

The Lost Continent: Travels in Small-town America Study Guide

The Lost Continent: Travels in Small-town America by Bill Bryson

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Plot Summary

Bill Bryson, who grew up in Des Moines, Iowa, says that someone had to be from Des Moines. He says people there either accept the fact that they'll marry a local girl and work at Firestone or they spend years moaning about the place and grow up to marry a local girl and work at Firestone. Bryson, a writer, decides to take a long circuitous journey through many of the states, recording his observations along the way. He does so with wit and sometimes wisdom, implanting stories from his own life along the way.

Bryson's travels are divided into two sections - East and West. He first travels eastward, finding an array of towns, historical sites and interesting people. He says that he is searching for the perfect town but soon admits that he's not going to find it in a single location. With that in mind, he begins finding pieces of that perfect town with the intention of putting them all together once he has the pieces.

Bryson's travels include Missouri, Tennessee, North Carolina and Kentucky before he moves northward. In Washington, D.C., he's disappointed to find that the Smithsonian Institute has been divided into a number of smaller buildings, each with a particular theme. While he says he is still interested in the place, there's no longer a sense of discovery at what might be found around the next corner. He finds that, however, at the Henry Ford Museum in Detroit, much later during his journey.

He has held to the idea that the New England states would be graceful places, filled with pretty scenes and clapboard churches. Again he's disappointed and hates those cities that have turned into tourist traps, selling crappy sweatshirts and high-priced tickets to disappointing attractions.

As he travels westward, Bryson writes that he hates the dull flatness of Kansas and can't imagine why the settlers ever stopped there. His route is interrupted by snow and he turns south from his position in Colorado, eventually making it to New Mexico where he spends a day with his niece in Santa Fe. A section of California that he'd looked forward to turns out to be incredibly boring and he's appalled at the haphazard car of the Yosemite National Park. He recalls being awed by the Grand Canyon as a child but is met with an overcast sky that prohibits a clear view on this trip. Through the shabbiest town he encounters - Wells, Nevada - to the casinos and nightlife of Vegas, Bryson's details and observations continue as he travels.

When he nears Des Moines, he realizes that his trip is soon to come to an end. Having traveled more than 13,000 miles, he enters Des Moines - the town he'd vowed to leave as a child - and realizes that he could be happy living there.



Chapters 1 through 4

Chapters 1 through 4 Summary and Analysis

Bill Bryson, who grew up in Des Moines, Iowa, says that someone had to be from Des Moines. He says people there either accept the fact that they'll marry a local girl and work at Firestone or they spend years moaning about the place and grow up to marry a local girl and work at Firestone. People who are merely passing through stop for gas and never leave, and will be seen years later, confused but serene in their decision. The best thing about being from Des Moines is that by Iowa standards it's a "dynamic hub of wealth and education." When Bryson is ten, he watches a documentary about film making in foreign countries and is hooked. He immediately wants to live somewhere else and says he wants to "step outside my front door and be somewhere." When he's old enough to leave, he does. On a return trip, he selects typical Iowa postcards, including sunset over a feedlot, and the cashier says they're "purty." Bryson says that upon taking a closer look, what he'd thought was silly really was "purty."

Recalling his childhood, he talks of summer vacations. He says that he and his siblings - a brother and a sister - sometimes entertain themselves by sticking matches into a boiled egg or apple until it resembles a porcupine, then drop it out of the rear window of their station wagon where it creates a small explosion and causes the following car to swerve. His mother comments only occasionally with observations such as, "I think you hit that dog/man/blind person back there, honey."

Bryson says it's the "disturbed and erratic background" of his own childhood that somehow prompts the urge to return to the "land of my youth." He says the reason for the return is "what writers call a journey of discovery." He spreads out maps, quizzes his mother, borrows her car and sets out for Missouri "with a light heart." He adds that "it isn't often you hear anyone say that."

Bryson says that the year in Britain had been bleak, like "living inside Tupperware." By contrast, Iowa has "hysterical color" that includes red barns and yellow and green fields below a brilliant blue sky. Bryson notes that the route he selects is the same his father always followed for holidays at the grandparents. He notes that it's a pity he'll never know why his father picked that route, and that his love of directions is like that of all Midwesterners. Bryson describes the typical town, saying there is always a business or two named Vern's. As a child, he'd always thought Pella was a bit atypical because there were windmills in most yards and an annual festival celebrating tulips. He stops and wanders around briefly in Pella, then moves on, finding he has memories of several towns along the way and the children's voices constantly asking how much long they'd be cooped up in the car.

He's then at the turnoff in Winfield where his father would always announce "with delirious joy" that they were nearing Bryson's grandparent's home. Upon arrival, the grandparents would always be waiting at the gate and Bryson says that he wonders if



they'd rushed out as the car approached or had waited there for hours, and believes it to be the latter. Bryson describes life for his grandparents, including that his grandmother used the recipes found on product labels and listened in on telephone conversations for entertainment, often turning to report the gist of the conversation to those in the room and sometimes butting in to offer her opinion. The town has also changed and Bryson notes that there are some things in life that simply can't happen. "You can't beat the phone company, you can't make a waiter see you until he's ready to see you, and you can't go home again."

Bryson stops in Mount Pleasant for coffee and says that the availability of the New York times is "an extraordinary feat of distribution," and that he's comforted by the newspaper, especially the advertising inserts though he knows the majority of the items advertised are junk.

Bryson notes that Highway 218 is marked on his map as "scenic," and that it's a relative term the same as "a good Barry Manilow album." He crosses the Mississippi but doesn't have time to really look at the river, though it prompts memories of seeing it as a child. He'd always been glad to see the river but disappointed afterward, realizing it was the total of his mental stimulus for that day.

