

I'm a Stranger Here Myself: Notes on Returning to America After Twenty Years Away Study Guide

I'm a Stranger Here Myself: Notes on Returning to America After Twenty Years Away by Bill Bryson

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Plot Summary

I'm a Stranger Here Myself: Notes on Returning to America after Twenty Years Away is author Bill Bryson's account of his life in America after living in England for twenty years. Bill, his wife and their four children return to Bill's home country where they establish their home in Hanover, New Hampshire, where Bill works as an author. This book is a selection of newspaper columns on becoming re-acclimated to life in America for Bill and establishing an American lifestyle for his family.

Bill Bryson, a prolific writer on travel and everyday life issues, tells the story of returning to America after having lived in England for twenty years. While in England Bill married and raised a family of four children in a remote farming area in the English countryside. When the children's education needs and Bill's work make it important for them to move from their remote location, Bill and the family decide to make the move to America.

The family selects the college town of Hanover, New Hampshire in which to settle and all but Bill thoroughly embrace the American way of life. Shortly after their move, Bill is approached by a friend of his, an editor of a British newspaper, to write columns about American life for the British paper. The columns presented in this book help illuminate American life for a British audience but American readers can completely understand and empathize with Bill's experiences.

Bill enjoys being back in America for the most part but does find some things annoying or more complicated than life in Britain. Bill acknowledges that he had left America as a young man and returns as a middle-aged man with more responsibilities so his perspective on the country will naturally be different. Bill is thrilled to once again see live baseball games and small town American life. There are also things that have radically changed since Bill had been a boy in Des Moines, Iowa, such as the seemingly endless supply of junk food and cable television channels.

Not all of Bill's experiences are so pleasant; however, as he is faced with domestic problems with the family's large home. Bill finds situations such as going to the hardware store a daunting task as he readily admits all through the book that he is not mechanically inclined in the slightest. Bill also struggles through obtaining citizenship for the family and tax forms. Every challenge is approached with humor and it is impossible to think that even the most challenging situations could be difficult for a man who finds the humor in every situation.

Bill's writing style is so informal and casual that it seems like each column is just a friendly discussion over the back fence in his small town. By the end of the book it feels as if a friend has moved away and the reader wonders what Bill and his family are doing now.



Coming Home, Mail Call, Drug Culture, What's Cooking?, Well, Doctor, I was Just Trying to Lie Down..., Rule Number 1: Follow All Rules, Take Me Out to the Ballpark, Help!, A Visit to the Barbershop and On the Hotline

Coming Home, Mail Call, Drug Culture, What's Cooking?, Well, Doctor, I was Just Trying to Lie Down..., Rule Number 1: Follow All Rules, Take Me Out to the Ballpark, Help!, A Visit to the Barbershop and On the Hotline Summary and Analysis

In May of 1995, Bill Bryson, along with his wife and four children, moves to Hanover, New Hampshire, after having lived in England for twenty years. Bill has no particular reason for selecting Hanover other than it seems like a really nice place to live with a charming main street and it is the home of Dartmouth College. Bill finds that coming back to America is a little unsettling because he left as a young man and returns as a middle-aged man with a family. Bill draws on some of the familiar things of his youth such as baseball but is completely lost at the hardware store where he must purchase items to maintain a home and other adult activities different in England.

Bill adapts quite easily to small town life in New England and is especially fond of the post office where the people are friendly and the role of the post office is specifically to facilitate mail as opposed to Britain where the post office functions as a tax center, lottery agent and car tax agent among other things. One of the things that Bill misses about Britain is the late night television program Open University, a lecture-based program perfect for helping a person become drowsy. Bill is amazed at the differences in advertisements on British and American television particularly in the outright manner in which Americans advertise personal hygiene products. Bill also finds adjustments when dining out and relates an incident when he takes his wife to a restaurant in Vermont and is humiliated by his shortcomings in gourmet culinary trends.

Bill uncovers some surprising facts related to American household injuries involving beds, mattresses, pillows and other consumer products and finds that he is more likely to be injured by his ceiling or underpants than being murdered in his New Hampshire town. Bill also finds that it is important to follow rules such as waiting to be seated by a hostess at a restaurant instead of seating yourself. The most glaring episode regarding



rules is the demand for personal identification before being allowed to board a commercial airplane.

One thing that Bill is glad to have back in his life is baseball which he finds immensely more exciting than the comparable British game of cricket. Since Bill's column is printed in a British newspaper he details the facts of American baseball for his audience by starting with the World Series which has just started as he writes this column. Other mysteries of American life that Bill explains to his British audience are the seemingly endless amount of numbers an American must have for identification purposes—from computer serial numbers to insurance policy numbers—and the surprising number of hotline numbers for consumer products such as dental floss.

One of the major adjustments Bill must make to small town American life is the barbershop where he gets his hair cuts. The barber seems to know only hairstyles from the 1950s and Bill endures the indignities of wry comments from his wife due to a haircut that is too short.

Bill establishes the fact that this book is a collection of columns written for Night & Day magazine, a supplement of the Mail on Sunday newspaper published in London, England. Bill had recently returned to American from a twenty-year stint living and working in England and receives a call from the editor of the Night & Day, Simon Kelner, who convinces Bill to share his American experiences with a British audience. One issue to note is that this book was published in 1999, two years before the terrorist attack on America on September 11, 2001. The instance of Bill arguing and trying to board a plane without proper identification would not be an issue today due to the strict passenger requirements at all airports.



Design Flaws, Room Service, Consuming Pleasures, The Numbers Game, Junk-Food Heaven, How to Have Fun at Home, Tales of the North Woods, The Cupholder Revolution, Number, Please and Friendly People

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Bill marvels at the seemingly unending styles and designs of athletic shoes but wonders why his computer keyboard is so hard to use. Bill does not like that many keys are duplicated and that there is no key for the $\frac{1}{2}$ fraction. Bill also wonders about design flaws in cars, VCRs, TV remote controls, microwave ovens and more. In contrast, Bill loves old-style motels because they are a part of the vanishing American popular culture of the 1950s. Bill relates fond memories of traveling as a boy when his father would find the least expensive motels to lodge the family on vacations. Nevertheless, Bill was able to find intrigue in being on the road and wishes his own family would share his enthusiasm for the old-style motels as opposed to modern chain hotels.

One of the lifestyle changes that Bill notices now in America is the overwhelming amount of shopping opportunities. For the first time Bill encounters telemarketing operators, outlet malls, catalogs and Internet shopping offering a plethora of items available to anyone at any time. In Bill's mind, the shopping explosion is only a short distance from the runaway spending by the U.S. government, whose national debt is \$4.5 trillion at the time—an amount unfathomable by most people, including Bill.

