A Walk in the Woods Study Guide

A Walk in the Woods by Bill Bryson

BOOKRAGS

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Plot Summary

In the grand tradition of the travel memoir, writer Bill Bryson tells the story of his trek through the wilderness along the Appalachian Trail. With no real outdoors experience or knowledge of the trail's difficulty, he walks into a sporting goods store in his hometown of Hanover, New Hampshire, and spends a small fortune on the necessary gear, most of which is a mystery to him. His plan is to hike the entire 2,200-mile trail in one season, starting at Springer Mountain in Georgia and ending at Mt. Katahdin in Maine. He has a companion who is as comically unprepared for the trek as he is. Stephen Katz is an old school friend, who climbs off the plane with a large stomach and a duffel bag of Snickers.

Their trek starts at Amicalola Falls, a seven-mile hike from the Appalachian Trail's southern starting point, Springer Mountain. They set off in early March on a day of record cold and immediately discover what they have gotten themselves into. They are middle-aged, out of shape and carrying forty-pound packs on their backs over miles of hills that seem not to end, but after a few days they begin to settle into the trail. They meet many different types of hikers, including students, senior citizens, Boy Scouts and the air headed Mary Ellen, who attaches herself to them for several days. A few weeks into their trip they encounter a late snow that nearly strands them, but they push on after spending a few dull days in bunkhouses and motel rooms watching television.

A few days later they reach the Great Smokey Mountains, a more strenuous hike than the mountains of Georgia. They make it to the famed Clingman's Dome, the highest point on the Appalachian Trail, and decide to take a holiday in Gatlinburg, Tennessee, a tourist trap with motels, shops and fast food. There, they decide to skip over the rest of the Smokies. They take a cab to Knoxville, rent a car and drive to Roanoke, Virginia. Virginia is flatter and more springlike. They happily settle back into walking until Waynesboro, where Katz makes a date with a married woman and spends the rest of his time there hiding from her gun-toting husband. They proceed to encounter unidentitified animals in their camps and rude, drunken shelter mates. The first stage of their journey ends in Front Royal, Virginia, where the men part ways but plan to return in the summer to hike Maine's Hundred Mile Wilderness.

In the meantime, Bryson is determined to keep hiking, even if only by day, and has some unsatisfying hikes through the rocky terrain of Pennsylvania. More enjoyable hiking greets him in New England, where he hikes Massachusetts' Berkshire Mountains and Vermont's Stratton Mountain, the spiritual birthplace of the AT. In New Hampshire Bryson hikes Mt. Lafayette with a neighbor and has a scare when the weather turns and he finds that has forgotten his waterproofs. They also hike Mt. Washington, the New England AT's crowning glory and an enormous tourist attraction.

Bryson and Katz return to the trail in August to hike the Maine woods. It is difficult after months of unstrenuous hiking, particularly for Katz, who hasn't been hiking at all. For several days they laboriously cross lagoons and dangerous streams, and they quickly learn that they are in much more dangerous territory than any other they've

experienced. One day, Katz leaves the trail in search of a shortcut and is lost for nearly two days. They decide they aren't cut out for this part of the trail and hitchhike out, spending their last night in Maine with a cheery guesthouse owner, who reminds them that the trail will still be there when they get ready to try again.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

Bryson gets the idea to hike the Appalachian Trail shortly after moving to Hanover, New Hampshire, when he stumbles onto part of the trail on a short hike near his home. He has no real wilderness experience, so he asks around and reads up on the trail, discovering that the perils awaiting him include snakebites, bear attacks, poison ivy, flooding rivers, and a long list of injuries and diseases he might fall victim to. To prepare, Bryson heads to his town's sporting goods store and spends an afternoon with Dave Mengle, who he has been told is a local expert on the Trail. Mengle presents him with a barrage of choices of packs, sleeping bags, cook sets, boots, tents, and thermal clothing. Bryson spends a small fortune and is left wondering what he's gotten himself into.

Chapter 1 Analysis

A Walk in the Woods begins with an almost fairy tale first line of, "I happened upon a path that vanished into a wood on the edge of town." Bryson reports that it is no mere footpath but the famed Appalachian Trail, which is long, arduous, beautiful and potentially deadly. With an almost mystical curiosity, he decides to follow it. He decides to hike the "AT" for many of the same reasons, and in perhaps the same way, that many people do. Having been living in England for years, he decides hiking the trail will be a good way to reconnect with the landscape of his home country and to experience a wonder of the American landscape that is rapidly changing. He experiences an overpowering urge to be in the woods, not really knowing what awaits him. The visit to Dave Mengle's store, while on the surface a comical scene, shows how far removed from the wilderness Americans have become. The gear Bryson buys is designed to help him experience as few inconveniences as possible. He's equipped to combat wet, cold, rashes, dirt, the open air, unpleasant food, and tears in his clothes. It is also designed to help him survive, so he leaves the store with a different perspective on what he is about to do. It is clear that the trail will be much more difficult than he thought. If he is not careful and fully prepared, he might not even make it out of the woods.

The wilderness thus looms in front of Bryson with not a small degree of foreboding. The comedy in his exchange with Mengle seems almost designed to distance the reader from the gravity of the challenge he is about to undertake, yet at the same time it underscores that same gravity. When he enters the store, Bryson is as unprepared to begin his journey as he could possibly be. He is overweight, addicted to creature comforts, and clearly blind to the difficulty and danger involved in walking from Georgia to Maine. He is aware of most of these facts and consequently makes himself the butt of his own jokes, perhaps to ease himself into the realization of what he is undertaking.

In these early pages, the wilderness and civilization clash before Bryson has even left Hanover. With his tent erected in his basement and all his new gear around him, Bryson appears like someone afraid of experiencing the wilderness, not eager to immerse himself in it. He is setting off on this journey less out of love for the wild than of a desire to conquer it, and his doubt about the situation is so strong that he actually lies to himself about how hard it will be. Bryson seems ripe for a transformative experience.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

Bryson puts notes in his Christmas cards inviting friends and family to join him on his trek, for all or parts of it. Only one person responds - Stephen Katz, an old school friend he hasn't seen in twenty-five years. Katz tells Bryson that he is in great shape and sounds upbeat about the trip, so Bryson gladly welcomes him. When Katz steps off the plane a week later, he staggers across the tarmac with a large stomach and a duffel bag full of Snickers, claiming that he will have seizures if he does not eat every hour. They visit Dave Mengle again to outfit Katz for the trip and then buy provisions, with Katz attempting to stuff their cart full of Little Debbie's and other junk food. The next morning Katz staggers downstairs with shoes and pots tied to the outside of his pack, looking not at all prepared for the trip. Bryson's wife drives them to the airport, where they learn that wolves have been a problem in the part of Georgia they will be starting their hike in. They also learn that there will also be record cold.

