In a Sunburned Country Study Guide

In a Sunburned Country by Bill Bryson

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

Journalist and humorist Bill Bryson takes three trips down under to tell the story of the forgotten continent. Australia, a land of extremes representing almost every climate on Earth and filled with more unique flora and fauna than any other continent, is largely ignored by the rest of the world. Coverage of political news from Australia is scant in western presses, and social news from the continent is almost nonexistent, despite its size and prominence in world affairs, both as a land of immense resources, and as a unique fighting force in the great wars of the twentieth century.

Bryson's first trip takes him to Sydney, where he walks the town, admiring the famous Sydney Opera House and the Harbor Bridge. In vain, he attempts to boogie board at a local beach, then finds himself stupefied by the glitz of the local gambling club. Next, he and photographer Trevor Ray Hart hop the famous Indian Pacific railroad for a ride across the bottom half of the continent to Perth.

On his second trip, Bryson takes a driving tour of the Boomerang Coast, the crescent of inhabited area along Australia's southeastern shore that contains the bulk of its people and its four largest cities. From Sydney, Bryson visits the rather bucolic Canberra, capital of Australia and a city lost within a park. After that, Adelaide, the southernmost of the four great cities of the Boomerang Coast, where citizens seem to go out of their way to tell Bryson that the city, which has lost much of its former commercial success to Sydney, is dying. Finally, Bryson sets off for Melbourne, where a couple of friends show him around the city and the surrounding country.

For his third and final trip, Bryson takes along a friend named Allan Sherwin. They go for a dip in the Great Barrier Reef, Bryson again wholly inept in the water, before hoping a flight to Darwin, the tiny town that sits "topside," as the Aussies say, on the northern coast. From Darwin, Bryson and Sherwin drive due south into Australia's punishing interior to Alice Springs. There they make a brief excursion to see Ayer's Rock, or as the Aborigines call it Uluru, a massive sandstone formation that impresses both men with its solemnity and grace. Sherwin flies home from Alice Springs and Bryson flies back to Perth to take two excursions, first south and then north. First south into the forests of southwest Australia to see the jarrah and karri trees rise hundreds of feet above the forest floor. Second, and lastly, to the north to visit the living descendants of the oldest lifeforms known to man.

Throughout his trip, Bryson fills the reader in on many points of Australia's remarkable history. His stories are shocking, amazing, and at times disturbing, but his wry sense of humorous suffuses the book and his enthusiasm for Australia, the land and its people, shines.

Chapters 1-3

Chapters 1-3 Summary and Analysis

Bryson sets Australia before his readers as a country we know shockingly little about. The amount of coverage Australia receives in western press is far less than most countries in the world. This is ironic as Australia is one of the singular places in the world. It is home to the world's largest living thing, the Great Barrier Reef, and is the habitat of more deadly creatures than anywhere else in the world.

Bryson had only visited Australia for book tours and consequently he had never seen the "real" Australia. He plans to travel the famed Indian Pacific railroad across the continent from Sydney to Perth. On the first day, he takes a brief tour of Sydney during which he visits a local club and spends an embarrassing couple of hours attempting to boogie board at a nearby beach.

The next day, Bryson, joined by photographer Trevor Ray Hart, boards a train at Sydney's Central Station for the first leg of his journey. He and Trevor stop first at a town called Broken Hill, where the temperature can reach as high as 118 degrees. From Broken Hill, they take a day trip into the blistering desert in a powerful off road vehicle, accompanied by a member of the local travel board. They travel north into the desert and Bryson takes the opportunity to list some of the early expeditions sent by Europeans to explorer the land.

Bryson and Hart reboard the train to Perth. They enter the Nullarbor, a vast desolate region of flat red desert. Bryson and Hart are allowed to ride in the locomotive for several hours, where Bryson is mesmerized by the glimmering, razor-straight track stretching ahead of them. The next day they arrive in Perth and reflect that they have just done what few Australians do, travel the whole length of the continent. Bryson's self-deprecating wit suffuses the narrative, which is casual and conversational. He describes himself falling asleep in the car and drooling on himself. This, along with the colorful tale of his ineptitude on the beach, puts him at odds with his description of Australia's many perils. This ironic contrast sets up the rest of the book.

Chapters 4-6

Chapters 4-6 Summary and Analysis

Early European explorers occasionally passed by and set foot on Australia, thinking it another large island in the Indies, perhaps the size of New Guinea. Among its early names was New Holland, but it was never equated with the fabled southern continent until the late eighteenth century. Lieutenant James Cook and the HMS Endeavor followed the shoreline of Australia for eighteen hundred miles in 1770. On his subsequent voyage, he took botanist Joseph Banks, who collected over thirty thousand specimens of plants and small animals from the new continent. On January 26. 1788, Captain Arthur Phillip arrived in Australia with a colony of mostly petty criminals, anchoring in the harbor now known as Circular Quay.

Bryson's next trip to Australia finds him standing at Circular Quay in Sydney. He reflects on the modern city that has developed at the sight of the much beleaguered prison colony that Captain Phillip founded. Bryson discusses the history of the famed Opera House, begun in 1950s, and easily the most recognizable feature of Sydney. But Bryson writes that he is more partial to the Harbour bridge. Bryson walks the suburbs surrounding the harbor and peeks into the Natural History museum where he joins a pack of young boys, all pressing their faces against the glass to ogle stuff specimens of Australia's many lethal snakes. His walk takes him into a park, where a pair of unruly dogs force him to vault a wall into a stranger's backyard.

Bryson is without a guide or fixed companion for the first time, as he takes his walking tour of Sydney, and then sets off into the heartland toward Canberra. His descriptions focus on the environment, not the people, and he mentions only a few encounters with Australians.