Bryson is briefly lost, having taken a road that turns to gypsum and abruptly intersects with a major highway. Unable to stop at the intersection, he "jumped on the brakes with all my feet and make a noise like Tarzan missing a vine as the car went into a skid." On the positive side, he slides sideways and is pointed in the correct direction when he comes to a stop. He stops in a town he calls "Dullard," citing his fear that someone will recognize themselves from his description and will beat him up. He stays at a bad restaurant that's too expensive and has bad food, adding that it's so bad he continues to taste it long after the meal is over, each time he burps. He's reminded of a movie in which the people of a town wait for a lone visitor that can be roasted at the annual barbecue, and that the people of this town look at him with "barbecue eyes." He meets a barmaid who has "ready for sex written all over her face but better bring a paper bag written all over her body." The woman offers a wild account of her numerous husbands and compliments Bryson on his good English, considering he's a foreigner from Britain.

Crossing the Mississippi again at Quincy, Bryson notes that the river is imposing but "flat and dull." He stops at another diner where he observes a group of farmers interacting. Bryson says that it's interesting that most farmers are missing some body part and imparts his theory about the reason. He says that it's not because they work around large machinery - because many industries have big machines and the majority of their workers aren't missing a finger or a limb. He says that it's because they don't feel the pain of other people. He then says that his own grandfather would be repairing the car and have a jack fall, then would call out for someone to jack it back up because he's finding it a bit difficult to breath. Bryson says that only three things can kill a farmer and they are "lightning, rolling over in a tractor and old age. It was old age that got my grandfather."



At Carbondale, he finds no small businesses such as "Vern's" and chooses a Pizza Hut. When he has trouble making up his mind under the eyes of a pushy waitress, he explains that he's out of touch, having just gotten out of prison for killing a pushy waitress. He picks up razors, a notebook and candy at K Mart, a six pack at the "Kwik-Krap" convenience store, and goes to his motel, noting that in Carbondale, this is probably as much fun as is possible.

Bryson describes his parents to some degree. He says his father annually packs up the car for a vacation. In an effort to save money, the family typically eats in a restaurant that washes dishes "once a week" and stays in a motel with a single television in the office which is always inhabited by some odd person. When they arrive at their destination, there is water and fun that make it worth the trip.

Bryson's descriptions of people and places are funny but he grows somewhat serious for the pace of a couple of sentences. He explains that the purpose of the trip that prompts this book is the death of his father and the realization that his father's passing took something of Bryson as well. Bryson also describes his longing to find the "perfect town." He cites the fact that there's a paper boy on a bicycle in every hometown movie ever made, and says he wants to find that town. When he enters Carbondale, he passes shopping centers, gas stations and strip malls, expecting any minute to arrive at the heart of town, but simply arrives back in the country without ever finding a "downtown." He says that the town had been "eaten by shopping malls."

Bryson recalls the joyful holidays spent at his grandparent's home and is heartsick to find that the home place is surrounded by cheap housing, the barn is gone and the house in need of painting, occupied by a woman who stares at him through the door. He says he'd imagined the possibility that the house would be inhabited by a sweet, elderly couple who would act as if he were their own grandson and would allow him to reminisce about his childhood in the house. This bit of whimsy seems to be exactly what Bryson is seeking. He is an adult and it's evident that he doesn't really expect to find this, but that he's nonetheless looking for something.

Bryson visits Mark Twain's boyhood home, which he says is ultimately boring, and later visits the small village where Abraham Lincoln had grown up. He notes that he's bored with Lincoln's town almost immediately and wonders why he remembers it as being an amazing place to visit. Bryson expresses an ideal that seems prevalent in most adults as they age - the difference in what is amusement for today's youth. He says he isn't certain which is worse, that the youth of his day were so easily entertained or that the youth of today are not.



Chapters 5 through 9

Chapters 5 through 9 Summary and Analysis

Bryson continues his trip, cutting across the southern edge of Kentucky so that he was out of the state just forty minutes after entering. He stops in Jackson, Tennessee, for a burger, cites the fact that it's twenty degrees hotter than when he left Carbondale that morning, and that he's in the Bible Belt. When a young girl says, "kin I help yew," Bryson is certain he's now in another country.

When he reaches Mississippi, he recites the movies he's seen set in the south and says that they all depict southerners as "murderous, incestuous, shitty-shoed rednecks." He mentions the three young men - Andrew Goodman, Michael Schwerner and a black man named James Chaney - who were killed during the tumultuous race riots of the region. A police officer who pulls up beside him says, "Hah doo lack Miss Hippy," forcing Bryson to admit that he's "kind of slow" and doesn't understand and prompting the officer to speak more slowly so that Bryson finally understands he's being asked how he likes Mississippi. Bryson says he wants to tell the officer he's been in the state for an hour and hasn't yet been shot at, but the light turns green and the opportunity gone. In Oxford, he faces the same challenge when a young woman gives him directions that include, "make the skyaya," which Bryson eventually realizes means to circle the square. He plans to visit the home of William Faulkner but can't find it and admits that he's never read a Faulkner book, so visits the college instead before later making his way to the birthplace of Elvis, located in Tupelo. Bryson says it's refreshing that the people haven't tried to cash in on Elvis and that the birthplace is the center of a small park without the myriad of attractions nearby. He eats, rests and relaxes and decides Tupelo is "wonderful."

As he travels through Auburn, Alabama, he says that he's always been intrigued by college towns but is disappointed in this case to not have found a single bookstore other than the one that sells textbooks and Auburn t-shirts. He says that as a student, he and his fellow students studied when there weren't riots, dope or sex available, but that he doesn't believe learning is among the options of the students today. He cites a study that determined students were "stupid as pig dribble," and says a question every bit as interesting as why students are so stupid is why a college town can't support a book store.

Bryson is disappointed by Pine Mountain which is nothing like the name implies and travels on to Warm Springs, where President Roosevelt had died. At the site, called "Little White House," he encounters a bus load of senior citizens from Calvary Baptist Church and notes that it's from "some place like Firecracker, Georgia, or Bareassed, Alabama," and that they shoved in front of him without the realization that he "wouldn't hesitate to give an old person a shove, especially a Baptist." He comforts himself with the thought "that soon they would be dead." A rock from each state lines the path and Bryson writes, "it's not often you see an idea that stupid brought to fruition."



