

**A Walk in the Woods**  
***Rediscovering America on the Appalachian Trail***  
**by Bill Bryson**

About the Book

Back in America after twenty years in Britain, Bill Bryson decided to reacquaint himself with his native country by walking the 2,100-mile Appalachian Trail, which stretches from Georgia to Maine. The AT offers an astonishing landscape of silent forests and sparkling lakes — and to a writer with the comic genius of Bill Bryson, it also provides endless opportunities to witness the majestic silliness of his fellow human beings.

For a start there's the gloriously out-of-shape Stephen Katz, a buddy from Iowa along for the walk. Despite Katz's overwhelming desire to find cozy restaurants, he and Bryson eventually settle into their stride, and while on the trail they meet a bizarre assortment of hilarious characters. But *A Walk in the Woods* is more than just a laugh-out-loud hike. Bryson's acute eye is a wise witness to this beautiful but fragile trail, and as he tells its fascinating history, he makes a moving plea for the conservation of America's last great wilderness. An adventure, a comedy, and a celebration, *A Walk in the Woods* is destined to become a modern classic of travel literature.

Praise for the Book

“The best way of escaping into nature is to read a book like *A Walk in the Woods*. . . . The reader is rarely anything but exhilarated.”

— **Christopher Lehmann-Haupt**, *New York Times*

“Choke-on-your-coffee funny.”

— *The Washington Post Book World*

“Bryson is . . . great company right from the start — a lumbering, droll, neatnik intellectual who comes off as equal parts Garrison Keillor, Michael Kinsley, and . . . Dave Barry.”

— *New York Times Book Review*

“*A Walk in the Woods* is an almost perfect travel book.”

— *The Boston Globe*

*Courtesy of Broadway Books*

## About the Author

### **William Bryson**

American Writer (1951? - )

**Known as:** Bryson, Bill; Bryson, William

Entry updated: 01/03/2007

**Birth Place:** Des Moines, Iowa

**Personal Information:** Born c. 1951, in Des Moines, IA; son of William Bryson (a sports columnist); married; wife's name Cynthia (a nurse); children: four.

**Education:** Attended Drake University.

**Addresses:** Home: Hanover, NH, and Norfolk, England. Agent: c/o Author Mail, Broadway Books/Doubleday, c/o Random House, 15400 Broadway, New York, NY 10036.

**Career:** Journalist and author. Worked at a newspaper in Bournemouth, England, beginning 1977, and for business sections of *Times* and *Independent*, London, England. Guest on television programs, including *Good Morning America* and *Sunday Morning*. Appointed an English Heritage Commissioner, 2003; named Chancellor of Durham University in northern England, 2005; honorary Order of the British Empire, or OBE, from the British government, 2006.

## WRITINGS

### AS BILL BRYSON, EXCEPT AS INDICATED

- *The Facts on File Dictionary of Troublesome Words*, Facts on File (New York, NY), 1984, revised edition, 1988, published as *The Penguin Dictionary of Troublesome Words*, Penguin (New York, NY), 1984, revised edition, Viking, (New York, NY) 1988, published as *Bryson's Dictionary of Troublesome Words*, Broadway Books (New York, NY), 2002.
- (As William Bryson) *The Palace under the Alps, and Over Two Hundred Other Unusual, Unspoiled, and Infrequently Visited Spots in Sixteen European Countries*, Congdon & Weed (New York, NY), 1985.
- *The Lost Continent: Travels in Small-Town America*, Harper (New York, NY), 1989.
- *The Mother Tongue: English and How It Got That Way*, Morrow (New York, NY), 1990.
- *Neither Here nor There: Travels in Europe*, Secker & Warburg (London, England), 1991, Morrow (New York, NY), 1992.
- *The Penguin Dictionary for Writers and Editors*, Viking (New York, NY), 1992.
- *Made in America: An Informal History of the English Language in the United States*, Morrow (New York, NY), 1994.
- *Notes from a Small Island: An Affectionate Portrait of Britain*, Morrow (New York, NY), 1995.