Bryson begins a driving trip that will take him back and forth between the four largest cities in Australia, all located along the southeastern edge, which is also known as the Boomerang Coast. His first task is to penetrate the Blue Mountains, which lie to the west of Sydney. He spends a night in the tourist town of Katoomba, where he meets an argumentative old Yorkshire couple, and visits the Katoomba falls. He drives out of the mountains and into the Australian heartland, which looks much like the American Midwest. He flips through the radio channels and finds station after station playing music from the thirties and forties. In a town called Cowra, famous for a mass breakout of Japanese prisoners of war during World War II, he is intrigued by the museum created to commemorate the incident. He spends the night in a town called Young, which lies on the Olympic Highway on the way to Canberra. The entire town seems stuck in the 1950s, except for one bizarre building whose sign identifies it as a pet and pornography shop. He visits the Lambing Flat Museum, which commemorates the Australian gold rush, and Bryson relates the tale of a famous riot between white settlers and Chinese settlers, which led to the White Australia policy, which forbade the immigration of any non-European people until the 1970s. There is a fair amount of

digression into the history of many of the places that he visits, including the founding of Sydney, the riots of the Australian gold rush, and the planning and building of Canberra. But Bryson always brings his historical introspection back to the present by citing curiosities that fascinate him, including the little holographic tour guide that takes visitors through the Lambing Flat Museum, and the bizarre pet and pornography shot.

Canberra is next on Bryson's itinerary. When the Commonwealth of Australia was formed in 1901, both Sydney and Melbourne were prominent cities, each with a reasonable claim to be called the capital. As a compromise, a small farming community named Canberra was chosen to be the new capital, and the modern city arose through coordinated urban planning. Bryson takes off on foot to see the city and immediately loses his way in the seemingly identical streets of Canberra's carefully planned suburbia. The first day and night in Canberra proves rather dull, and Bryson spends the evening drinking in the hotel bar and making up sarcastic slogans for the city.

The next day, Bryson visits the National Capital Exhibition, where he is handed a weighty bag filled with brochures and learns about the slow development of the city. The next day he visits the House of Parliament, and concludes that his initial reaction to Canberra was unjust, and that it was a city that had managed to swell to over 330,000 people, while still maintaining the feel of a park. His humor and conspiratorial sarcasm make this more of a memoir than a staid history of Australia or a careful description of the lands through which he travels.

Chapters 7-8

Chapters 7-8 Summary and Analysis

After several days in scenic Canberra, Bryson sets out across more desolate land toward Adelaide. He tries to enjoy the confusing banter of cricket on the radio, and stops for the night in the desert town of Hay, where he looks in vain for kangaroos in the barren land surrounding the town. The land around Hay was not always barren. In the nineteenth century, a man named Thomas Austin unwittingly devastated millions of acres of greenery by releasing English rabbits to hunt for sport. This was followed by a decade-long drought, from which the region has never recovered. Bryson soon arrives in the verdant, rolling hills of the Barossa Valley, which makes quite a contrast to the barren land he has been driving through for days. He describes this land as almost Eden-like, with lush hills covered in citrus groves rolling down to the southern coast. The tourist town of Tanunda provides Bryson with his next stop. He concludes that this clearly yuppie town is pleasant but unremarkable.

Bryson's humorous description of the bewildering appeal of cricket might offend the die-hard cricket fanatic. His is not contemptuous of the sport, but he clearly is bemused by the dedication of the Australians, normally a people who are not afraid to get their hands dirty and who play an altogether more brutal sport, but who would have for a sport in which you dress in white and can play all day without getting a speck of dirt on your uniform.

Adelaide is a city too isolated to survive, at least according to its inhabitants, who mention its doom frequently to Bryson. Despite these ominous pronouncements, the city seems a prosperous and attractive one to Bryson. Bryson finds himself shut out of several events. First, the cricket match between Australia and England, which it seems as though most of the town is attending, is sold out. Second, the South Australia Museum, where Bryson had hoped to get a glimpse at the famous Spriggina fossil which has been put forward as a possible explanation of the sudden explosion of life in the Cambrian period, is closed due to a National holiday.

A walking tour through Adelaide's many parks convinces Bryson that in some ways Australians take the city for granted. Though Australians are amiable and adventurous people, they often display a stark self-critical attitude. Bryson notes that they are often consumed by concerns of how good other places in the world are compared to Australia. Bryson sarcastically writes of the deadly creatures in Australia, and in particular the saltwater crocodile. He seems to think that if he were an Australian he would not be able to focus on what other nations or cities have, because he would be too busy scanning the surrounding water for crocodile snouts.

Bryson writes that the difference between Canberra and Adelaide, is that Canberra is a city built in a park, whereas Adelaide is a city filled with parks. There is clearly and appeal to both for Bryson. Bryson's has a standard itinerary for exploring a town or city.

In each case, he first gets a room at a hotel, seemingly at random, then spends the daylight hours walking the entire city, both residential and commercial areas. His favorite stops along his walking tour are museums, large and small, and bookstores. At night, he invariably walks into a pub and begins drinking while writing notes about the day. Sometimes he drinks to excess and in several places he shares the inexplicable notes he discovers later, which must have meant something to him while drunk, but are scrambled and bizarre in the light of day.

Chapters 9-10

Chapters 9-10 Summary and Analysis

Bryson takes his leave of Adelaide, as he has friends to meet in Melbourne. He takes a curving road known as the Princes Highway along the coast east. The terrain is more barren than he expected, as he feels he is driving into civilization by driving east toward Melbourne, and he amuses himself along the drive by playing with the lyrics of a favorite and frank Australian folk song. A sign promising the world's biggest lobster forces him to stop and examine a fifty-six-foot sheet metal crustacean. A man asks Bryson to take his picture with the monstrosity and Bryson quips that the man can tell his friends that it is an engagement photography.

The next day finds Bryson on the Great Ocean Road along the Mornington Peninsula. The road is a hair-raising 189 miles of sinuous turns along crumbling cliffs, overlooking, to the south, the Victorian coastal waters, the site of the large number of known shipwrecks in the world. He passes near to Winchelsea, where Thomas Austin released his bag of rabbits to horrendous consequences, and Bryson discusses how other immigrant species have destroyed or endangered much of Australian flora and fauna. The worst offender is the common cats, which now number in at least twelve million and hunt the whole length of the continent, severely reducing the numbers of many of Australia's natural smaller mammals. On the tip of Mornington Peninsula, Bryson visits treacherous Cheviot Beach, where in 1967, prime minister Harold Holt was pulled under by the currents and never seen again.

