

Strangers on a Train, redux

Staincliffe pens gripping new thriller

Suspended Sentences

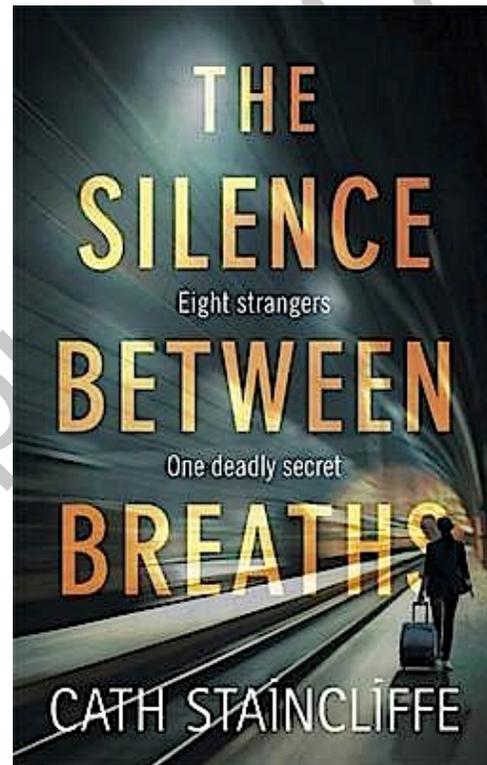
by Jim Napier

Told from the viewpoints of eight strangers, *The Silence Between Breaths* is Cath Staincliffe's gripping account of a terrorist act, revealed through the eyes of both victims and the perpetrator. It explores both the antecedents of the event and its terrible aftermath, ending some lives, and changing others forever. It is not a book you take to the beach for a few hour's diversion; but you will come away with a more profound understanding of discontent in its many faces, and impressed by Staincliffe's ability to reveal people's innermost lives.

One most days the commuter train from Piccadily station to the suburbs is a routine and, truth be told, boring run. Filled with a eclectic mix of shoppers, business people, students and families enjoying a day out.

Except this is not most days, and before it has ended we find ourselves in a shadowy, surreal world where one person's grievances, whether real or imagined, can trigger horrendous consequences, obscene in their impact on un-

suspecting and innocent people going about their daily lives.



Jeff is a frazzled young man travelling to a job interview. He's missed the bus connection to the train, and the interview means a lot to him, a chance to convince his mum that he can do something right without screwing up. When he manages to climb aboard just as the train is pulling out, he finds a young woman occupying his seat. She's surly and reluctant to move,

but eventually she does, and they establish an uneasy conversation: he is diffident, she is combative and critical. After awhile the tension lessens, and she tells him her name is Holly.

Caroline is travelling from Manchester, planning a get-together with a friend, a brief respite from her demanding children and her mother, who suffers from dementia.

Naz is a train car attendant who dreams of opening his own restaurant. While he fantasizes about having a cookery show on television, even his own brand of merchandise, he picks up other people's rubbish.

Meg and Diana are a couple from Buxton. They're headed for a walking holiday along the South Downs, accompanied by Meg's Springer Spaniel, Boss. Diana is the outgoing one, always socializing with strangers. Meg is more self-conscious, envious of her friend's easy familiarity with others. Polar opposites, their relationship is feeling the strain.

Nick and Lisa are headed for the wedding of Lisa's sister. At their sister's urging, and against their own judgment, they're taking along their two toddlers, Evie and Eddie. The children's bickering inevitably spills over into Nick and Lisa's own lives, and Nick closes his eyes and shuts out the banality

of their existence, dreaming of another, more tranquil life.

Rhona, Agata, and Felicity are headed for a business fair. Felicity is their boss, all about profits and adaptability, meaning screwing her staff in the name of profits, and Rhona resents her manipulative ways. But with a small child, Maisie, Rhona can't afford to antagonize her. Today she'd been forced to send Maisie to school ill to attend the event, and the possibility that she might worsen over the course of the day nagged at her.

Saheel is a first-year university student, harbouring a very dark secret. With top marks, he's the pride of his parents. In contrast, his thirteen-year-old sister Kulsoom is, at least in his eyes, out of control: she goes anywhere she wishes and dresses as she pleases, and doesn't bother going to mosque. In Saheel's eyes she's blasphemous and shameful, a symptom of the decadent and corrupt society she lives in. But he's a man with a plan.

Eight individuals, eight stories; some tragic, all devastating. In a previous novel, *Witness*, Cath Staincliffe experimented with the structure of a single unforeseeable incident told from varying points of view, and like all of her works, it was superbly handled. *The Silence Between Breaths* is even better.

DeadlyDiversions.com

Celebrating the best in crime fiction

Drawing on the all-too-familiar pattern of disaffected homegrown terrorists who wreck havoc on unsuspecting ordinary people, Staincliffe paints a layered portrait of ordinary people caught up in events not of their own making, and blissfully unaware of the event about to engulf them. There's even

room for an insightful look at the angry young terrorist at the heart of it all. Transcending the gripping climax of the tale, Staincliffe paints a heartbreaking portrait of the aftermath of evil. All in all, a fine thriller wrapped around a revealing portrait of our very troubled times.

Previously published on *Reviewing the Evidence*, February 2017.

§Since 2005 Jim Napier's reviews and interviews have appeared in several Canadian newspapers and on various crime fiction and literary websites, including his own award-winning site, *Deadly Diversions*. His own crime novel, *Legacy*, is scheduled to appear in the Spring of 2017. He can be reached at jnapier@deadlydiversions.com



© Jim Napier 2017