

The Life and Times of the Thunderbolt Kid Study Guide

The Life and Times of the Thunderbolt Kid by Bill Bryson

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Plot Summary

The Life and Times of the Thunderbolt Kid: A Memoir by Bill Bryson traces Bryson's childhood in 1950s America. He relates an all-American experience in Des Moines, Iowa, full of family oddities, friendships, and his own rich imagination. The work intertwines the events, people, and inventions that transformed America during the decade, along with Bryson's own experiences and thoughts in fourteen themed chapters. Throughout, Bryson uses his alter ego, the Thunderbolt Kid, and his humorous reminiscences to illuminate the concerns, preoccupations, and joys of a nation and a young boy in Iowa.

At some point in his childhood, Bryson decided that his biological parents could not possibly be his biological parents and he could not possibly be from earth. Finding an old football jersey with a golden thunderbolt on it that no one knew anything about confirmed for Bryson that he had been placed on this earth by King Volton of Planet Electro. Bryson spent his formative years vaporizing morons and perfecting ThunderVision, which allowed Bryson to see under women's clothing, if only in his imagination.

Aside from his superhero powers, Bryson experienced many of the trials and travails of childhood in the 1950s. He endured family vacations, annoying neighborhood kids, punishments at school, and a job as a paper boy. He learned that adults were not to be trusted, playtime disappointments were more disappointing because one never expected them, and that time moves especially slow when one was waiting for Christmas. Yet, Bryson's childhood also included many joys, including watching Mr. Milton belly flop off the high dive at the lake, reading comic books at the Kiddie Corral, and seeing movies each week with his mother.

Intertwined with Bryson's experiences are the events and people that made 1950s America what it was. He shows a nation filled with optimism and excitement over increasing prosperity and inventions like the television, fast food, dishwashers, and the hydrogen bomb. Yet, in the midst of digging swimming pools and investing for the future, Americans also dealt with fears over polio, Communism, and the potential for World War III. The decades of Bryson's childhood were both intoxicating and frightening for growing children and their parents.

Through the book, readers see Bryson growing up as the world around him changes. The places and people of his childhood would eventually pass on to become something altogether different, with just hints of the past. His recollections bring back a time that has largely passed, but that had a large impact on the nation and the generation of baby boomers.



Chapter 1, Hometown

Chapter 1, Hometown Summary and Analysis

Bill Bryson traces his childhood in 1950s America, relating an all-American experience in Des Moines, Iowa. The work intertwines the events, people, and inventions that transformed America during the decade with Bryson's own experiences and thoughts in fourteen themed chapters. Throughout, Bryson uses his alter ego, the Thunderbolt Kid, and his humorous reminiscences to illuminate the concerns, preoccupations, and joys of a nation and a young boy in Iowa.

Bill's father liked to practice isometrics in the 1950s. He had a knack for practicing in airplanes. He'd go to the back of the plane and would push against the outer wall of the airplane, looking like he was trying to put a hole in it or force his way out.

Although Bill's father was never embarrassed, Bill had enough embarrassment for both of them. His dad worked for The Des Moines Register as a sportswriter, and Bill sometimes got to go along to Major League cities to attend a ball game. Most of the time, the trips were in the Midwest, but once every summer they would fly somewhere to see the games. Bill got to go in the clubhouse and onto the field before the game, meeting players like Willie Mays and Ernie Banks.

In the 1950s, America was experiencing a boom in the economy and people were buying up things like washing machines and vacuum cleaners. People were excited about owning things like a toaster. Bill's family treated the new refrigerator like a treasured guest.

People looked toward the future, imagining space colonies and underwater cities. Advertisers cashed in on the search for enrichments, offering home courses on everything from cutting meat to building radios. Bill's brother once bought a booklet that was supposed to teach him how to throw his voice and a "device" that was supposed to turn a black and white television into a color one, although neither ad turned out to be as advertised.

The highlight of Bill's father's year were the two weeks he'd spend going to the World Series as a sports reporter. He also got to witness many famous events during the games. Back then, the games were played during the day so the only way that most people got to see the games on TV was to play sick or gather around a TV in town. After a particularly famous series between the Brooklyn Dodgers and the Giants, Bill's father returned home to welcome William, his second son and third child, into the world on a snowy, December day.

1951 wasn't a very eventful year in the United States. Harry Truman was president and the country was at war with Korea. The case known as Brown v. the Board of Education began in Topeka, Kansas, although it would take several more years for it to reach the



Supreme Court. The population of America was around 150 million people, but there were no interstate highways yet. The country was concerned about nuclear war. Air raid drills happened across the country.

On December 8, Des Moines gained seven new boys and three girls, Bill being one of them. He had one older sister, Betty, and one older brother, Michael. His sister was five years older than Bill and his brother nine years older. They were really like adults to him, since they were older and not around much as he grew up.

Bill's mother had the additional pressure of running a home along with working at the De Moines Register. She was always late, pretty forgetful, and supper was almost always burned. Like other people in Iowa at the time, they didn't eat anything adventurous. Most of their food was actually leftovers. As both his parents grew up in the Depression, nothing was thrown away unless there was no way to avoid it.

Bishop's was a cafeteria downtown Des Moines where the family would go. The food was good and the restrooms had atomic toilets. When someone flushed the toilet, the seat lifted, retreated into a recess, and came back out sanitized. Des Moines had other delights as well, like the best banana cream pie and the best baked goods. The town was full of small businesses that were the best. Even if they weren't the best, they were Des Moines'.

The local supermarket, Dahl's, had something called a Kiddie Corral. This was built to look like a cowboy corral and it was filled with comic books. Parents dropped their kids off at the Kiddie Corral and kids didn't care how long their parents shopped. Dahl's also had a conveyor belt system that carried your bagged groceries to a pick up spot.

Businesses in Des Moines all had something unique thing, such as the underground passage that connected the Younkers stores on each side of Eighth Street. Younkers also had a Tea Room, where mothers took their daughters. Bill's mother and sister went each week, and after Bill learned of this he bugged them to go along too. Finally, Bill's mother invited him when they were shopping downtown one day. Every child got to choose a present from the toy box and Bill was looking forward to this most of all. He took his time choosing, but when he opened it, it was a miniature doll. Bill tried to exchange. The moment he was turned down was the birth of the Thunderbolt Kid.



Chapter 2, Welcome to Kid World

Chapter 2, Welcome to Kid World Summary and Analysis

It's a myth that childhood goes by fast. Instead, time moves more slowly in Kid World, particularly if it was a sunny afternoon and one had to be in school. Time moves even more slowly when a holiday like Christmas or a summer vacation is coming. Time moved the slowest when Bill was sitting in Dr. D.K. Brewster's dental chair. Dr. Brewster was old with wobbly hands and he didn't believe in using Novocaine. Bill's family seemed to be his only patients, probably because Bill's father was cheap.