From Warm Springs, Bryson travels to Macon, Georgia, along a route that he describes as not particularly scenic though it earns a scenic designation on his map, then on to Savannah where he is awed by the Spanish moss and the beautiful squares in the historic district. He leaves Savannah by the Herman Talmadge Memorial Bridge that "flings" him into South Carolina. He stops at Beaufort where there are so many signs restricting activities that he leaves with twelve minutes remaining on his thirty-minute parking meter, so that he is in Charleston - his next stop - twelve minutes earlier than planned and walks the streets for the afternoon, observing the wealthy, white mothers watching over happy children. Bryson notes that it's almost as if he'd stepped into a Pepsi commercial and figures he's seen the best the country has to offer and that nothing else will measure up.

Bryson next travels into North Carolina and says it's almost as if someone had demanded that the landscape improve at the state line. He stops at the Biltmore Estate, a 250-room house built by George Vanderbilt. He refuses to pay the \$17.50 admission fee and is soon on his way to the Great Smokeys, "which, thank God, are free." He admits that he drives ten miles out of the way to spend a night in Bryson City, only because his last name is Bryson, and says that isn't even enough to guarantee pleasure. Bryson describes the city as "a crypt with sidewalks" but says it's interesting to see his name used so often. He also notes that some of the signs would make good keepsakes, but he'd need a crowbar.

He is appalled at the squalid town called Cherokee and relieved to find none of the junk shops, motels and tourist attractions allowed inside the national park of the Smokey Mountains. He says Gatlinburg is worse than Cherokee and that Americans will never understand the idea that it's not necessary to make a place ugly. In Gatlinburg, he finds a Ripley's Believe it or Not Museum and recalls that his father always denied his pleas to go in. Bryson buys a ticket, admitting that it's too expensive but that his father - who is now rolling over in his grave - need the exercise. He does resist the baseball cap with a rubber dog turn on the brim, saying that it's been enough extravagance for that particular day.

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Bryson notes the lack of billboards and says that they were taken down as the result of Ladybird Johnson's beautification campaign. He then describes times in which he and his siblings would see repeated advertisements for wonderful attractions though the attractions never lived up to the billboard advertisements. Bryson says that he misses the billboards because in the grand scheme of thing, they were better than nothing. He also cites the Burma Shave signs, posted in groups of five so that the traveler read it as a poem, and that those were exciting for him as a childhood traveler.

Bryson talks of the poverty and the race issues, saying that there's a mingling of blacks and whites that doesn't exist in the north. In Tuskegee, Alabama, he is the only white in a restaurant and though no one seems to care, he admits to being relieved when he is back on the highway. He notes the large homes of whites next door to shacks with black children riding bikes in the yard. He is pleased with the city of Columbus, describing the



beautiful downtown. It's here that Bryson admits he's never going to find the perfect town that he'd been searching for but will have to piece it together. He says several of the pieces exist in Columbus. Then he has trouble understanding a waitress who offers him a breakfast menu and says he would never be able to pick up the language.

Traveling the Smokey Mountains, Bryson notes the number of people traveling in RVs and calls them a "life support system on wheels," adding that those who travel in RVs are careful that they're never without air conditioning for a moment. He makes fun of them, saying they compare gadgets and carry things such as portable tennis courts, harboring a deep fear that they'll need something and prompting an entire industry to provide those necessities



Chapters 10 through 14

Chapters 10 through 14 Summary and Analysis

Bryson tells the story of the mysterious disappearance of the settlers of Roanoke, Virginia, and the theory that they moved inland and settled in the Appalachians where their descendants - known as the Melungeons - remain. Bryson says these people are dark skinned but have the other attributes of white people, and are shunned by those in the region. When he stops for gas, he asks about the Melungeons and the attendant says, "Don't know." When the attendant returns inside, he picks up the phone and Bryson says he expects to be picked up by police as he hastily leaves. He later gets thoroughly lost on a "shortcut" and travels around for hours, only to emerge onto the highway a short distance from where he left it.

Bryson next stops at Colonial Williamsburg where he realizes that there's no signs saying a person has to have a ticket, and simply walks in rather than taking the shuttle bus. He notes that if he'd had his family along, he'd have easily spent \$75 even before he bought the souvenir t-shirt saying "Boy Were We Screwed at Colonial Williamsburg." He is disappointed at his first stop inside, an apothecary shop that only sells souvenirs though those include replicas of apothecary jars. He notes that the size is impressive but that there are "bogus touches," such as the repaired tombstones in the church yard. He is more impressed with Mount Vernon, owned and operated by a group of women who raised the money to buy the property for their historical group. Bryson says they are knowledgeable about anything pertaining to the decorations of the home.

In Washington, D.C., Bryson is reminded of the trips of his childhood and is disappointed at the new arrangements of the Smithsonian. He says the exhibits are now arranged the same as if an old woman had carefully folded and organized everything. He says it's interesting, but lacks the element of surprise he'd cherished in his childhood. He sees a visiting Japanese dignitary, but says people are completely unimpressed when he tells of that event later. He visits several memorials and then moves on to drive past Annapolis and into Maryland. He says he barely remembers Delaware and is soon nearing Philadelphia.

In Philadelphia, he notes the squalor though says it isn't as bad as the ghettos he recalls from his childhood visits to the city. His father would whistle nervously and drum his fingers on the steering wheel when faced with the ghettos portions of the city. But Bryson says that for all the trash and poverty, Philadelphia - unlike Washington - feels like a big city. He meets old friends from Des Moines, Hal and Lucia Herndon, and spends an evening sightseeing and visiting. He notes that there's an easy opulence about Americans and that for a moment he wants all the possessions that seem to come so easy to Americans. He does point out that Hal and Lucia are a responsible, middle class couple without the seldom used scuba gear and tennis rackets in the closet - and that he knows because in the middle of the night when everyone was asleep he got up and looked.