Chapter 2 Analysis

The beginning of the hike seems to bode poorly for Bryson and Katz. Katz is in perhaps even worse shape than Bryson is to enter the woods, and his reasons for going on the trip are not yet clear. This fact alone leads one to wonder what kind of hiking companion he will be and if he will be able to handle the challenges the trail throws at them, particularly since he has been dishonest about his physical shape. Bryson has been reading up on bear attacks, and the conflicting advice he has received about how to handle one suggests that he and Katz might be asking for trouble that they won't be able to deal with. His reading in fact foreshadows what Bryson claims is a bear experience later in the novel, though a much more comical one than in these reports. However, even the man at the airport check-in desk says that they might be good candidates for a wolf attack. So when they set out, it is with little confidence in themselves and the decision they have made.

Doubt has turned to fear. The narrative zeroes in on the gruesome bear attacks Bryson has read about, in fact taking up nearly seven pages on the subject before returning to the story's real action. At the heart of this fear is the knowledge that they are about to immerse themselves in the dangerous wilderness without experience or skills. This immersion means isolating themselves, from civilization, from what is familiar, and, perhaps most frighteningly, from other people. Bryson and Katz are leaving a society that takes comfort in ambulances and doors that lock, police officers and cell phones. Though on one hand they are doing this to "get away from it all," they are doing it knowing that they are bringing with them a dependence on it all. The woods are about to strip them down, telling them exactly how strong they are and whether they will be able to cope with the challenges that present themselves.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

Bryson and Katz discover that one of the hardest things about the Appalachian Trail is often getting onto it. Trailheads often start several miles from a major highway, and this is the case with Springer Mountain. They will have to hike seven miles to it from Amicalola Falls State Park, which is also remote. Fortunately, they meet a man named, Wes Wisson, who agrees to take them to Amicalola Falls for a fee. On the drive he tells them about some of the people he has driven to and from the trailhead, many of whom quit the trail after just a few days.

They spend the night at the Amicalola Falls Lodge and wake to a morning temperature of 11?. At breakfast Katz flirts with a homely waitress named Rayette and tries to talk Bryson into staying at the lodge another night. Bryson insists they have to start their journey. They set off in the cold on March 9, 1996 and immediately find just how out of shape and unused to walking they are, especially over hills and with forty-pound packs. Every step is a struggle. Katz has an especially hard time, and while they are walking separately, he ends up throwing much of their food away in a fit of desperate load-lightening. At dusk they reach the camping shelter and retire wearily. The next morning they awake to find their water bottles frozen solid. Katz makes coffee and promises to "be good" that day.

Chapter 3 Analysis

The adage that the hardest part of a journey is often taking the first step seems to apply to the beginning of Bryson's and Katz's trek. They go to surprisingly great lengths to embark on a journey that they don't seem to think they can complete. In spite of Katz's stalling at the Amicalola Lodge, the journey ultimately begins. Bryson becomes surprisingly energized by the thought of hitting the trail. He reflects that most Americans are setting out to smog and traffic jams, while he and Katz are heading into the wilderness, where there are no calendars or meetings or ringing cell phones. He suddenly feels ready. He is, after all, just going for a walk in the woods.

The reality of the trail is quick to settle on them, however. They can barely lift their packs, and the hills are relentless. All seems reduced to the task of simply trudging forward, which feels nearly impossible under the weight of their packs. For Katz's part, reason itself goes out the window as heavy bags of rice and sugar get flung into the woods. His body has taken over, seeming to say that there will be no need of the food if he can't make progress. The weight of men's packs seems to foreshadow a very long, very difficult journey ahead of them. It also symbolizes the personal issues that they have brought into the woods with them, particularly Katz, who seems to be running away from something.

The difficulty of these early steps speaks to the emotional struggles they will have to overcome along the journey. Again, the woods will strip them down to their basic selves and force them to learn how strong they are. The journey has started the way journeys are supposed to - by presenting all the good reasons to quit and giving the characters the choice of quitting or pressing on.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

Before long, Bryson and Katz manage to settle into the trek. They rise at dawn, eat a breakfast of raisins and Snickers, and hike until late afternoon. They usually walk separately, since Katz is slower. Along the way, they meet many different types of hikers, including students, older couples, and solo hikers like the goofy and talkative Mary Ellen, who attaches herself to them. For a couple of days, Mary Ellen criticizes their choice of tent, food and boots, but she turns out to be just as inexperienced a hiker as Bryson and Katz. After a day of hiking with her, they come to Neels Gap, where there is an inn with a store, laundry facility and showers, all of which they take advantage of. A few hours later they are refreshed and ready to return to the trail, and they find that Mary Ellen has disappeared. They pitch their tents in a meadow a mile up the trail, and just as they are beginning to enjoy their camp, Mary Ellen reappears, claiming that she has been looking for them. She tells them they are slow and promises to "keep an eye" on them from then on.

Chapter 4 Analysis

That Bryson and Katz are in a new world begins to become apparent. The woods are an all-encompassing, "cubic" presence around them, completely cutting them off from their old lives but also preventing them from seeing too far ahead of them. They become forced to deal only with what they can experience immediately by their five senses. The forest they are in was once part of a chain of woods that stretched from Alabama to Canada. Even though they will not have to go too many days without a motel room, they are still very far away from anything. Life has become simple, with the only thing that matters being the need to keep walking.

They meet relatively few people on the trail, though from time to time they come across someone. In the "real world," there are ways to avoid people if necessary, but on the trail it is difficult to shake a fellow hiker who decides to make a nuisance of herself. Bryson and Katz loathe Mary Ellen's company, because they view her as a person who lacks the innate intelligence to belong in the woods. The irony here is, of course, that she is probably no more out of her element than Bryson and Katz are out of theirs. The woods have thus become a complete new world for them. The woods have stripped them of anything external, such as their jobs, their educations, their relationships, forcing them to deal only with what is before them. They have to adjust their concepts of their own identities to meet the wilderness' peculiar challenges.

They are steadily being drawn into the world of the wilderness and falling in sync with the rhythm of the trail. Apart from the obvious difficulty, perhaps the most daunting aspect of the trek is the fact that they never seem to know what is ahead. "You gradually lose track of how far you have come...The elusive summit continually retreats by

whatever distance you press forward." Time has lost meaning." The goal, Mt. Katahdin in Maine, has been pushed into a future that they cannot deal with, at the moment. This early part of the journey is thus shrouded with a constant sense of the unattainable, of the lack of gratification or sense of progress. It is yet one more transition they have to make, coming from civilization with its "instant gratification," fast food restaurants, and express lanes.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary

Two days later, Mary Ellen is still tagging along, driving them crazy. Bryson and Katz make a plan to hike fourteen miles to Dick's Creek Gap, from which they can hitchhike to the nearest town - without Mary Ellen. They walk quickly enough to lose her on the trail and exit the woods onto Highway 76, where they are picked up by a drunk country couple who are on their way to get married. This hair-raising ride lands them in Hiawassee, and they happily check into a hotel. At dinner they begin feeling guilty about leaving Mary Ellen behind, worrying that she will have to spend the night alone in the wilderness. On the trail the next morning, they meet another hiker who has heard that snow is expected, so they quickly get moving again. Two days later they learn that Mary Ellen has quit the trail.