Bill is completely thrilled by the junk food products available in the grocery stores of America. Shopping with his wife who eschews junk food for healthier options, Bill obstinately purchases a few items against his wife's wishes and is forced to consume his own bad choices. Outside of junk food, Bill's wife is very fond of the American way of life especially having her groceries bagged, pizza delivery and free ice water. Bill's American household favorites include the garbage disposal, central heating and the fireplace ashpit.



Bill loves his adopted New Hampshire home and marvels that 85 per cent of the state is covered by forests in which people and aircraft are sometimes lost and never found. Even more remarkable is that the same forested area had been meadows and farmland as late as 1874. The migration of farmers to states like Ohio and Illinois and to expanding industrial areas left the land to return to its natural forested state.

An emerging trend that Bill finds odd is the appearance of cupholders in American cars, attributed to the fact that Americans spend so much time in their cars that they demand conveniences no matter how insignificant the comforts might seem. Bill is more than a little inconvenienced by a U.S. government employee when trying to get his wife's social security number in order to complete some tax forms. Apparently, the only person allowed to request a person's identification number is the person himself, leaving Bill annoyed at the end of a conversation that had begun quite favorably. Bill is more positive about the friendly people in his town, especially his neighbors, who re-stock the Bryson refrigerator prior to the family's return from a trip.

The Bryson family is fully immersed in the American lifestyle, complete with its trappings of junk food, unlimited shopping and government red tape. The author's humorous style turns both good and bad situations into interesting ones by giving the reader diverse perspectives on the topics. It is clear that Bill has great energy and enthusiasm for his re-born American experience which draws the reader in, wanting to know more about the Bryson family's adjustment to America and their view on the country and how it has changed for Bill and how the rest of the family views everything with a fresh eye.



Why Everyone Is Worried, The Risk Factor, The War on Drugs, Dying Accents, Inefficiency Report, Why No One Walks, Wide-Open Spaces, Snoopers at Work, Lost at the Movies and Gardening with my Wife

Why Everyone Is Worried, The Risk Factor, The War on Drugs, Dying Accents, Inefficiency Report, Why No One Walks, Wide-Open Spaces, Snoopers at Work, Lost at the Movies and Gardening with my Wife Summary and Analysis

Bill shares several examples of inefficiency and ineptness of federal agencies such as the Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI) and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and even makes fun of sniffer dogs who could not find planted explosives at a Milwaukee airport. Bill also shares with his British readers that as an American he is twice as likely as they are to suffer an untimely and accidental death as discovered in *The Book of Risks: Fascinating Facts about the Chances We Take Every Day*. "I now know that my chances of being murdered sometime in the next twelve months are 1 in 11,000; of choking to death 1 in 150,000; of being killed by a dam failure 1 in 10 million; and of being fatally conked on the head by something falling from the sky about 1 in 250 million," *The Risk Factor*, p. 85.

One of the inequities that Bill sees in American life is the punishment for being caught with LSD. It is not that Bill advocates drug usage, but the penalties, especially for those who have extenuating circumstances, seems much too harsh. Bill realizes that he is in the minority among Americans who share his opinions on the subject of punishing drug users. For example, Bill cites the example of the state of Texas which had recently voted down a \$750 million bond to build new schools but overwhelmingly passed a \$1 billion bond for new prisons to incarcerate convicted drug abusers. What is even more alarming to Bill is that convicted rapists and murderers will probably spend less time in jail and have more benefits when returning to civilian life than anyone caught with drugs. Overall, the situation saddens Bill because the government's programs and punishments clearly do not work and the money spent to enforce them could be spent on more positive initiatives.



Conversely, Bill delights in the local accents of the native New Englanders and is especially intrigued to listen to Walt, a Vermont carpenter who does odd jobs around the Bryson household. Unfortunately, according to Bill, the influx of people to New England will one day eradicate all the local accents and dialects. One of the things that Bill does not like about his town is that not enough people walk, preferring instead to drive their vehicles miniscule distances down streets that were never designed for large vehicles. Bill also underestimates the time necessary to drive from Hanover to Maine for a day's outing and is surprised because the state seems smaller than it actually is.

One of Bill's pet peeves is privacy and he resents the individual's loss of privacy in America even in clothing store dressing rooms. Bill cites an example of a customer in a Michigan department store who had discovered that a store employee had watched through a metal vent as the customer tried on clothes. The customer sued for invasion of privacy but the court sided with the store stating that it is reasonable for a retailer to defend itself against shoplifting. Even more appalling to Bill are the people who glean personal information about others from the Internet. Employees especially are vulnerable when companies can read employees' e-mail and can make decisions about an employee's job based on what is discovered.

Summer is an interesting time for Bill who takes his children to see this year's summer blockbuster film, *Lost World*, very much in style and action to its predecessor, *Jurassic Park*. Bill endures the time at the multiplex and thinks that the films would be much better had they been shown at a movie theater like the one he went to as a young boy in Des Moines. Summer is also a time for gardening, an activity Bill would really enjoy if he did not have to do it with his wife who is an expert English gardener and makes Bill feel inadequate to handle even the smallest gardening task.

Bill's columns are presented in no particular sequence or chronological order, so the reader is free to just enjoy the author's musings on his new life experiences without the need to fit them into any type of pattern for understanding. As the book progresses, the easygoing pace and engaging tone makes it seem as if the reader is becoming a new friend or neighbor who is learning about the Bryson family by chatting over the back fence or sharing a Sunday picnic.



Ah, Summer!, A Day at the Seaside, On Losing a Son, Highway Diversions, Fall in New England, The Best American Holiday, Deck the Halls, Fun in the Snow, The Mysteries of Christmas, Life in a Cold Climate

Ah, Summer!, A Day at the Seaside, On Losing a Son, Highway Diversions, Fall in New England, The Best American Holiday, Deck the Halls, Fun in the Snow, The Mysteries of Christmas, Life in a Cold Climate Summary and Analysis

Bill enjoys the temperate, however brief, summers of New Hampshire and is glad that their house has a screened-in porch so he can enjoy days and evenings out there. Unfortunately, a skunk has also taken up part-time residence on the porch until Bill outwits it and repairs the broken screen which had been the undesirable tenant's point of entry. When summer comes, the Bryson family always wants to drive to the ocean to spend days on the beach and even though Bill finds the entire process tedious and unenjoyable, he acquiesces so that the family can enjoy itself.

As the summer draws to a close, Bill interrupts his work to play baseball with his youngest son because he has just driven his oldest son to college in Ohio and realizes how quickly the time passes as the children grow up. Bill's sentimental side is tempered a bit with details of the financial commitments necessary for a college education today, as well as the logistics of preparing a young person to leave home for the first time. After the family adjust slightly to the loss of the college student, Bill realizes that it will not be long before his youngest child will be leaving home and he wants to capture every possible moment with his young ballplayer while he is still at home.