He travels to Gettysburg and says it doesn't measure up to the fun of his childhood visits there when his father would buy him a toy rifle and turn him loose in the park to wage war on unsuspecting tourists. His father would wander through the park, reading the many historical signs, all at no charge. Bryson says he felt guilty at having not gotten anything from the visit but on impulse visits the home of the Eisenhowers nearby. He says the home is perfectly preserved, looking as if Mamie and Ike had simply wandered off, which both were completely capable of doing near the end of their lives.

Bryson next visits his brother who lives at the heart of the "rustbelt," Bloomsburg. He notes that his brother recently moved from Hawaii - just when Bryson has the chance to travel anywhere he wants in America. They visit Amish Country where they overeat at a restaurant in a barn-like structure where heaping platters and bowls of food is served to the Brysons and others seated around a large trestle table. That night, Bryson and his brother drink beer and eat from an all-night fast food place and Bryson decides to take a bus for the next leg of his journey - New York. The bus trip is horrible and he notes that the only thing he can imagine that might be worse would be if he were dead or at a Bee Gees concert.

Bryson visited New York as a teenager and says the city still frightens him on this visit. He says he wants to hand out business cards that say "Thank you for not killing me." He cites the number of panhandlers who ask for money, some of them multiples times. He says he regrets that he doesn't live in the time period when a gentleman could have struck them with sticks. He spends the day roaming the city, noting that one undeniable fact about New York is that anything can happen. He sees a strip club and believes the pictures of beautiful and sometimes famous women to be a fraudulent attempt to lure in patrons, just as had been the case at the Iowa fairs when Bryson, fourteen, would pay his dollar to see a stripper who looked nothing like the advertisement but was his mother's age. He returns to his room where he notes that there are some movies available for \$6.50, including a porn movie with "plenty of bonking," but is too cheap and fears that someone will blackmail him with the receipt, threatening to tell his mother.

In the Appalachian Mountains, Bryson notes the number of shacks alongside the road, the homes of white families living in abject poverty. His writing returns to issues of poverty and race repeatedly. In this case, he says that a white family has to try to live in poverty, and points out that poverty is relative because most of these people own vehicles that were purchased new. When he reaches Washington, D.C., he encounters a man who is begging and says that the beggar should mug someone because that at least is more dignified. He recalls a trip to that city during his childhood in which he and his family were at a diner. Blacks who entered ordered and took their lunches to go. It seems the inequality disturbs him, wherever he sees it. It was during a family trip there that they saw a shooting and Bryson notes that it was his first realization that a person can be killed or forced to take his lunch in a paper bag outside to eat, simply because someone doesn't like something about that person.



Chapters 15 through 19

Chapters 15 through 19 Summary and Analysis

Bryson quickly crosses Connecticut and briefly wonders if he should go back, thinking there must be something he missed. At Bellevue Avenue near Newport, he skips the official tour of the impressive homes built by the wealthiest of the country around 1900, opting to follow a path that follows a cliff for a view of the rear of the homes instead. He notes the tourists at the elaborate home of Cornelius Vanderbilt and wonders what the "dog-faced old prick" would think of the intrusion. Bryson says the houses would make most people think that no one - other than themselves - deserve to be so rich. Cape Cod is pretty but incredibly congested with the Columbus Day weekend travelers. He says he can't see a "single real attraction" and that it seems every business in town is aimed at getting tourists to spend money. He stops and purchases a hot dog which he eats "with sand" and washes it down with a cup of coffee, also "with sand."

Bryson next heads into Boston and says it's the "real New England," so the towns he sees will improve. As he enters Maine, he soon realizes that he's not going to find the landscape he'd expected. The houses and scenery are drear with nothing remarkable. He compares it to the trips with his father when a particular amusement park could be seen in the distance but remained just out of reach. When he reaches Wiscasset - cited as the best town of the state - he gives up Route 1 and turns north, saying that Wiscasset was "OK," but certainly not worth the travel time.

He arrives in Littleton and pays too much for a motel room that the proprietor says is clean with a great television and plush carpets. Bryson says the room is all that was promised and feels like a "shit" for having doubted it. At dinnertime, he goes to the Topic of the Town restaurant where the waitress is overly polite and rushes to top off his water glass every time he takes a sip. At one point he wants to tell her that all he wants is for her to "piss off" so that he can eat, but doesn't. By the time he reaches the motel, he has come to believe that the town has been inhabited by aliens and smiles back at them hoping to remain on their good sides. He leaves before the town is stirring awake the following morning. In the nearby town of Peacham, he finds no one around and wonders if the aliens from Littleton have taken them all to "the plant Zog." He finds a large cemetery - seemingly too large for the small town - and becomes sad at the sheer number of youngsters buried there. He leaves the town quickly, driving west across Vermont and noting the improvement in scenery. He stops at a diner and listens to an overweight, undereducated woman moan about her husband, job and kids, prompting Bryson to note that it seems the most beautiful places in American are inhabited by the poorest people. In Stowe, he finds the people are rich and that the town caters to them.

In Cooperstown, home of James Fenimore Cooper, Bryson finds a town that almost lives up to his idea of perfection but is clouded by the number of tourists, most visiting the Baseball Hall of Fame and Bryson himself spends three hours there, reminiscing about his own childhood. He has dinner in a restaurant attached to a bowling alley and



the staff are clearly anxious for him to finish so they can close. He says he never really minds bad service because it makes him feel better about leaving a tip.

Bryson cites the dirty conditions around Cleveland and his amazement that man has managed to "kill" Lake Eerie. He says that he'd read a newspaper article in which a board overseeing water quality reported 362 chemicals now in the lake, compared to thousands at some previous testing, and Bryson is amazed to see two men fishing in the murky water.

He travels onward and catches a brief statement within a news broadcast that indicates a huge fall in the stock market but has to tune in to a Canadian station to get any substantive information. He cites his own work on a radio station in which the owners refused to pay for their sportscaster to travel to out-of-town games. On those game nights, Bryson talked to a man on the phone who gave a rough draft of what was happening and Bryson passed it on to the sportscaster who presented it as if he were there. When for some reason the call didn't come on time, the sportscaster improvised, saying a brief shower had called a halt to the game and picking up as if nothing had happened when the next report arrived.