Chapter 5 Analysis

The town of Hiawassee, Georgia, presents the men with the opportunity to both rejoin civilization for a while and, more importantly, lose Mary Ellen. In a burst of energy and motivation unlike any other in the story, they sprint up the trail, until they reach the highway, which stands as a kind of dividing line between the wilderness and civilization. Stepping out of the wilderness reminds Bryson and Katz how much they are still straddling the line between civilization and the woods, mostly because of latter's ironic closeness to each other. They don't yet seem to truly belong in the woods, but at the same time they seem out of place in the world of restaurants and Trans Ams. It is interesting that they are helped into Hiawassee by the country couple. Bryson has mildly scorned uneducated southerners up until now, painting them as backwoods freaks. However, when he and Katz come out of the woods, they find themselves being helped back to civilization by people he might have described as "hillbillies," individuals who are somehow deemed much closer to the wild than other people. Ironically, in this scene, they themselves are the "mountain men" crawling out of the woods.

The routine they have fallen into in the woods is shoved temporarily aside in favor of soft beds and lemon pie, but as their cravings are fulfilled their thoughts return to the trail and Mary Ellen, whom they have left to fend for herself. Bryson insists that she came onto the trail at her own risk, but he really agrees with Katz. She is inexperienced and alone in a place that could turn deadly for her in a moment. Their concern for her robs the town visit of much of its pleasure, particularly when they return to the trail and learn that she has not only done fine on her own but has spent the previous evening bad-mouthing them.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary

Three days later, and just as they are beginning to feel like hikers, it begins to snow. When the weather turns bad, they happen to reach a narrow path along Big Butt Mountain - with the mountain on one side of them and a deep drop on the other. The trail is also interrupted by streams that are frozen over and dangerous to cross. Snow accumulates, the wind whips around them, and visibility is only a few feet. They find themselves unable to go up the steeply climbing trail in front of them, but they are also afraid to go back. They take a chance that a logging road that crosses the trail will take them around the mountain and back to the trail, in hopes that they can reach the next shelter. They do reach the shelter, which they share with a man named Jim and his son Heath, who are hiking for the weekend. They wake to knee-deep snow but decide to push on, because the highway that will take them to a campsite with showers and a store lies just six miles ahead. They walk together for a few hours, as far as a side trail that will lead Jim and Heath back to their car. Bryson and Katz hike to the highway, at which point Jim and Heath reappear with their car and give them a ride to the campsite.

The campsite is crowded with stranded hikers, as is the bunkhouse they are assigned. After one miserable night, and some entertainment as Katz tried to climb into his bunk, they hitch a ride to Franklin, North Carolina. Franklin is not much better than the campground, however. Bryson is bored and eager to return to the trail. Katz is happy watching television and drinking soda, but Bryson declares that they will return to the trail the next morning, even though the snow drifts are still high. They are lucky to find that another antsy hiker has already cleared a path for them. In a few days the snow begins to melt.

Chapter 6 Analysis

Just as they are starting to feel more or less at home on the trail, the reality of the wilderness and its disregard for the presence of man reaches Bryson and Katz in the form the snowstorm at Big Butt Mountain. They are forced to develop real woods skills in order to survive it and find their way to the nearest shelter. The snowstorm is thus a milestone for them on their journey, because it marks the point at which the journey becomes an internal one, as well. It represents the beginning of their transformation from novices to real hikers. They shed their soft, helpless selves and simply deal with the challenge in front of them.

Negotiating the trail in extreme weather teaches them that they are capable in the woods, in spite of bad maps and weather. With newfound confidence, they push forward on the trail in spite of deep snowdrifts, and Bryson finds when they reach Franklin that the urge to return to the trail is irresistible. This has much to do with becoming part of the trail, as opposed to their early attempts to simply overcome it. Bryson is learning to

take what comes on the trail, finding that it is much more enjoyable if he takes the daunting goal out of the picture and simply walks. Katz, however, happily renews his love affair with television and soft drinks and makes a fuss about leaving. This is an important development in the story, because it places a tension between the two main characters based on their identity in the woods. Bryson is becoming the contented woodsman, while Katz is still sticking it out for his own still-undefined reasons. His reaction to Bryson's putting his foot down about returning the trail is thus interesting. As he is not being forced to hike the Appalachian Trail, one wonders why he ultimately agrees to resume pushing through the snow.

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary

Four days after leaving Franklin, Bryson and Katz reach the Smoky Mountains National Park, a beautiful but rigorous hike across North Carolina and part of Tennessee. That first night they camp in a dirty and rodent-infested shelter with a chain-link fence across the front to keep out bears. After a night of defending their sleeping bags from mice, they set out in the morning in fog and drizzle and then hike nine miles in a driving rain. That night's camping shelter is crowded, and Bryson is pestered by a nosy man who wants to talk hiking equipment. The next four days they walk in steady rain, camping at night in more shelters crowded with Spring Breakers. On the third day they reach Clingman's Dome, the highest point on the AT. Normally it offers a spectacular view, but that day everything is shrouded in fog. Wet, tired and disappointed, they decide to temporarily rejoin civilization by going to the tourist town of Gatlinburg, Tennessee.

Chapter 7 Analysis

As the trail gets more difficult, Bryson finds himself becoming more and more absorbed with the simple task of pushing forward. When Katz, who had fallen behind for a bit, asks him how he managed to get over a fallen tree across the path, Bryson cannot even remember seeing it. Thus, the soft "middle-ager," who could hardly carry forty pounds of pack, has now become someone who conquers some of the hurdles of the trail, while considering them fairly unremarkable.

Bryson's peace is interrupted when Spring Break brings an unwelcome crowd to the trail, which is designed for thru-hiking and not the kind of section hiking many of the newcomers are doing. For Bryson, the spring breakers are just another intrusion of society into the sanctity of the trail. So early in his journey, he has already lost patience with people who are unwilling to immerse themselves in the woods, as he and Katz are doing. He has taken on a kind of "all or nothing" attitude about the wilderness that raises the question. What constitutes full appreciation of wilderness, and where is the line between a serious hiker and a tourist? After all, Bryson and Katz sleep in motel rooms every chance they get, but at the same time, they always quickly return to feeling at home in the woods. Are they less appreciative of the wilderness, because they do not camp every night? Are they more one with the woods than the spring breakers and the day hikers?