Melbourne is the second largest city in the country, behind Sydney, and though it was once the more prominent of the two, it has been losing ground in commercial success. Melbourne hosted the 1956 Olympics, but when the time came for Australia to play host again, in 2000, it was Sydney that received the honor. Bryson has a particular fondness for Melbourne, because it was the city he visited on his first trip to Australia, to attend a writer's festival in 1992. He writes with amusement of Melbourne's bizarre right turns, in which the driver must enter the far left lane and wait for an opening, so as not to block the trams that run down the center of the streets, and of their unabashed love for their beloved "footy," what they call Australian Rules football.

Bryson meets up with Alan Howe, an old friend who worked at the London Times as an intern when Bryson was on staff, and is now the editor of the Sunday Herald-Sun in Melbourne. Alan and his wife Carmel Egan regale Bryson with the story of a recent encounter they had with a crocodile when traveling up an estuary in Queensland.

The next morning, Alan goes to work to put out the paper, and Carmel takes Bryson to see some sights in the city. She points out an old man carrying a card table and a chair across the street, telling Bryson that the man is Jim Cairns, former deputy prime minister, who often sells his autobiography from the little table at a nearby market. They visit the Crown Casino, a gambling club whose scale dwarfs the huge Penrith casino

Bryson had visited in Sydney. In the Immigration Museum, they study photographs from the 1950s, when the commercial airline industry began making it possible to travel to Australia in less than five weeks, and true immigration, in large numbers began. The 1950s was also the time that Australia's first established rules of citizenship for those born in Australia. Up until that time they were simply British citizens, and most of the spoke of Britain as home, even those that had never been there.

Despite his often sarcastic remarks, Bryson speaks affectionately of Australia, and his willingness to venture out into its barren spaces, even if on a modern road, clearly indicates his interest in the country. He seems to the reader very much like a child fascinated with even the most mundane things about the country. Still, he admitted lacks the indomitable will of the true investigative reporter. He spends quite a bit of time talking about the plague of Australian flies that will not leave him alone on his walk to Cheviot beach. He explores some of the World War II ruins halfheartedly, but is quickly repulsed by an unfortunate encounter with a spider web.

His squeamishness is again at odds with his environment, and the reader is left to wonder how in the world it would stand up to traveling into the real bush, away from the, for Australia, peopled southeast coast. Alan Howe's crocodile tale gives Bryson a chance to mention a point of irony that Australians often display. They will tell you how the dangers that lurk in their country are highly exaggerated, but then proceed to tell you about the many times they have come close to severe injury.

Chapters 11-13

Chapters 11-13 Summary and Analysis

The next day, Alan Howe and Carmel Egan take Bryson to their country house in the King Valley. Howe tells Bryson about the horrific bushfires that are always a danger in Australia. They can move at fifty-five miles per hour and send flames hundreds of feet into the air. They visit Glenrowan, a town famous for the downfall of Australia's most famous outlaw, Ned Kelly. The highlight of this visit was their trip through an animatronic show reenacting many of the pivotal moments of Ned Kelly's last stand.

The next day they drive into Alpine National Park, to meet up with a ranger named Ron Riley, who takes them up Mt. Bogong in a four-wheel-drive vehicle. They spend the day driving through the park, peering at distance ranges, with Ron Riley stopping to ask hikers if they need anything, or naming with delight all the flora and fauna around them. The next day, on the way back to Melbourne, they stopped at a small museum dedicated to the Megascolides australis, the giant worms of southwest Gippsland, the largest earthworms in the world, which can grow up to twelve feet long and more than six inches in diameter.

Bryson clearly enjoys the time he spends with Alan Howe and Carmel Egan. The text describing their tours is sprinkled with what are probably inside jokes. When they show him a favorite lookout spot, Bryson tells them that he is amazed with the view and that if they put this in New England it would be filled with tourists at all times. They look at the empty walkways around them, and Alan Howe tells him not to put the location in his book. Bryson replies that of course he will not.

After a flight from Melbourne back to Sydney, Bryson drives north along the coast toward Brisbane. He is running behind schedule and, while stopped for the night in an unremarkable town called Macksville, in New South Wales, he tries to figure out how much he can see of Brisbane in three days. He decides to forgo most of the sights in Brisbane and instead visit Myall Creek, the sight of a famous incident involving the slaughter of Aborigines.

Bryson presents a brief overview about the initial peopling of the Australian continent, which occurred sometime between 45,000 and 60,000 years ago, and must have involved either a miraculous feat of ancient seafaring or a preposterously rare accidental migration. By the time Europeans arrived to colonize Australia there were anywhere from 300,000 to 1 million Aborigines living on the continent. Their numbers have been slashed dramatically during the twentieth century and may now be as low as 60,000.

The indiscriminate killing of native Australians was condoned by Britain in the early part of the nineteenth century. All in all, perhaps 20,000 Aborigines were intentionally killed by white settlers, sometimes merely for the fun of killing. This began to change with an

incident at Myall Creek in 1838. After a group of white settlers rounded up approximately twenty-five Aborigines in the area, on the admittedly preposterous suspicion of cattle rustling, and summarily executed them all, public outrage, led by journalist Edward Smith Hall and Governor George Gipps, led to the trial and hanging of seven of the men involved. From that point on, the indiscriminate killing of Aborigines moved underground, and continued well into the twentieth century.

In the town of Bingara, near where the Myall Creek massacre occurred, Bryson talks to a local journalist named Paulette Smith, who has studied the incident. Bryson is stunned when she tells him that few people know about the incident, there is no memorial, and little to know interest in it from passing tourists. She explains that Myall Creek was one of many mass killings of Aborigines, and despite the fact that it is unique because the white people who did it were punished for it, most people do not single it out as a special event.

After Myall Creek, Bryson drives into Surfer's Paradise, on the Gold Coast, but is unimpressed with its glitzy chain hotels and brand name shopping centers. He spends a short day watching the beach, then heads back south along the Pacific Highway, towards Sydney.

Bryson works hard to convey a sense of amazement at the incredible odds of the incident or incidents that peopled Australia, but in many ways this reaction shows the ignorance that most people have regarding species migration. Australia and other far more remote islands have acquired migrant species throughout time. Accidental migration of species is a common story in geologic history. The incident seems amazing to human beings because we have a difficult time thinking about large chunks of time, and how the odds of even an extremely improbable event approach inevitability if they are allowed thousands, tens of thousands, or millions of years to occur.