- *A Walk in the Woods: Rediscovering America on the Appalachian Trail*, Broadway Books (New York, NY), 1998.
- *I'm a Stranger Here Myself: Notes on Returning to America after Twenty Years Away*, Broadway Books (New York, NY), 1999.
- (Editor, with Jason Wilson) *The Best American Travel Writing, 2000*, Houghton Mifflin (Boston, MA), 2000.
- *In a Sunburned Country*, Broadway Books (New York, NY), 2000, published as *Down Under*, Doubleday (London, England), 2000.
- *Bill Bryson's African Diary*, Broadway Books (New York, NY), 2002.
- *The Life and Times of the Thunderbolt Kid*, Broadway Books (New York, NY), 2006.

Author of "Notes from a Big Country," a weekly column in *Mail on Sunday*. Contributor to periodicals, including *Travel and Leisure*, *National Geographic*, and *New York Times*.

**Media Adaptations:** *Neither Here nor There* was adapted for audio recording by Random House (New York, NY), 1999. *In a Sunburned Country* was adapted for audio recording by BDD Audio (New York, NY), 2000.

### Sidelights

William Bryson's works can be divided into two categories, according to some reviewers. "In his adoptive Britain," Norman Oder explained in *Publishers Weekly*, "Bryson reached best-seller status with wiseacre travelogues. . . . In the United States, he's best known for excursions into the lore of the English language."

For the first of the travelogues, the American-born journalist returned from his home in North Yorkshire, England, to his native Iowa and set out on a journey by car across the North American continent to write *The Lost Continent: Travels in Small-Town America*. The work is an account of a thirty-eight-state tour Bryson began in 1987, having decided to embark on the kind of motor trip his family once took in their blue Rambler station wagon. Bryson's quest was to find the perfect small town in which, as he explains in *The Lost Continent*, "Bing Crosby would be the priest, Jimmy Stewart mayor, Fred MacMurray the high school principal, Henry Fonda a Quaker farmer. Walter Brennan would run the gas station, a boyish Mickey Rooney would deliver groceries, and somewhere, at an open window, Deanna Durbin would sing."

Throughout his travels, however, Bryson offers descriptions of what he finds as "parking lots and tallish buildings surrounded by a sprawl of shopping centers, gas stations and fast-food joints." His observations about small-town America are laced with a sharp-edged humor; at one point he notes that "talking about a scenic route in southeast Iowa is like talking about a good Barry Manilow album," which alienated some reviewers. *Los Angeles Times Book Review* contributor Wanda Urbanska termed *Lost Continent* "merely a forum for the put-down humor so popular these days." A *Newsweek* critic, however, noted that the book "is paradoxically touching — a melancholy memoir in the form of a snide travelogue." *The Lost Continent* proved more popular with readers, becoming a

Book-of-the-Month Club alternate selection. “You have to be able to laugh at yourself to understand this book, and I know that is asking a lot of some people,” Bryson explained in the *Chicago Tribune*. “It really is a fond portrait.”

Bryson again took to the road with his next book, although this time journeying the European continent. *Neither Here nor There: Travels in Europe* describes his adventures in places such as France, Italy, Norway, and Turkey. As with *The Lost Continent*, some reviewers expressed reservations about *Neither Here nor There*, complaining that the book’s humor sometimes wears thin. A *Los Angeles Times* critic, however, found some of Bryson’s descriptions “amusing and accurate” and noted that Bryson occasionally “provides the perfect telling detail.” Dervla Murphy in the *Times Literary Supplement* found that “sometimes Bill Bryson’s humour recalls [P. G.] Wodehouse, sometimes Flann O’Brien. More often it is distinctive, depending on his cunning use of flamboyant exaggerations, grotesque but always successful metaphors and the deft juxtapositions of incongruous images — the whole presented in a style that boldly veers from laid-back colloquial American to formal clean-cut English.”