Most likely, neither is true. Bryson is pure in his love of the woods, but at the same time he is still bound to his life in society, is ultimately dependent on it, and will eventually return to it. This foreshadowing of his journey's end is perhaps distasteful to him, so the spring breakers are an unpleasant reminder of that part of himself he is trying to lose.

Chapter 8

Chapter 8 Summary

Bryson and Katz persuade some student day-hikers at Clingman's Dome to give them a ride to Gatlinburg, which is a tacky tourist trap with motels, junk shops and overpriced fast food joints. There they see a large-scale map of the AT and realize what slow progress they are making. They decide to skip over the rest of the Smokies and pick the trail back up in Virginia, where it is flatter and more pleasant. They hire a wise-cracking cab driver to drive them to Knoxville, where they can rent a car and drive to their next starting point.

Chapter 8 Analysis

If the Appalachian Trail represents what remains of the American wilderness, Gatlinburg, Tennessee, represents a brash denial of that wilderness. Situated just outside the Smoky Mountains National Park, Gatlinburg is a Mecca for mountain tourists looking for T-shirts and expensive corndogs, tattoos and miniature golf. It is the anti-wilderness, an alternative to woods and trails for those with the shortest of attention spans. Ironically, however, it is in Gatlinburg, which seems to want to forget it is nestled in the mountains, that Bryson and Katz discover the true scale of the Appalachian Trail and, by extension, the unrealistic goal of hiking it all.

Thus, an important re-evaluation of their journey occurs in Gatlinburg, and the location of their realization is significant as well. Gatlinburg is not just the anti-wilderness. It is a statement about a way of life that is taking its dying gasps. That statement is that "civilization" is determinedly swallowing up the wilderness. Like it or not, it is no longer possible for Americans to truly immerse themselves in the wild, because there is always a Gatlinburg or Hiawassee just around the corner, seducing idealistic hikers with hamburgers and Ripley's Believe It or Not museums. Bryson and Katz seem doomed to be reacquired by civilization. Confronted with the impracticality of their journey, they stop resisting and find a way to continue their journey that seems to offer better chance for success and satisfaction. It is an important shift in the story. At the beginning they are obsessed with finishing and with proving to themselves that they can succeed. At this point, however, they have already overcome some of the most difficult sections of the trail. The journey now becomes about experiencing and enjoying the places they find themselves in, rather than progressing just for the sake of progressing.

Chapter 9

Chapter 9 Summary

Driving from Knoxville to Roanoke, Virginia, is an adventure, since the men have been living in the woods for a few weeks. When they arrive, they are assaulted by a seemingly unending strip of Wal Marts, video stores and other commercial monstrosities.

Chapter 9 Analysis

Having researched the Appalachian Trail considerably before setting out, Bryson is aware of some of the more famous thru-hikers to complete all 2,200 miles of the trail. One man was in his eighties, one weighed 350 pounds, and one was a grandmother who, in spite of frequently getting lost, completed it twice in her sixties. Deciding to skip over parts of the trail does not feel like a failure. Bryson no longer sees the need to hike every inch of the trail just to experience it. With that in mind, they temporarily return to civilization by car, the anti-hike.

Coming into Roanoke while not on foot, their perspective shifts in a peculiar way. Before, towns were temporary but welcome interruptions to the great expanse of the woods. Now, the reverse seems true in the face of Roanoke's "commercial hideousness." The woods could not seem farther away, but this is at least partly due to some disappointment that they have chosen not to hike the whole trail. Renting the car is an unpleasant symbol of their ultimate, unavoidable return to civilization. Entering Roanoke reminds them of the world they really belong to, and the fact that they will never be the woodsmen they have fantasized about becoming.

Chapter 10

Chapter 10 Summary

Having skipped a few hundred miles of the trail, Bryson and Katz emerge in Virginia to find, ironically, that spring is in fuller swing than it was to the south. They are now hiking in the Blue Ridge Mountains. This section of the trail is more secluded, but they meet a few colorful characters, like a man who has been section hiking the trail for twenty years. Bryson happily falls back into the rhythm of the trek. However, on their sixth night in the woods, they walk into a clearing and see the town of Waynesboro in the distance, its signs for motels and restaurants visible from eight miles away. They are elated.

Chapter 10 Analysis

Virginia is enjoyable. Spring has come, and the woods seem alive with plants and animals that were still under winter's spell further south. Bryson begins to think about the transformation that the visit to Gatlinburg seemed to spur. After a few days in the woods, they stop being conscious of their dirtiness and start following a simpler rhythm of rising, walking, eating and sleeping. The need to make a specific amount of progress each day is gone. Perhaps, more than at any other part of the story, Bryson's gratefulness to the wild for existing is apparent. He is beginning to become a part of the trail, not just a traveler on it, and the trail is in a sense being absorbed into his body through the blisters and sore muscles that he now accepts as just part of the journey. Bryson is conscious of the enduring urge to "revisit the real world" every several days. These desires of wanting to cast off society but at the same time stay connected to it conflict yet again, much to his bewilderment. How can he enjoy the woods so fully when he is immersed in them, but be so happy to come across a town like Waynesboro, which he probably would not have paid any attention to if making his journey by car? They are not fully "mountain men," but they perhaps do not need to be. They are simply enjoying the woods and enjoying simple comforts, like a motel room, when they come.

Chapter 11

Chapter 11 Summary

The men arrive in Waynesboro the next day, and after checking into their motel Bryson decides to go buy some insect repellant. Nonetheless, none of the shops near the motel sell it, so he makes an arduous trek on foot to the Kmart, involving walking on a busy road and falling down in the mud while trying to cross a creek. In the end, he finds that Kmart is out of insect repellant. When he returns to the motel, as grubby as if he had been on the trail, Katz announces that he has a date with a woman he met in the laundromat. Her name is Beulah, she weighs more than 200 pounds, and she is married, as Katz soon learns. Bryson is dining alone when Katz skulks into the restaurant. He is being followed by Beulah's gun-loving husband. He locks himself in his motel room with a chest of drawers in front of the door, until it's time for the cab ride back to the trail.

Just after Waynesboro they enter the Shenandoah National Park, which becomes Bryson's favorite part of the trip so far. The terrain is easier, the scenery is beautiful, and the woods are alive with animals - owl, grouse, deer and even a mother turkey and her chicks crossing the trail. Their first night sleeping on the trail, they are awakened by the sound of an animal shuffling through their camp. Bryson is convinced it is a bear, but Katz is unworried. A second animal joins the first, but they only appear to be drinking at the stream the men have camped beside. Eventually they leave, and with his knife beside him, Bryson manages to fall asleep.