Weekends were also long in Kid World. Sunday morning alone could last for months while Bill waited for the television programs to start. There was always a lot to do on weekends, though. Bill could spend a whole morning getting all the laces on his shoes right. Injuries provided another activity since one could attract a small audience with a splinter and sunburns inevitably left the skin peeling, which could easily take up another few hours. Bill had knee scars that he kept for years.

Since the days were long and not much ever really happened, kids often watched things, hoping that something more exciting would happen. Bill liked to go with his father to the lumberyard just in case one of the men cut off a finger or hand. Kids also liked to do things just to see what would happen. Sometimes they would make a disgusting drink to see what it tasted like or pinch the fire on a match head. Bill knew more in those first ten years than at any other point in his life, such as what was written under tables, what was at the back of every closet in the house, and how to get across any room in the house without touching the floor.

Bill spent a great deal of time with Buddy Doberman, who lived across the alley and had good toys. Buddy was also stupid, which meant that Bill could almost always get him to take the fall for something bad that they had done.

Des Moines was a safe city with long streets and leafy trees. Grand Avenue was the main street through town, bringing people from their homes to the downtown area. Bill's family lived in an area known as South of Grand, which was where the best houses and oldest trees were.

There were more kids then. In the mid-1950s, America had over thirty-two million children under the age of twelve. If Bill stood on any street corner with his bike, a hundred kids would appear wanting to know where he was going and whether they could come along. Vacant lots would have six hundred kids already playing when he got there. The numbers were higher at the parks that bridged two different neighborhoods. Mostly, the kids were unsupervised, but it was still peaceful. Fights happened, but they never went too far.



In Bill's tenth year, he became a memorable figure in the realm of accidental bloodshed. He was playing football when he injured his head. Blood was spurting from his head like a sprinkler and kids thought he'd die. Bill ran home and his parents called the family doctor and his mother wrapped towels around his head. Dr. Alzheimer arrived four hours, later smelling of bourbon.

Natural dangers in Iowa were minimal. Cicada killers emerged from the ground in some years and the danger was that one would fly up your shorts. Another threat was poison sumac, as were the red berries in the backyard. Bill knows that the berries weren't really deadly since they made a little neighborhood kid eat some once as an experiment. The only real danger in town was the Butter boys, who liked to harass smaller children. The Butter boys were bigger than everyone else and they had been held back in school multiple times. One day the spring rains flooded the small shacks that the Butter boys lived in. The Thunderbolt Kid guided the rain across the prairies to the spot.



Chapter 3, Birth of a Superhero

Chapter 3, Birth of a Superhero Summary and Analysis

Bill had an uncle who had a permanent hole in his throat. When the gauze over it came loose, Bill could see the food that he'd eaten and it looked like cottage cheese. Although Bill told his mother that he didn't like cottage cheese, she forgot about this and put it out at every meal. His mother was forgetful about many things, like her own kids' middle names or the dates of their birth.

Even though his mom was forgetful, Bill and his family couldn't hold this against her. His mother liked everyone and everyone liked her. Every Friday, Bill would meet his mother downtown and they would go to dinner and a movie. Bill would hurry downtown after school. First, he would stop at Pinky's, a novelty and joke store. He'd walk around the mezzanine at Frankel's and the check out Younker's for new Hardy Boys books. He'd go to the soda foundation at Woolworth's and then go to the Register to pick up his mother. They'd go to Bishop's for dinner and then to one of the three old movie places downtown. In the middle of the movie, Bill always went to the restroom where he would lock the stall doors from the inside and crawl under the divider to the next one until they were all locked. After the movie, they would always go to Toddle House for pie.

One night at Toddle House, Bill realized that the old man sitting next to him had been drinking out of the same glass as Bill. The man was eating poached eggs, which disgusted Bill. When the man got up to leave, the Thunderbolt Kid sent bolts of electricity into his back and the man disappeared.

Bill's not entirely sure how the Thunderbolt Kid got his great powers. He decided that his parents couldn't really be his biological parents and that he really wasn't from earth. One day when Bill was about six he came across a woolen jersey in the basement. It was green with a golden thunderbolt in satin on the chest. No one knew where it had come from or how it had gotten into the house. Bill was sure that it was the Sacred Jersey of Zap, which had been left for him by King Volton, his real father. King Volton must have brought Bill to earth in 1951 and put him with a regular family in Iowa, who had been hypnotized to believe that he was theirs.

Bill added a number of things to his Thunderbolt Jersey, including a Zorro whip, a bow and arrow, a Roy Rogers vest and cowboy boots, an army surplus canteen, a compass, and a Batman flashlight. For a little while, he even wore underpants over his jeans like Superman, but this attracted too much laughter at the Kiddie Corral. All of the gear weighed around seventy pounds all together, but with it on, Bill became the Thunderbolt Kid (Captain Thunderbolt later).

Bill didn't use his superpowers to do good. Primarily, he used his X-ray vision to see beneath women's clothes and vaporize people that he didn't like. Bill used to think a lot



about X-ray vision. He wondered how one could use X-ray vision to see under a person's clothes because one would also see their blood and muscles. Even if one could just focus on the skin, the body parts would still be distorted by all the various undergarments.



Chapter 4, The Age of Excitement

Chapter 4, The Age of Excitement Summary and Analysis

Everything seemed better in the 1950s and people felt indestructible. Kids didn't wear helmets when riding bikes or seat belts in the car. All foods were good for people and every week brought news of something else that would just make life better. The military began testing atomic bombs in Nevada, which soon became a tourist attraction so people could feel the shake of the earth and see the mushroom cloud.

Television became the joy of the 1950s. Along with the television came TV dinners, created by C.A. Swanson and Sons. Television programs were different than today as well. Back then, commercials were built right into the show so the characters would pause during a conversation for an announcer to give the commercial.

The only thing that came close to the fascination with television was America's love of the automobile. After World War II, the number of cars exploded. By the middle of the decade, households were buying multiple cars. The drive-in restaurant, drive through banking, and drive-in movies all started.

TV and cars combined to produce the desire and means to get to other places. Walt Disney realized this and opened Disneyland in 1955 in Los Angeles. People predicted disaster as amusement parks were decreasing in popularity and there wasn't any public transportation to Disneyland. However, Disney used television to bring the people, by launching a television program that was really a big commercial. Since Bill's father liked to take cheap vacations and liked to visit obscure museums, Bill wasn't likely to get there.

The worst part about vacations was stopping in Omaha where Bill's mother's relatives lived. His mother had grown up poor in a shack-like house by Omaha's stockyards. After Bill's mother got a scholarship to Drake University, she never really went back. Her mother died when she was young. Her sister became a nun and her father died. That left her three brothers at the house. Bill's father called the brothers the Three Stooges and Bill thought that they were very uninteresting. They'd lived in the small house their whole life and to Bill's knowledge none of them worked or went outside very much.