Chapters 14-15

Chapters 14-15 Summary and Analysis

For his next and most daring trip to Australia, Bryson is joined by his friend Allan Sherwin. They fly into North Queensland for a look at the Barrier Reef before heading west into the forbidding desert of Australia's interior. Things go wrong from the beginning, as flooding prevents them from driving north into the jungles and initially they are stuck in Cairns. They spend the first day hiding from the monsoon in the hotel bar, Bryson assaulting his friend with a list of the painful and deadly animals that inhabit this region and with several gruesome stories about saltwater crocodile attacks. They cannot swim in the pleasant looking cove that the hotel sits in because it is box jellyfish breeding season and a dip could bring severe pain and even death. Sherwin asks Bryson incredulously what kind of country he has brought him to.

The next day, they board a large ship that ferries tourists thirty-eight miles out to the Great Barrier Reef. They moor at a place called Agincourt Reef. They first take a ride on a semi-submersible boat for a few of the reef. They decide to do a bit of snorkeling, but Bryson's swimming skills are not up to the tasks and he quickly leaves Allan to the adventure.

The next day the rains let up, and they drive north into the tropical forest to Daintree, and explored the beach at Cape Tribulation, where Captain Cook first laid eyes on Australia.

Allan Sherwin and Bill Bryson enjoy one-upping each other throughout their travels. Sherwin is clearly the more adventurous and athletic of the pair, so Bryson tries to gain the advantage early by shocking the younger man with a litany of all the poisonous and potential fatal animals that inhabit Queensland. Sherwin sends back a snapper entree after Bryson informs him of a rare but unpleasant virus that the fish can inflict upon those that eat it. Sherwin teases Bryson about his inept attempt to snorkel in the Great Barrier Reef. Bryson, who was having trouble even keeping his mask on while treading water on the surface, leaves the water early, but just to razz his more athletic chum, he dries off with Sherwin's shirt, which is soaking wet when Sherwin leaves the water and picks it up. Sherwin seems happy to continue Bryson's tradition from his earlier trips of exploration during the day and drinking at night.

They fly into Darwin, a small town on Australia's north coast, or "topside" as the majority of Australians call it. They spend a dreadful night in a hotel that Bryson spends much time mercilessly slandering because of the stupendously unprofessional service they receive in the place. Darwin had been devastated by Cyclone Tracy in 1974, and there was still evidence of this destructive event in the town. In the local museum, they listen to a tape recording made of the storm by a priest and browse through a stuff menagerie of local animals, including a seventeen foot crocodile named Sweetheart who, when he was alive, had a penchant for attacking boats.

They set off south on the Stuart Highway, to cover the 1479 desolate kilometers to Alice Springs. During World War II, the area briefly became a staging area for the Allies, at one time holding as many as 100,000 troops. Today the desert has swallowed up most of the remains, and few of the buildings are intact and visible from the road. The stop for the night in a town called Daly Waters and stay at the local public house, one of only a handful of buildings in the town. In Daly Waters they visit the famous Stuart Tree, where in 1862, explorer John McDuall Stuart stumbled upon a stream of fresh water that saved his expedition, the first expedition to find a practicable route from Adelaide in the south to the northern coast.

That night they drink far too much in Daly Water's surprisingly crowded and lively pub. The next morning when Bryson asks Allan if he had disgraced himself, Allan says no, but that he agreed to a month-long house swap in the summer with a tourist couple from South Korea. When Bryson asks if this is a joke, Allan reaches into Bryson's front pocket and pulls out the Korean's business card on which is written, in Bryson's hand, the start and end dates he had agreed to.

Bryson successfully conveys the desolation of Australia's interior, but this is not a dive into the bush sort of trip. They are driving in an air conditioned car on a paved road frequented by shipping convoys, and though their surroundings are desolate, it is unlikely that they are in danger of anything more than eye fatigue or extreme boredom.

Chapter 16-17

Chapter 16-17 Summary and Analysis

Bill Bryson and Allan Sherwin continue on the road to Alice Spring, surrounded by a bleak desert, Martian in its harsh red features. They stop briefly at a site known as the Devils Marbles, where a vast field of massive boulders, some thirty or more feet across, were perched seemingly miraculously on bases the widths of manhole covers.

They arrive in Alice Springs, a town of 25,000, but with an average of 350,000 tourists a year. Bryson comments on how bizarre it is, in the middle of such bleakness, to suddenly find a town with name brand shopping centers and international hotels. Disappointed with their hotel view of the K-mart parking lot, they decide the next day to drive the 300 kilometers to see Ayers Rock, or to give it its proper Aborigine name, Uluru, a massive sandstone rock formation, sacred to the Aborigines and designated by the UNESCO as a World Heritage Site. Both men are transfixed by the massive rock, but as they were unable to get rooms at the nearby tourist town, they are forced to start back to Alice Springs after spending only two hours driving around Uluru.

Throughout the book, Bryson's admiration and awe for all things Australian has been evident. He is clearly fascinated by the culture, the geography, and the history. He has described many of these elements in loving detail, but it is clear from his description of the great rock Uluru that nothing captivated him more than it. Even his most reverential descriptions of other sites contained his typical flashes of sarcastic humor, as if he was saying, "I like this alot, but here's something funny about it anyway..." Not so with Uluru. He only spends two hours at the site with Allan Sherwin, and they do not even get to do any climbing on the rock, but there is not one sarcastic quip in the whole of his description. He impresses upon the reader that the most important thing he wishes to say about Uluru, is that the reader must go see

Bill Bryson and Allan Sherwin return to Alice Springs and take a room at a motel at the edge of town whose chief attractions for them is that it has both a pool and a bar. Allan, who is flying out of Alice Springs to return home the day after the next, tells Bryson that he will be spending his final day in Australia lounging by the pool and working on his tan. It is thus that Bryson finds himself venturing out alone the next day. He visits the Alice Springs Desert Park, a kind of desert habitat museum, containing a great deal of information on the various types of desert in Australia's interior, along with a host of desert animals in captivity. Bryson is surprised by the excellence of the facility. He also visits a small aviation museum that houses the restored airplane Kookaburra, which flew into the desert in April of 1929 to search for the lost plane of aviation legend Charles Kingsford Smith. The Kookaburra went down in the Tanami desert, and its two occupants, Keith Anderson and Bob Hitchcock, soon expired of thirst. Kingsford Smith and his crew were later rescued from the much more hospitatible site, the Kimberley Coast, at which they were forced to set down when their plane had run out of fuel.