Chapter 11 Analysis

Simple pleasures take a backseat to the sexual needs of Katz when he and Bryson settle into Waynesboro for the night. First, in a parody of their wilderness adventure up until now, Bryson must make perhaps the most difficult journey so far - getting to Kmart on foot. While partly written for its simple comic value, the scene is an important comment on how increasingly difficult it is becoming for the men to embrace both the wilderness and civilization. Where at the beginning of the story Bryson is a puzzled beginner in his basement, trying to bring as much of the material world into the wilderness as he can, here he is bringing the woods into town - and finding that what gets him around in the woods has no place in an urban setting. In the woods, it is preparedness and wilderness skills that help them survive. In Waynesboro, it is a car. The wilderness seems in this part of the story to have claimed Bryson, making a simple trip through what should be a familiar type of landscape a near impossibility.

Another reversal occurs when they return to the woods. Where in Waynesboro Katz is terrified of Beulah's husband and goes to irrational lengths to protect himself, he is perfectly calm when the unidentified animal, which Bryson insists is a bear, wanders into their camp. In town Bryson reassures Katz that he is overreacting, using humor and

pretending to be the gun-toting husband to try to calm him. In the woods, it is Katz's turn. He ridicules Bryson by mocking his intellectual-sounding speech, as he asks the bear to go away. This character interplay is one of the richest aspects of the story. The reader is reminded how different a story this would have been had Bryson taken the journey alone or with someone whose personal traits are more like his own.

Chapter 12

Chapter 12 Summary

Bryson decides they will camp at shelters from then on. A few days after the terrifying night by the stream and after mostly being alone on the trail, they are joined in a shelter by some Boy Scouts and a group of section hikers. A high school teacher named John Connolly joins them on a hike to Big Meadows campground, where some tourists exclaim over them and the fact that they have been trekking through the woods for weeks. A small crowd gathers as Katz proudly demonstrates some of his gear. Back on the trail, they pass a meadow where, a month later, two women would be found murdered in their tents.

Three days later another driving rain descends on them. They arrive at a shelter in the evening, soaked and miserable, and soon after a crowd of obnoxious hikers in what looks like safari clothing barges into the shelter and begins taking it over. Bryson and Katz pack up and pitch their tents outside, and the people proceed to get drunk and party until late in the night. As the men are leaving the shelter the next morning, Katz confesses that he has stolen the shoelaces of the rudest woman in the group.

Chapter 12 Analysis

As they push through Virginia, the "civilized world" begins to penetrate the wilderness and the solitude of Bryson and Katz. The tourists in the campground seem to have never heard of hiking, nor do they seem aware that the famed Appalachian Trail, perhaps the most famous large-scale hiking opportunity in the country, is just a few miles away. To Bryson, these people represent that section of American society that views the wilderness as a kind of oddity placed strategically for their gawking enjoyment. They are the world Bryson and Katz have temporarily withdrawn from and to which they will have to soon return.

Likewise, the bad habits of the "civilized world" infiltrate the trail itself, a place where consideration and general good citizenship are valued, when the men's rowdy shelter mates appear. At this stage of the journey, there is a real sense of Bryson's, and even Katz's, beginning to misidentify with the world they have withdrawn from. The rude hikers seem not to truly be in the woods to hike or connect with nature at all. Their safari clothing alone seems to suggest that they don't even know where they are. They behave exactly as they would back in whatever city they have come from.

Chapter 13

Chapter 13 Summary

Bryson and Katz reach the end of their trek's first stage. They each have to return home for part of the summer but plan to meet again in August to hike the Hundred Mile Wilderness in Maine. They have hiked 500 miles when Bryson's wife picks them up in Front Royal, Virginia. Bryson feels strange being back in his hometown, not hiking. He goes on a series of day hikes but longs to be back on the trail. In June he drives to Harpers Ferry, West Virginia, where he learns more about some recent murders. Had they not been killed, the women would have been passing through Harpers Ferry at about the same time.

Chapter 13 Analysis

Just as adjusting to the woods was difficult in the beginning, readjusting to life outside is a challenging period in which Bryson reorients himself. After a few weeks of spending time with his family, he starts going for short walks in Hanover but is disappointed by the feeling of being back before lunch. The old urge to immerse himself in the woods returns, and he finds himself in northern West Virginia, ready to hike again. He is settling for the not-quite-satisfying alternative of driving himself to a trail, hiking for a while, and then returning to the car - much like the "Reebok hikers" he so looked down on before.

Like the Bryson of several chapters ago, he is once again on the threshold between his two lives of town and the woods, and he is once again disoriented. The shock of entering Roanoke a few weeks before this is perhaps revisiting him, as he comes to terms with the fact that he is not the fully immersed wilderness man he had wanted to become. He fears ending up as a day hiker, both because of that type's lack of true appreciation for the woods and because, having experienced relative immersion in the woods, anything short of it is much less pleasurable. Thus, he experiences an identity crisis of sorts, attempting to sort out the reality of his life versus the expectations he set for himself and versus his sense of satisfaction with the direction his journey is taking him.

Chapter 14

Chapter 14 Summary

With a bad map and a longing for the "old days" of hiking with Katz, Bryson drives from Harpers Ferry to a trailhead in Pennsylvania, hoping for at least a taste of the state's challenging rocky terrain. He happens to be hiking in a general area where two pairs of well-known murders had occurred several years before, which he knows, because he has been reading up on the subject. A short hike up to a place called Pine Mountain is disappointing and leaves him wondering what the point is in hiking the trail in such small chunks.

Bryson drives north, searching unsuccessfully for a satisfying piece of trail to hike. He passes through the strange town of Centralia, which is deserted, because the enormous anthracite coal bed on which it is situated was accidentally ignited decades before and is still slowly burning underground. In the town of Palmerton he looks for a mountain he wants to climb and whose foliage has been famously devastated because of a nearby zinc factory. He tries to park at the factory and inspect the mountain from a distance, but a guard hassles him about his presence and his interest in the mountain, for reasons he never figures out. The guard radios for another official, who calms the first guard down and gives Bryson directions to the trail. He takes an easy hike through a devastated woods that resembles a battlefield after shelling, eventually coming to a steep hill that does not lend itself to a day hike. He leaves the trail and Pennsylvania wishing he hadn't tried to hike the trail with a car.

