



What We Talk about When We Talk about the Tube: The District Line

John Lanchester

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John Lanchester, author of *Whoops!* and *Capital* takes us on a whirlwind tour of the Tube to show its secrets, just how much we take for granted about it, and what we're really talking about, since we so often do talk about it. In short, he shows what a marvel it is - part of a series of twelve books tied to the twelve lines of the London Underground.

In John Lanchester's inimitable style, he unravels the various mysteries of the Underground and explores its true significance for both London and the wider world. Like, what's the difference between the Underground and the Tube? How do tube drivers get to work to start driving the tubes when the tube lines aren't running? And where can you get your hands on driver-point-of-view videos?

What We Talk about When We Talk about the Tube: The District Line Details

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Boorrito says

Two things made me pick up this book: the title and the fact it's the District Line book in this series. As someone who grew up with the District Line at the bottom of my garden, it's the line that I have the most attachment to.

It's a brief book, but that works to its advantage. It's thoughtful without overdoing it which is easy to do with this subject matter, and there were several paragraphs that made me laugh out loud - such as the footnote about Skyfall. And while Lanchester might have not found the driver leading passengers through the front cab if a train gets stuck in a tunnel reassuring, I was because I was thinking about just that last time I was on the Piccadilly line. I have a soft spot for books about London that really understand the city, and this was one of those books, which bumped it up from a three star to a four.

Recommended reading to go alongside this book if you're interested in more of the history, and in fact is mentioned several times in text? The Subterranean Railway

Niklas Pivic says

This is clearly one of the more funny, intelligently written and entertaining of the bunch of books that are written to commemorate the 150th anniversary of the London subway.

I love the way the author has noted and answered questions like "How do drivers reach the start of their working day if the subway doesn't run before that?" and "What's the difference between 'tube' and 'underground', if any?".

It's also notable that getting stuck in a train while underground may cause temperatures higher than 35 degrees; this is the legal limit for the transportation of livestock - but there really isn't one for humans.

Also, there are words on the complete isolation of the drivers. They may have no human contact for hours, and are forced - by means of concentration - to not listen to music or use their mobile phone while driving.

All in all: too short! I could have read double the amount that the author wrote on the subway, and he's not restricted it much to that of the District line, which is what the book is semi-made to be about.

Stuart Hill says

Lanchester's book is not purely focused on the District Line but also digresses to encompass a potted history of the London Underground, the everyday experience of the tube driver and some general observations on society and London. The prose is light and easily accessible yet this was not at the expense of insight and thought-provoking commentary.

The history of the system is described very well considering how short the book is. I would definitely recommend it for anyone who was looking for an introductory history, with the proviso that there was the occasional inaccuracy. The Budapest Metro, for example was the second underground railway in Europe rather than the Paris one as was stated here. I also got the impression that the author had a limited amount of time to research the topic as his examination of the tube as portrayed in film and literature omitted the 2004 horror movie *Creep* and the novels *Underground* by Tobias Hill and *King Solomon's Carpet* by Barbara Vine. It is nonetheless curious that the Underground has not made more appearances in fiction; even JG Ballard, an author committed to reflecting the modern world in his work resulting in narratives centred around car parks and tower blocks didn't ever mention the Underground anywhere to my knowledge. This may have been due his home being in Shepperton, a suburb not served by the Tube. The system has also made a few appearances in video games as well including *The Getaway: Black Monday*, *Tomb Raider III* (an impressive level set in the disused Aldwych station), and *Uncharted 3: Drake's Deception* (a fictional station called North Atwood). Most recently 2014's *The Evil Within* featured a fictional subway system with a station clearly modelled on the London Underground.

Overall though this was a very enjoyable, informative and entertaining read. The brevity of the narrative and compact nature of the publication make it, appropriately, the perfect choice of reading matter for a trip on the Tube.

Howard says

part of a series of short books commemorating 150 years of the London Tube in 2013, Lanchester's contribution is full of interesting facts and observations, which i read, as intended, jostling for space with fellow London commuters

Richard Smith says

Lots of interesting insights into the tube and its centrality to London life. If you are not regularly on the tube you aren't a Londoner. And do you know that the Underground and the Tube are not the same thing? If you want to find out the difference read the book.

Steve Mayer says

I loved John Lanchester's "Capital" and loved this as well. Short, perceptive, and elegantly written, it's full of interesting facts about the tube, particularly the district line, and how the underground has affected the city. I would be curious to know whether other books in the series are just as good.