After dropping Allan Sherwin off at the Alice Springs airport the next day, Bryson visits the Alice Springs School of Air, a sort of classroom on the radio, where a teacher conducts lessons with young children spread out on the ranches over one thousand miles around Alice Springs. Bryson walks about Alice Springs, and occasionally spies an Aborigine loitering about, often bruised, bandaged, or in general in a bad way. It reminds him of a conversation he had in Cairns with a lawyer named Jim Brooks, who had for years been trying to do what he could to ease the plight of the native Australian. He had told Bryson about the horrors of the government relocation and reeducation programs of the twentieth century, in which the government seized young Aborigine children from their parents, forced them into new communities, often telling them that their parents were dead or did not want them any more, in a misguided attempt to integrate the Aboriginal children into the white community.

Chapters 18-19

Chapters 18-19 Summary and Analysis

After a short plane ride, Bryson arrives in Perth, the only large city on Australia's western coast. He encounters an echidna, the only creature related to the bizarre duck-billed platypus. The echidna and the platypus are the sole members of the animal group known as monotremes, and their curious nature, part reptile, part mammal, has baffled scientist since their discovery. He encounters the hedgehog-like echidna while strolling through Kings Park on his way to the Perth botanical gardens, which he proclaims to be Australia's best. Bryson points out how the varied and in many cases harsh environments of Australia promote specialization in species and is responsible for Australia's staggeringly high numbers of unique flora and fauna.

Perth owed much of its success to the boom in mineral mining Australia experienced after 1950, much of along the western coast. Bryson walks through Perth's nouveaux riche suburbs, filled with palatial mansions and created largely by the mineral boom, to try to find the thirty-five million dollar home that had belong to one of the more famous land owners and miners, Lang Hancock, who died in 1992, but who at one time could claim that his land held more iron ore than the United States and Canada combined. After viewing the home from the street, Brysons walks on to the suburb called Fremantle, which lies just outside of Perth, on the beach.

The next day, Bryson drives south into the jarrah and karri forests southwest of Perth. The Karri tree is to Australia what the sequoia is to North America. They grow up to 250 feet tall and can reach almost 50 feet around. The Jarrah tree is slightly smaller but no less arresting. Bryson drives into the forest to a place called the Valley of the Giants, to visit a site called the Tree Top Walk, at which one may walk on an elevated platform set in the trees.

Next, Bryson sets off on an eight hour drive north from Perth to Sharks Bay to see an example of the lichen-like creatures known as stromatolites, whose origins date to nearly 3.5 billions years ago. At a small town called Kalbarri, he along with most of the town's population of 1,500 watch from the beach as a large fishing boat, holed on a reef the previous day and nearly lost, is towed in to port. Just north of Kalbarri is Red Bluff Beach, where in 1629, Captain Francisco Pelsaert, as a form of punishment for cruelty and mutiny, marooned two dutch sailors.

At Sharks Bay, Bryson walks out into the sheltered cove on a walkway above the shallow water. Below him, stromatolites, which appear as clumps of indistinct gray matter, dot the water. They are in appearance completely unremarkable. What is remarkable about them is that they are the oldest known living species of life on earth, and the cove that they inhabit has been lost by time. A wall of of sand dunes known as the Faure Sill protects the tiny cove. That and the unique climate of the region make it

the only place on earth in which the environment of the stromatolite's original time, 3.5 billion years ago, has remained, and the only place in which they have survived.

Bryson entertains the brief fantasy of continuing his drive north all the way to Darwin, but is forced to return to Perth and end his trip.

The last two chapters are more wistfully written than the rest of the book. Perhaps it is the departure of Allan Sherwin, who has been with Bryson since this trip began, or perhaps it is that Bryson's owe trip comes to an end after the stromatolite adventure, but Bryson's tone is one of loss. At the end of the book, he reminds the reader of a phenomenon he mentioned in the first chapter, that Australia receives scant attention from the outside world, and he remarks that when his trip is over and he is forced to leave, that it is almost as if Australia will cease to exist when he goes. He will not be able to learn about the conclusion of the political events he has been following while in the country, he will not know if some new species has been discovered in the desert, and years later, he may not even be able to remember which sites he saw in the country and which he did not see.

Characters

Bill Bryson

A lifetime professional writer, Bryson has written several travel narratives, informational nonfiction, and fiction works. He describes himself throughout the book in self-deprecating terms. He is pudgy, accident prone, nonathletic, a sloppy sleeper, and a sarcastic cutup. Bryson was born in Des Moines, Iowa in 1951. His father was a sportswriter, as his older brother Michael is to this day, so Bryson was raised in a writing family. He was educated at Drake University, and has since received several honorary degrees. He and his wife Cynthia have four children.

Throughout the book, Bryson sets himself up as the antithesis of the rough Australian environment. Where much of Australia is a harsh desert, Bryson is pudgy, where Australia's seas are challenging and hold many dangers, Bryson is clumsy and unathletic. He demonstrates this on each of the three trips in the book, but it is cast in particularly strong light in his boogie boarding episode, his attempt to outrun a pack of dogs on the outskirts of Sydney, and his fruitless attempt to snorkel at the Great Barrier Reef.

Bryson is clearly enamored with the Australian culture, even the parts of it that seem bizarre or ineffectual. His writing paints him as as an analytical intellectual, with a sharp, dry wit. While this can sometimes make him seem as though he is putting on airs, his self-deprecation usually mitigates any sense that he thinks himself superior to most of the people he encounters, even though he can run circles around them linguistically. He has his talents and they have theirs, and he is impressed with the Australian people in general. Still, many of his jokes take the form of a quip he makes to an average person at the end of a conversation, which he knows that they do not understand. In this way, he manages to laugh with and at everything he sees. Still, his reverence for the continent is far stronger than his criticism.

