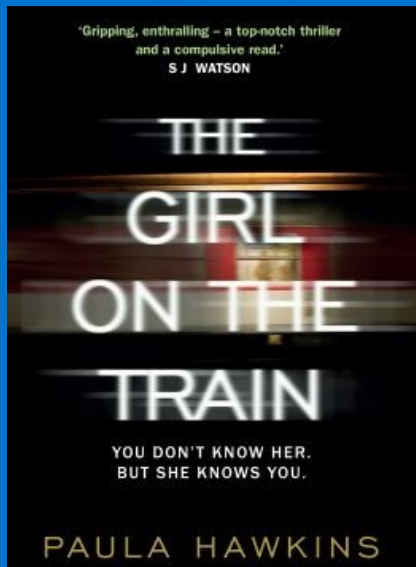


The Girl on the Train



Author Background

Born: Salisbury, Rhodesia (now called Harare, Zimbabwe) in 1972

Lives: South London

Born and raised in Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), Paula Hawkins moved to London at the age of 17. Hawkins' father was an economics professor and financial journalist. After graduating from Oxford, Hawkins became a journalist—reporting on business for *The Times*.

In her thirties, Hawkins began writing romantic comedies under the pseudonym Amy Silver. Hawkins published four novels as Amy Silver: *Confessions of a Reluctant Recessionista* (2009), *All I Want for Christmas* (2010), *One Minute to Midnight* (2011) and *The Reunion* (2013). However, Hawkins did not achieve commercial success until she turned to writing a novel with much darker themes - *The Girl on the Train* (published under her own name).

The idea for *The Girl on the Train* occurred to Hawkins during her time as a commuter, when she contemplated what she would do if she observed something sinister from her train window. Hawkins also took some of her inspiration from Alfred Hitchcock's film *Rear Window*, in which a man witnesses a murder from his apartment window. In an interview with *The Sydney Morning Herald*, Hawkins noted:

*"I love the atmosphere of Hitchcockian films, that sort of paranoia and self-doubt that his characters often have when they wonder if they are going mad or if they have seen what they really thought.... So much depends on perceptions and fleeting moments."*¹

Hawkins took six months—writing full time—to complete *The Girl on the Train*. Struggling financially, Hawkins saw writing the thriller as *"a last roll of the dice for me as a fiction writer"*.² Published in 2015, the novel quickly became a huge commercial success—lingering at the top of bestseller lists in Australia, the UK and the USA. In 2016 the novel was made into a successful film starring Emily Blunt as Rachel Watson.

In 2017, Hawkins published *Into the Water*, a novel of psychological suspense set in a tiny rural town where two women have died in the water within months of each other. Dreamworks bought the film rights.

Reflecting on the pressure of writing *Into the Water* in the shadow of the success of *The Girl on the Train*, Hawkins revealed:

*"You have to develop as thick a skin as you can and shut out the noise. It was a difficult process mostly because it was so interrupted. I wanted to shut myself away and immerse myself in it but I couldn't — I was constantly touring or having to do interviews But I met some really interesting writers, and I have more confidence now. It's swings and roundabouts really."*³

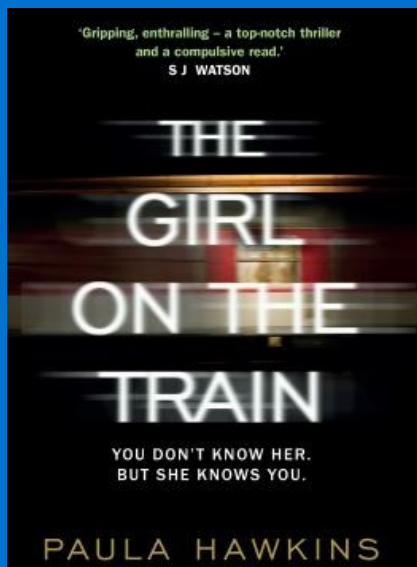
¹ L. Morris, "Paul Hawkins: The Girl on the Train Author on Fiction, Difficult Women and Emily Blunt", *Sydney Morning Herald*, 15 May 2016.

² A. Alter, "Welcoming the dark twist in her career", *New York Times*, 30 January 2015.

³ M. Magwood, "Runaway Train: Michele Magwood chats to Paula Hawkins about her latest novel *Into the Water*", *Sunday Times (South Africa)*, 15 May 2017.