Bill loves the season of autumn in New England for its spectacular leaf color displays. "It is a truly astounding sight when every tree in a landscape becomes individual, when each winding back highway and plump hillside is suddenly and infinitely splashed with every sharp shade that nature can bestow—flaming scarlet, lustrous gold, throbbing vermilion, fiery orange," *Fall in New England*, p. 138. Bill especially loves the holiday of Thanksgiving because of the consumption of large amounts of food followed by hours sitting in front of a television watching football games.



Bill has less enthusiasm for the Christmas holiday which requires him to risk life and limb climbing into the attic to retrieve and then hang up all sorts of blinking Christmas lights and decorations. Bill passes the rest of the winter trying to keep up with his family whose athletic abilities and aptitudes for winter sports far exceed his own. When his athletic prowess fails, Bill is content to enjoy the breathtaking beauty of a New England winter while waiting for summer once more.

This section of columns is arranged more sequentially to indicate the seasons and passing of time. Bill's sentimentality emerges strong in these columns as he describes the bittersweet event of delivering his eldest son to college and wanting to savor what time he will have left with his youngest son before he too leaves home. Bill is also awestruck by the beauty of autumn in New England and does not understand how anyone could not be overwhelmed by such a magnificent natural display. Throughout all these pieces is the undercurrent of gratitude that Bill knows he is fortunate to have the life he has.



Hail to the Chief, Lost in Cyberland, Your Tax Form Explained, Book Tours, The Waste Generation, A Slight Inconvenience, At the Drive-In, Drowning in Red Tape, Life's Mysteries and So Sue Me

Hail to the Chief, Lost in Cyberland, Your Tax Form Explained, Book Tours, The Waste Generation, A Slight Inconvenience, At the Drive-In, Drowning in Red Tape, Life's Mysteries and So Sue Me Summary and Analysis

A holiday that is new to Bill is President's Day. As a boy in Des Moines, Bill had been familiar with Lincoln's Birthday on February 12 and Washington's Birthday on February 22. The consolidated birthday celebration of both presidents prompts Bill to think that all presidents, not just Lincoln and Washington, should be celebrated on President's Day. Another date that puzzles Bill is the New Millennium, when 1999 turns over to 2000 and all the electronic and digital systems on the planet are supposed to crash. Bill does not see the logic in this thinking and attributes it to the thousands of inept computer programmers out there. Even more frustrating for Bill is the U.S. Internal Revenue Service tax forms which he ridicules in an entire column dedicated to the topic.

One of the things Bill does enjoy about his life as an author is that he gets to go on book tours to major cities. Bill finds that he enjoys talking about his books and, despite the harrowing travel and appearance schedule, he likes the experience overall. Bill even tries ordering room service, something that his frugal upbringing would never allow. Unfortunately, the room service experience is not as he had imagined because most meals are delivered with the food cold and the ice cream melted. These trips usually include stays in nice hotels complete with fine food and being driven to the sites he needs to visit. While he does enjoy these sporadic luxuries, Bill is a frugal person at the core and he laments over the gross waste created by Americans such as leaving home and office computers on all night and not putting hot water heaters on timers.

Bill also enjoys all the conveniences of American life but feels that most people have become so used to conveniences that they will tolerate almost any inconvenience to achieve them. Bill states the drive-thru window of a fast food restaurant as an example. When taking his children to eat one day, the line of cars in the drive-thru lane is long so



Bill and his family go inside the restaurant to eat. When exiting the building after their meal, most of the cars which had been in line earlier are still there; the people refusing to go inside the building for food because the drive-thru is supposed to be more convenient.

One of the driving events that Bill enjoys is watching a movie at a drive-in theater. Bill remembers going to drive-ins as a boy but his own family is not as enthralled with the idea when they visit one of the last remaining outside theaters and have a miserable experience. The night is made even more irritating because the family has included one of his young son's friends, Bradley, who spills his drinks and popcorn and must be accompanied to the bathroom at the most inopportune moments.

Bill's humor comes out when he talks about things he does not understand, which are most things according to him. Bill writes, "Here are some of the things I have never been able to figure out: What did insects do at night before there were electric lights? Why is it that the more hair I lose off the top of my head the more grows in my nostrils? When the phone rings, why does someone always say, 'Is that the phone?'" *Life's Mysteries*, p. 199. Bill is especially perplexed by the litigious nature of Americans and cites the current case of Richard M. Nixon's estate suing the U.S. government for \$210 million to compensate the Nixon family for lost earnings they might have made if they had had access to papers seized during the Watergate investigation.

Some of the qualities that make Bill Bryson such an interesting author are his self-deprecating manner and willingness to tell the world about his self-described inadequacies. These qualities make him very real and human to the reader who can relate to the foibles of a person who is literate but intelligent but fails miserably at domestic tasks and any sort of manual labor. Bill is always quick to commend the people with skills he does not possess and has the highest regard for those who repeatedly get him out of messes.



The Great Indoors, Death Watch, In Praise of Diners, Shopping Madness, The Fat of the Land, Your New Computer, How to Rent a Car, The Wasteland, The Flying Nightmare and Enough Already

The Great Indoors, Death Watch, In Praise of Diners, Shopping Madness, The Fat of the Land, Your New Computer, How to Rent a Car, The Wasteland, The Flying Nightmare and Enough Already Summary and Analysis

Bill acknowledges that most Americans spend their days in enclosed spaces such as office buildings and shopping malls and is incredulous that those who have the opportunity to enjoy some time outdoors still do not take advantage of it. Bill has a little too much air when he encounters turbulence on a commuter flight from Boston to Lebanon, New Hampshire, one day. Bill makes all the requisite prayers to change his life if allowed to live but soon forgets them once he has landed safely.

One of the things that Bill does not enjoy is shopping because the sales people will not allow him to browse even if he is just waiting for his wife and not shopping at all. Bill relates an especially frustrating experience at a toy superstore where he hears the familiar reply of "aisle seven" to any question about the location of any item in any store. "'Where's women's lingerie?' you ask. 'Aisle seven.' 'Where's pet food?' 'Aisle seven.' 'Where's aisle six?' 'Aisle seven,'" Shopping Madness, p. 220.

Bill is also frustrated by the complexities of renting a car at an airport when faced with the multiple insurance coverage and refueling options available. When Bill has made all the appropriate decisions, he is faced with signing the car rental agreement which is explained as, "Well, this one gives us the right to come to your home and seize one of your children or a nice piece of electronic equipment if you don't bring the car back on time. This one is your agreement to take a truth serum in the event of a dispute. This one waives your right to sue. This one avows that any damage to the car now or at any time in the future is your responsibility. And this one is a twenty-five dollar donation to Bernice Kowalski's leaving party," How to Rent a Car, p. 234.