In the mid-1990s, Bryson moved back to the United States, where he settled with his family in Hanover, New Hampshire. Before leaving England, where he had lived for more than twenty years, the author toured the island one last time, confining himself to public transportation and foot travel. *Notes from a Small Island: An Affectionate Portrait of Britain* represents what some reviewers have likened to a fond farewell. “This affectionate valediction lauds British eccentricity, endurance, and genius for adversity,” Oder wrote. British critic Boyd Tonkin reported in *New Statesman and Society* that, beneath the humor of Bryson’s “all-smiles, easy reading jaunt,” there flows an undercurrent of lament for days gone by. “The Britain he loves is quaint, quiet and deeply welfare-statist,” Tonkin wrote, and Bryson’s criticisms of “the damage wrought by market-minded dogmas,” however witty, left the critic “unpersuaded. . . . He seldom reads our mustn’t-grumble tolerance as a sign of surrender, not just of civility.” In the United States, on the other hand, some reviewers were delighted with Bryson’s “trenchant, witty and detailed observations,” as a *Publishers Weekly* critic noted. *Publishers Weekly* recommended *Notes from a Small Island* as an “immensely entertaining” account, and *Booklist* reviewer Alice Joyce hailed Bryson’s writing as “delightfully irreverent.”

Bryson marked his return to the land of his birth with an exploration of one of America’s longest and oldest footpaths — the Appalachian Trail. His goal was to walk the entire trail, more than two thousand miles long, from Georgia to Maine. He set out optimistically from a Georgia state park with a companion of his boyhood and completed the first hundred miles with relative ease. “Initially, it didn’t seem an impossible task,” Bryson told Oder in an interview. “But your expectations cannot match reality.” Citing difficulties ranging from “drudgery” to the whimsical reliability of maps and map makers to the defection of his partner, Stephen Katz, Bryson abridged his plan. According to *New Statesman* critic Albert Scardino, “He decides he doesn’t have to walk the whole trail to absorb its spirit.” In various segments over a period of time, Bryson eventually completed more than eight hundred miles of hiking and observation. *A Walk in the Woods*:

*Rediscovering America on the Appalachian Trail* is the memoir of his journey. A *Forbes* reviewer remarked that the author's "humor is winning and succinct" and displays a talent "for boiling down his observations to their absurd essences." *Library Journal* critic Nancy J. Moeckel wrote, "Bryson shares some truly laugh-out-loud moments" in his "amiable" account of the journey and the people he met along the way. A British reviewer for the *Economist* compared Bryson's talents to the "droll American mix of folksy intelligence and aw-shucks wit" of Garrison Keillor, and Ron Antonucci recommended the memoir to *Booklist* readers as "a marvelous description and history of the trail."

Oder suggested that *A Walk in the Woods* represents a combination of both sides of Bryson's career: "picaresque traveler and lore-gatherer." The lore-gatherer emerges in several books about words and language, beginning with *The Penguin Dictionary of Troublesome Words*. A third edition of the *Penguin Dictionary* was released in 2002 as *Bryson's Dictionary of Troublesome Words* and contains "some sixty percent" of new or updated material, according to the author. Created initially by Bryson as an editorial tool for personal use, it remains a concise guide to common English language problems. Features include lists of words and phrases often misused, clarification of differences between British and American English, redundant wording, examples of blatant errors found in prominent publications, and a glossary of punctuation and grammatical terms. A *Booklist* reviewer described this book as "admittedly narrow in range" but a "pithy guide [that] will work fine in conjunction with a full-blown style manual." Lilli McCowan of the *European Business Journal* concluded, "Bryson can help us to get stylish and even better, understood."

*The Mother Tongue: English and How It Got That Way* is an anecdotal, historical survey of what Bryson calls "the most important and successful language in the world." *The Mother Tongue* was warmly received by critics, who considered the book lively and engaging. *New York Times Book Review* contributor Burt Hochberg found reading Bryson's presentation of such topics as etymology, pronunciation, spelling, dialects, grammar, origins of names, and wordplay "an enthralling excursion." *Los Angeles Times Book Review* contributor Fred S. Holley called the volume "a vastly informative and vastly entertaining consideration, not only of the language's history but also of its position today."

In *Made in America: An Informal History of the English Language in the United States*, Bryson, according to Oder, "uses the evolution of American English to slalom through American history and culture." The *Economist* described Bryson as "an easy, intelligent and good-humoured writer" but warned, "Towards its end the book threatens to become little more than a history of consumption and consumer goods: how the automobile, shopping mall, aeroplane, hamburger, came to America." That reviewer also warned of errors — a caution echoed by other critics as well. In *People*, Elaine Kahn identified some of the mistakes that could lead an unwary reader astray. Others reviewers were less critical, however. Albert Kim of *Entertainment Weekly* was engaged by Bryson's "unabashed curiosity" about the English language and the "sheer delight" he derives from transmitting the information to his readers. George W. Hunt summarized the work in

*America* as, overall, “a leisurely history . . . of a nation’s growth as dramatized by its changing vocabulary,” and a *Publishers Weekly* reviewer called the book “a treasure trove of trivia about American culture past and present.”