Allan Sherwin

Allan Sherwin met Bill Bryson in a pub in London, before Bryson was to set off for his third and most challenging Australian trip. Bryson had mentioned that the conditions in the desert interior of Australia are so harsh that explorers have often had to drink their own urine and the urine of their horses or camels to survive. Sherwin finds this concept so fascinating that he immediately asks Bryson if he can join Bryson for a trip through the desert. As they are flying over the Pacific, the men jokingly give one another permission to drink the other's urine if they get lost in the outback.

When they arrive in Queensland, Bryson immediately puts Sherwin on the defensive by reading off a virtual list of dangerous critters that surround them, both in the land and in the nearby waters of the seemingly pleasant beach, which they cannot swim in because

it is box jellfish mating season. Sherwin soon gets the upper hand though. He is clearly the more athletic of the two, and he mocks Bryson's pathetic attempt to snorkel when the two visit the Great Barrier Reef. To get Sherwin back for this, Bryson uses Sherwin's shirt to dry off while the other man is still diving.

Both men seem to like to end the day with a beer, and in several instances the most critical piece of information that they seek when they enter a new town is the location of the pub. Sherwin even breaks the door down on one rarely used drinking room in Darwin. On the way to Alice Springs, they stay seemingly in the middle of nowhere, in a town called Daly Waters, which only contains a handful of buildings. Ironically, it is there that they get the most inebriated, as a strange influx of people fills up the local pub and the two men join in the party.

Sonja Stubing

A young woman who works for the regional tourist office of Broken Hill, Sonja accompanies Bill Bryson and Trevor Hart out into the desert to the mining town of Menindee.

Steve Garland

A former professional photographer from Sydney, Steve Garland works as the chief warden of Kinchega National Park, a region over 26,000 square miles in size, but with a population of just 2,500.

Walter Burley Griffin

Walter Burley Griffin was an American architect and disciple of Frank Lloyd Wright, who was picked to provide the initial urban planning for Canberra.

Lachlan Macquarie

Macquarie was a Scotsman and governor of the colony on Australia in the early nineteenth century. Australia is littered with places, towns—landmarks, rivers, lakes, etc.—bearing variations of his name.

Thomas Austin

Thomas Austin was an Australia landowner who, in 1859, released a small bag of rabbits on his property with the intention of hunting them for sport. His mistake led to millions of devastated acres as the rabbits, who found themselves in a land with no natural predators to thin their numbers, proceeded to breed and spread out, devouring everything green in their path.

Catherine Veitch

Catherine Veitch was Bill Bryson's first Australian friend. He met her at a reading in Melbourne in 1992, and visited her home several times before her death.

Edward Gibbon Wakefield

While in prison at Newgate Prison in London in the early 1830s on charges of child abduction, Edward Gibbon Wakefield conceived of a planned community of investors and industrialist to be located on the southern coast of Australia. This expedition marks the founding of what is now the city of Adelaide.

Reginald Sprigg

Sprigg was a young government geologist who, while on a survey in the Ediacaran hills in 1946, discovered the fossil that was later named after him, the Spriggina fossil, which formed the basis for a new epoch in geological history, called Ediacaran after the location in which he found the fossil.

Ginger Faye Meadows

Meadows was an American model killed by a saltwater crocodile in 1987. Her death is among the most famous of all saltwater crocodile fatalities, particularly because she was swimming with another woman, who witnessed the attack, and because both women saw the crocodile approach. Most victims of crocodile attack do not see the dangerous predator approach.

Harold Holt

Holt was prime minister of Australia for two years before he took an ill-advised dip in the treacherous waters of Cheviot Beach, on the Mornington Peninsula near Melbourne. His body was never recovered.

Alan Howe

Now the editor of the Sunday Sun-Herald in Melbourne, Alan Howe met Bill Bryson as an intern at the London Times.

Ron Riley

Ron Riley is a rangers in the Alpine National Park who showed Bill Bryson, Alan Howe, and Carmel Egan around the park in a four-wheel-drive vehicle.

Ned Kelly

Australia's most notorious and celebrated gangster.

Edward Smith Hall

Edward Smith Hall was a journalist from Sydney who campaigned for prosecution of the white men involved in the Myall Creek massacre in 1838.

Deirdre Macken

Deirdre Macken is a journalist from the Sydney Morning Herald who gives Bryson a tour of Sydney and tries to teach him out to use a boogie board.

Trevor Ray Hart

Trevor Ray Hart is a young photographer who accompanies Bill Bryson on a trip across the Australian desert on the exotic Indian Pacific railroad.

Objects/Places

Bluey, bluebottle

Also known as a Portuguese man-of-war, it is one of Australia's many potentially lethal creatures.

footy

The affectionate Melbourne slang for Australian Rules football.

Redback

A member of the widow family, the Redback is a virulent web spinner native to Australia. Its bite is highly toxic to humans but there have been no reported deaths from Redback bites since the discover of its anti-venom in 1956.

Giant Worms of Gippsland

Megascolides australis, the giant earth worm, a museum dedicated to which Bryson visits with Alan Howe and Carmel Egan.

Sydney

Sydney is the largest of Australia's cities and is today its most famous. Its Opera House and Bay Bridge are architectural sites of world renown.

Canberra

Canberra is a planned urban community that serves as Australia's capital. Bill Bryson describes it as a city inside of a park, with large expanses of open greenery spread between its municipal and government buildings.

Adelaide

Adelaide lies on the southern side of the Boomerang Coast. It is one of Australia's largest cities, but has been in decline for several years, losing much of its commercial industry to Sydney and Melbourne.

Melbourne

The second largest of Australia's cities, Melbourne has for decades competed with Sydney for prominence. It played host to the Olympics in 1952 but saw that honor fall to its rival city in 2000.

Alice Springs

Alice Springs is a town of 25,000 which lies near Ayers Rock in the middle of Australia's forbidding interior.

Uluru, Ayers Rock

Ayers Rock, or Uluru as the Aborigines call it, is a massive sandstone rock formation in Australia's desolate interior. This contiguous mass of stone rises over 1,000 feet out of the desert plain and is a sacred site to the Aboriginal people.