Bryson wonders what will happen to Detroit - already the most violent city in America - when the car industry folds. He isn't interested in Detroit but does stop at the Henry Ford Museum. He's annoyed at the entrance price of \$15 but instantly enthralled and enjoys his time there, including his visits to the many houses of famous Americans, collected by Ford are carefully reassembled on the grounds. He stops next in Mackinaw City, Michigan, where the entire town is closing up for the winter, finds a motel willing to rent him a room and goes out to find dinner. Eats in a deserted restaurant and drinks in a deserted bar, saying both were warm against the winter winds and cozy. He wakes to snow and boards a ferry to Mackinac Island where it's so quiet he equates it with a city preparing to lapse into a "six-month coma." He spends a day wandering the island and is pleased with the quiet. He finds a hotel calling for "proper attire" and wants to slip in to see what it's like to be rich, but a liveried doorman prevents it. Driving on, he discovers a series of shops advertising "pasties," and wants to know if it's the food he knows from England. He says he's disappointed in the taste, but that there's nothing wrong with it. It's just that after having eaten nothing but junk food, he isn't ready for the uninspired food.

Bryson goes off on a tangent about health care, comparing that in America to what's available in Britain, then apologizes saying he'd really meant to offer uninteresting facts about Wisconsin. He soon crosses the line into Iowa and notes that he's happy because his license plate no longer stands out as being a visitor from another state. Rather than driving on through to Des Moines, he stops at Iowa City and discovers that it's homecoming week with all the festivities. At a bar he meets an old friend, John Horner, a teacher. They talk briefly about the kids who surround them and it's Horner who says the kids of today are intellectually much younger than their age, and are shallow.

Bryson arrives at his mother's home in Des Moines the following day and, despite the eagerness to see his mom, takes time to write his trip notes - a task he says makes him



feel equal in importance to a jumbo jet pilot. He's driven 6,822 miles in 34 days. He goes inside, accepts his mother's offer of a sandwich and notes that it's "good to be home."

Bryson seems always to be interested in history though he often pokes fun at the most mundane issues. In Cape Cod he points out that the pilgrims who landed there were really trying to reach Jamestown, and that they didn't bring anything along to help make their new lives a success. He says there were no plows or horses or fishing tackle among their possessions. However poor they were at the planning process, they made it up by quickly moving on toward Massachusetts, and "So did I."

Bryson generalizes about several of the towns he visits. He says that in one village, there's an expensive clothing shop but not much else, and that he can't think of many things worse than living in a place where a \$200 sweatshirt is readily available but not a can of beans. Then he qualifies that there are worse things - brain cancer or taking a drink from your grandmother's denture cup - but that he hopes the reader can still see his point.

Bryson talks about the look of a long-distance traveler and says it's easy to recognize another who is far from home and has been on the road for some time by the overweight wife asleep in the front seat, children going wild in the backseat and the presence of laundry and takeout food. He says two travelers who notice each other either feel envy or sadness, depending on which still has the longer distance to drive. Then Bryson says he'd seen a car from Alaska and notes that he'd never before seen an Alaskan license plate. He says there were no others in the car and speculates that the man might have already killed the wife and kids and have them in the trunk.

Bryson has memories of visiting the Mackinac Island at age four and having stepped in horse manure. His mother cleaned one shoe only to have him step in another pile with the other shoe. Bryson says his mother was always patient with him, unlike his own efforts with his own children. It's one of his many references to his mother's equanimity. In this instance he notes that she's even patient when it comes to "horse shit."



Chapters 20 through 28

Chapters 20 through 28 Summary and Analysis

Bryson heads for Nebraska and notes that it's boring - at least Iowa has some colors of green "and a hill." He says he doesn't understand why the original settlers passed through the green of Iowa but stopped before Colorado to settle in Nebraska. His first stop is Winterset, a town so small it takes only a minute to find the house that's the birthplace of John Wayne, though it's closed. He soon crosses the Missouri River to Nebraska City and says it's actually much nicer than Iowa. He then reaches the geographical center of the United States and says that if the United States were invaded at this moment, he'd be the last one captured. He calls it a position for a "last stand," and says he feels slightly guilty for leaving it unattended.

He drives through Great Bend and then to Dodge City, noting that somewhere in that stretch he officially left the Midwest behind for the West. He stops off in Holcomb, Kansas, where the infamous murders of the Clutter family occurred. He is surprised to find that people seem unaware of the book, "In Cold Blood" that told the story of the murders. A teacher explains that the majority of the people seem to feel that the author, Truman Capote, exploited their town and refused to read it or to allow it in their public library.

He crosses into Colorado and is disappointed that he's not immediately viewing majestic mountains. He then crosses mountains to reach the town of Victor, former home to a number of wealthy gold mines and miners. The town is almost deserted and he drives on to Cripple Creek to discover that it's "way too touristy." He plans to press on to Aspen but finds the highway closed due to snow. He winds up in Leadville, notes the poverty on the outskirts of town and the wonderful Victorian buildings downtown, and stays at the Timberline Motel and has an adequate meal at the Golden Burro Café. With the continued threat of snow, Bryson makes the decision to head south toward New Mexico.

Bryson is annoyed that Taos is a tourist trap inhabited by white-haired hippies but is charmed by Santa Fe. He drinks too much one night, visits with his niece at St. John's College the following day, then heads out on Interstate 40, soon arriving at the Grand Canyon before moving on toward Utah and then to Nevada where he includes extensive descriptions of the gambling and people there. Next, he's in California and notes that there's always contrasting scenery. Past the town of Mojave, Los Angeles' smog is apparent. He discards the idea of going into the city, instead turning to the little-traveled San Joaquin Valley where he quickly learns the reason there are few tourists is that the area is simply boring. Before hitting the Sierra Nevada Mountains, he notes that the only difference between California and Iowa is that Iowa has no smog and orange trees in front yards.