Bill acknowledges that he is one of the many overweight people in America and is not happy when his wife puts him on a diet. Bill thinks that he is not entirely to blame for his situation because of the fatty, calorie-laden food served in most restaurants. Another excess that baffles Bill is the multitude of channels available on American television. It is especially remarkable to Bill that there is a channel that televises cartoons 24 hours a day. Bill loves some of the shows from his childhood such as *Leave it to Beaver*, *77 Sunset Strip* and *Wagon Train* but wishes that the cable networks would vary the schedules so that the shows would appear at different times to offer more flexibility for the viewers.

Another fond childhood memory Bill has is flying with his father who was a sportswriter and Bill remembers feeling very privileged to go along on some of the sports trips. Today's flying experience leaves Bill feeling more than a little frustrated with the endless lines, overbooked flights, delays and multiple point layovers for what should be direct flights. Bill mentions his displeasure with Northwest Airlines who balk at the notion of seating Bill's family members together when it means asking other passengers to change their seats.

Bill is amazed by the abundance and variety of products available to American consumers. Bill recalls going to the supermarket shortly after his return to America where he sees eighteen varieties of incontinence diapers, thirty-five varieties of Crest toothpaste and endless pizza, cereal, dog food, ice cream and cookies varieties. For the most part Bill is intrigued by the wealth of choices but one venue he does not appreciate is a coffee shop with multiple choices when he would like a simple cup of coffee. Bill's family loves the variety available in stores and restaurants but Bill holds out for simplicity wherever possible.

It is interesting to note the differences in some of Bill's frustrations with American life when this book was written in 1999 and how he must be even more irritated with some facets of American life today. The annoyances Bill experiences with air travel in the late 1990s do not even compare with the huge frustrations experienced by air travelers today. The range and choices of food and consumer products is dizzyingly complex, making a trip to the supermarket or drugstore almost a military mission. Further, buying a cup of coffee today is no easier than it was in 1999 when the venues and their choices have multiplied greatly and have become American icons in their own right.



At a Loss, Old News, Rules for Living, Our Town, Word Play, Last Night on the Titanic, Property News, Life's Technicalities, An Address and Coming Home: Part II

At a Loss, Old News, Rules for Living, Our Town, Word Play, Last Night on the Titanic, Property News, Life's Technicalities, An Address and Coming Home: Part II Summary and Analysis

Bill again tells the reader about his inadequacies such as looking for a movie theater restroom and ending up in the alley on the other side of a locked door or having to return to a hotel desk several times during a visit to confirm his own hotel room number. One episode of ineptness occurs when checking into the airport and creating quite a mess when Bill's carry-on bag explodes when he tries to locate a frequent flier card. Bill admits to frequent catastrophes when he flies and since his air travel schedule has accelerated, Bill spends a lot of time feeling less than perfect.

Bill ponders the prospect of getting old and realizes that he will have some benefits. "As far as I am concerned, there are three good things about getting older. I can sleep sitting up, I can watch 'Seinfeld' reruns over and over without being able to say definitively whether I have seen them already, and I can't remember the third thing. That's the problem with getting older, of course—you can't remember anything," *Old News*, p. 252. Bill's memory is already starting to fade and finds himself calling his wife so that she can remind him of the purpose of the errand he is running. Bill's frustration is increased because his wife has an amazing memory and can recall the minutest details from events that occurred many years ago.

In order to garner some control in his life, Bill issues his rules for living which, among other things, require that people must make the choice of being stupid or slow and not both; that all cars must be equipped with gas caps on both sides and at the rear of the car; Martha Stewart should be designated as illegal; and all microwaves should recognize the type of food placed inside and cook the contents appropriately.

Bill is glad to live in the small town of Hanover, New Hampshire, where crime is practically nonexistent, with a remarkable public library and a movie theater that is owned by the local civic improvement society. Bill laments the demise of small towns in America and blames the huge discount stores that establish on the edges of towns and pull business away from small town downtown areas. Even post offices are not immune



to demise as Bill cites the case of the post office in Livingston, Montana, being closed without notice to the town's residents.

As a writer, Bill pays special attention to words, especially the sound of words that indicate what they actually are. For example, granola sounds like a crunchy mix of grains; snooze is a great word for the activity; and words such as dribble, bloat, chortle and clank are among Bill's favorites. Bill is less enamored with words such as haggis, anorak, spatula, tofu, pantaloons, serviette, sweetbreads and settee. Words from the British vocabulary still remain some of Bill's favorite sounds. These words include gobsmacked, chivvy, berg, snog, gormless, skive, pillick, naff, prat and plonker.

In one of his columns, Bill creates a satire of the sinking of the Titanic based on the British passion for decorum and gracious behavior. "'Good lord, Buss, what's all the commotion?' 'Oh, hello, Smythe. Not like you to be up at this hour. Smoke?' 'Thank you, don't mind if I do. So what's the kerfuffle? I saw the captain as I came by and he looked in a dreadful stew.' 'It appears we're sinking, old boy,'" Last Night on the Titanic, p. 269. This style of dialogue continues until both characters part company hoping to get in a bit of sleep before the ship's fateful plunge.

Bill also writes about the purchase of a new flat in London that he and his wife make. Having waded through the sea of paperwork, the couple assumes that hassles are behind them as they set out to furnish the new dwelling. However, after selecting the appropriate furnishings, Bill finds that the delivery of the items is continually delayed with some major pieces arriving months after their purchase date. To complicate matters, Bill returns to the United States after the purchases and must try to manage the deliveries from across the ocean.

At home in the United States, Bill feels inadequate once again when forced to call a plumber to fix a problem with the washing machine. Bill wishes his wife were at home because he does not like talking to mechanical people because they know more than he does and can charge him exorbitant rates because he is uninformed. This encounter with the washing machine repairman is no exception to Bill's pattern of humiliation and the event ends with a repaired machine and Bill's pride and wallet just a little bit lighter.

Bill is more in his element when asked to deliver an address to a graduating class from Kimball Union Academy in Meriden, New Hampshire. Although Bill's son does not understand why his mechanically inept father has been asked to impart advice, Bill feels confident that he can deliver some appropriate remarks primarily because he has survived twenty-eight years post high school himself and has learned a few things of importance. Bill sidesteps the typical remarks given at graduation ceremonies and delivers ten simple observations that are his guideposts. Some of these thoughts include a person's appreciating that he is alive; being passionate about doing something in life and then doing it; never thinking that winning is everything; never cheating; and striving to be modest.

To sum up his book, Bill tells the reader that he is not quite sure how he and his family came to live in America when they had been perfectly happy ensconced in a charming



farming village in the English countryside. After the decision to move to a more urban setting for the sake of the children's education and Bill's work, the idea of settling in America was offered up and agreed upon. Bill is not so sure the decision is the correct one but the rest of his family completely adopts America and loves their new home. Bill had grown up in America so the novelty for the country is not there as it is for his family. Nevertheless, Bill leans into his new lifestyle and is reminded that American people are generally upbeat and much less negative than the British so his experience has some promise after all.

