

The Life and Times of the Thunderbolt Kid: A Memoir *by* Bill Bryson



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Author: Bill Bryson

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Reviews of the **The Life and Times of the Thunderbolt Kid: A Memoir** *by* Bill Bryson

Anyshoun

Seriously. I was up past bedtime, and I was reading Bryson's description of lame 1950's toys. I won't give it away, but imagine what he can do with the topic of "electric football". After a particularly vigorous episode of chortling, my wife trudged out of bed to decree that, if I insisted on continuing to read, I'd have to take it downstairs.

And that's what this book is, a laugh-out-loud remembrance of a simpler, sillier time. Bryson's travelogues are what made him famous, and he never would have made it without a fantastic memory for detail and an ability to convey a vivid mental picture of the topics he chooses. His descriptions of 1950's Des Moines are consistently evocative. It's like a travelogue unearthed from a

50 year old time capsule. I feel like I have visited there.

Still, readers of Bryson know that what truly sets him apart is his uncanny ability to attract and describe morons, as well as all manner of idiotic situations (generally self-inflicted). For a man who can do this on, say, a simple trip to Australia, imagine how much comedy gold can be mined from a childhood in the Midwest of the 50's. It is, as they say, a target-rich environment. His remembrances include family, friends, school, Des Moines, lame childhood toys, nuclear bombs, and more. Even things like TV dinners, which we have all heard mocked before, are skewered in new and amusing ways.

For all of that, though, the memoir is not mean spirited. I think that the ridicule works so well because it is easy to sense Bryson's real affection for his subjects (well, at least the ones who aren't carbonized by the x-ray vision of the Thunderbolt Kid). He's poking fun, but in a way that family and friends might poke fun at each other over old childhood foibles at a Thanksgiving dinner. It's the humor that you get when your wife knows that you're ridiculous, but loves you just the same. This book belongs with such classic tributes to youth as *The Wonder Years*, *Stand By Me*, and *A Christmas Story*. Buy it, and enjoy it. Just try not to read it next to someone's bedroom.

Forcestalker

So I love Bill Bryson - and have bought many of his books and Cds - however I was dismayed to see something marked as "Audio CD" shipped out which is a weird Ipod nano sized MP3 device with the whole book on it. (appears to be a non-rewriteable MP3 device) Not that that's not a neat idea - but it demands you listen via headphones - I listen at work or while I drive and was expecting a CD - I am returning this item - and looking forward to getting a real CD. Buyer beware!! But Bill Bryson is a great reader and storyteller.

Light out of Fildon

You can't judge a book by its cover. That much I already learned 20 years ago, while reading the tragedy-shrouded comic masterpiece "A Confederacy of Dunces." This notion was unequivocally confirmed during the past couple weeks, as I savored nearly every sentence of Bill Bryson's exceptionally wise and witty "memoir," which I obtained from a used book dealer here in Vancouver, Canada for the smartest \$1 investment that I've ever made.

The saga begins in Des Moines, IA in 1951 with Mr. Bryson's birth to an unheralded genius sportswriter father and a loving absent-minded mother with a penchant for burning food and, with humor and at times pathos spanning the entire range of sophistication, follows his adventures growing up in America's corn capital. The reader is taken along a roller coaster ride through nearly two decades of America at its pinnacle, when optimism for the future was the norm - in spite of the eerie McCarthy conservatism that Mr. Bryson doesn't fail to mention - within a vibrant hard-working society with abundant jobs that suddenly discovered a world of comfort and seeming happiness filled with wondrous new gadgets of all shapes and sizes. It's in this world where children enjoyed relatively immense freedom, compared to what they face in our society just over half a century later. The tall-fish tales abound when Mr. Bryson details the can't-stop-laughing-out-loud misadventures of his many mischievous friends, with names like Buddy Doberman and Milton Milton. In fact, one would think that Des Moines is on the coast, with all the fishy truth stretching that goes on... But Mr. Bryson is at his best when he integrates fact and fiction seamlessly for inevitably hilarious results.

Perhaps this book's great personal appeal has something to do with my arrival in Winnipeg, Canada from Europe at the age of six, where I'd spend the next 13 years thawing toes and scratching welts, not to mention playing in rock bands, proudly drinking under age, shooting paper clips and throwing frozen eggs at animate and inanimate objects, shooting pucks and sometimes shooting pellet guns indoors, and in general having fun, which for a boy then typically meant doing things one wasn't

supposed to do, according to those in authority. Geographically, Winnipeg is Canada's Des Moines; it's also the respective nation's bread basket and metropolitan oasis in the middle of fields and more fields, but the similarities don't end there. The portrayal of Des Moines of the '50s so much reminded me of Winnipeg in the late 60s/early 70s... In fact, at times I thought that Mr. Bryson was describing the Winnipeg of my youth, with its exciting and friendly department stores, atmospheric movie theatres, endless eateries high on fun and low on healthy diet, its surprisingly easy access to underage beer, etc. But mostly what Bill and I had in common as children in two different cities half a generation apart was time, lots of time to goof around and learn who were, on our own terms. My children (aged 9 and 5) and their friends don't have that time... or opportunity.

Tears came to my eyes often as I read this epic satirical statement against mindless conformity and disrespect for the past. For the vast majority of the first 258 pages they were tears of joy and laughter. But then came the final 10-page chapter, aptly titled "Farewell", and I cried. Really, this very grown man actually started crying. Mr. Bryson's lament of how Des Moines has changed from the days of his childhood (book was written in 2006) hit me hard, as I thought about the scores of historic music theaters, cafes, night clubs and beautiful residences that have been torn down in my current home Vancouver in the name of "progressive development" since I returned here in 2006 (coincidentally the year the book was written), after living 17 years in other countries and cities. This destructive development has completely altered the city's atmosphere and corroded its community spirit. But Vancouver has world-class beautiful scenery, at least. What about poor Winnipeg, where I left in 1981 but return ever 5 years to visit? Like Des Moines, it likely has some sensitive souls such as Mr. Bryson "imagining again having things that no other city had" and trying to cope with the harsh truth that it never will.

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