Darwin

A lonely outpost on the northern coast of Australia, or "topside" as the Australians call it, Darwin is described by Bryson as impressive only in the rudeness of its inhabitants.

The Great Barrier Reef

A massive collection of coral colonies, The Great Barrier Reef stretches for more than one thousand miles off the northeast coast of Australia and is home to tens of thousands of marine creatures.

stromatolites

An ancient form of life found only in three spots around the world, including Sharks Bay on the western coast of Australia, stromatolites filled the Earth's oceans over 3.5 billion years ago. Their respiratory processes were responsible for the accumulation of oxygen in the Earth's atmosphere, enabling the development of all complex life.

Perth

The largest city on the western coast of Australia, Perth owes its recent flourishing to the explosion of mineral mining that has occurred in western Australia beginning in the 1950s.

Jarrah, karri, and tingle

Strange names, to be sure, but jarrah, karri, and tingle are all species of eucalyptus and each grow to immense heights and, in the case of the karri, immense girths, in the forests of southeastern Australia.

Themes

Australia in the 1950s is Australia now

In the 1950s, Australia experienced a boom in material wealth, brought on by the official formation of the Australian state and by the discovery of the countries vast mineral resources. Thus, many of the towns of its interior spring up in the 1950s, seeded by immigration and usually placed near to a mining operation or ranch. Bryson notes that the small towns of Australia never left this lucrative decade. While the big cities on Australia's coast, Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide, and Perth, have all swollen into modern cities, and exist very much in the computerized, commercialized world of the twenty-first century, the tiny towns that fill the rest of the country are still sporting decor from the previous century. Bryson finds it charming. As he is driving through the bucolic farming country around Canberra, he finds that all of the radio stations are playing Doris Day and Frank Sinatra. Bryson, who was born in the 1950s and grew up in Des Moines, remarks that being in the small towns of Australia is almost like revisiting his childhood in Iowa. One is left to wonder what the next great boom will do to the country. In fifty years, will the small town Australian proprietor show travelers, with a sense of amazement, his satellite television set and his iPod, while in Sydney the population is driving hover cars.

The Plight of the Aborigines

Native Australians, known as Aborigines, probably migrated to the solitary continent more than 45,000 years ago. Up until the arrival of European colonizers, Aborigines had little contact with the outside world, and their culture developed on its own for tens of thousands of years. The arrival of European colonies brought great hardship for the local people. They were treated like vermin by the white colonists, eradicated by murder and disease. Their numbers, once in the millions, have dwindled down to just 60,000 at most. Even today, they live on the periphery of Australian society. Bryson is dismayed by their lack of participation in society. He says that you simply do not see them at all in the big cities, and in the small towns, you never see them working at any level of society. They come and go, standing on street corners, and limping vaguely in and out of civilization.

Australian attitudes toward Aborigines range from true compassion, to patronizing condescension, to outright racism. Many of the state's attempts to "civilize" the Aborigines have been both immoral and disasters. For a large part of the twentieth century, the Australian state claimed legal guardianship over Aborigine children, and would forcibly remove them from their parents and place them in foster care in white society, all in a misguided attempt to integrate Aborigines into white culture. The children were often told their parents were dead or did not wish to care for them anymore.

Bryson talks to many white Australians about the Aborigines, but he gets almost no answers. The Australians are at a loss for what to do with their native neighbors, and over and over, Bryson hears the same exhausting and helpless phrase from white Australians: "It's a problem."

Australia's deadly fauna

Australia is a country of extremes. This is true of its flora, its fauna, and its many environments. In the first chapter of the book, Bryson recites from the list of things in Australia that will kill you. Five on this list—the funnel web spider, box jellyfish, blue-ringed octopus, paralysis tick, and stonefish—are the deadliest of their type in the world. From snakes like the Taipan, to widow spiders like the Redback, Australia is full of venomous and potential lethal critters. Even the oddity know as the duck-billed platypus, almost cute for its delightful bill and glossy fur, is poisonous. The most deadly of Australia's creatures is the saltwater crocodile, which lurks in shallow bays and estuaries. Saltwater crocodile attacks can occur in seconds, and often all that witness see is the soft splash that signaled the victim being ripped underwater.

Australians are quick to tell you that the country's dangers are exaggerated. There are countermeasures and anti-venom for most of the creatures. There has not been a fatality from a Redback spider bite since the discovery of the anti-venom in the 1950s, even though thousands of Australians are bitten each years. There are only 150 known deaths due to saltwater crocodile attacks, a number not to be ignored, it is true, but infinitesimal in comparison with heart-attacks or car fatalities.

Bryon notices an interesting irony in the way Australians talk about their deadly creatures. Australians go out of their way to convince tourists that the lethality of the forgotten continent is exaggerated, but then often proceed, in the same conversation, to recount the times when they almost died, either by putting their foot down on a Taipan or swimming into a school of box jellyfish.

Style

Perspective

Bill Bryson is the son of two writers, and his many years as a journalist make him at home on a page. His talent for mixing witty observation and careful resource is well suited to writing about Australia, a country whose history contains stories both bizarre and amazing. Bryson is something of a clown, a quick witted man with a sarcastic remark resting perpetually on his tongue, but his reference and amazement for his subject keep his humor from sounding condescending. His prose is conversational, but not simple, chalked full as it is of lengthy words and rather intellectual analysis. If he sometimes tends towards academic superiority, this is easy nullified by his frank self-deprecation. He is a clown with words, but he is also literally a clown, flouncing around on his boogie board, battered by waves while making a ridiculous attempt at snorkeling, and stumbling face first into innumerable spiderwebs.

One thing is clear throughout the text, he truly loves Australia, and he conveys his sense of wonder to his reader, doing everything he can to impress upon the reader that the forgotten continent is a treasure that must be seen to be believed. In many ways, he portrays himself as a kid, lost on a continent of impossibilities, and his sense of wonder if contagious. The book does what all good travel narratives do. It fills its reader with a desire to hop a plane or a train or a boat and see the world for himself.