Snow continues to be an issue as some of the passage Bryson wants to travel are closed. He drives through forest scenery that gives way to the burned out remains of the



Toiyabe National Forest. He stops at a phone booth to phone his mother, reassuring her that he hasn't been killed as millions are each year and that he has plenty of clean underwear. He then spends the night in Wells, Nevada, which he describes as the "sorriest, seediest" town he's ever seen. He has a bad dinner and refuses a doggie bag, saying he doesn't think he can find a dog who'll eat it. He says he goes back to the motel and goes to sleep but his stomach continues to yell for food.

Bryson tells the story of a not-so-bright woman who'd done cleaning for his family when his grandmother, ill with cancer, had come to live with them. The woman had wanted to quit but his mother, promising that she couldn't "catch" cancer, induced her to stay with a raise. The woman soon died of cancer and Bryson says he tells the story because there was absolutely nothing of interest between Wells and Twin Falls, Idaho. He spends a day in Idaho before driving on to Wyoming and says the scenery could have come from a story book. He soon arrives at another national park and spends some time at Geyser Basin in Yellowstone but skips Old Faithful.

The following day Bryson makes the decision to go on to the Custer Battlefield National Monument which he says was a "pleasant surprise." The battle was fairly small as is the battlefield. In Sundance, Wyoming, he finds that the only restaurant in town has been rented for a private party. Driving on, he passes Mount Rushmore and through the flat boredom of South Dakota to Sioux Falls. As he realizes that he's nearing Des Moines again, he doesn't want the trip to be over, but it soon is. He's driving more than 13,000 miles and visited 38 states. In Des Moines, he feels serene and notes that he could be happy living here.

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Bryson says that Kansas is more than he expects. He cites the fact that most of the towns are "quintessentially American," and that both Superman and Dorothy Gale were from Kansas. He later talks about the traffic, saying that he believes the state must recruit old people to drive its highways.

Bryson says that the Grand Canyon is awesome in a way that can't be explained. He says that even as a talkative and obnoxious child, the sight stopped him immediately. He says that other than the sight of his grandfather's body in its coffin, it was the single most impressive moment of his childhood.

Bryson wants to visit the Redwood National Park but doesn't have time, and is monumentally disappointed at Yosemite. He says the view going in was outstanding but the park - as is the case with all national parks in America - is poorly run. He then goes on about the historical failings of the park system and says that one of the biggest problems in Yosemite is the lack of signs to point tourists in the correct direction.



Characters

Bill Bryson

Bill Bryson is a writer who goes on a trip across a large section of the United States, recording his thoughts and observations along the way. Though the book is about Bryson's travels, facts about Bryson are soon revealed through the course of his observations. He is a native of Des Moines, Iowa, and says that as a young man he couldn't wait to get out of the town. Finishing his trip, he says it's good to be home and admits that he could live in Des Moines.

Bryson seems concerned about equality. He speaks often of race issues. While in Mississippi, he recalls the three young men killed during the race issues of that region. He also writes about his impressions of the Blacks who are not served at a luncheonette counter in Washington, D.C., but who order their meals and leave. As a child, Bryson asks his father about these situations and goes so far in his questioning that he wonders what would happen to a Black person who dared to sit at the counter anyway. He also wonders what would happen if a Black had a counter and refused service to a white person.

It seems evident that Bryson feels family and family values are important. He talks to some length about his dependence on his own family, though he is brutally honest about their shortcomings as well. Bryson writes about his desire to find the perfect town and comes to realize that it simply doesn't exist as one place, but that there are pieces of it scattered across America.

Bill Bryson's Father

Though never named, Bryson describes many aspects of his father. As Bryson begins his journey, he takes the route his father always selected for family holidays with Bryson's grandparents. Bryson now admits that there's nothing his father liked better than covering the dining room table with maps as he considered routes. Bryson also describes his father's adamant denial that the family were going to stop at some attraction being advertised on billboards, though he always gave in at a specific point. His father would then declare that they were only staying a half hour and that they were not buying anything, seeming to take solace in his renewed control of the situation. When the attraction was invariably less than had been advertised, he would give in and buy toy knives and bags of dinosaurs to salve the childhood grief.

Though Bryson openly pokes fun at his father, it seems evident that his father played an important and lasting role in Bryson's life. He notes that his father always seemed to bemoan the price of restaurants and tourist attractions and Bryson himself goes so far as to skip attractions with exorbitant admission fees.



Maude Bryson

Bill Bryson's grandmother. Bryson's memories of his grandmother are varied greatly. He notes that when he arrived at the home of his grandparents, both would be waiting at the gate and Bryson cites his belief that they might have been waiting for hours, having nothing else to do. Soon after their arrival, Maude Bryson would rush inside to take something out of the oven. Unlike the memories of wonderful foods from most grandmothers' kitchens, Bryson doesn't remember his grandmother as a good cook.

Bill Bryson's Grandfather

Bryson describes his grandfather as having been a farmer. Typical of all farmers, he was tough. Bryson notes that the only three things that could kill a farmer are lightning, rolling over in a tractor and old age, and that it's old age that caused the death of his grandfather.

Bill Bryson's Mother

Bryson's mother seems to be a gentle soul. On family vacations she's quiet, but sometimes points out to her husband that he might have just run over something. According to Bryson, she is woefully inadequate as a navigator reading the map and infinitely patient with him as a child.

Lucia Herndon

The lifestyles editor at the Philadelphia Inquirer and a friend of Bryson's who is also from Des Moines. Bryson notes that Lucia's desk is the messiest in the office and it's Lucia who takes Bryson to Mount Airy.

Mr. Morrissey

The deaf milkman who delivered to the Bryson house each morning. Bryson notes that the man was about sixty, wore a hearing aid and had a dog for a companion, named Skipper. Morrissey would talk loudly, not hearing the level of his own voice, and would make comments such as "Well, Skipper, would you fucking believe it, I left the cottage cheese on the goddamn truck." Bryson says no one in his neighborhood wanted to get the deaf Mr. Morrissey fired but were not upset when home deliveries ended.