In 1960, a curious thing happened just before Bill's birthday. Bill's father said that the family was going on vacation over Christmas break, but wouldn't say where they were going. They headed west, passing the Rockies and going on to California. Christmas Day, the family spent on the beach and on the day after, they went to Disneyland. Bill had the best day on the rides, thinking it was the best place ever. The next morning, they got back in the car to drive home, although they didn't stop in Omaha on this trip.



Chapter 5, The Pursuit of Pleasure

Chapter 5, The Pursuit of Pleasure Summary and Analysis

Even fun was different in the 1950s. There wasn't as much of it, for one thing, but this made you appreciate it more when it came along. One of Bill's more pleasurable times came on an August day in 1959. His mother had accepted an invitation for Bill to go to Lake Ahquabi for the day with Milton Milton's family. This didn't make Bill happy, since Milton Milton was really annoying and his family was worse. Bill used his ThunderVision on them repeatedly, but they seemed to be indestructible.

After lunch, Mrs. Milton made everyone sit quietly for forty-five minutes so they didn't get cramps. There was a wooden platform in the lake with a really high diving board that no one ever jumped off. Mr. Milton had been a diving star in high school, which he liked to tell everyone about, and decided to give it a go. He sprang off the board but was going really fast. Somewhere in the middle, he flailed and hit the water in the form of an X. Two fishermen towed him back to shore and he spent the rest of the day on the beach, his entire body raw and with abrasions on every surface. That same day, Milton Junior cut himself with a hatchet. Bill thinks that it was one of the best days of his life.

The previous high point in Bill's life had involved Lincoln Logs. These were toy wood logs that one could use to build cabins or fences with. Buddy Doberman and Bill discovered that they could turn the toys white if they peed on them. They set out to create the first albino set at school over several weeks. They refused to tell anyone how they were doing it, however. Mr. Sipkowicz tasted the Lincoln Logs one day, thinking that the boys were using lemons.

Bill did find a great deal of pleasure in candy. His favorites were almost always made of wax like wax teeth or bottle caps. Bishop's had many penny candies available. Grund's, a small mom and pop store, also had them. An old couple ran the store and everything in the store was outdated. Children went to the store to steal candy, knowing that they wouldn't be caught. Sometimes kids made small purchases, but this was usually just a distraction.

Most things that were supposed to be fun in the 1950s were really disappointments, such as model making. It looked fun on the box, but it was messy and frustrating. Advertisers were good at making things look attractive and fun. The chemistry set that he got for Christmas one year had lots of stuff, but most of the experiments didn't work. Bill had more success randomly mixing things together from around the house.

Comic books were one of the few things that were really exciting. Millions were produced each month during the early 1950s. Bill read them to learn what was going on in the field of superheroes to keep his professional knowledge up to date. Then comic books decreased in number and kids stopped reading them as much, since they could

watch TV instead. Comic book producers tried new tricks, like making the heroines sexy, to get more kids reading. The Kiddie Corral began to fill up with comic books featuring Disney characters, which also made girls visit the Kiddie Corral more often.



Chapter 6, Sex and Other Distractions

Chapter 6, Sex and Other Distractions Summary and Analysis

In 1957, Bill's sister decided that she and Bill were going to see the movie Peyton Place, which was supposed to be a steamy movie. The movie itself was very anticlimactic, as no one got naked, just lots of people talking.

Not long after, Bill would get a little more insight into sex. He came in one Saturday afternoon and found his parents wrestling in bed. They told him that his mother was checking his father's teeth. In those days, it was hard to have sex because of all the various regulations on it. Almost every state outlawed various sexual acts, although the language never really identified the issue as sex so it was kind of confusing. The word "pregnant" wasn't allowed on television and various entertainment acts were shut down for being too suggestive.

Magazines like Playboy offered men and boys the chance to see naked women, although you couldn't legally buy them. Sometimes, at the drug store, Bill could sneak a peek at one if his dad was busy talking to the pharmacist. Most of the time, boys of the decade had to rely on the underwear spread of mail order catalogs. Another option was to spy on people. When boys discovered holes in the wall that allowed them to see undressed women, they charged admission.

In Bill's neighborhood, the girl everyone wanted to see naked was Mary O'Leary. She was very pretty, but she refused to take her clothes off. This made her even more attractive to Bill. One summer, Bill went to his grandparents' farm for the Fourth of July. When he returned, the other neighborhood boys told him that Mary had taken all her clothes off for them.

Not too long after this, Bill decided to take his father's closet chest apart. He took all the drawers out and found behind them his dad's modest set of girlie magazines. Bill took the magazines to the tree house to share with the other boys. He returned them before his dad got back, but Bill often wonders what his father thought when he looked at the magazines again. They now were well-worn and had balloon captions.



Chapter 7, Boom!

Chapter 7, Boom! Summary and Analysis

On November 1, 1952, the United States exploded a hydrogen bomb in the Eniwetok atoll in the Pacific Ocean. No one knew what this bomb would do and it could potentially have ignited all the oxygen, ending life. On March 1, 1954, a bigger bomb was dropped over the Bikini atoll. However, the bomb also came with big problems. Radioactive ash fell on nearby islands, making many people sick and even killing some. Japanese fishing boats that had been caught in the ash unloaded their catch in port, distributing the tainted fish to the population.

Afterward, the United States used Nevada as a test site more frequently, although it continued to use other places as well. By 1958, the average child in the United States carried ten times more strontium than the year before. The tests were moved underground, but sometimes those blasts created huge craters and fallout over nearby states. While the population waited for World War III, comic books gave kids an imaginary one.

People had other things to worry about though. Polio was a concern, and people worried about keeping up with the Joneses. They also had to worry about teenagers. Although there had always been people of this age, teens became more visible during this time period. They smoked, talked back to authority figures, were disrespectful, listened to rock 'n' roll, and they petted each other in the back of cars.

The other fear of the time period was Communism. Hollywood came under scrutiny and various hearings were held. Many states instituted loyalty oaths. Leaflets were handed out that helped people identify Communists. Joseph R. McCarthy was the best at producing fear, waving around lists of Communists, until he tried to implicate General George Marshall. That signaled McCarthy's downfall.



Chapter 8, School Days

Chapter 8, School Days Summary and Analysis

Bill's elementary school, Greenwood, was the most handsome elementary school Bill has ever encountered. Everything gave an air of class and craft. The auditorium was like a real theater, which made even the worst performance sound just a bit better. The school also had the best gym, with large windows, varnished wood, and echoing acoustics that made normal gym sounds better.

Bill and his classmates played inside most of the time because it was almost always winter. The school was usually heated to tropical proportions to combat this, keeping everyone sleepy all the time. Much of the school day was taken up by taking clothes off and putting them back on again. Since Greenwood didn't have a cafeteria, students had to go home for lunch, dressing and undressing no less than four times each day.