Tone

The tone of the book is split between reference for Australia's many wonders, and Bryson's relentless sarcasm. He writes in a confident, conversational style, as if he is relating the story to a friend, and his enthusiasm for the subject is evident in every story he tells, and in every description he writes about the ordinary and extraordinary sites of the country. He seeks throughout to impress upon his readers that they need to get themselves to this delightful continent at some point in their lives.

His daily excursions follow a familiar pattern. Usually he walks around the town he is in, takes in some of the sites, mostly museums and other places of cultural interest, then retires to a pub for an evening of contemplation about what he has seen. There are several nights when he gets drunk and wakes up the next morning with the previous night's activities a blur in his head. These personal moments add to the familiar feel of Bryson's narrative. His reader is a friend, with him on the journey during the day, carousing with him, beer in hand, at night, and waking up with him in the morning, sharing his fuzzy head and cottony tongue.

Structure

The book is broken up into three parts representing three trips Bryson makes to Australia. In the first, he visits Sydney and takes a train ride on the famous Indian Pacific line all the way across the country to Perth. On the second, he takes himself on a driving tour of the major cities of the Boomerang coast, Sydney, Canberra, Adelaide, and Melbourne. On the third, he and buddy Allan Sherwin, after taking a quick dip in the Great Barrier Reef, drive into Australia's blistering interior to visit Alice Springs, and the unique rock known as Uluru.

The chapter breaks are, for the most part, placed at the end of a successful day of site-seeing, after Bryson has knocked a few back at whatever pub he manages to find. The chapters are segmented based on either visits to individual locations, or digressions into Australian history. Bryson does not write whole chapters consisting of historical anecdotes. Instead, he disperses them throughout the text and keeps the reader in touch with his own journey at all times by keeping the digressions short and carefully tying them in to what he is seeing or doing. Nor are the digressions free of the sarcastic wit that he uses to tell his own tale. This continuity of tone binds the digressions to his journey.

Quotes

"Looking up, I discovered with a start that we were in the forbidden coach section. I have never felt so stared at in my life. As we followed David through the two coach cars, 124 pairs of sunken eyes sullenly followed our every move. These were people who had no dining car, no lounge bar, no cozy berths to crawl into at night. They had been riding upright for two days since leaving Sydney and still had twenty-four hours to go to Perth. I am almost certain that if we had not had the train manager as an escort, they would have eaten us." p. 41

"Do you know how sometimes on very fine days the sun will shine with a particular intensity that makes the most mundane objects in the landscape glow with an unusual radiance, so that buildings and structures you normally pass without a glance suddenly become arresting, even beautiful? Well, they seem to have that light in Australia nearly all the time." p. 74

"What is certain is that the Lambing Flat riot led to the adoption of what became known as the White Australia policy, which essentially forbade the immigration of any non-European people until the 1970s. It would—and I really don't mean to pun here—color nearly every aspect of Australian life for over a century." p. 82

"After years of patient study (and with cricket there can be no other kind) I have decided that there is nothing wrong with the game that the introduction of golf carts wouldn't fix in a hurry. It is not true that the English invented cricket as a way of making all other human endeavors look interesting and lively; that is merely an unintended side effect." p. 105

"That's the thing about Australia, you see. It teems with interesting stuff, but at the same time it's so vast and empty and forbidding that it generally takes a remarkable stroke of luck to find it." p. 120

"Just inside this transition area was a signposted path leading up a medium-sized eminence called Cheviot Hill. This is what I had come to see, for it was at Cheviot Beach, on the other side, that Harold Holt went for the Swim That Needs No Towel." p. 141

"This was a man, you understand, who had not so long ago held the second highest office in the land. The equivalent in America, I suppose, would be to find Walter Mondale sitting at a card table in a mall in Minneapolis selling White House coasters and other memorabilia." p. 154

"What is is about this one small corner of Victoria that led to the evolution of extremely outsized worms is a question that science has yet to answer—but then, it must be said, very few of the world's best minds are drawn to the questions of earthworm physiology and distribution." p. 173

"The tentacles of the box jellyfish carry enough wallop to kill a roomful of people, yet they live exclusively on tiny krill-like shrimp—creatures that hardly require a great deal of violent subduing. As ever in the curious world of Australian biology, no one knows why the jellyfish evolved such extravagant toxicity." p. 232

"Because it is so bang in the middle of nowhere, Alice Springs ought to seem a miracle—an actual town with department stores and schools and streets with names—and for a long time it was a sort of antipodean Timbuktu, a place tantalizing in its inaccessibility." p. 249

"My room had a balcony where I could watch the setting sun flood the desert floor and burnish the golden slopes of the MacDonnell Ranges beyond—or at least I could if I looked past the more immediate sprawl of a Kmart plaza across the road. In the 2 million or more square miles that is the Australian outback, I don't suppose there is a more unfortunate juxtaposition." p. 250

"Sensing me, it stopped. It had glossy black quills, pointing straight back, and had curled itself roughly into a ball, so I couldn't see its pointy snout, but it was clearly an echidna. It could be nothing else. I couldn't have been more thrilled. It was a little pathetic, I grant you, when you consider that this was my most exciting moment of engaging a creature in the wild in Australia. In a country filled with exotic and striking life-forms my high point was finding a harmless, animated pincushion in a city park." p. 276

"But that is of course the thing about Australia—that there is such a lot to find in it, but such a lot of it to find it in." p. 303

Topics for Discussion

Discuss the rivalry between Sydney and Melbourne. How has the Olympics affected this rivalry?

Small town Australia seems stuck in the 1950s. Give examples of this phenomenon from Bryson's travels.

Give some examples of Australia's toxic fauna. Discuss the irony with which Australians deal with their many potentially lethal critters.

Discuss the plight of the Aborigines. Give examples from other parts of the world where indigenous peoples came into conflict with colonizers. How is the plight of the Aborigine similar to these examples? How is it different?

Bryson relates the stories of multiple expeditions to find a convenient path through the country's interior. Discuss these missions, their successes and failures.

Does Bill Bryson's sarcastic humor undermine his sense of awe? Does his self-deprecation help to mitigate this?

Bryson describes Canberra as a city lost in a park, and Adelaide as a city replete with parks. Discuss the difference in these descriptions based on Bryson's observations.

Is conversation narrative, like Bill Bryson's, superior to an objective, pedagogical tone?