

## **When trains roll through my stories**

The Amtrak rumbles into Wallingford's historic station blowing its horn, its brakes squealing rhythmically until it comes to a stop—directly across two major streets. I once saw an ambulance sit at one of the crossings with its siren and lights on, waiting—never a good situation. This morning my wife will ride the train into New Haven, about 16 miles to the south, but the days for this stop are numbered. Another station is being built, along with a new rail line adjacent to the current one—part of a recent, state-sponsored transportation plan. The new station, a large steel and concrete structure that spans both sides of the track, is situated just north of the current station—thus solving the emergency vehicle problem. And the new rails are seamless, using slick looking, concrete cross-ties.

I've never lived this close to a rail line—not an out-the-back-door proximity to be sure—but passing three quarters of a mile from our house, their horns can cut through your dreams at night. With the new line, many more trains will rumble through. Officials have come up with a plan to reduce the noise impact of all that horn blasting. Supposedly, a horn warning from speakers located at the

crossings will have less of an impact than the train engineer's rolling blasts. But I've heard the new horns—they are still loud, but sound sick, without any character. So with clickless rails, odorless ties, steel stations and wimpy horns—well, they try to squeeze the romance out of everything these days. I did have to wait at one of our crossings for a circus train to pass—now that was cool—and it had dozens of cars, so I had time to daydream about passing circus trains.

The longest train ride I had was a trip through New York State that ended when the engine broke down—luckily where I needed to get off. It was a hot, muggy day, and I recall the train inching up this slight incline at walking speed—at that point I knew something was amiss. It finally crawled into the Albany station, stopped, and then all its lights went out. I could hear a station announcement declaring that all further stops were cancelled. I don't consider myself preoccupied by trains and railroads, but they do end up in some of my stories. I find them useful as dramatic elements—representing obstacles, danger, escape—and death. In our area, there are recurring reports of people “trespassing” onto the tracks and getting hit. Some receive minor injuries, but tragically, most are severely injured or killed. Some cases are no doubt suicides, and I try to imagine being in their shoes—try to imagine what happened, or didn't happen, in their lives that led them to this

horrific point. In my story, *Music City Detour*, a young man—in a rush to get home and see his fiancée—is forced by chance circumstances to consider another person’s mortality, and thus his own. In *The Puppet Show*, railroad tracks serve as a border between a dump—representing childhood innocence (free play and exploration) and a trailer park full of adult concerns, shortcomings, and threats. In *The Garbage Man*, a train accident haunts a man and the depressed housewife who falls in love with him. And finally, in my novel *The Sins of Maggie Black*, my heroine’s lowest point occurs at a deserted train station in the prairie town of Scottsbluff, Nebraska—which has, like most western cities, a railroad cutting through the heart of it.

Children, I believe, are natural romantics and dreamers. We adults were all children at one time, and if there is no wonder left in our daily grind, we can at least recall a hot summer afternoon from long ago, when we walked the smelly, creosote ties of our childhood, daydreaming. We’d pause, looking down the rails into the hazy distance, and then listen—and you do remember this now, I know you do—the tiny leap in our heart when we first heard it, first saw the faint, flickering light—knowing something big and loud and unstoppable was headed our way.

For pictures, see the image gallery