Bill wasn't particularly popular with his teachers. They sent Bill to the cloakroom quite a bit, which Bill still thinks is strange. Although it was meant to be a punishment, the cloakroom was where everyone's stuff was and a child could go through any of it or read what he wanted.

Bill didn't do much as a student. The only reason he went to school at all was for the mimeograph paper, which had an intoxicating scent. On Mondays, Bill would jump out of bed early just because the mimeograph paper was handed out that morning. On other mornings, Bill would either come in late or not at all.

Bill's reputation also wasn't helped by the fact that he seemed to do everything wrong, helped along by his mother's forgetfulness. He always forgot to bring something for show and tell or Valentine's cards for the class, or permission slips for field trips.

Bill did like school, despite all of this. He really enjoyed reading, especially the Dick and Jane books. The family was perfect in the books and no one ever bled or got injured. Everyone was healthy and good; there were no Butter boys or atomic bombs or poison sumac. There was no dirt, pain, or bad smells. Everyone talked in a very formal way that didn't sound like humans. Bill liked the books so much that he used to take them home and just not return them.

Of course, once the books were at home, there really wasn't a reason to even go to school. His dad only got involved twice a year when the report card came home with all of Bill's absences listed. Although his father threatened military academies, nothing was ever done about it, particularly when his father saw the cost of the schools.

Every month, the school had a civil defense drill where a siren would sound and everyone, including the teacher, would get under their desks, pretending to save themselves from a nuclear blast. Bill remembers being amazed that everyone thought that getting under a desk would save them. Since no one was watching, he decided not

to participate. A few drills later, the principal and a National Guard member stopped in to check on things, and found Bill sitting in his desk reading a comic while everyone else was huddled under their desk.



Chapter 9, Man at Work

Chapter 9, Man at Work Summary and Analysis

Being a newspaper boy had to be one of the worst jobs of the 50s and 60s. Bill had to work in the afternoons six days a week and then get up before dawn on Sundays to deliver that day's paper.

Bill began working as a newspaper boy at the age of eleven, working the plum location around Greenwood school. But mansions have long driveways and Bill was quite absentminded, and sometimes couldn't remember if he'd left papers at any of the last thirty houses. It wasn't uncommon for him to finish the route and find extra papers in his bag.

Bill also had to spend three evenings a week trying to collect the subscription money from the people he delivered to. People would send him away, saying that they couldn't be bothered right then. Dogs were also a danger, with Dewey, a Labrador and the size of a black bear, being the worse. Dewey hated Bill. One day, Dewey bit him in the leg. When Bill showed Dewey's owners his wounds, they denied the attack. However, a week later, Dewey attacked a visitor to the owner's house and Dewey departed in a van, never to be seen again.

Bill did well, however, and just before his twelfth birthday, he bought himself a portable black and white television for his room. After that, he was rarely seen around the house. About the time Bill got his own television, he decided that he liked books better. He collected books from the shelves downstairs and read through a wide variety. By reading, he discovered that his mother had been a prom queen at Drake and that his father had several sports articles a year published in a series of books about the best sports writing. The new revelations made Bill revise his Thunderbolt Kid backstory. Now, he was their biological offspring and his father had been the one to have been dispatched by King Volton. The landing must have been hard, however, giving his father a concussion so he didn't remember anything about his mission.



Chapter 10, Down on the Farm

Chapter 10, Down on the Farm Summary and Analysis

Bill's grandparents lived in Winfield. Bill loved everything about the town, including Main Street and the cornfields around town. A big red barn and a small, neat house stood on his grandparent's farm. A big oak tree grew in the backyard.

Bill generally spent his time on the farm following his grandfather around. Bill also went with his grandfather to the downtown area and Bill would get to choose two bottles of Nehi pop. In the summer, the family would walk into town for a potluck dinner virtually every night. The main dishes always came with the accompanying Jell-O and great desserts.

The weather in Winfield was colder, hotter, snowier, windier, and sunnier. The flatness of the land meant that one could watch incoming storms long before they got to Winfield. Tornadoes were also threats.

Winters in Winfield were cold. His grandparents turned off the heat at night in the house. The sleeping porch was the coldest part of the house, as it was hardly separated from the outdoors. One had to wear as many layers as possible and then be covered in as many blankets as possible. Surprisingly, after all this, it could be comfortable, although one couldn't move or cold air would creep in.



Chapter 11, What, Me Worry?

Chapter 11, What, Me Worry? Summary and Analysis

The first time that Bill learned adults couldn't be trusted was when he broke his leg at age four. Bill was alone at his friend Arthur Bergen's house, and had been playing on the jungle gym when he must have fallen. When he came to, he saw a man in a uniform standing over him. Bill told the man that he'd hurt his leg, but the man was more interested in finding the address he was looking for. Mrs. Bergen finally got home, but she just told Bill to get up and walk on it. Eventually, she realized that Bill was really hurt and went to get his parents.

Bill's parents took him to a young Cuban doctor, who tried to argue that Bill's injury was worse than he knew what to do with. Bill's father finally convinced him to set the broken leg, so Bill's leg stayed almost backward for six weeks. Thankfully, when the doctor cut the cast off, Bill's leg went back to its right position and within a couple of days, Bill could walk on the leg again.

America had a sense of security back then, although that eroded with the development of Soviet long range missiles. Suddenly, people became concerned about all the destructive things in the world. Bill's parents didn't really seem to worry about things. When Bill was young, his father bought a station wagon and decided to take the family to New York. Since it had no air conditioning, Bill and his sister laid the tailgate flat and stood on it, holding on the roof rack to catch a breeze. Later on the trip, the family ended up at a hotel in a not so safe part of Harlem, because Bill's father had found a cheap deal and booked the room in advance.

The next time that Bill realized he couldn't trust adults was in 1962, with the Cuban missile crisis. With supposed missiles trained on the United States, the end could come quickly. Bill waited around the house to tell his parents that they were all going to die, but they told him that everything would be fine. Later, it did come out that the Soviets did have missiles in Cuba. Bill hasn't trusted any grownups since then.



Chapter 12, Out and About

Chapter 12, Out and About Summary and Analysis

Riverview was a small amusement park with a rickety, old roller coaster that shook the ground when it passed. None of the rides had timers so sometimes riders got caught on an endless ride when the attendant wanted to take a break or found something better to do. Everything at the park was horrible.

The Iowa State Fair, however, provided entertainment that everyone could enjoy. It always took place during the hottest, muggiest days possible, which left kids bathed in sweat and sticky, sugary fair food. Most people came to ride the rides at the fair, but boys dreamed of the strippers' tent. When Bill was twelve, one had to be thirteen to get in. The next year, Bill learned that they had upped the age requirement to fourteen.