Chapter 14 Analysis

Hiking Pennsylvania is wholly unsatisfying, because Bryson is alone and cannot immerse himself in the woods, as he did back in the spring. He has become a "dabbler," saddled with a car and a schedule, both aspects of the civilized world that do not fit with the timelessness and the self-sufficiency he once enjoyed. Ultimately, the Pennsylvania trip becomes dominated with town visits, the opposite of his life in the woods before, as he explores Centralia and Palmerton. The visit to Centralia, a deserted jungle of ruin, is almost an urban parody of the isolation he and Katz had enjoyed in the woods. It is also a comment on the tension between the earth and the people who live on it. As the human-caused fire that emptied the town might be seen as the natural world's rebellion against the society that was taking advantage of it.

Palmerton recalls this same theme, with the zinc factory standing in the foreground of the mountain it devastated. Society's guilt regarding what has happened shows in the guard Luther's statement that he is "not paid to look at hillsides." He is protective of whatever secret lies behind the devastation of the mountain, suggesting a kind of malice on the part of society toward the wilderness that accounts for the disturbing nature of the scene. The second guard's eagerness to smooth over the situation and get Bryson

on his way reads as an acknowledgement of the violence done to nature - and perhaps part of a collective shame regarding this - and at the same time a desire to pretend it hasn't happened.

Chapter 15

Chapter 15 Summary

In northern Pennsylvania, Bryson stands at a place called Delaware Water Gap, just across the Delaware River from New Jersey. He has a spectacular view of Kitattiny Mountain, which he proceeds to hike up to Sunfish Pond, a mountaintop pond created by glacial movement during the last ice age. Glad to be out of Pennsylvania, he enjoys easier and more interesting terrain and better maps with which to traverse it. The urge for "real hiking" is now overpowering.

Chapter 15 Analysis

Hiking in the Delaware Valley revisits the issue of the strange American attitude toward the wilderness. Either we want to chop it down or enshrine it, so that as few people as possible can access it. The latter happened here in preparation to build a dam that was never even completed, at the expense of villages and farms that were bulldozed for the project. In their place is now a "corridor" of unpopulated land acting as a kind of buffer between society and the AT. Bryson comments that he would not have minded the trail passing near historic farms and villages, but for some reason there must be a sharp separation between society and the wilderness.

In America the wilderness must be something we must drive to with heavily stocked coolers and leave in time to watch the evening news. This chapter thus reintroduces a central question of the book. Why *does* America hold the wilderness at a distance? Does it in fact have something to do with a sense of superiority, in which we have convinced ourselves that housing developments and town halls are somehow better than the wilderness? Ironically, Bryson seems to forget that he has at times been both happy to cut himself off from society and eager to rejoin it. The disorientation he feels after leaving the woods in Virginia thus clearly continues, and his seemingly frantic search for a satisfying wilderness experience speaks to his continued need to find gratification in his experience through an "all or nothing" attitude toward appreciating the woods. This attitude is clearly failing him, preventing him from fully enjoying his experience.

Chapter 16

Chapter 16 Summary

Happily back in New England, Bryson is trying to hike as much of the region as he can before meeting up with Katz in August for the Hundred Mile Wilderness of Maine. On a three-day hike through the Berkshire Mountains of Massachussetts, he is thinking about the occasional sightings of mountain lions, generally believed extinct in the east. He has read up on all the wildlife that has suffered from over hunting in the last century and notes that these woods are relatively quiet now. On this trip, Bryson meets an Appalachian Trail "celebrity" at the time, named Chicken John. He is known all along the trail for frequently getting lost and hiking in the wrong direction. They hike together to the town of Dalton, where Bryson saves John from yet again getting lost. From there, Bryson makes for Adams, from which he hikes to Mount Greylock, the highest peak in Massachussetts. It is rumored to be the inspiration for Melville's white whale in *Moby Dick* and served as the setting for a number of nineteenth-century American novels. Bryson hikes another eight miles to Williamstown, where he is to meet his wife. At the end of the day, he has put in seventeen miles and is pleased to be "a walker again."

In Vermont, Bryson sets off for Stratton Mountain, the "spiritual birthplace" of the Appalachian Trail and its slightly older cousin, the Long Trail. At the summit he comes across a crowd of tourists, one of whom is proudly showing off a mysterious environment monitoring device that looks expensive but useless. Bryson continues across Vermont in a series of day hikes, this time with his car not seeming like a nuisance.

Chapter 16 Analysis

Back in New England, Bryson now has terrain suitable for the kind of long-distance hiking he has missed since parting ways with Katz. The seventeen miles from Greylock to Williamstown seem to tell him that he is still a real walker, not the "Reebok" variety that Pennsylvania forced him to be. *Is* he a real hiker, though, or was he ever one? He has, in a way, become the "spring breaker" from the Smokies, who had irritated him with their piecemeal enjoyment of the woods, though his hope of re-immersing himself allows him a vestige of the old superior feeling. In this way the old debate of where the line is between the serious and the dabblers is revived.

It is, at any rate, with renewed faith in his ability to connect with the wilderness that he stumbles onto the tourist with the gadget in Vermont. A man with no waterproofs, provisions or even long pants is putting all his faith in technology to help him negotiate the wilderness, even though the device would not be able to save him if the weather turned. Here technology is seen as giving humanity a false sense of ownership of the woods, highlighting the arrogance with which people who do not want to actually immerse themselves in the wild nevertheless seem to regard it. The man with the

device is troubling for the same fundamental reason as the tourists who patronized Bryson and Katz weeks before with their overblown sense of awe. He represents yet another facet of the American attitude toward the wilderness, that of holding the wilderness at arm's length, thinking society somehow superior. Bryson is understandably happy to disappear into the forest with just his woods skills to bring him back out again.

Chapter 17

Chapter 17 Summary

It is now time for Bryson to hike New Hampshire, to which he has recently moved and which he is eager to explore. His neighbor, Bill Abdu, offers to go with him on some of his day hikes. They start with Mt. Lafayette, a tough hike second only to the famed Mt. Washington. As they climb, the weather quickly begins to turn, as often happens in the mountains of New England. Bryson discovers that he has forgotten his waterproof jacket. With the temperature dropping and the wind picking up, he begins to panic. It is only after they pass the summit and descend on a side trail toward a lodge that the wind begins to die down. Leaving the lodge after refueling with lunch and coffee, they discover that the sun has come out.

Chapter 17 Analysis

Bryson learns that frightening and dangerous situations can occur in nature even within two hours drive of home, showing yet again how simultaneously far away from and close to the wilderness society has planted itself. Recalling perhaps the anxiety of getting caught in the snowstorm at Big Butt Mountain, Bryson is temporarily reduced again to his fundamental survival instincts when cold and dangerous wind catch him unprepared. Ironically, his neighbor is fully prepared even though he hasn't just spent weeks living as a mountain man, thus showing the blurry line that exists between Bryson's wilderness and "civilized" selves. In this period he seems to be caught again between his two lives, one lived in the all-encompassing wilderness that reduces life to simplicity and the other lived with dependence on automobiles and tourist rest stops.