Sources: Wikipedia, *New York Times*, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, *The Guardian*, *Sunday Times (SAfrica)*

The Girl on the Train



Book Summary

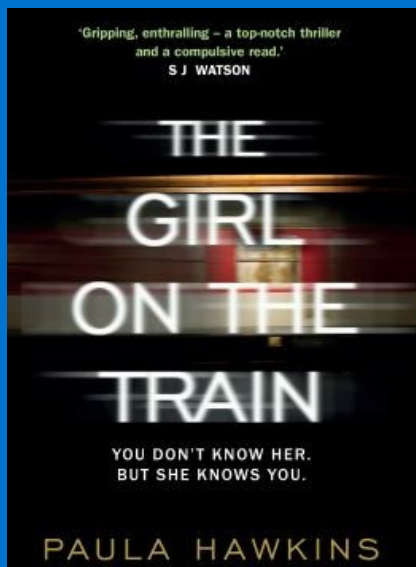
Rachel catches the same commuter train every morning. She knows it will wait at the same signal each time, overlooking a row of back gardens. She's even started to feel like she knows the people who live in one of the houses. 'Jess and Jason', she calls them. Their life – as she sees it – is perfect. If only Rachel could be that happy.

And then she sees something shocking. It's only a minute until the train moves on, but it's enough.

Now everything's changed. Now Rachel has a chance to become a part of the lives she's only watched from afar.

Now they'll see; she's much more than just the girl on the train...

The Girl on the Train



Discussion Questions

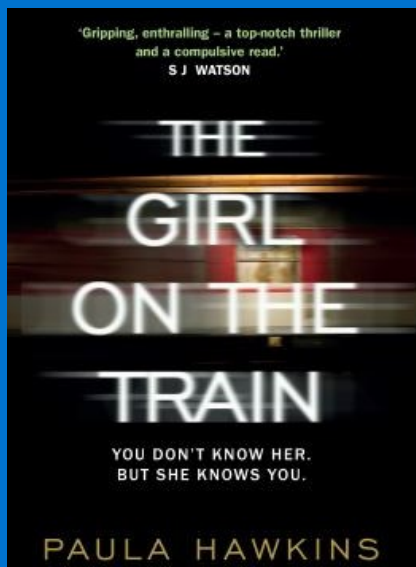
1. Enthralling page-turner or predictable bore? How successful do you think *The Girl on the Train* is as a thriller?
2. Rachel Watson's memories and perceptions are distorted by alcohol —making it difficult for her to trust herself and for the reader to trust her as a narrator. Do you enjoy the challenge of reading a novel with an unreliable narrator? Do you like novels with multiple narrators (such as Rachel, Megan and Anna)?
3. The suspense/thriller genre is heavily male-dominated and often caters to the male gaze. How does *The Girl on the Train* (and similar thrillers such as *Gone Girl*) challenge typical tropes and suspense narratives that tend to leave out, eroticize, or minimize women's voices?
4. One of Rachel's deepest disappointments is that she can't have children. How does the topic of motherhood drive the plot of *The Girl on the Train*? What do you think Paula Hawkins is trying to say about the ways motherhood can define women's lives?
5. In both Rachel's and Megan's respective marriages, deep secrets are kept from the husbands. Do you think many relationships rely on half-truths? How much is too much to hide from a partner?
6. What assumptions did you make about Rachel at the start of the novel? What assumptions did you make about the other characters? How did your assumptions affect your understanding of the central mystery of the novel?
7. Were you satisfied with the ending?

Just for fun

8. Whether gazing from a train window, sitting at an outdoor café or waiting in an airport lounge, we all find opportunities for people-watching. What is the most interesting thing you have seen (or imagined you have seen) whilst being a voyeur?

Some questions adapted from NNEDV (National Network to End Domestic Violence) and the publisher website: Penguin Random House Australia.

The Girl on the Train



Reviews

The Girl on the Train, Hawkins's first thriller, is well-written and ingeniously constructed — perhaps a bit too ingeniously. The first-person narrator is now Rachel, now Anna, now Megan, and some of Megan's soliloquies date from long before her disappearance — yet are strategically inserted between present-day chapters related by Rachel and Anna, making the reader feel a bit manipulated. But the portrait of Rachel as a chronic drunk who just might save herself by playing detective is rich and memorable.