Mr. Piper

The crazy man who lives in Des Moines. Mr. Piper talks about how horrible the British are and Bryson takes great pleasure in sparking impossible debates with the old man about the British way of life.

John Horner

The friend Bryson encounters during the homecoming event at Iowa City. Horner says that the children are fourteen years old physically, but emotionally and intellectually are only about eight. He also says that children of today are more shallow than those of his own generation and that their desires are different.

Steve Shannon

The KCBC sports caster who Bryson sometimes works with as a teenager. Bryson notes that Steve had the ability to sit in the KCBC broadcasting station and report on a baseball game as if he were there.



Objects/Places

Amalgam

The imaginary but perfect small town Bill Bryson is searching for. He soon comes to realize that he won't find this town but that he can use pieces of towns to create it.

Des Moines, Iowa

Where Bill Bryson lives as a child.

Pella

The town based on a Dutch heritage near the beginning of Bryson's trip. He notes that there are windmills in many yards and an annual event around the tulips that grow there. Over the course of the story, Bryson compares many things to the excitement of seeing the little windmills in Pella. It's also where Wyatt Earp is from.

Carbondale

The Illinois town where Bryson stays in a Heritage Motor Inn and has dinner at Pizza Hut. He notes that the town has no downtown, and surmises that it was "eaten by shopping malls."

Columbus

A town in Mississippi where Bryson discovers and describes a beautiful downtown area. This is also the point of his journey at which he admits he's never going to find the perfect town, but that some of the pieces exist in Columbus.

Pine Mountain

A town that Bryson chooses to drive through because the name conjures up images of craggy mountains, forests and streams. He says he realizes why they chose the name - that no one would ever have visited a town called Pine Flat-Place.

Bryson City, North Carolina

Bryson says he drove ten miles out of the way to reach this town simply because his last name is Bryson. There's a small motel with an old-fashioned neon sign and Bryson says that would be the motel for his perfect town.



Washington, D.C.

Where Bryson visits the Smithsonian and monuments and watches a Japanese dignitary leave the White House.

Bloomsburg

The city where Bryson visits with his brother's family and the point from which he embarks on the bus ride to New York City.

Cape Cod

The town where Bryson stops and has a hotdog "with sand" and coffee, also "with sand." Bryson notes the pilgrims landed here by accident and quickly moved on, and that he opts to do the same.

Detroit

Where Bryson stops to visit the Henry Ford Museum.

Holcomb, Kansas

The city where the Clutter family were murdered. The event was written about by Capote in a book titled, "In Cold Blood."

St. Francis's Cathedral

The site of a famous staircase that isn't supported by anything but its own weight. Bryson is disappointed that the church is owned privately and admission is charged.



Themes

The Search for a Perfect Town

As Bryson enters New England, he says he had expected to find beautiful scenery and white clapboard churches all along the way. Instead, he finds the typical lines of strip malls, convenience stores and fast-food places. It's here that he said he had hoped that New England would have held onto "something of its former charm," but is again disappointed. It seems he is always ultimately disappointed with some aspect of his current location. He describes the squalor, poverty and touristy atmospheres as being negatives. He does come to select pieces of towns along the way as being appropriate for his perfect town and soon realizes that he's going to have to create the town himself, piecemeal.

It seems that Bryson's search for the perfect town goes deeper than just the physical aspects of the place. For example, Bryson is in Washington D.C. when he writes of his thoughts as a child on the inequality of life. He first sees a shooting there and then watches as Black customers of a diner order their lunches and leave. He never sees a Black take a seat at the lunch counter and his father explains the practice of not allowing Blacks to eat at the lunch counter. Bryson is amazed to discover that someone can be refused a seat - or shot in the head - simply because someone else didn't like something about that person.

Coming of Age

Bryson begins his story by saying that he's from Des Moines, Iowa, and that someone "had to be." He cites the fact that there are few options available to anyone from Des Moines and that from an early age he had longed to live somewhere. He expresses it clearly as a longing to be able to open his door and be somewhere. That desire manifests early in Bryson's life and he studies other places, apparently with a passion. The story comes full circle as Bryson completes the second phase of his journey, reaching the outskirts of Des Moines and knowing that his adventure is over. He says that he suddenly realizes that he could be happy living in Des Moines.

While the journey itself is an example of the coming of age theme, there is also a subtler example in Bryson's own actions and reactions to specific ideas. He talks about his father's penchant for family vacations and that he's always griping about cost of the attractions along the way. Bryson himself almost always includes the cost of admission into the various events and sometimes talks about the cost of motels. In this and in several other aspects of his writing, he seems to now have taken on the role of the "adult" on the travels.



A Unique View of History

Bryson's travels are interposed with his own take on a great many historical events and people. For example, he points out the book lying open as if President Eisenhower had walked off in the middle of reading it is a Louis L'Amour western and cites the interesting choice of literature considering the man ran a college and led the nation. As he's nearing the end of his travels in Pennsylvania, he cites the odd shape of the state. The state line between Pennsylvania and New York is straight for many miles but then juts out. Bryson says it looks as if the draftsman's arm had been jostled at that point but in reality it was a way for the people of Pennsylvania to have access to Lake Erie without crossing out of the state. Bryson calls that a "200-year-old reminder of how the early states weren't at all confident that the Union was going to work."

In another section, Bryson talks about Lincoln's Gettysburg Address and how he'd always pictured Lincoln giving that speech immediately after the battle with the bodies of those who died still littering the fields. In truth, the speech came later and Bryson says it's somehow disappointing to view the speech with that information. These kinds of notations are plentiful throughout the book and seem to be Bryson's way of including some historical facts for the reader.

Style

Perspective

The book is written entirely in first person from Bill Bryson's point of view. The perspective is limited to that of Bryson. The story is written from both Bryson's point of view as he travels and his memories of childhood. The first person limited point of view is the only option available for this story. The use of first person is vital because of Bryson's tendency to include personal memories. For example, Bryson tells the story of seeing his grandfather's death. Had Bryson used a third person point of view, the personal memories would have had a lesser impact.

