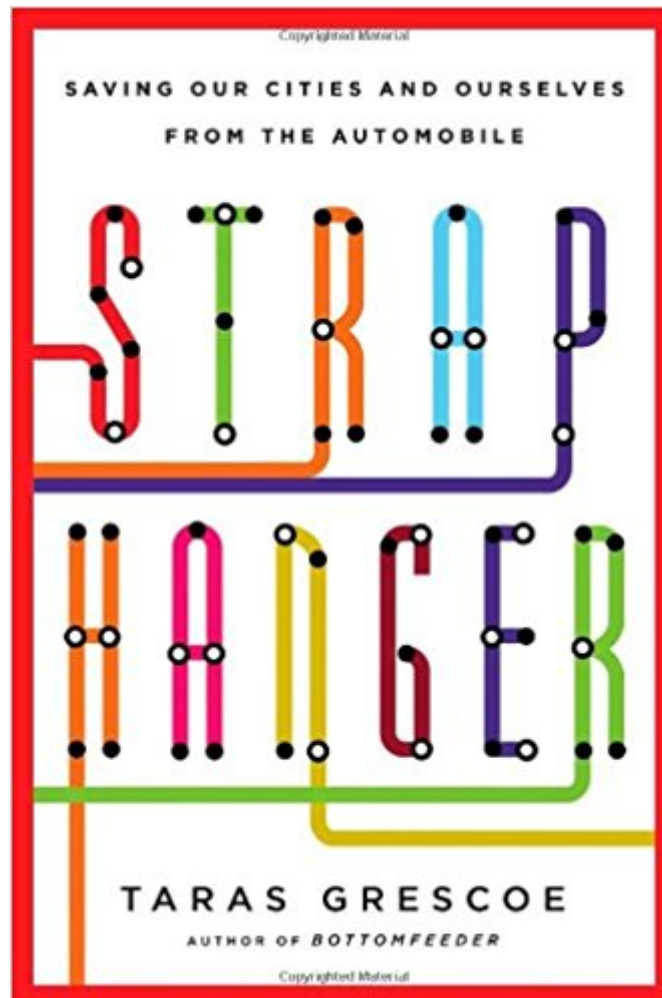




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# Straphanger: Saving Our Cities And Ourselves From The Automobile



## Synopsis

Taras Grescoe rides the rails all over the world and makes an elegant and impassioned case for the imminent end of car culture and the coming transportation revolution "I am proud to call myself a straphanger," writes Taras Grescoe. The perception of public transportation in America is often unflattering— a squalid last resort for those with one too many drunk-driving charges, too poor to afford insurance, or too decrepit to get behind the wheel of a car. Indeed, a century of auto-centric culture and city planning has left most of the country with public transportation that is underfunded, ill maintained, and ill conceived. But as the demand for petroleum is fast outpacing the world's supply, a revolution in transportation is under way. Grescoe explores the ascendance of the straphangers— the growing number of people who rely on public transportation to go about the business of their daily lives. On a journey that takes him around the world— from New York to Moscow, Paris, Copenhagen, Tokyo, Bogotá, Phoenix, Portland, Vancouver, and Philadelphia— Grescoe profiles public transportation here and abroad, highlighting the people and ideas that may help undo the damage that car-centric planning has done to our cities and create convenient, affordable, and sustainable urban transportation— and better city living— for all.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

— "All the cities we admire most in the world--the places young people want to live--boast great public transit systems or are in the process of building them. Taras Grescoe explains why:

there's nothing more civilized than a great subway, or a bus rapid transit system, or a squad of ferries, or any of the other ways we've learned to move ourselves around urban space. As this splendid account makes clear, a car isn't liberation: not needing a car is liberation!

—Bill McKibben, author *Eaarth: Making a Life on a Tough New Planet*

“Grescoe presents a strong and timely argument for moving metropolitan motorists away from their cars.”

—Publishers Weekly

“[Straphanger] is rife with bits of interesting trivia, and it almost reads like a travelogue as the author revels in the wonders of his diverse destinations. With a smooth, accessible narrative style|each chapter is packed with important information| A captivating, convincing case for car-free--or at least car-reduced--cities.”

—Kirkus

“Entertaining and illuminating...Grescoe's adventurous, first-person inspection of the world's latest high-tech transit systems keeps readers engaged while underscoring the importance of developing greener forms of transportation.”