Bryson revisited his favored genre of travel writing and his editorial past for *The Best American Travel Writing, 2000*. As guest-editor, Bryson shared duties with series editor Jason Wilson to publish this volume of Houghton Mifflin’s “Best American” series. This collection of travel anthologies was described by Nicholas Howe in the *New Republic* as “‘testosterone travel’ or ‘exploraporn’ . . . today’s versions of the adventure stories that ran thirty or fifty years ago in barbershop or cigar-store magazines.” Bryson chose travel pieces he liked for this collection, penned by writers who, according to a *Publishers Weekly* contributor, “share a love of a place, a moment, a people,” and who have written tales to “remind us of how amazing the world truly is.”

Bryson recorded his return to the world of his roots in a collection of essays originally written for the British magazine *Night and Day*. The book *I’m a Stranger Here Myself: Notes on Returning to America after Twenty Years Away* is filled with funny anecdotes describing contemporary American life from the absurd, witty, and unique vantage of Bryson who chose to make his birth land home after twenty years as an expatriate. “This is humor writing at its sharpest,” noted Brad Hooper in *Booklist*, who went on to say, “his saving grace is that he does more laughing with us than at us.” Wilda Williams of *Library Journal* reported that the book is filled with Bryson’s “trademark humor,” but also “a bit slight and choppy,” a small criticism that she does not expect to have any impact on the book’s popularity.

*In a Sunburned Country* is Bryson’s appropriately eccentric and humorous depiction of Australia, the continent he claims “has more things that will kill you than anywhere else,” an opinion he expands, saying, “If you are not stung or pronged to death in some unexpected manner, you may be fatally chomped by sharks or crocodiles, or helplessly carried out to sea by irresistible currents, or left to stagger to an unhappy death in the baking outback.” Harry Levins writing in the *St. Louis Dispatch* warned that “*In a Sunburned Country* is not a travel guide or tour book,” yet he recommended Bryson’s “witty, curious, and fiendishly observant” book as good traveling company. Robert Zeller in *Antipodes* reported that “Bryson is at his best in portraying the various characters he encounters . . . and in conveying his sense of wonder at his discoveries.”

Not all reviewers found *In a Sunburned Country* to be Bryson’s most sterling book. David Gates in *Newsweek* found Bryson’s “leaden whimsy and faux-conversational tone” to be annoying and “the wealth of gee-whiz factoids [to be] almost . . . worth the trip.” Perhaps the most accurate description of the book, its author, and the subject was from a reviewer in *Publishers Weekly* who commented that “a land as vast as Australia needs a primer to make it accessible, and Bryson has accomplished that with humor and relentless curiosity.”

Reviewers from the *Boston Herald* and other newspapers have compared Bryson’s writing to that of a “somewhat sedate” or “smarter, more sarcastic” Dave Barry, but

Gloria Maxwell of *Library Journal* provided a more concise definition of Bryson's writing: "What makes Bryson the most entertaining and interesting travel writer around is his singular facility to fashion a unique whole from historical facts, topographical observations and geographical ramblings." A *Publishers Weekly* critic agreed, claiming that Bryson's "strength lies in his ability to incorporate astounding facts about the country with nutty personal anecdotes."

## FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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- Bryson, Bill, *The Mother Tongue: English and How It Got That Way*, Morrow (New York, NY), 1990.