At the conclusion of the book, the reader feels almost as if an old friend has said goodbye. Bill's wit and engaging writing style are so conversational and the topics are so relevant for anyone living in America that it would be hard not to relate to Bill's stories. Although written for a British audience, the columns are filled with content that will have American readers thinking that Bill must be a next door neighbor or the funny guy at work. His topics have universal appeal.



Characters

Bill Bryson

Bill Bryson is a well-known author who has written books on travel and his experiences in everyday life. Bill was raised in Des Moines, Iowa, and fondly recalls family vacations and trips with his sportswriter father. Bill also becomes a writer and moves to England as a young man where he works for several newspapers and eventually writes books. Bill marries a nurse named Cynthia and they have four children whom they raise in England. When the time comes for the family to move from their remote country house in England for the sake of the children's education and for Bill's increasing work demands, they decide to move to America. Bill's sentimentality rises when he rediscovers long lost pleasures like baseball and he embraces his American roots even though some of his new experiences are not as pleasant as he had remembered. Bill is an admittedly a more accomplished writer than he is a handyman and he struggles with the maintenance of his family's home but approaches each situation with his signature humor. Through his columns, which allow for personal opinion, Bill is revealed to be gracious, broadminded, adventurous, and sentimental. Although his life is vastly different from his childhood spent in Des Moines, Bill still retains the values and fundamental beliefs of a boy born and raised in a small town in Iowa.

Mrs. Bryson

Bill is married to a British woman named Cynthia whom he calls Mrs. Bryson throughout the book. Although Mrs. Bryson does not contribute directly to the narrative, she is an important part of the book because she influences so much in Bill's life. Mrs. Bryson takes a leap of faith by moving her young family from England to America but finds that she completely loves the American way of life. Some of the things that Mrs. Bryson enjoys are trips to the seaside, grocery stores where her purchases are bagged, and gardening. Through her husband's columns, Mrs. Bryson is revealed to be cheerful, positive and extremely patient. Overall Mrs. Bryson adapts well to life in America and seems to be the guiding force for the family's daily and long-term direction and maintenance. Mrs. Bryson is also revealed to be intelligent, articulate and well-informed on health issues and places her husband on a diet to improve his health. Mrs. Bryson also seems to be adventurous and initiates spontaneous trips to the seashore much to her husband's chagrin. It is not clear from the book whether or not Mrs. Bryson is employed outside the home but she seems to spend the bulk of her time devoted to her family.



Bryson children

Bill and Cynthia have four children named David, Felicity, Catherine and Sam. Their physical descriptions and personalities do not figure largely in the book, other than what the author shares through small scenarios.

Jimmy

Jimmy is a fictitious character who enters into Bill's writing periodically when he wants to make an obscure point.

Bill's Father

Although he is not an active part of the book, Bill's father is mentioned when Bill recalls his childhood memories.

Simon Kelner

Simon Kelner is the editor of the Night & Day magazine, a supplement of the Mail on Sunday newspaper published in London, England.

Hanover Barbers

Bill puts his hair styling in the hands of the barbers at the Hanover Barbershop.

Walt

Walt is a Vermont carpenter who does odd jobs around the Bryson household.

Bradley

Bradley is the friend of Bill's younger son. He goes to the drive-in theater with the Bryson family one summer night.

Department Store Clerks

Bill is annoyed by department store clerks who will not let him browse without annoying interruptions.



Objects/Places

Hanover, New Hampshire

The Bryson family settles in Hanover, New Hampshire, upon their return to America.

Dartmouth College

Dartmouth College is an Ivy League university located in Hanover, New Hampshire.

Hanover Post Office

Bill enjoys visiting the Hanover Post Office because of its friendly people and welcoming ambience.

Baseball

Bill is happy to have access to live baseball games and baseball broadcast on the radio when he returns to America.

Hanover Barbershop

Bill frequents the Hanover barbershop for his grooming even though the barbers' techniques seem to be stuck in the 1950s.

Dental Floss Hotline

Bill marvels at the ludicrous addition of a hotline number on a container of dental floss.

Motels

Bill has fond childhood memories of staying in motels but his own family prefers chain hotels.

Junk Food

Bill goes overboard when grocery shopping when he finds so many more junk food products available than when he left America as a young man.



Cupholders

Cupholders are one of the more frivolous new additions to American life to which Bill has to become accustomed.

New Hampshire Forests

Bill is awestruck by the vastness and density of the New Hampshire forests that cover 85% of the state.

The Book of Risks

The Book of Risks: Fascinating Facts about the Chances We Take Every Day provides Bill with some interesting information about his chances of being harmed or killed in ordinary circumstances.

The Seaside

The Bryson family enjoys spending a day at the ocean but Bill does not share their enthusiasm for sandy adventures.

Leave it to Beaver, 77 Sunset Strip and Wagon Train

Leave it to Beaver, 77 Sunset Strip and Wagon Train are television shows from the 1950s and 1960s that Bill recalls fondly.

Northwest Airlines

Bill and his family have an unpleasant experience on Northwest Airlines and he declares that he will never use the airline again.



Themes

Sentimentality

The very concept of this book is based on sentimentality, a prominent theme in Bill's life. The very act of returning to America after having been away for twenty years evokes all sorts of sentimental images and emotions for Bill. Some of the more fondly recalled memories are baseball games, both live and broadcast on the radio; the sound of a screen door slamming in summer; and visiting diners in small town America. Bill's mild ridicule and sarcastic style is tempered when sharing his thoughts on his older son going away to college and the void that that creates in the Bryson household. This leave-taking spurs Bill to spend more time with his younger son because he wants to capture as much time with the boy before he too leaves for college. Bill also shares memories of his father throughout the book in events such as driving on family vacations and accompanying his sportswriter father on airline trips. Although Bill paints his father as the epitome of frugal, it is clear that Bill loved his father and truly relishes the time spent with him during childhood.

Family Life

Bill's family is very important to him which is evident as the columns of the book progress. It is the education of his children which prompts Bill and his wife to make the decision to move from rural England to a place where the children will have more stimulating and formal opportunities. It is clear from Bill's columns that he enjoyed his childhood and wants to create similar experiences for his own children even though they may not share his enthusiasm for the same things. For example, going to the drive-in theater is a fond memory of Bill's childhood but the event is not a positive one for his kids who would prefer an air-conditioned movie theater to the inconvenience of viewing a film from the backseat of a car. Bill also takes his family to the seaside to enjoy the quintessential summer experience of coastal life, even though going to the beach is not one of Bill's favorite activities. It is clear from Bill's columns that the family is close, all of them accompanying the elder son on the drive to college in Ohio. Overall, Bill shares events which indicate a life that is very dedicated to domestic life which seems picture perfect in his small New England town.

