

THE "L"

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(1) The Chicago train, known as the "L" because it is elevated, takes one on a revealing trip from the northside, near Evanston, to the center of the city downtown. Unlike the well-known glamour and excitement of Michigan Avenue and the beauty and serenity of the lakefront, the L shows a grim, gloomy part of Chicago. Yet the L, many of its riders, and the surrounding environment provide a necessary image for completely understanding Chicago.

(2) Every day thousands of people standing on the cold, steel platforms await the L. Shelters in need of paint protect Chicago commuters from the city's biting wind and hold risqué advertisements for liquor, cigarettes, jeans and R-rated movies. Graffiti encircle the advertisements with the bold, forbidding inscriptions of local gangs. Beer cans and trash carelessly thrown upon the tracks contribute to the dumpy sight. A powerful uproar is heard seconds before the L makes its long awaited appearance. The shrieking clamor sends a chill up one's spine as the train wheels scratch against the tracks. At street level, the L has a desolate appearance as it rides the tracks in solitude like a lonely runner. However, when they board the train, commuters are oblivious to the exterior, filing in like soldiers and searching for empty seats.

(3) A ride on the L can promote feelings of fear or annoyance or sadness. Many riders wear cold, aloof expressions as they cautiously hold onto their belongings and sit upright at attention for fear of being robbed or assaulted. Others appear grumpy and disturbed, often complaining about the weather, the trains' delay, or problems concerning the city. The sadness of poverty prevails as a woman wearing ill-fitting clothes gets on, carrying children who stare with big, open eyes as if in search of food, warmth, or even love. An old, haggard bum in tattered clothes can be found sleeping off his drunken stupor. The majority of these people do not talk to each other but, instead, glare out at the fleeting glimpses of Chicago.

(4) A lot of Chicago's poverty and degradation is exposed during the southbound ride. As the hazy sun lies on rundown apartments and boarded-up houses, one senses the reality of being poor in the city. Back porches hold laundry lines where a family's entire wardrobe can be found strung out for all to see. Vacant lots, where houses once stood, are now the playgrounds for children who must create their amusement among weeds, broken glass, and other debris. The grim, gray tombstones of a cemetery can now be viewed from above, the wall below now failing to maintain its privacy and respect. One of the most unpleasant parts of the trip is the area traveled underground. The darkness and clamor of the tunnel and train creates a scary atmosphere for what seems like hours but is actually only a couple of minutes.

(5) The forty-five minute trip from the north side of Chicago to the downtown area is not a pretty sight on the L. It is a depressing trip filled with sadness and poverty. Yet, one must keep in mind that the L, some of its riders, and the surrounding environment provides a necessary balance to its contrasting image of glamour and excitement and is a necessary part of understanding Chicago.