Dennis Drabelle

The Washington Post

The Girl on the Train is full of back-stabbing, none of it literal. But Anna stole Rachel's husband and now gloats about it. Tiny, birdlike Megan has betrayed Scott.... And Rachel has lied her way into Scott's confidence by pretending to be a friend of Megan's from the art gallery, even though she never knew Megan.... Ms Hawkins keeps all these fibs, threats and innuendoes swirling through her book, to the point where they frighten and undermine each of her characters. None of them really know which of the others can be trusted or believed. And although there's a lot of Hitchcock to the book's diabolical plotting, there's also a strong element of *Gaslight* the classic story in which a man tries to convince his wife that she is going mad. All three women in the book are candidates for this treatment, and Ms. Hawkins puts it to very good use.

Janet Maslin

New York Times

This is Hawkins' first thriller — she's a journalist by training — but it doesn't read like the work of someone new to suspense. The novel is perfectly paced, from its arresting beginning to its twist ending; it's not an easy book to put down.

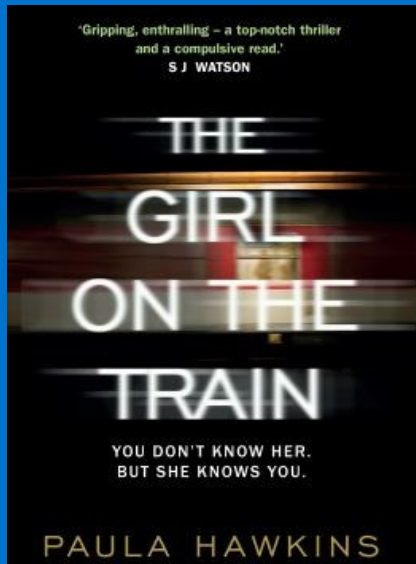
.... Hawkins' writing is excellent, and also cinematic, in the best possible way. Her novel doesn't read (as many thrillers do) like a screenplay that's been wrestled kicking and screaming into prose form. But the story, down to the title, is indisputably Hitchcockian, and in some scenes, Hawkins seems to be paying tribute to the director's imagery in films like *Strangers on a Train* and *Rear Window*.

.... But what really makes *The Girl on the Train* such a gripping novel is Hawkins' remarkable understanding of the limits of human knowledge, and the degree to which memory and imagination can become confused.

Michael Schaub

NPR [online]

The Girl on the Train



Reviews (continued)

The Girl on the Train, by Paula Hawkins: really great suspense novel. Kept me up most of the night. The alcoholic narrator is dead perfect.

Stephen King on *Twitter*, 4:05 AM - 26 Jan 2015

This is, thank goodness, an era of complex and mighty female characters. In books like Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl*, Kimberly McCreight's *Reconstructing Amelia*, and Rosamund Lupton's *Sister* and in TV shows such as *Orange is the New Black* and *Homeland*, men are not the only characters allowed to seethe and rage and avenge. Paula Hawkins's fast-paced debut thriller, *The Girl on the Train* tells the intertwining stories of three such women squirming beneath the skin of their airless lives.

.... Some of the strongest passages are when these two women are allowed to stop and think, to try to understand their own dilemmas and the ensuing ramifications, rather than being shoved forward along the tracks of the sleek plot. Here and there, especially as the book progresses, one craves to see and hear them as the distinct, recognizable women they are, rather than the types that they increasingly become.

Heidi Pitlor
Boston Globe

I could barely read it but read on anyway, wanting to know more or less from page one why such hatred of women would be so popular. I should have known better. After all, hatred of women is something that has concerned me for decades.

.... One of the reasons for the success of *Gone Girl* and *The Girl on the Train* may be that they make violence not just compelling, like any horror story, nor just manageable, like detective stories (which always reassure us that the worst will finally be contained by the law), but digestible, a bit like consuming a TV dinner, legs outstretched, in an armchair. Sitting there (metaphorically), I felt I was being invited to identify as a reader with a man – a man not particularly sexual, or fit or even menacing, in fact someone who is pretty bored by the world – for whom misogyny just happens to be the best show in town, and, since both these stories were written by women, simply a fact of life that has nothing to do with him (even if, as we will see, he just might be a killer).

... That women make up a large part of the readership of these novels would be no objection. Again there is nothing new here. Patriarchy thrives by encouraging women to feel contempt for themselves.

Jacqueline Rose
London Review of Books