While Bryson's sarcasm is sometimes scathing, there is a sense of the importance of his family connection that is evident throughout the book. The understanding of that family connection lessens the impact of the sarcasm and humor that might otherwise be offensive. For example, Bryson's relationship to his father was obviously an important one. He tells of his sense of loss after his father's death. Despite that, Bryson offers several caustic comments, such as that he knows his father would roll over in his grave if Bryson paid the asking price for a particular thing. He goes ahead, noting that his father could use the exercise. The words would seem incredibly harsh without Bryson's personal perspective that makes it clear to the reader that he loved his father.

Tone

While the majority of Bryson's stories are humorous, they are not always complimentary to his subjects. He writes of his father's refusal to spend money on restaurants other than the cheapest options which means someone during the meal will find dried egg for someone else's meal between the tines of their fork. He tempers those harsh statements with humor. For example, he goes on to say that the person finding the egg invariably realizes they have contracted "cooties" from the encounter.

There is a continuous need to determine which of the places, things and people being described by Bryson are real and which are the result of his continuous sarcastic humor. For example, he often stops in at a "Kwik-Krap" convenience store and that he listens to music by singers with names like "Hank Wanker and Brenda Buns." The sarcasm is sometimes biting as he talks of the typical K-Mart customer - the 250-pound woman with no less than four children with rhyming names, who wants a cheap stereo even though it sounds cheap. He says his father liked K Mart.

Structure

The book is divided into two parts. Part I is titled East and Part II is titled West. The book is also divided into twenty-eight chapters, ranging from about six pages to fourteen. Chapters are not named but are merely numbered. There are several common threads



throughout the book. For example, the first chapter ends with Bryson saying that he's headed out to Missouri with a light heart, and that it's not often you hear someone say that. At the end of Chapter 3, Bryson notes that he fell asleep "with a happy heart" and "dreamed gentle dreams of southern Illinois and the rolling Mississippi River and Dr. Joyce Brothers. And it's not often you hear anyone say that either." There are similar threads that draw the book together and these seem vital because the book is a series of observations related only in the fact that Bryson is telling them with his continuous wit.

An interesting section to this book is an index. It is included at the end of the book and provides an easy way to find references to particular people, places and events. Some are straightforward such as "St. George, Utah, 242-43." Others point out the humor of the book such as the listing for marijuana, which is written as, "Pot, smoking of, 199-200." Another is "Sex," under which there are three listings, including, "and state law." References to prostitution, shacks, Pop-Tarts and "Love Boat" are among the listings in the index section. The book begins with a disclaimer in which it's noted that the people, places and events of the story are true but that some names have been changed to protect the privacy.



Quotes

"We quickly discovered during illicit forays into the picnic hamper that if you stuck a bunch of Ohio Blue Tip matches into an apple or hard-boiled egg, so that it resembled a porcupine, and casually dropped it out the tailgate window, it was like a bomb. It would explode with a small bang and a surprisingly big flash of blue flame, causing cars following behind to veer in an amusing fashion." Chapter 1, Page 10

"Stand on two phone books almost anywhere in Iowa and you get a view." Chapter 2, Page 15

"Aged black men sat on porches and stoops on old sofas and rocking chairs, waiting for death of dinner, whichever came first." - Description of Cairo, Illinois, Chapter 5, Page 52

"He explained that Southerners had become so sensitive about their reputation for being shit-squishing rednecks that all the presenters on TV and radio tried to sound as if they came from the north and had never in their whole lives nibbled a hush puppy or sniffed a grit. Nowadays it was the only way to get a job." Chapter 7, page 70

"It was precisely as motels always used to be, with the rooms spread out along a covered veranda overlooking a lawn with two trees and a tiny concrete swimming pool, which at this time of year was empty but for a puddle of wet leaves and one pissed-off looking frog." Chapter 9, Page 88

"I only ever knew one journalist with a truly tidy desk, and he was eventually arrested for molesting small boys. Make of that what you will - but just bear it in mind the next time somebody with a tidy desk invites you camping." Chapter 13, Page 128

"I did all the things you do in hotel rooms - played with the lights and TV, looked in the drawers, smelled the little cake of soap in the bathroom, put all the towels and ashtrays in my suitcase - then wandered out to have a look at the city." Chapter 14, Page 142

"Every few hundred yards I would find my lane vanishing beneath me and other lanes merging with it from the right or left, or sometimes both. This wasn't a road system, it was mobile hysteria. Everybody looked worried." - Traveling into Boston, Chapter 15, Page 154



"Michigan is shaped like an oven mitt and is often about as exciting." Chapter 18, Page 183

"I was headed for Nebraska. Now there's a sentence you don't want to say too often if you can possibly help it."

"After each song, a disc jockey would come on and jabber for a minute or two in Spanish in the ton of a man who has just had his nuts slammed in a drawer. There would then be a break for an advertisement, read by a man who sounded even more urgent and excited - he clearly was having his nuts repeatedly slammed in a drawer - and then there would be another song. Or rather, it would be the same song again, as far as I could tell." Chapter 22, Page 228

"Here's a riddle for you. What is the difference between Nevada and a toilet? Answer: you can flush a toilet." Chapter 24, Page 244

"I spent the night in Wells, Nevada, the sorriest, seediest, most raggedy-assed town I've ever seen. Most of the streets were unpaved and lined with battered-looking trailer homes. Everyone in town seemed to collect old cars." Chapter 25, Page 264

Topics for Discussion

What is it that prompts Bryson's decision to make the trip?

What is Amalgam? Is Bryson's search for it reasonable?

List at least three places Bryson visits that he visited as a child with his family. Compare the visits.

Describe Bryson's family.

Describe at least three places Bryson believes to be good and at least five that disappointed him. What are some of the things that attract him? Repel him?

What is Bryson's impression of the Smithsonian? What aspects of the museum have changed for him since his previous visit there? Does he call that a positive change?

What kinds of personal memories do Bryson insert into his travel stories? What is the purpose?