During most of the year, kids didn't have either Riverview or the state fair for entertainment. Mostly, Bill and his friends went downtown and goofed around. Sometimes, they went to matinées, which were always badly acted and cheaply made. Bill didn't mind as they generally spent the time running around the theater having popcorn fights. The manager tried to control things, but it never worked for long. When the balcony was open, kids could drip substances down onto the people below. The matinee was finally closed.

Bill thinks that Doug Willoughby was the smartest person he's ever met, particularly for scientific and mechanical topics. He was also great about getting fun out of situations that didn't seem fun. Willoughby's whole family was smart and they had tons of books in their home. The bedroom that Willoughby shared with his brother looked like a laboratory, with beakers and vials everywhere. They introduced Bill to the sport of match fighting, which involved lighting matches and throwing them at each other in the dark, although they once set the house on fire.

When Willoughby was grounded for this event, Bill turned to another friend, Jed Mattes. Jed had great manners and exposed Bill to the more refined things in life. The year of Bill's fourteenth birthday left him waiting with eager anticipation for the strippers' tent. He and Doug went, but learned that the rules had changed again and they now had to be sixteen. The next week, Bill went back with Jed to the fair, where Jed got Bill into the strippers' tent. The stripper was bored and she didn't get completely naked, but Bill thought he had died and gone to heaven.



Chapter 13, The Pubic Years

Chapter 13, The Pubic Years Summary and Analysis

1957 ranked as the happiest year on record in America, according to the Gallup Organization. However, African Americans were still excluded from many places and some were killed just for trying to vote. The Soviets now had an intercontinental missile and they launched the first satellite into space. Americans were also having to confront some of their choices as research showed that cigarettes caused cancer and juvenile crime rose.

In Des Moines, the 1950s exited as chain stores and restaurants came in. Dutch elm disease killed the town's elm trees. Some older houses were torn down to make way for hotels. The first shopping mall opened in 1959, making people abandon the downtown area. Bill started at Callanan Junior High School.

It was at Callanan that Bill met Stephen Katz. Doug Willoughby decided to take over the Audio-Visual Club. Willoughby saw promise in the club, as it provided a locked room for the boys to smoke in, access to the school's sex education films, and a legitimate reason to be out of class. Fifteen boys joined the club and voted out all the former members, the geeks. Milton Milton was the only geek allowed and only because he threatened to alert the officials to what was really going on. Through the club, Bill meet Stephen, a transfer student, who was drunk quite often at the age of fourteen.

Bill's big discovery during this time was cigarettes. The high school preoccupation was drinking, with Katz leading the way. Katz became very accomplished at stealing beer. Katz rented an apartment in which to keep the beer and provide a place for everyone to drink. Eventually he was arrested and sent to reform school.

Bill got through high school, leading the school in absences. He went to Drake University for a year or two and then moved to England.



Chapter 14, Farewell

Chapter 14, Farewell Summary and Analysis

While Bill was growing up, his father would call the family together every so often to see how everyone felt about possibly moving to a big league city. Bill was always for moving, but it never occurred. Now, Bill is glad that they didn't move as he got to spend his formative years in a good, positive city.

The Des Moines that Bill remembers is, in many cases, no longer there. Greenwood Elementary is still there, but the gym and auditorium are gone. Dahl's supermarket is also still there, but the Kiddie Corral and the grocery conveyor tunnel are gone. The downtown stores closed one by one.

People also changed and moved on. Bill's father died in 1986. His mother eventually sold the house and moved to an apartment. Doug Willoughby lives in the Midwest and it's been years since he blew anything up. Stephen Katz used mind altering substances for twenty-five years, appeared in Bill's book *A Walk in the Woods*, and had been sober for three years. Jed Mattes became Bill's literary agent. He died in 2003 of cancer. Buddy Doberman went to California in college and hasn't been heard from since. Milton Milton joined the military and died during the first Gulf War.

The Thunderbolt Kid's sacred jersey was thrown out by Bill's parents sometime in 1978 while they were cleaning the house. Many of his other childhood treasures suffered the same fate. Bill think that it's a shame that people and places don't keep the things that make them unique.



Characters

Bill Bryson

Bill Bryson is a best selling author who has written a number of books, including *A Short History of Everything*, *A Walk in the Woods*, and *I'm a Stranger Here Myself*. In this work, Bryson presents a memoir of growing up in 1950s America. He was born in 1951 in Des Moines, Iowa. His mother and father both worked at the Des Moines Register and he had an older brother and sister. His father's parents lived in Winfield, Iowa, and the family went to visit Bill's grandparents from time to time.

Bryson's childhood was characterized by playing outside with friends, watching television, and reading comic books at the Kiddie Corral. He imagined that he was from another planet and invented the Thunderbolt Kid when he found an old football jersey in the basement. Some of his favorite days as a child were going to Disneyland, watching Mr. Milton belly flop from the high dive, seeing movies with his mother, and attending baseball games with his father.

Although Bryson liked to read, he spent much of his early school days in the cloakroom as a punishment or at home pretending to be sick. As he liked to be up late at night, he was often late for school or just didn't go at all. His teachers didn't seem to like him much, probably because neither Bill nor his mother remembered things like permission slips, money for saving stamps, or cookies for the class. As Bryson grew older, he took a job as a paper boy, risking life and limb to deliver the paper beyond Dewey, and earning enough money to buy his own television.

Like many boys his age, Bryson was interested in girls, particularly Mary O'Leary. His circle of friends grew to include Dough Willoughby, Jed Mattes, and Stephen Katz, who brought Bryson in on their schemes. He joined the A/V club in order to get out of class and made fake IDs. He eventually graduated, attended Drake University for a couple of years, and moved to England.

Bill's Father

Bill's father grew up in Iowa. He was a sportswriter for *The Des Moines Register*, which meant that he traveled quite a bit during baseball season and got to attend many famous games, including the World Series each year. Bill shares his father's writing at several points in the book, arguing that his father was one of the best sportswriters of the time period. Bill enjoyed going with his father on some of the trips as well. Bill's father and his wife had three children, two boys and a girl.

Bryson doesn't include a good physical description of his father, but he does include many details about his father's personality. Personally, Bill's father appears as a smart, caring individual. Bill also makes the point throughout the book that his father was cheap. He often choose inexpensive vacations for the family, such as their hotel in



Harlem, and used a dentist that didn't believe in Novocaine so that he didn't have to pay a lot of money. Some of the other eccentric aspects of his father's personality were that he liked to eat burned food, liked to do isometrics on airplanes, and liked to take the family to obscure museums. He and his wife appear to have a good marriage and Bill feels that he was a good father.

Bill's Mother

Bill's mother grew up in Omaha, Nebraska. Her mother died early and Bill's mother and her sister were responsible for handling the household. She also had three brothers that continued to live in the small shack by the stockyards that they all grew up in. Bill's mother got a scholarship to Drake University and met Bill's father at The Des Moines Register. They married and had three children, two boys and a girl. She continued working at the paper as the home furnishings editor. Bill and his mother met for dinner and a movie most Friday nights.