—Library Journal

Taras Grescoe is the award-winning author of four books and countless articles focusing on world travel. He's written for The New York Times, The Times (London), Wired, the Chicago Tribune Magazine, and the Los Angeles Times. He currently lives in Montreal. He has never owned a car.

So this book is made for me - an exploration of mass transit around the world and what makes it work so well in some places while failing in others. I have lived with good transit and loved it and currently live with basically no transit, which drives me crazy. I liked the variety of places Grescoe visited and his ideas about what makes a system work and why some systems accomplish so little. Also, he and some of his interviewees had good ideas about how to make new systems successful and how to improve systems that aren't so good. They do admit, though, that some of these systems can't be saved. well worth reading.

A study of public transportation systems around the world. Insightful analysis of how these systems work from the author's experiences from living in many places around the world without a car.

Taras Grescoe vividly paints the history and current state of public transit in the world in this book. He presents a convincing case that car-free living is the optimal path for society and that cities built around automobiles are dead-ends.

To understand how badly this book fails to achieve its objective of transit advocacy, one needs to read no further than Chapter 3. In this chapter, Grescoe claims to focus on Phoenix, even though most of the chapter is devoted to rambling prose about Frank Lloyd Wright and the author's encounter with noted anti-urbanist Joel Kotkin -- in California, not Arizona. Kotkin is often wrong, but he was right to say that Grescoe had reached his conclusions before doing his research. Grescoe admits as much when he writes that before he observed what other cities were doing right, he had to observe what one city was doing wrong. In other words, Grescoe came to Phoenix not with an open mind, but with a predisposition to hate the city. Unfortunately, Grescoe was so blinded by his prejudice that he saw only what he wanted to see in order to confirm his negative impressions and ignored signs of success all around him. Grescoe claims he saw only a few university students when he rode the city's light rail line; however, I ride it to and from work every day, and it's crowded almost all the time. See the photo for an example. Since operations started in late 2008, light rail ridership has been approximately 50% higher than forecast, and the projected 2020 ridership level was achieved 8 years earlier than anticipated in 2012. Recognizing that success, Phoenix voters just approved a new sales tax increase that will fund significant light rail expansion. Grescoe blatantly contradicts himself by first stating, incorrectly, that Phoenix has no historic city center. Then, a few pages later, he admits that prior to World War II, Phoenix was a compact and walkable city with an extensive streetcar network. He also claims that Phoenix's extraordinarily successful light rail line "doesn't really go anywhere." Since when does "nowhere" include two university campuses, an emerging biomedical center, symphony hall, popular theaters, a convention center, corporate headquarters, several major museums, state and federal courthouses, a busy international airport, a community college, and several of the city's most celebrated arts districts and historic neighborhoods? Of course, defenders of Grescoe might say that this negative review is the result of hurt feelings and wounded civic pride. Not really. It's about so much more than that. The real problem is that if Grescoe approached one city with a preconceived conclusion, isn't it likely he did the same with the other cities profiled in the book? As a result, Straphanger has no credibility at all. Grescoe can't be trusted no matter which city he praises or condemns. His unconvincing arguments against Phoenix's emerging transit culture echo the same tired and thoroughly debunked cliches used unsuccessfully by opponents of the city's light rail line, and, as a result, he plays right into the hands of the anti-transit voices he opposes.

This book is a strange, intertwined mixture of a personal quest for the best place to live on Earth and an overview of transit systems in various cities such as New York, Phoenix, Paris, Tokyo and

Philadelphia. The former is of no special interest with rather banal descriptions of the author's childhood experiences in suburbia or of his current marital bliss. The latter is quite enlightening and covers for each of a wide range of urban transit systems historical aspects, a diagnostic and a prognostic. The bibliography shows that significant research was made by the author who took the pains of personally visiting each city. The approach is by no means rigorous however and much contents appears based on impressions and interviews with specific stakeholders. Descriptions and analyses are certainly not exhaustive and for instance nothing is said of the extensive development of bus lanes in Paris over the last 15 years as a complement to the metro. The writing style is overly dramatic with the chapter on New York City beginning for instance on the blasting site for a new subway line. The first sentence reads: "Something impossibly big and powerful was moving beneath the city."! Strangely, no maps are provided and the reader must resort to Internet to adequately spatialize what is described in each city covered. Though it does provide interesting vignettes on what goes on in terms of transit in many locations, this work presents too many quirks to be recommended.

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