Adjustments

Bill and his family make a huge move to live in America, a country whose geography and culture is completely foreign to his wife and children. Having lived in a remote area of England all their lives, the children must learn to live in an American town with many more social and educational opportunities. Cultural differences also abound as the family adjusts from watching cricket to enjoying baseball games as well as the mountains of fast food options which were not available to them before. Mrs. Bryson,



like the children, seems to adjust quite nicely to her new home and country and is especially fond of the supermarkets and relatively easy trips to the seashore. Bill's adjustments to his new life are mixed as he is happy to recapture some elements from his life in America as a boy but is now faced with very adult issues for which he feels completely unprepared. Bill reasons that he is the age now that his father was when faced with similar situations of maintaining the household and managing IRS returns. Bill is pleased with some newer features of American domestic life such as garbage disposals and fireplace ashpits, but would prefer not to have to address any issues in which hardware is necessary. Overall, the family makes a difficult transition appear very easy by keeping humor and fun at the forefront.

Style

Perspective

This nonfiction book is written in the first person narrative perspective. This means that the person telling the story is the author himself and he delivers his views and relates events according to his own perception of them. The author does not supply any insight into the motives, feelings or actions of any other people and can only relate instances about these people from his own point of view. When there are conversations detailed, the author can simply relate what the other person says, and although the author may guess at the other person's thoughts, he cannot share them with the reader. Since the nature of the book is a nonfiction account of a person's philosophy on different topics, there is little room for any other points of view. This relaying of personal thoughts is punctuated at times by the retelling of events or incidents to add some dimension to the book, but everything is still from the author's own experiences and perspective. While this technique can be viewed as limiting, the author is able to provide much detail on his own thoughts and emotions which would not otherwise be available to the reader and is in complete alignment with the nature of the work.

Tone

The tone of the book is very informal and engaging, almost as if the reader is having a one-on-one conversation with the author. The language is informal and casual to define the author's personality and energy. There are several slang usages of words but they are in context with the dialogue and appropriate for the work. The narrative is also very high energy with a laid back yet intelligent wit belying the author's own personal style of speaking. The story is told in an unhurried style to mirror the author's pace during his transition to American life. There is also a strong undercurrent of authenticity and sincerity throughout the book which makes the columns very believable. Since Bill is an educated man, and clearly well read, his observations of the people and circumstances he encounters are always insightful and viewed with humor and wit. Bill lets the reader into his mind to know what he is thinking, which is necessary because there are no other notable people with whom Bill interacts.

Structure

The book is structured with an introduction followed by 70 very brief chapters consisting of 3-5 pages each. The chapters represent columns that Bill wrote for publication in a British newspaper to inform British readers about his transition to American life after having lived in England for 20 years. In order to keep the book interesting, Bill varies the column styles. For example, some columns are rants about targeted topics and Bill writes forcefully to complete his points. Other columns have bits of dialogue inserted to break up the narrative, while a few columns do not have any of Bill's direct opinions, just

scenarios written to get his point across. Examples of these include the dialogue of the two aristocratic men on the Titanic as the ship sinks and the satire of how to complete an IRS tax form. True to Bill's humorous style, the chapter titles are very witty, short and to the point. Given the fact that the chapters were originally published as newspaper columns, they are rather short which makes for quick reading and the coverage of many subjects in a brief span.



Quotes

"Coming back to your native land after an absence of many years is a surprisingly unsettling business, a little like waking from a long coma. Time, you discover, has wrought changes that leave you feeling mildly foolish and out of touch. You proffer hopelessly inadequate sums when making small purchases. You puzzle over ATM machines and automated gas pumps and pay phones, and are astounded to discover, by means of a stern grip on your elbow, that gas station road maps are no longer free." *Coming Home*, p. 2.

"As well, there has been the constant, unexpected joy of reencountering all those things I grew up with but had largely forgotten: baseball on the radio, the deeply satisfying whoing-bang slam of a screen door in summer, insects that glow, sudden, run-for-your-life thunderstorms, really big snowfalls, Thanksgiving and the Fourth of July, the smell of a skunk from just the distance that you have to sniff the air quizzically and say: 'Is that a skunk?', Jell-O with stuff in it, the pleasingly comical sight on oneself in shorts. All that counts for a lot, in a strange way." *Coming Home*, p. 3.

"But the really amazing change that occurred while I was away is that now even prescription drugs are advertised. I have before me a popular magazine called *Health* that is chock full of ads with bold headlines saying things like 'Why take two tablets when you can take one? Prempro is the only prescription tablet that combines Premarin and a progestin in one tablet.'" *Drug Culture*, p. 12.

"Going to a restaurant is generally a discouraging experience for me because I always manage somehow to antagonize the waitress. This, of course, is something you never want to do because waitresses are among the relatively small group of people who have the opportunity to sabotage items that you will shortly be putting into your mouth." *What's Cooking?*, p. 13.

"Here's a fact for you: According to the latest *Statistical Abstract of the United States*, every year more than 400,000 Americans suffer injuries involving beds, mattresses, or pillows. Think about that for a minute. That is almost 2,000 bed, mattress, or pillow injuries a day. In the time it takes you to read this article, four of my fellow citizens will somehow manage to be wounded by their bedding." *Well, Doctor, I Was Just Trying to Lie Down...*, p. 17.

"People sometimes ask me, 'What is the difference between baseball and cricket?' The answer is simple. Both are games of great skill involving balls and bats but with this crucial difference: Baseball is exciting, and when you go home at the end of the day you know who won. I'm joking, of course. Cricket is a wonderful sport, full of deliciously scattered micromoments of real action. If a doctor ever instructs me to take a complete rest and not get overexcited, I shall become a fan at once. In the meantime, my heart belongs to baseball." *Take Me Out to the Ballpark*, p. 24.



"And here's the problem. Nobody deserves to go to the World Series more than the Chicago Cubs. But they can't go because that would spoil their custom of never going. It is an irreconcilable paradox." *Take Me Out to the Ballpark*, p. 27.

"I have very happy hair. No matter how serene and composed the rest of me is, no matter how grave and formal the situation, my hair is always having a party. In any group photograph you can spot me at once because I am the person at the back whose hair seems to be listening, in some private way, to a disco album called 'Dance Craze '97.'" *A Visit to the Barbershop*, p. 31.

"I came across something in our bathroom the other day that has occupied my thoughts off and on ever since. It was a little dispenser of dental floss. It isn't the floss itself that is of interest to me but that the container has a toll-free number printed on it. You can call the company's Floss Hotline twenty-four hours a day. But here is the question: Why would you need to? I keep imagining some guy calling up and saying in an anxious voice, 'OK, I've got the floss. Now what?'" *On the Hotline*, p. 35.