One of Bill's mother's characteristics was that she was very forgetful. Bill writes that she had trouble remembering their middle names and the birth dates of her kids. Since she worked and managed the household, she often forgot things around the house, like signing permission slips for Bill's school trips or the dinner in the oven. Often, she burned dinner because she'd be busy doing something else and forgot about it. She also made Bill wear his sister's Capri pants one day when she was in a rush. Yet, Bill says that no one could ever be mad at his mother. She liked everyone and everyone liked her. She wanted everyone to be happy and tried her best, in her own way, to make that happen.

The Thunderbolt Kid

The Thunderbolt Kid (or Captain Thunderbolt later) was Bill's imaginary alter ego. Bill had many versions of how the Thunderbolt Kid got his superpowers, but somewhere along the line, Bill decided that his parents couldn't really be his biological parents and he must not be from earth either. Bill imagined that he was from the Planet Electro in Galaxy Zizz. He decided that his real father, King Volton, had left him on earth and that he had hypnotized Bill's parents to think that he was really theirs.

When he was about six, Bill found a green jersey with a gold satin thunderbolt on the front. No one knew how the jersey got in the basement or where it had come from. Bill imagined that his King Volton had left it for him. He added to the jersey an assortment of other gear including a Zorro whip, a cowboy vest, and boots. He sometimes included an Army surplus knapsack, but it smelled like cat urine so he didn't do it often. Bill also wore a cowboy hat, coonskin cap, or a football helmet. For a while, he even wore underpants over top of his clothes, but other kids made fun of him for this so he stopped.



Bill didn't use his superpowers for the common good or to catch bad people. Mostly, he tried to use his X-ray vision to see under women's clothes and to vaporize the people that he didn't like. His specialty was killing morons.

Milton Milton

Milton Milton was one of the neighborhood kids that Bill knew as a youngster. Milton was the most annoying of all of them, however, and his family was annoying too. One summer day, Bill's mother accepted an invitation for him to go to Lake Ahquabi with Milton's family. While they were there, Milton's father tried to dive off the high dive, but did a belly flop instead. Milton Junior also cut himself with a hatchet. Bill writes that this was one of his favorite days.

Buddy Doberman

Buddy was Bill's best friend during his childhood years. Buddy lived across the alley, and his parents were generous so he had many good toys. Buddy also wasn't the smartest person ever. This meant that Bill was often able to blame Buddy for his own misdeeds. Buddy and Bill discovered that Lincoln Logs turned white if they peed on them, so they set out to create the first albino set.

Mary O'Leary

Mary was a neighborhood girl that Bill adored. He thought that she was beautiful and he always liked to land on her if possible during a football game. He wanted to see her naked. One summer, Mary O'Leary took off her clothes for the neighborhood boys, but she made sure to do it on a day that Bill was at his grandparents' home so she didn't upset him.

Michael Bryson

Michael was Bill's older brother. He was nine years older than Bill. For the first few years of Bill's life the two shared a room. Bill's brother had allergies and there were about four hundred handkerchiefs that he pushed into various hiding places around the room.

Mary Elizabeth Bryson

Mary Elizabeth, also called Betty, was Bill's older sister. She was five years older than Bill. Bill relates one story where his sister used Bill as her alibi to see the movie "Peyton Place". Bill saw her as the sex authority in his life. She and Bill's mother often went to the Tea Room.



Bill's Grandfather

Bill's grandfather lived in Winfield, Iowa on a small farm. He was a rural route mailman and he rented out part of the farm land to others. His grandfather spent a lot of time rebuilding things, although he often cut himself in the process. Once he heard a noise outside and got up to look out, but all he couldn't see anything. The next morning, he found that the garage had been destroyed by a tornado and realized that he must have seen the tornado passing when he looked outside the night before.

Doug Willoughby

Doug was another of the neighborhood boys that Bill knew growing up. Doug was the smartest person that Bill's ever met, particularly in the areas of math and science. He was good at finding fun everywhere and he also liked to get free food by adding a bug to his food. His family had many books, and Doug and his brother liked to experiment with different scientific things in their room.

Jed Mattes

Jed was a friend of Bill's when he was young. Jed was a very charming, polite boy with great manners. Through him, Bill learned all about the finer things in life, like good food and interior design. He could talk his way into almost any situation, including getting people to show him their house. Jed got Bill into the strippers' tent at the Iowa State Fair with his smooth talking.

Stephen Katz

Bill met Stephen at Callanan in the A/V Club. Katz became an accomplished beer thief throughout school and was eventually sent to reform school. He continued to use alcohol and other substances for many years before becoming sober and getting a job in a printing plant. He also appeared in Bill's book *A Walk in the Woods*.



Objects/Places

The Des Moines Register

Bill's father and mother worked at this newspaper. His father was a sports writer for the paper and his mother a home furnishings editor.

Des Moines, Iowa

Bill grew up in Des Moines, Iowa during the 1950s.

Bishop's

This was a cafeteria in Des Moines that the family went to often. The food was good and the toilets sanitized the seats when flushed.

Dahl's

This was the neighborhood supermarket. It was the site of the Kiddie Corral and it also had a conveyor system to take the groceries to waiting cars.

The Kiddie Corral

Located in Dahl's, the Kiddie Corral was full of comic books. Kids stayed here reading while their parents shopped.

Yunker Brothers

This department store had a building on either side of Eighth Street and an underground passage connecting them. The Tea Room was located in Yunker Brothers.

The Tea Room

Located in Yunker Brothers, The Tea Room was where Bill's mother and sister went weekly. When Bill was finally allowed to go, he picked a doll from the toy box.

Omaha, Nebraska

Bill's mother grew up here. The family would stop here on vacations to see her brothers.



Disneyland

The family took a trip to California, including Disneyland, when Bill was a child. He thought Disneyland was the finest thing in America.

Lake Ahquabi

Bill went to the lake with Milton Milton's family in 1959. Milton's father tried to dive off the high dive, but ended up doing a belly flop.

Grund's

Located on Ingersoll Avenue, Grund's was a place to get penny candy. Bill stole candy from the store.

Greenwood Elementary

This was the school that Bill went to as a child. It was an old brick building that seemed huge. Bill thinks it is one of the handsomest elementary schools he's ever seen, with polished hallways, cloakrooms, and embossed radiators.

The Cloakroom

The children in Bill's school often got sent to the cloakroom as punishment. Bill didn't think it was much of a punishment as it left him alone with everyone else's stuff out of sight.

Dewey

Dewey was a black Labrador who was owned by a customer on Bill's newspaper delivery route. The dog routinely tried to bite Bill and chase him away from the house.

