

# Living with strangers in new york city

[Life](#), [Relationships](#)



B. Living With Strangers In 2011 8, 244, 910 people were living in one of the United States' most famous cities: New York. New York has the highest population density in the United States with over 27000 people per square mile and it is estimated that 200 languages are spoken in the city. In a city with so many people, different cultures, and languages converts may have difficulties with growing accustomed to a city full of strangers. The American novelist and essayist, Siri Hustvedt, debates in the essay " Living With Strangers" from The New York Times, 2002, the complications and challenges an urbanite must overcome in a large city's society.

The main theme in the essay is the ability to show humanity in a city full of strangers. In this essay I will analyse and comment on the essay " Living With Strangers". By way of introduction Siri Hustvedt describes how everyone in her hometown, Minnesota, greeted when they met even though it was somebody they did not know. The author quickly moves on to an anecdote from when she first moved to New York. The anecdote describes how she in her apartment is a witness to her neighbours' private acts such as a heated argument and walking around in underwear.

Even though she sees and hears these intimate moments she does not know the people around her and therefore she is " living with strangers". What Siri Hustvedt unintentionally experiences in her apartment may seem transcendent but at least her apartment's walls protect her from a confrontation with the people she is overhearing. These walls cannot protect her in public and Siri Hustvedt finds herself in intimate contact with people she does not know " In my former life, such closeness belonged exclusively to boyfriends andfamily. " (LI. 6-17) To survive these transcendent

experiences the New Yorkers follow the unspoken law “ PRETEND IT ISN’T HAPPENING”. Siri Hustvedt tells three stories where either she or someone she knows has experienced the pretend-it-isn’t-happening law. The first story is from her friend who had just arrived to New York when a lady wearing only a flimsy bathrobe entered the bus he was on. In a smaller city the almost naked woman would have drawn attention to herself, but not in New York. Not even when she started yelling about her token, the New Yorkers reacted. Siri Hustvedt’s friend did, however, react because he was new in New York and therefore had not learned the pretend-it-isn’t-happening law. The second story is Siri Hustvedt’s own from about a year ago. She was in a train where a man started yelling about a very sore subject for New Yorkers: 9/11. He said it was God’s punishment for their sins. Siri Hustvedt describes the episode as uncomfortable: “ I could feel the cold, stiff resistance to his words among the passengers, but not a single one of us turned to look at him” (ll. 3-35). In this story the unspoken law is very clear. If the man’s statement had been said in the news or written on the Internet it would probably have created a big and abrasive discussion, but because it was in public the unspoken law overpowers the urge to speak up. Siri Hustvedt’s last story happened only a couple of weeks ago from when she wrote the essay. Her husband and she were on a station waiting for a train. They sat at one end of a bench. At the other end of the bench sat a man looking like someone you should avoid.

Siri Hustvedt was right in avoiding the man for when he walked past them he spat in their direction and a bit of saliva hit Siri Hustvedt, but her husband and she chose to ignore it. The three examples support the pretend-it-isn’t-

happening law. Siri Hustvedt frequently uses of adjectives makes the examples seem realistic to the reader. That the stories are from Siri Hustvedt's point of view gives a personal connection and therefore she makes use of ethos, which makes the reader able to relate to Siri Hustvedt. Also the fact that the three anecdotes had happened over a period makes it relevant.

So far the essay has had a critical view on the urban living. Siri Hustvedt has by negative adjectives and adverbs, such as howling, shocked, ashamed, cold, stiff, tired, empty, hostility, and terribly, made the urban living seem lonely and at some point horrifying. In the third and final part of the article Siri Hustvedt discusses when and what will happen if people do not follow the pretend-it-isn't-happening law. " Taking action may be viewed as courageous or merely stupid (...)" (l. 53) this statement is once again supported my anecdotes from the urban life.

The first story is by Siri Hustvedt's husband who was a witness to a man being threatened on his life because he asked another man to put out his cigarette. Even though it was only a verbal attack it can have horrible consequences because, as Siri Hustvedt puts it " it carries no moral insight into when to act and when not to act" (ll. 72-73), you will never know when you are being attacked for not obeying the unspoken law. Siri Hustvedt moves on to telling another story, which contrary to the previous story has a happy ending.

Her daughter, Sofie, was riding the subway when a man loudly declared his love for her. Sofie is a product of the pretend-it-isn't-happening law and therefore she did as all the other passengers did, she ignored the man. The

situation made Sofie very uncomfortable until the passenger next to her broke the unspoken law with a witty remark. This made Sofie feel better “ it lifted my daughter out of the solitary misery that comes from being the object of unwanted attention among strangers who collectively participate in a game of erasure. ” (LI. 3-95) By telling this story Siri Hustvedt gives a new alternative to the pretend-it-isn't-happening law. The passenger chose to stop being a part of the passive audience and instead he helped the girl. By doing so the passenger does not only make Sofie feel good, but he also proves Siri Hustvedt's final point, which is that, the pretend-it-isn't-happening law can also lead to something good. Siri Hustvedt finds the decision whether to act or not exciting. Out of necessity the New Yorkers often choose not to act, but when they do it opens up to another understanding of a person's personality or another worldview.

In Minnesota people greet with the same sense as New Yorkers ignores others presences. Therefore it is not possible to overcome the barrier of strangers in Minnesota, but in New York people become real if they do not obey the unspoken law. Siri Hustvedt begins with a negative and critical view on the urban living, but in the end Siri Hustvedt turns the negative to the positive and a good urban living becomes a decision for the individual New Yorkers. If you choose to overcome the barrier of strangers you will experience a presence of the people surrounding you.