This stage of Bryson's journey is perhaps the most disorienting so far. He unhappily finds himself back in the category of the incompetent day hiker, a true blow to the pride of his "mountain man" self, which he thought he had regained in Massachusetts. The disappointment is significant, because it foreshadows the difficulty awaiting him in the Hundred Mile Wilderness of Maine, which will ultimately force him to end his journey early. For now, he is still failing to see the true relationship between wilderness and civilization. Civilization emerged out of wilderness, so ironically, there is no possibility of their existing separately.

Chapter 18

Chapter 18 Summary

Bryson scales Mt. Washington, the highest peak in New England, again accompanied by his friend, Bill Abdu. They are two in a crowd of hikers and tourists taking advantage of a beautiful July day. The summit is nothing like other summits along the trail. It is tourist-oriented, complete with a cafeteria, shops, and plenty of noisy people.

Chapter 18 Analysis

Mt. Washington is an interesting punctuation mark to Bryson's summer of "Reebok hiking." It offers the challenge of the "real wilderness," having a history of claiming lives and setting wind speed records, but at the same time it is accessible and immensely popular with the day-hiking tourist set. It is an almost perverse joining of civilization and wilderness, resulting in a kind of confusion over whether Bryson and Abdu are indeed in the wild or a theme park. Maybe here more than anywhere else, Bryson is conscious that he is at the moment standing on the wrong side of the dividing line between "real" and amateur hikers. His pride over having slept in the woods and survived the snowstorm at Big Butt Mountain is momentarily negated by disappointment that he is now mixing with tourists clamoring for corndogs and photo ops. Yet, the history surrounding Mt. Washington is still intriguing, and Bryson notes the way it transformed over the last century from pure wilderness to refuge for the rich to a piece of scenery that devoted wilderness seekers and camera-happy tourists alike seek out. The line between civilization and wilderness is never blurrier, and Bryson seems happy to conclude his last experience as a "dabbling" hiker.

Chapter 19

Chapter 19 Summary

Rejoined by Katz in his home in Hanover, Bryson is preparing to leave for the Hundred Mile Wilderness of Maine. Katz has the bright idea that instead of their heavy packs, they should carry only the basics in newspaper delivery bags, which he has brought along. Bryson talks sense into him, but they do pare their packing down to only those things they cannot live without for the ten days the trek will take them. The first day back on the trail with full packs is hard for both men, but especially Katz, who has not been hiking in the interim. He once again starts throwing things out of his pack, including a water bottle that leaves them short on water. As they are setting up camp that evening, they spot a moose drinking at a stream nearby. They go to bed exhausted, now remembering how hard the trail really is.

Maine quickly becomes the hardest part of their whole trek. Progress is slow as they laboriously cross lagoons and rivers. After three days they emerge at their first stop, the town of Monson and Shaw's, a famous AT guesthouse. They are joined by a young couple who are thru-hiking the whole 2,200 miles of trail. Shopping for provisions to replace what Katz threw out, Bryson discovers that Katz has been drinking again. They fall out when Bryson refuses to buy him beer.

Chapter 19 Analysis

With the return of Katz and his customary attempts to make the trip easier, the question again arises. What is he doing in the woods? Bryson comments that all of the trail has been hard, and Maine is the hardest part. Compared to the Maine woods, the Smokies and Shenandoah were barely even wilderness. The sense of being deeply enclosed in a place in which they could easily be stranded for days or even weeks in an emergency is more real than anywhere else in the story. The men realize that whatever hope they had of becoming successful "mountain men," fully separate from amateur wilderness-goers, was left back in Front Royal. The Hundred Mile Wilderness is just that - entering it, one becomes completely sealed off from society, falling at the mercy of the woods' dangers. Bryson and Katz now have considerable wilderness skills, having walked 500 miles of the Trail's southern end. In Maine Bryson again feels like the unprepared day hiker who forgot his waterproofs on Mt. Lafayette. He is no more one with the woods than the tourists scaling Mt. Washington were. In a strange reversal, Bryson and Katz now appear as they did at the beginning of the story. They are clumsy, incompetent, and even a danger to themselves.

The difficulty of Maine is a hard blow to the characters' "mountain men" identities. For much of the story they have prided themselves on being serious hikers. They have felt they have withdrawn from civilization, but now they realize how much the modern world's conveniences had truly penetrated their journey in the form of town visits, rides

in Trans Ams, and a comforting wealth of other people. They also realize how unavoidably dependent they are on all these things. Here civilization truly is far away, and it is surprising how disconcerting this fact turns out to be.

The pages leading up to Bryson's and Katz's setting off thus carry an ominous weight that appears nowhere else in the story. This feeling, created by the physically imposing landscape ahead of them, hints at the personal turmoil that Katz clearly experiences but that he has not spoken about yet. The obvious question is why is he drinking again, and why is he doing so in the middle of a trip into the remote woods?

Chapter 20

Chapter 20 Summary

The Hundred Mile Wilderness starts off as a series of steep rock walls, which the men scale in extreme heat. Their water supply grows short. They call a truce over a shared Snickers bar, and Katz tells Bryson about the loneliness and despair that made him start drinking again. Leaving Katz to rest, Bryson pushes ahead to a pond where he will refill their water bottles. Katz never makes it to the pond. Bryson goes looking for him, worried, because he knows he is out of water, but doesn't find him. In the end, he gives up and makes for the next shelter, where he spends his only night on the trail without Katz. He figures Katz has passed him at some point and gone ahead north, so in the morning he hits the trail again and eventually finds a pack of Katz's cigarettes stuck on a branch alongside the trail. A few hours up the trail Bryson finds Katz, who had gotten lost after trying to take a shortcut off the trail. They agree it is time to go home, and they flag down a ride on a nearby logging road.

Chapter 20 Analysis

In perhaps the most deeply symbolic plot twist of the book, Katz literally gets lost in the woods, but it becomes clear that he is also lost on another level. He and Bryson have been character foils for each other throughout the story, with Bryson playing the role of the put-together career man and Katz the role of the discontented mess. Up until this point, however, the difference has been mostly humorous. Now, we see Katz as a person who is aware that his life has little direction. He has no family, an unfulfilling job, and the promise of many more dull and lonely years eating TV dinners. Bryson attempts to help him out of his literal catastrophe but finds that, in fact, Katz must find his own way back. He must help himself.