Winfield, Iowa

Bill's grandfather and grandmother owned a small farm on the outskirts of town. Bill loved everything about Winfield and he particularly remembers the cold winters.

Grandparent's Farm

Bill's grandparents owned a small farm, which included a big red barn, orchards, a huge oak tree, and a small, neat house.



Harlem, New York

The family took a trip to New York and stayed at a hotel in Harlem, as it was a cheap room. The police recommended that the family find another room, but Bill's father didn't want to pay more.

Riverview

Riverview was a small amusement park on the north side of town. The roller coaster was old and not well-made, the rides had no timers, and the bumper cars were souped up. Everything about the place, according to Bill, was awful.

Iowa State Fair

The Iowa State Fair was a big event in the state each summer. Bill tried for several years to get into the strippers' tent before finally getting in when he was fourteen.

Callanan Junior High School

Bill attended junior high at this school. He met Stephen Katz at the school.

The A/V Club

Willoughby, Bill, Katz, and others took over the A/V Club from the geeks. This gave them a place to smoke, access to the sex education films, and a legitimate reason to be out of class.

Themes

Childhood

In large part, *The Life and Times of the Thunderbolt Kid: A Memoir* is about childhood. Bryson writes about the events and feelings he had growing up in Des Moines during the 1950s. For the most part, Bill's childhood is a good one. Nothing bad really happens, although there are larger threats that he is aware of. He spends his days in a family that cares for him and in a place that is relatively safe. He gets to enjoy the simple pleasure of life. In many ways, Bill's childhood represents the all-American childhood of the baby boomers.

Throughout the book, Bill's use of the Thunderbolt Kid illustrates both a child's imagination and also his feelings of powerlessness in situations. Bill creates the story of the Thunderbolt Kid and incorporates the old football jersey and other items into this theory of how he had superpowers and was not from this world. While many of the things that the Thunderbolt Kid did, such as trying to see beneath women's clothes, were imaginative and fun, some of the situations also show how a child can feel small and powerless at times. At one point, Bill mentions that his superpowers were often used against those who impeded his happiness. As a child, he didn't always have the power to change the situation or to walk away from it. Through the Thunderbolt Kid, Bill was able to exert some control, even if it was only in his mind.

Bill's discussion of his childhood also illustrates the playful, carefree nature that most children have. He and his friends delighted in exploring the world and learning new things. They spent time outdoors playing with each other and figuring out different strategies and methods for navigating the world. The pleasures were simple: candy, television, a movie, and riding bikes around town.

Change

Change enters the book in many places. People, places, and the nation change over the years that Bill discusses. As the book focuses on Bill, the reader witnesses the changes in him as he grows up. Born in 1951, the reader first sees Bill as a young boy who plays outside and spends time with his family. He enters school, learns to read, and gets into trouble. As he ages, he becomes more interested in girls and finds more creative ways of getting into trouble. As he enters his junior high and high school years, Bill learns to smoke, makes fake IDs, and manages to continue his string of absences.

The book also allows the reader to see the changes that happen in Des Moines as Bill grows up. As he ages, the places that were familiar during his childhood gradually change or disappear. The Kiddie Corral gets fluff comic books and then goes away. The town's elm trees die, houses are torn down, and stores become something different. Places like Bishop's and the Toddle House, where Bill spent time as a child, close. His



elementary school, while still standing, also changes in look and character, becoming something that Bill only vaguely recognizes.

Finally, the nation also undergoes changes during Bill's childhood. The prosperity and consumerism grew, with people buying everything that they wanted and dreaming about more inventions. Technology advanced, with the United States and the Soviet Union developing bigger bombs, missiles, and satellites. Yet, at the same time, the nation also saw threats to national security and increasing crime. Places like Des Moines became different, and people felt less safe and secure than they did at the start of the 1950s.

Family

Bryson presents his family as a little odd, but they clearly played a large role in his life, helping to shape the person that he became. His family, although not as close as some other families, does seem to care about each other. His parents provide for the three children and give them opportunities to grow. They take vacations together and celebrate holidays together. The family also visits their extended family, although Bill appears to enjoy visiting his father's parents more than his mother's family.

Many of the stories in the book focus on the oddities in Bill's family. He describes his parents as loving, but not always observant about things. They believed that life would work out and didn't get upset about too many things. Bill's father often looked for a deal, which led to interesting situations at the dentist and on vacations. Bill's mother was forgetful, burning dinners, sending the wrong bags with Bill on sleep overs, and failing to sign permission slips for him. As his parents were sometimes preoccupied with their jobs or other activities, Bill was able to get away with doing things like missing class a lot and getting into trouble with Willoughby and Katz.

At the same time, many of the things that Bryson discuss are common to most families. Every family has its oddities, and although they may not be the same as Bill's family, his stories still ring true and familiar to others. Most people have family members that embarrass them in some way, just like Bill had. Most people have stories of family vacations and potentially dangerous situations or injuries. Although the unique aspects of Bill's stories are his alone, these are common elements that most people find in their own families and relationships.

Style

Perspective

Bill Bryson is a famous author who has written a number of books including *A Short History of Nearly Everything*, *A Walk in the Woods*, *Made in America*, and *I'm a Stranger Here Myself*. This work, *The Life and Times of the Thunderbolt Kid*, is subtitled as a memoir. In the work, Bryson reflects on his early childhood, growing up in Des Moines, Iowa. As a memoir, the book comes from Bryson's subjective view. He relates the stories of his childhood through his own eyes and thoughts. The reader sees the 1950s through Bryson along with his imaginative understandings of the world that he lives in.

While the adult Bryson is present, much of the book features the opinions and thoughts of a child. There are several instances that Bryson, looking back, is clearly a little ashamed of or wishes that he could have changed. However, by including even the embarrassing thoughts and feelings of a young boy, the stories in the book resonate as familiar to many people. While some of the details may be embellished, the overall texture of the stories appear truthful, including Bryson's discussion of his imaginary alter ego, the Thunderbolt Kid.

Tone

Bill Bryson takes a nostalgic, humorous tone in *The Life and Times of the Thunderbolt Kid*. Although some of the topics Bryson discusses are serious in nature, like atomic bombs and other threats, he ties the topics into lighthearted childhood fun, such as how he got in trouble for not participating in the air raid drill. The purpose of the book appears to be entertainment, giving readers more information about Bryson and the time period.

Bryson looks back at his childhood and the events that he remembers from it. By presenting the information about the time period, he provides a context for the actions that someone might not ordinarily have. Yet, many of the situations he presents would be familiar to many different people. Anyone who has grown up in a family has stories like the ones Bill tells about his family, although the particulars of the stories will be different. For people who grew up during this time period or had similar situations, the book is meant to bring a sense of nostalgia and remembrance.