"But then most things in the world don't seem right to me. On the dashboard of our family car is a shallow indentation about the size of a paperback book. If you are looking for somewhere to put your sunglasses or spare change, it is the obvious place, and it works extremely well, I must say, so long as the car is not actually moving. However, as soon as you put the car in motion, and particularly when you touch the brakes, turn a corner, or go up a gentle slope, everything slides off. There is, you see, no lip around this dashboard tray. It is just a flat space with a dimpled bottom. It can hold nothing that has not been nailed to it. So I ask you: What then is it for?" *Design Flaws*, p. 41.

"I believe I have just secured definitive proof that America is the ultimate shopping paradise. It came in a video catalog that arrived unsolicited with the morning mail. There, among the usual diverse offerings—Titanic, Tai Chi for Health and Fitness, every movie ever made by John Wayne—was a self-help video called *Do the Macarena Totally Nude*, which promises to guide the naked home viewer through 'the hot moves of this Latin-influenced dance that is sweeping the nation.'" *Consuming Pleasures*, p. 47.

"I decided to clean out the refrigerator the other day. We don't usually clean out our fridge—we just box it up every four or five years and send it off to the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta with a note to help themselves to anything that looks scientifically promising—but we hadn't seen one of the cats for a few days and I had a vague recollection of having glimpsed something furry on the bottom shelf, toward the back. (Turned out to be a large piece of gorgonzola.)" *Junk-Food Heaven*, p. 55.

"However, there are certain things that are so wonderful in American life that I can hardly stand it myself. Chief among these, without any doubt, is the garbage disposal. A garbage disposal is everything a labor-saving device should be and so seldom is—noisy, fun, extremely hazardous, and so dazzlingly good at what it does that you cannot imagine how you ever managed without one. If you had asked me eighteen months ago



what the prospects were that shortly my chief amusement in life would be placing assorted objects down a hole in the kitchen sink, I believe I would have laughed in your face, but in fact it is so." *How to Have Fun at Home*, p. 60.

"A man calls up his computer helpline complaining that the cupholder on his personal computer has snapped off, and he wants to know how to get it fixed. 'Cupholder?' says the computer helpline person, puzzled. 'I'm sorry, sir, but I'm confused. Did you buy this cupholder at a computer show or receive it as a special promotion?' 'No, it came as part of the standard equipment on my computer.' 'But our computers don't come with cupholders.' 'Well, pardon me, friend, but they do,' says the man a little hotly. 'I'm looking at mine right now. You push a button on the base of the unit and it slides right out.' The man, it transpired, had been using the CD drawer on his computer to hold his coffee cup." *The Cupholder Revolution*, p. 69.

"There are certain times when the informality and familiarity of American life strains my patience—when a waiter tells me his name is Bob and that he'll be my server this evening, I still have to resist an impulse to say, 'I just want a cheeseburger, Bob. I'm not looking for a relationship'—but mostly I have come to like it. It's because it's symbolic of something more fundamental, I suppose." *Number, Please* p. 74.

"There are many wonderful things about the United States of America that deserve praise—the Bill of Rights, the Freedom of Information Act, and free refills are three that leap to mind—but none is more outstanding than the friendliness of the people." *Friendly People*, p. 77.

"Here's a fact for you: In 1995, according to the *Washington Post*, computer hackers successfully breached the Pentagon's security systems 161,000 times. That works out to eighteen illicit entries every hour around the clock, one every 3.2 minutes. Oh, I know what you're going to say. This sort of thing could happen to any monolithic defense establishment with the fate of the earth in its hands. After all, if you stockpile a massive nuclear arsenal, it's only natural that people are going to want to go in and have a look around, maybe see what all those buttons marked 'Detonate' and 'Code Red' mean. It's only human nature." *Why Everyone is Worried*, p. 81.

"America is, in short, a pretty risky place. And yet, oddly, we get alarmed by all the wrong things. Eavesdrop on almost any conversation at Lou's Café here in Hanover and the talk will all be of cholesterol and sodium levels, mammograms and resting heart rates. Show most Americans an egg yolk and they will recoil in terror, but the most palpable and avoidable risks scarcely faze them." *The Risk Factor*, p. 86.

"Please understand it is not remotely my intention here to speak in favor of drugs. I appreciate that drugs can mess you up in a big way. I have an old school friend who made one LSD voyage too many in about 1977 and since that time has sat on a rocker on his parents' front porch examining the backs of his hands and smiling to himself. So I know what drugs can do. I just haven't reached the point where it seems to me appropriate to put someone to death for being an idiot." *The War on Drugs*, p. 90.



"If you go to the remoter corners of the state and hang out at a general store you might just overhear a couple of old farmers (pronounced 'fahmuhs') asking for 'a frog skin more' of coffee or saying 'Well, wouldn't that just jar your mother's preserves,' but more probably it will be urban refugees in L.L. Bean attire asking the storekeeper if he has any guavas." *Dying Accents*, p. 94.

"A researcher at the University of California at Berkeley recently made a study of the nation's walking habits and found that the average person in the United States walks less than 75 miles a year—about 1.4 miles a week, barely 350 yards a day. I'm no stranger to sloth myself, but that's appallingly little. I rack up more mileage than that just looking for the channel changer." *Why No One Walks*, p. 101.

"I love to garden—there is something about the combination of mindless activity and the constant unearthing of worms that just suits me somehow—but frankly I am not crazy about gardening with my wife. The trouble, you see, is that she is English and thus can intimidate me. She can say things like, 'Have you heeled in the nodes on the *Dianthus chinensis*?' and 'Did you remember to check the sequestrene levels on the *Phlox subulata*?'"
Gardening with my Wife, p. 117.

"In New England, a friend here recently explained to me, the year divides into three parts. Either winter has just been, or winter is coming, or it's winter." *Ah, Summer!*, p. 121.

"Every year about this time, my wife wakes me up with a playful slap and says: 'I've got an idea. Let's drive for three hours to the ocean, take off most of our clothes, and sit on some sand for a whole day.' 'What for?' I will say warily. 'It will be fun,' she will insist. 'I don't think so,' I will reply. 'People find it disturbing when I take my shirt off in public. I find it disturbing.' 'No, it will be great. We'll get sand in our hair. We'll get sand in our shoes. We'll get sand in our sandwiches and then in our mouths. We'll get sunburned and windburned. And when we get tired of sitting, we can have a dip in the water so cold it actually hurts. At the end of the day, we'll set off at the same time as thirty-seven thousand other people and get in such a traffic jam that we won't get home till midnight. I can make trenchant observations about your driving skills, and the children can pass the time in back sticking each other with sharp objects. It will be such fun.'" *A Day at the Seaside*, p. 125.

"So we went out onto the front lawn and here is where it gets sentimental. There was a kind of beauty about the experience so elemental and wonderful I cannot tell you—the way the evening sun fell across the lawn, the earnest eagerness of his young stance, the fact that we were doing this most quintessentially dad-and-son thing, the supreme contentment of just being together—and I couldn't believe that it would ever have occurred to me that finishing an article or writing a book or doing anything at all could be more important and rewarding than this." *On Losing a Son*, p. 129.