### PERIODICALS

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- *Antipodes*, December, 2000, Robert Zeller, review of *In a Sunburned Country*, p. 175.
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- *European Business Journal*, spring, 2002, Lilli McCowan, review of *Bryson's Dictionary of Troublesome Words*, p. 53.
- *Forbes*, September 26, 1994, Katherine A. Powers, audiobook review of *The Mother Tongue*, p. S32; May 4, 1998, review of *A Walk in the Woods*, p. S140.
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- *Insight on the News*, October 16, 2000, Rex Roberts, review of *In a Sunburned Country*, p. 33.
- *Library Journal*, April 1, 1998, Nancy J. Moeckel, review of *A Walk in the Woods*, pp. 114-116; May 15, 1999, Wilda Williams, review of *I'm a Stranger Here Myself*, p. 114; September 1, 1999, Carolyn Alexander, review of *Neither Here nor There*, p. 255; March 1, 2000, review of *In a Sunburned Country*, p. S1; June 1, 2000, Joseph L. Carlson, review of *In a Sunburned Country*, p. 174; November 15, 2000, Gloria Maxwell, audiobook review of *In a Sunburned Country*, p. 118; December, 2000, Robert Zeller, review of *In a Sunburned Country*, p. 175; September 15, 2001, Nancy Pearl, review of *A Walk in the Woods*, p. 61; August, 2002, review of *Bryson's Dictionary of Troublesome Words*.
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- *New York*, September 18, 1989, Chris Smith, review of *The Lost Continent*, p. 26.
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**Source:** *Contemporary Authors Online*, Thomson Gale, 2007.

**Source Database:** Contemporary Authors Online

## Author Interview

**Q: You are usually referred to as a “travel writer,” and your books are shelved in the “travel books” area of bookstores, but you are hardly a conventional travel writer. What does the term “travel writing” mean to you?**

**Bill Bryson:** Well, I suppose all it suggests really is leaving home, having to go somewhere and having an experience out in the wider world.

**Q: Are there travel writers of the past whose work you really admire?**

**BB:** There’s a lot of travel writers whose work I admire very much. But it’s really their writing that I admire. They’re not inspirational to me in the sense of me reading them and thinking, “Oh, I’d like to go make that trip myself.” I’m very glad they’ve made it for me. I think it’s very interesting to read about places that I’m unlikely ever to go, or circumstances under which I’m unlikely to see them. I know how hard it is to write descriptive passages in a fresh way. If I go to a mountaintop and the view is great, whatever I write, in the first draft, always sounds like something you’d write on a postcard: “Mom, it’s breathtaking. It was stupendous.” This is one reason why I admire the work of Paul Theroux, for instance. He can describe a landscape in a very original and novel way. It’s impressive.

Everyone in the world has done travel writing after a fashion, because everyone who has gone on vacation has written somebody a letter or a postcard. And most of those phrases that spring to mind have been used. It’s very hard to describe something that’s particularly beautiful or majestic or whatever in a way that’s fresh and original.

**Q: Is there a secret to that, do you think?**

**BB:** It’s just really hard work. I mean, there are other parts of putting together books that are relatively easy compared with that. But the parts that I always struggle over are the parts where I’m describing the landscape and describing the way things look — particularly if it’s beautiful. It’s much easier for me to describe something that’s ugly. Then you don’t have all these clichés tumbling out at you.

**Q: Yes, I'm approached by so many would-be writers who say, "All my friends tell me my letters home are so good, I should write travel stories." Well, I try to gently tell them, good travel writing is an art — it's more than just a letter home.**

**BB:** I think a basic error that is made with travel writing, particularly by aspiring travel writers, is the same mistake that most people make when they want to show slides from a vacation — just assuming that everybody's interested in it. You have to work from exactly the opposite assumption: Nobody is interested in this. Even your wife is not interested in this. You have to somehow make it so that they become interested in it. Every travel writer does it in different ways. And I suppose my trick is to try and make them laugh so that they feel that there is going to be some reward in terms of amusement.

**Q: Some writers are tempted to fictionalize their writing when it suits their purposes. How do you feel about that? How closely do you stick to the actual facts of a trip?**

**BB:** In a book like *Mother Tongue*, where my purpose is to convey information in as accurate a way as I can, I'm very rigorous and careful. But with the travel books, my approach is much more relaxed — though I still try to be accurate, it's not paramount in the way it is with a book that's presenting itself as the history of the English language. So, I tend to write without much of anything on the desk — and then I get up and wander off and go look at a map or check a note or go to the library.