Ben says

There is no denying that John Lanchester is a talented writer. This is first work of his that I've read, but he has an easy and friendly approach to writing. Reading this book it felt like you were listening to a friend rattle off stats and stories about the tube. It isn't an exciting subject, but Lanchester made it relatable and

amusing.

The book does lose its way towards the end, it moves from stats and stories into more theories about how we experience and live with the tube. The theories are indeed interesting, but Lanchester isn't as good at explaining them as he is when retelling humorous stories.

The book also needed another edit - there are quite a few grammatical errors throughout the book, even a couple of spelling mistakes. The one I can't forgive, and it is the film nerd within me, is Lanchester attributing *The Warriors* to John Carpenter.

The 3 star rating is a bit harsh, it is probably more of a 3.5 or even a 4. I didn't learn more from its 80 pages than I have from a lot of 200-300 page books.

Lou Robinson says

This volume about the District Line was exactly what I expected from the Tube series - some good solid facts about the line. I liked it, simple as that.

Charles says

This is one of a series of short Penguin paperbacks, commissioned to celebrate 150 years of the London Underground. Lanchester was assigned the District Line, and his elegantly written 87 small pages are an engaging mix of the historical, the personal and the journalistic. He books himself a ride with a train driver all the way from Upminster to Richmond and back, a three and half hour trip, noting that the driver's job is so solitary that it makes even being a writer seem sociable.

Here's some of what I learnt:

1. The Tube is properly the name of the lines that were tunnelled - so not the earliest, which used the 'cut and cover' method for those parts near the centre of London where they had to go underground.
2. So "the Tube is a tube, but the Underground is by no means all underground." In fact, only 45% of the whole network is underground, including more than half the stations on the District Line.
3. The various lines were originally run by different companies, often hostile to each other. A ticket for one line could not be used on the others.
4. The District Line is the only line that crosses the Thames by bridge (at both Kew and Putney). It also goes under a river: the Westbourne (no, I hadn't heard of it either) runs above the platform at Sloane Square station, through a pipe.
5. The driver has to keep a hand on the lever to make the train move, twisting it to a horizontal angle: once let go, it springs back to the vertical and the train stops. This is the famous 'dead man's handle'.
6. Underground drivers are given their work schedule 110 weeks in advance: they know when they'll be on

and off shift two years ahead.

7. At its busiest, the Underground network carries more than 600,000 people - more than the population of Glasgow, the fourth biggest city in the UK.

8. The earliest line, the Metropolitan, opened in 1863. This was before electrification, so steam trains went through the tunnels. It was followed by the District (1868) and the Circle (1884).

9. The Paris Metro didn't open until 1900, and was a more centrally planned system, with everywhere in the centre of the city deliberately within range of a station. But London's more chaotic early start kept the city's lead over Paris in population and prosperity.

10. The tunnels in the tube have a diameter of 11 foot 8 and a half inches. There is no room for air conditioning so if the train stops on a hot day, the temperature in the carriages can quickly exceed the 35 degrees Centigrade, which is the legal limit for the transport of livestock. If the train is really stuck, the power in the line will be switched off, the lights in the tunnel switched on and the passengers led to the next station through an opening in the front of the driver's cab.

There's a lot to be said for finding out a bit of basic information about the world that's around you every day. Perhaps earlier generations were more aware of the wonder of the Underground, as we are today with the Internet. Here's a small piece of evidence of that, quoted by Lanchester: T.S.Eliot's acknowledgment of the difference between the tube and the Underground, in his poem East Coker:

Or as, when an underground train, in the tube,
stops too long between stations
And the conversation rises and slowly fades
into silence

Micki Myers says

A series I wish I could have been a part of - combining factual information about a tube line (and by default the entire London Underground system), with personal anecdote. Not only is this book an utter delight to read, but it is a beautiful example of book design in the old school, classic style.

Gavin Felgate says

The first District Line train out of Upminster in the morning is the first train anywhere on the Underground network. It leaves the depot at 4.53, the only train anywhere in the system to set out from its base before 5 a.m..

The first paragraph of John Lanchester's book on the District Line (part of London's underground system) gives a good idea that you are about to read something very anorak-like, which goes into a lot of detail about the running of the tube network, and this isn't too surprising when you realise that Lanchester used to work on the London Underground.