"I have to admit it. I have become my father. I even read license plates, though my particular interest is the slogans—'Land of Lincoln' for Illinois, 'Vacationland' for Maine, the zippily inane 'Shore Thing' for New Jersey. I enjoy making quips and comments on



these, so when, for instance, we see 'You've Got a Friend in Pennsylvania,' I like to turn to the other passengers and say in a wounded tone, 'Then why doesn't he call?' However, I am the only one who finds this an amusing way to pass a long journey." *Highway Diversions*, p. 134.

"Nineteen degrees below zero is unusually cold even for northern New England, so I was interested to see how long I could bear such an exposure, and the answer was thirty-nine seconds. I don't mean that that's how long it took for me to get bored with the idea, or to think, 'Gracious, it is rather chilly; I guess I'll go in now.' I mean that's how long it took me to be so cold that I would have climbed over my mother to get inside first." *Life in a Cold Climate*, p. 160.

"One of the most arresting statistics that I have seen in a good while is that 5 percent of all the energy used in the United States is consumed by computers that have been left on all night." *The Waste Generation*, p. 179.

"I'm not even going to begin to tell you about the frustration of trying to get a foreign-born spouse or other loved one registered as a legal resident in the United States because I haven't the space, and anyway it is much too boring. Also, I can't talk about it without weeping copiously. Also, you would think I was making most of it up." *Drowning in Red Tape*, p. 194.

"I have a friend in Britain, an academic, who was recently approached by the lawyers for an American company to be an expert witness in a case they were handling. They told him they wanted to fly the lead attorney and two assistants to London to meet him. 'Wouldn't it be simpler and cheaper if I flew to New York instead?' my friend suggested. 'Yes,' he was told without hesitation, 'but this way we can bill the client for the cost of three trips.' And there you have the American legal mind at work." *So Sue Me*, p. 202.

"The last time I was in Des Moines, I ran into an old friend of the family. He was dressed in a sweatsuit and flushed with that glow that denotes recent healthful activity. He told me that he had just come from a session with the Valley West Mall Hiking Club. It was a splendid April day, and I asked him why the club didn't use any of the city's several large and handsome parks. 'No rain, no cold, no hills, no muggers,' he replied without hesitation. 'But there are no muggers in Des Moines,' I pointed out. 'That's right,' he agreed at once, 'and do you know why? Because there's nobody outside to mug.' He nodded his head emphatically as if I hadn't thought of that, as indeed I had not." *The Great Indoors*, p. 208.

"To say that shopping is an important part of American life is like saying that fish appreciate water." *Shopping Madness*, p. 218.

"I have been thinking a lot about food lately. This is because I am not getting any. My wife, you see, recently put me on a diet. It is an interesting diet of her own devising that essentially allows me to eat anything I want so long as it contains no fat, cholesterol,



sodium, or calories and isn't tasty. In order to keep me from starving altogether, she went to the grocery store and bought everything that had 'bran' in its title. I am not sure, but I believe I had bran cutlets for dinner last night. I am very depressed." *The Fat of the Land*, p. 223.

"Congratulations. You have purchased an Anthrax/2000 Multimedia 615X Personal Computer with Digital Doo-Dah Enhancer. It will give years of faithful service, if you ever get it up and running. Also included with your PC is a bonus pack of preinstalled software—Lawn Mowing Planner, Mr. Arty-Farty, Blank Screen Saver, and Antarctica Route Finder—which will provide hours of pointless diversion while using up most of your computer's spare memory. So turn the page and let's get started!" *Your New Computer*, p. 226.

"You begin to wonder who watches it all. One of our channels is a twenty-four-hour cartoon network. That there are people out there who wish to watch cartoons through the night is remarkable enough, but what is truly astounding to me is that the channel carries commercials. What could you possibly sell to people who voluntarily watch Deputy Dawg at 2:30 A.M.? Bibs?" *The Wasteland*, p. 236.

"I have finally figured out what is wrong with everything. There is too much of it. I mean by that that there is too much of every single thing that one could possibly want or need except time, money, good plumbers, and people who say thank you when you hold open a door for them. (And, entirely by the way, I would like to put in on the record here that the next person who goes through a door that I've held open and doesn't say 'Thank You' is going to get it in the kidneys.)" *Enough Already*, p. 241.

"But I'm afraid it's so. I always have catastrophes when I travel. Once on an airplane, I leaned over to tie a shoelace just at the moment that the person in the seat ahead of me threw his seat back into full recline, and I found myself pinned helplessly in the crash position. It was only by clawing the leg of the man sitting next to me that I managed to get myself freed." *At a Loss*, p. 249.

"'Science finds the secret of aging,' announced a headline in our paper the other day, which surprised me because I've never thought of it as a secret. It just happens. No secret in that." *Old News*, p. 252.

"Sometimes you wonder what they were thinking when they named a thing. Take the pineapple. If ever there was an object that was less like pine and less like an apple, and in nearly every respect, this surely must be it. Or grapefruit. I don't know about you, but if someone handed me an unfamiliar fruit that was yellow, sour, and the size of a cannonball, I don't believe I would say, 'Well, it's rather like a grape, isn't it?'" *Word Play*, p. 267.

"If there is one thing that I trust I have made clear in these pages over the past many months, it is that I am not very good at technical stuff, even at the most basic level. For



instance, I have only just learned, to my considerable astonishment, that what I had for years called 'duck tape' is actually 'duct tape.'" *Life's Technicalities*, p. 277.

"Be happy. It's not that hard. You have a million things to be happy about. You are bright and young and enormously good-looking—I can see that from here. You have your whole life ahead of you. But here's the thing to remember. You will always have your whole life ahead of you. That never stops and you shouldn't forget it." *An Address*, p. 284.



Topics for Discussion

Bill makes the decision as a young man to live in England and stays there for 20 years. If you were to make a similar decision which country would you choose? Why?

There is a famous novel entitled *You Can't Go Home Again* by Thomas Wolfe and Bill begins his book by wondering if he can try to go home again by coming back to America. Do you think he fully returned home? Why or why not?

Many things have changed in America during the 20 years that Bill was in England. What things have changed for you during the last 10, 15 or 20 years that you would never have imagined?

Bill is a great wit and uses humor as a coping technique. What role does humor play in the family's transition to a new life?

Bill admits that he is not very handy around the house or with mechanical things but he is a great writer. Do you think that people can be both intellectually and mechanically gifted or are they one or the other?

What things would you miss from your current life if you were to move to another country tomorrow?

Bill spends a lot of time talking about the things that have changed in America during the time he was gone and the publication of this book in 1999. Discuss some of the cultural, social and political changes that have occurred since the book was published. What do you think Bill would say about them?