I'm focusing much more on the writing and on trying to re-create the experience mostly from memory. And it's just a completely different kind of book. I'm sure that in doing that, I make mistakes. In fact, I've gone back to places that I wrote about in the travel books and realized that the motel was on the southeast corner of the route, not the northwest corner. To tell you the truth, this doesn't bother me terribly much because they're not guidebooks. If I get a detail like that wrong, it's an honest error. It's not my purpose to give people guidance to where they can go and how they can retrace my steps.

**Q: You're not really expecting someone to set off with your book in hand and say, "Oh, let's stay here. Let's eat here."**

**BB:** Right. The book is absolutely faithful to my memory. Anything I've written in *A Walk in the Woods*, for example, I have a very clear memory of. But I just went up on Mount Graylock this week in Massachusetts, for example, and there's a lookout point up there, and it was much farther on than I recalled.

**Q: But none of that seems really too important in a work of literature like this.**

**BB:** That's the view I take. There are obviously certain times when you have to tend to accuracy. There are times when it is important. But as I say, it's not important in the same way it is in a book that's a history or biography.

**Q: When you set off on the Appalachian Trail, you knew you were going to write a book. But did you have something framed in your mind about how the book would proceed?**

**BB:** I realized very quickly that the book was going to be very different from the way I had loosely imagined it. First of all, we weren't having encounters on the trail with a lot of other people. There weren't a lot of other people out there. And Katz [Bryson's hiking companion] was a lot less communicative than I expected. I thought the guy was just going to fill me up with great anecdotes and great stories of what he'd been doing for the last 20 years. And he didn't.

As I say in the book, our relations were very congenial throughout once we sort of got through the first day or two. We settled into a routine. And there was no stress or tension or anything, but also there wasn't much conversation. And I just thought, Oh, God, all day long we're doing nothing. We're moving forward, but we're not actually doing anything that you could write home about. And at the end of the day, he puts up his tent and crawls into it. Quarter after 6, and he's gone.

So, I realized then, I'm going to have to do a lot more work on this to make a book out of this, which involved doing a lot of research once I got back, doing a lot more reading and finding out about geology and history. Much of the time I was struck by my ignorance when I was out there. And on the trail I couldn't do anything about it. I mean, you couldn't carry a set of encyclopedias or even a good reference. There were lots of times on the trail I would have really loved to have had those books for 10 minutes to read about various dogwoods or whatever.

**Q: What was your biggest fear going into the trip?**

**BB:** Bear attacks. Even though bear attacks are extremely rare, if you're going to get hurt by a big animal on the Appalachian Trail, that's the one that's going to do it. I was aware that my fear was irrational or inflated, but I couldn't quite shake it.

**Q: Somehow the fact that something is irrational doesn't hold much power out there in the woods.**

**BB:** No, it doesn't. Or in any circumstance when you're alone. Because even though I was hiking with Katz, when we were actually in motion most of the time we were several minutes apart. We weren't within sight of each other. I was always in the lead. And there are those times when you come around the bend, and you hear crashing in the undergrowth and something large. Your instinct is to think: Is that a bear? And it always turns out to be a deer or something much more tame and less threatening, but it was never quite out of the back of my mind.

**Q: What was the most important lesson of the trip?**

**BB:** The lesson I got from the trip was just how big the world is. And how big a part of that big world the United States is. The one thing that happens when you get onto the trail is you're approaching the world in a way that you've never approached the world before — i.e., on foot. You think you know what to expect, but you just don't. When you say 2,200 miles, the only way of conceiving that kind of distance is in terms of air miles or driving. You can't even imagine a distance of that magnitude except in some kind of a machine. It's just huge, and with a lot of hills in between. There's this whole other world out there, this whole other way of looking at that world. And that was something that really stuck with me and made it all worthwhile. I really understand now, in a way I never did before. And most people go through life without understanding at all.

**Q: Can you bring that understanding home with you? Do you find that you're applying that somehow in day-to-day life?**

**BB:** Not day-to-day life. Living in New Hampshire, I like to think when I drive down the road and see a hill and trees that I appreciate the scale of it in a new way, that I know what it would feel like to walk up that hill. I can look at it now, and if it's 2,000 feet, I know the difference between that and a hill that's 3,000 feet in terms of the exertion that is required.