At first, the book seemed to talk too much about the underground network in general and its history, and it felt a bit too much like a generic textbook, but in the second half of the book I started to enjoy it more, with several humorous anecdotes, which included drivers blaming hold-ups on trains that belonged to other networks, and observations about the behaviour of people on the trains.

I quite enjoyed the social commentary regarding the demographics visible on the District Line, with cleaners mostly coming in from London's East End in the morning rush hour, while white collar workers, lawyers and bankers all came from the west.

Overall, this was an easy book to read, and it proved to be an enjoyable source of trivia for London Underground geeks.

Alan Fricker says

Second of these little books I have read. This is a good one talking not only about the district line but about the experience of using the underground and the tube. History and the psychology of how we exist in a packed train. Not sure I agree with the observations of patterns of media consumption but these move fast

Ben says

An easy, short read but packed with insight and thoughtful commentary, Lanchester really captures the experience and larger sense of the tube (and through it, being a "Londoner"). Highly recommend for anyone living in the capital.

Michael Riess says

Wonderful! That said, you really have to be a Londoner to appreciate this book. 'The Tube' is to London what the nervous system is to human being...

Darryl says

London as it exists today would not be the same place without the Underground. The Underground is what gave the city its geographical spread, its population growth, its clusters of spaces and places.

This brilliant book by John Lanchester, whose most recent novel was the highly praised Capital, is part of Penguin's Underground Lines series, which celebrates the 150th anniversary of the London Underground, and it is one of the four books contained in the East-West Penguin Underground Lines e-book I recently

purchased. Unlike the trivial and very disappointing books on the Piccadilly and Hammersmith & City Lines, Lanchester's contribution is a superb exploration of the District Line, the Underground as a whole, and the profound effect that the system has had on the growth of the city and the everyday lives of its residents.

A District line train at its terminus at Richmond station

The District Line, which is aptly described as being like 'an older aunt who has seen better days', originated as the Metropolitan District Railway, and was later known as the District Railway, in order to distinguish it from the Metropolitan Railway, which began underground service in October 1863 between Paddington and Farringdon stations. The District Railway was created to provide a circular subsurface link to the major train stations in London, in order to allow commuters coming from the city's suburbs to quickly travel to their work places without having to navigate the city's congested streets. The first District Line service began operation in December 1868, which carried passengers between the South Kensington and Westminster stations, using steam locomotives to pull wooden carriages. The line has expanded significantly over the subsequent years, providing service to as far west as the posh suburbs of Richmond and Wimbledon, and as far east as Upminster.

A photo of Gloucester Road station, built in 1868, which was shared by the Metropolitan and District Railways (this was the first Underground station I entered on my initial trip to London in 2007)

Lanchester begins his book with a journey on the 4:53 am westbound train to Richmond leaving from Upminster, the first train of the day on the system. He observes his fellow passengers, initially blue collar workers from the East End off to their jobs in the City, who are then replaced by professionals who are employed in the financial district as he approaches central London and makes the return eastbound trip. He comments about the differences and similarities of the social and demographic groups that use the Underground, and the eastward displacement of the working classes, as the City and immediate East End neighborhoods have become less affordable to those earning modest salaries. Lanchester also speaks to Transport for London (TfL) workers throughout the book, who provide him with valuable insights into the Underground and the passengers who use it:

I asked TfL workers about the demographic difference between the two ends of the line. 'Put it like this,' one of them said. 'If they're annoyed about something, at this end of the line' — we were at Dagenham — 'they yell at you. You know about it straight away. At the other end,' he said with a shudder, 'they write *letters*.'

In subsequent chapters Lanchester expands his horizon to view the Underground as a whole, the effect of rapid transit on the development of cities, and the comparison of it to the metros of other cities such as Paris and New York, who created their systems decades afterward. He also discusses the psychology of passengers who ride the system; distinguishes between the terms *Underground*, which refers to the entire system, and the seemingly synonymous term *Tube*, which properly refers to the deeper level lines such as the Piccadilly, Northern and Bakerloo lines, and not the subsurface ones such as the Circle, District and Hammersmith and City lines; his personal fear of being in Underground tunnels, particularly when the train is halted between stations; the new air conditioned trains that will soon replace the 30+ year old ones that currently are in

service; his experience riding alongside the driver of a train, and how it differs from being a regular passenger; the monotonous work day of an Underground train operator; and the different personas that Londoners assume when they travel underground.

The only complaint that I have about this book is that it ended far too soon. I absolutely loved it, and reading it has made me eager to drop everything else and read Lanchester's latest novel as soon as possible.