At the same time, Bryson brings a sense of humor to the stories. He clearly chooses stories in the chapters that are meant to elicit a laugh or smile. He makes fun of himself and the people around him, although not in a mean way. In some of his stories, it is clear that Bryson exaggerates or embellishes the details to make the story funnier as well.

Structure

The *Life and Times of the Thunderbolt Kid* is separated into fourteen chapters. At the beginning of each chapter, Bryson includes a photo from the time period of his own life or of a famous event. He also includes a bibliography at the end of the book for the information that he includes about the events of the 1950s.

Each chapter of the book has an overall theme that Bryson focuses on. For example, in the "School Days" chapter, he discusses his elementary school and some of the events that are connected to it from his own life. Bryson also includes general information about the theme from the time period in each chapter. This helps to put a context around his personal observations and experiences.

The structure of the book works well for Bryson's purposes. The thematic chapters add more interest to his recollections than a strictly chronological account would and the general information that Bryson includes is interesting and even funny at times. He aptly points out some of the oddities of life through the general information and the experiences of others. The themed chapters create an easy flow for the book and allow Bryson to tell the interesting stories without making the story of his childhood seem incomplete.



Quotes

"I can't imagine there has ever been a more gratifying time or place to be alive than American in the 1950s." Chap. 1, p. 5

"So this is a book about not very much: about being small and getting larger slowly. One of the great myths of life is that childhood passes quickly. In fact, because time moves more slowly in Kid World—five times more slowly in a classroom on a hot afternoon, eight times more slowly on any car journey of more than five miles (rising to eighty-six times more slowly when driving across Nebraska or Pennsylvania lengthwise), and so slowly during the last week before birthdays, Christmases, and summer vacations as to be functionally immeasurable—it goes on for decades when measured in adult terms. It is adult life that is over in a twinkling." Chap. 2, p. 29

"Everyone in the world adored my mother. She was entirely without suspicion or malice. She never raised her voice or said no to any request, never said a word against another human being. She liked everybody. She lived to make sandwiches. She wanted everyone to be happy." Chap. 3, p. 53

"This jersey then was the foundation garment of my superpowers. It transformed me. It gave me colossal strength, rippling muscles, X-ray vision, the ability to fly and to walk upside down across ceilings, invisibility on demand, cowboy skills like lassoing and shooting guns out of people's hands from a distance, a good voice for singing around campfires, and curious bluish-black hair with a teasing curl at the crown. It made me, in short, the kind of person that men want to be and women want to be with." Chap. 3, p. 62

"Happily, we were indestructible. We didn't need seat belts, air bags, smoke detectors, bottled water, or the Heimlich maneuver. We didn't require child-safety caps on our medicines. We didn't need helmets when we rode our bikes or pads for our knees and elbows when we went skating. We knew without a written reminder that bleach was not a refreshing drink and that gasoline when exposed to a match had a tendency to combust." Chap. 4, p. 70

"TV and cars went together perfectly. TV showed you a world of exciting things—atomic bombs in Las Vegas; babes on water skis in Cypress Gardens, Florida; Thanksgiving Day parades in New York City—and cars made it possible to get there." Chap. 4, p. 78

"The really interesting thing about playtime disappointment in the fifties was that you never saw any of the disappointments coming. This was because the ads were so brilliant." Chap. 5, p. 99

"In short, the creators of the hydrogen bomb wished to wrap the world in unpredictable levels of radiation, obliterate whole ecosystems, despoil the face of the planet, and provoke and antagonize our enemies at every opportunity—and these were their peacetime dreams." Chap. 7, p. 123



"The school day was largely taken up with putting on or taking off clothing. It was an exhaustingly tedious process. It took most of the morning to take off your outdoor wear and most of the afternoon to get it back on, assuming you could find any of it among the jumbled, shifting heap of garments that carpeted the cloakroom floor to a depth of three feet." Chap. 8, p. 139

"I got sent to the cloakroom a lot, often for reasons that I didn't entirely understand, but I never really minded. It was a curious punishment, after all, to be put in a place where you were alone with all your classmates' snack foods and personal effects and no one could see what you were getting into, and where you could mug for the other pupils if you positioned yourself out of the teacher's line of sight. It was also a very good time to get some private reading done." Chap. 8, p. 142

"I was beyond hope really. Not only did I talk in low tone, miss lots of school, fail to buy savings stamps, and occasionally turn up wearing girly Capri pants, but clearly I came from a Bolshevik household. I spent more or less the rest of my elementary-school career in the cloakroom." Chap. 8, p. 151

"The state fair happened during the muggiest, steamiest period of the year. You spent all your time there soaked in perspiration and eating sickly foods—snow cones, cotton candy, ice-cream bars, ice-cream sandwiches, foot-long hot dogs swimming in gooey relish, bucketloads of the world's most sugary lemonade—until you had become essentially an ambulatory sheet of flypaper and were covered from head to toe with vivid stains and stuck, half-dead insects." Chap. 12, p. 210

"By the closing years of the 1950s most people—certainly most middle-class people—had pretty much everything they had ever dreamed of, so increasingly there was nothing much to do with their wealth but buy more and bigger versions of things they didn't truly require: second cars, lawn tractors, double-width fridges, hi-fis with bigger speakers and more knobs to twiddle, extra phones, and televisions, room intercoms, gas grills, kitchen gadgets, snowblowers, you name it." Chap. 13, p. 236

"By the early 1960s, people exchanged boasts about how long it had been since they had been downtown. They had found a new kind of happiness at the malls. At just the point where I was finally growing up, Des Moines stopped feeling like the place I had grown up in." Chap. 13, p. 241

"Smoking was the big discovery of the age. Boy, did I love smoking and boy did it love me." Chap. 13, p. 248

"The Thunderbolt Kid grew up and moved on. Until quite recently he still occasionally vaporized people, usually just after they had walked through a held door without saying thank you, but eventually he stopped eliminating people when he realized that he couldn't tell which of them buy books." Chap. 14, p. 267

"That's the way of the world, of course. Possessions get discarded. Life moves on. But I often think what a shame it is that we didn't keep the things that made us different and special and attractive in the fifties." Chap. 14, p. 268



Topics for Discussion

Bill writes, "I can't imagine there has ever been a more gratifying time or place to be alive than American in the 1950s" (Chap. 1, p. 5). What does he mean by this? What evidence does he present in the book to back this statement up?

Describe the transformation that occurred in Des Moines during the 1950s and after. What changed about the city? How does Bill feel about the changes?

How was Bill's childhood different than what a child might experience today? What things have changed? What has remained the same?

Describe Bill's relationship with his father and mother. How did he feel about them? How did their personalities and interests shape Bill's?

What was childhood like for American children in the 1950s? What concerns and excitements did they have?

How did Bill become the Thunderbolt Kid? What did he add to the story and his outfit? What superpowers did he have? Why do you think Bill developed the Thunderbolt Kid?

What was school like for Bill? Did he like school? What problems did he encounter in school?