The one thing you always tell yourself on the trail is that you will never take running water for granted again. Or, you know, flushed toilets or hot meals. And you do. As soon as you come off the trail, you forget that. You can't sustain that. You instantly take it for granted. Within 24 hours, it all seems completely routine again.

**Q: One thing that I was especially struck by in your book was the intimacy with nature that you conveyed. It's like living with a person for a long time. You get to know every contour of them, you get to know the nuance of their different moods — I think you had that same experience with nature.**

**BB:** It's certainly true. You are out in this world that most of us normally don't really experience except as backdrop, something in the distance. You realize that the woods are a strange place. Sometimes they're really quite strikingly menacing and remote, and at other times very intimate and almost caressing. Caressing sounds a bit New Age-y, but there are times when it's almost womblike, very comforting. And at other times it seems much more hostile and aggressive. You do feel very small out there. And you find yourself vulnerable to it, kind of at its mercy — not just the woods but nature in a wider sense.

**Q: The closest thing in my own life was when I went on the Karakoram Highway that goes up through Pakistan to the Chinese border. There were mountains towering above you that you knew had towered above Marco Polo and Genghis Khan. On a trip like that you come to terms with so many things that you just don't find in your daily life, important truths that we usually don't think about: How small we are. How big the world is. How puny our efforts are. But still how important they are despite the puniness. When I was reading your book I kept thinking about my own experience of being way out in the middle of nowhere and realizing how vulnerable I am and how much I depend on other people or on other things for my survival. It's pretty intense.**

**BB:** That's exactly the experience I had. And it's awful to think how easily you could go through life and not have that experience.

**Q: I take it you are very grateful.**

**BB:** Oh, absolutely. I mean, I hated 98.8 percent of it. There were moments of genuine exultation when the sun comes out and spring is coming and you crest a mountaintop and you get a great view. But most of the time it's either just boring as hell, or you're cold or wet or uncomfortable. Most of the time if you're honest, you don't want to be there. You want to be somewhere else where you are more comfortable. I suppose it's like any kind of penance. It's worth it because you get so much out of it. It's worth it just for those moments of exultation. It's also worth it for what you learn about landscape and yourself.

**Q: And what is your next project?**

**BB:** I've pretty well decided that I'm going to go and do a book on Australia. I didn't want to do another travel book. I wanted to go off and do something else — but Australia really, really appeals to me. And with the Sydney Olympics coming up in 2000, if you're going to do Australia, you've got to do it sooner rather than later.

I'm especially attracted by the wide open, unpopulated expanses you find there. In Iowa, where I grew up, you have pretty spacious areas — but it's inhabited space, cultivated space, something narrow. In Australia, it's just incredible expanses of nothing. I want to feel what that's like, to be in all that nothing.

*Courtesy of Salon.com, 1998*

## Discussion Questions

1. What do you think of the title of the book, *A Walk in the Woods: Rediscovering America on the Appalachian Trail*?
2. What did you think of the scene where they discovered on a map that they had only hiked two inches of the four feet of trail?
3. Do you agree with the author's statement, "If we couldn't walk the whole trail, we also didn't have to?"
4. Do you feel that their hike really counts as hiking the Appalachian Trail even though it was only 39% of the trail?
5. What do you think of the relationship between Bryson and Katz?
6. What about the interactions between them and the other characters in the book? Did you find the relationships humorous?
7. What do you think of the author's sense of humor? His opinions? His writing style?
8. Do you think that readers could find this book offensive or controversial? In what ways?
9. What do you think of the informational tidbits/tangents on history (of the trail, of the National Park Service, etc.), geology (of Centralia and the mountainside in Lehigh Valley), ecology (the effects of global warming, zinc mining, dam building), and social customs (the interaction and views of different people) in the book? Did any ignite your interest? Which ones? Why?
10. Do you view these "asides" as positive or negative in the structure of the book?
11. Did the ending of the book "feel right" to you? What do you think the author meant about it not feeling right about cutting grass after hiking the Appalachian Trail?
12. In an interview with the author, Bryson mentioned that Katz said "Oh, Bryson, you know, it's all bullshit, but it's really funny!" In the same interview, Bryson said "Everything I say in the book is absolutely true." What do you think?

*Courtesy of Manitowac Public Library*