The journey through the woods thus takes on a deep significance on a personal level for the characters, particularly Katz, who up until now has taken a backseat to Bryson's inner workings. The question of what Katz is doing in the woods is still in large part a mystery, but it is fitting that he should go on what is essentially a quest for identity in the wilderness, which has at times given him cause to truly feel capable. The Maine Woods, however, is a different matter. It shows both men that their attempt to fully immerse themselves in the wild is a futile, ultimately unnecessary one. They are not mountain men but rather people with jobs and children and responsibilities that cannot be made lighter by continuing to withdraw. Likewise, their lives will not be worse for re-entering society.

Chapter 21

Chapter 21 Summary

The loggers take them to the town of Milo, where they book a night at a guesthouse run by a cheerful old woman named Joan Bishop, who calls them boys and makes them iced tea and lemonade. She tells them that they are the first trail dropouts she remembers housing but also reminds them that the wilderness will still be there when they get ready to try again.

Chapter 21 Analysis

As all good journey stories do, the adventure of Bryson and Katz comes to a close, leaving them transformed but ready to move on with their lives. This transformation is a complex one. They are essentially the same people they were when they set out in Georgia, plus a few wilderness skills. They are also now capable in ways they weren't.

This is perhaps the nature of the changes that occur within them. They realize that they possessed the strength and potential to complete the journey all along, but the journey was ironically necessary in order to show them they could complete it. In addition, they have learned to simply follow, not try to control, the trail and their experience on it. They have altered their initial plan to hike every step of the 2,200-mile trail, realizing that it is not necessary to do so in order to feel that they have truly experienced the Appalachian Trail. As Katz reminds Bryson, they don't need to see every mountain on the East coast in order to know what one looks like - or appreciate it.

They have ultimately done what Bryson's initial decision to hike the trail involved. They've reconnected with the American landscape and seen it before civilization further alters and swallows it. His conclusion also leaves hope that the parts they missed might someday be experienced. Katz, from time to time, mentions returning to the Maine Woods to complete the trek, and though Bryson doubts that they will, the wilderness, as Mrs. Bishop reminds them, will - barring further damage from acid rain, urban sprawl and Forest Service logging - be there when they decide to try again. Accepting this realization is the true culmination of his journey, which has shown him that he doesn't belong only in the woods or only in civilization. He can exist in both without one necessarily having to be a threat to the other.

Characters

Bill Bryson

Author and main character of *A Walk in the Woods,* Bryson gets the idea to hike the Appalachian Trail after living in England for twenty years and wanting to reconnect with his home country's landscape. He has no real outdoors experience, but he also wants to see some of the scenery that is in jeopardy from things like acid rain and urban sprawl. The trail overwhelms him, but he pushes forward with determination to meet his goal, and after a few weeks he finds himself a contented hiker. He is happy when he reaches towns, with their motels and restaurants and showers, but is always eager to get back to the trail. He never seems to lose sight of the need to keep pushing on and to experience as much of the trail as possible.

As his trek progresses, Bryson is transformed from soft middle-ager to serious hiker. In towns the change is particularly apparent, as he soon finds himself preferring to walk even when he doesn't have to, much to the confusion of locals. He begins to diassociate himself with the "Reebok hikers," those who come to the woods for an easy few hours of hiking or, worse, those who view the wilderness as some kind of spectacle to be gawked at from beneath tacky straw hats.

When the first part of his trek ends, Bryson cannot get hiking off his mind. He vows to keep hiking during the interim. His trip to Pennsylvania is unsatisfying. His walks only last a few hours, and his car is always waiting at the end to carry him back to comfort. He does not feel that he is back in the woods. New England is much better, but it is clear that what he misses is sleeping in dirty shelters, eating bad food and trudging along day after day with Katz. The difficult Maine woods, however, teach him that he is not fully a "mountain man." He is middle aged with a family and a career that he must return to at some point. Realizing this, he is able to be satisfied with the nearly 900 miles they hiked since setting out as novices in March.

Stephen Katz

Bryson's comical hiking sidekick on the Appalachian Trail, Katz is an overweight reformed alcoholic with a love of Little Debbie cakes and homely women. Though he comes to find his own kind of satisfaction on the trail, Katz provides an important comic element, playing off Bryson's rugged determination to meet his goal. In many ways Katz appears to be just "along for the ride," reveling in visits to towns, with their opportunities for cream soda and steak dinners and television. While on the trail, he is committed to making it easier - flinging food out of his pack to make it lighter, trying to convince Bryson to stay extra nights in towns, and in one frightening instance going off the trail in search of a shortcut and getting lost.

Katz is a contrast to Bryson in other ways as well. He has never married and later tells Bryson that his alcoholism has to do with loneliness and despair over the direction his life has taken. Bryson already knew that some years prior to their trip Katz had gone to jail for cocaine possession, but he had since sworn off drugs and alcohol. Returning to his life after leaving the trail in Virginia seems to have been a difficult transition for him, because he began drinking again. Thus, while Bryson is frantically searching for a satisfying hike that summer, Katz has apparently been finding his own form of solace away from the trail.

Dave Mengle

Mengle works at the sporting goods store in Hanover, where Bryson and Katz buy all their gear for the trip. He has hiked parts of the trail, so he is advertised as an "encyclopedia of outdoor knowledge." In painful detail, Mengle describes and gives the pros and cons of nearly every piece of equipment in the store, leaving Bryson (and later Katz) bewildered and wondering what he's gotten himself into.

Mary Ellen

In the mountains of Georgia, the airheaded and talkative Mary Ellen attaches herself to Bryson and Katz. Though an inexperienced hiker herself, she criticizes the men's choices of gear and food, as well as their pace. She has an annoying habit of noisily clearing her ears by pinching her nose and blowing. The men manage to lose her on the trail long enough to hitch a ride a nearby town but soon feel guilty for leaving her in the woods by herself. Back on the trail, they learn that she has been talking to other hikers about the "overweight wimps" she has been saddled with.

Chicken John

Something of an AT celebrity at the time of Bryson and Katz's trek, Chicken John is a thru-hiker who is famous for constantly getting lost. Bryson meets him in the Berkshire mountains of Massachusetts and saves him from getting lost on his way to find a campsite.

Bill Abdu

Bryson's neighbor in Hanover, Abdu is an orthopedic surgeon and accompanies Bryson on some of his New Hampshire day hikes during the summer. He is with Bryson at Mt. Lafayette, when Bryson forgets his waterproof gear, and he also accompanies him to Mt. Washington.

Joan Bishop

Joan Bishop is the kindly old woman who owns the Bishop boarding house in Milo, Maine, which welcomes Bryson and Katz when they emerge from the Hundred Mile Wilderness.

Bryson's Wife

Bryson's unnamed wife often chauffeurs Bryson and Katz, as they head to and from the wilderness, dropping them off at trailheads and airports, and packing lunches for Bryson on his day hikes.

Objects/Places

Appalachian Trail

Stretching nearly 2, 200 miles from northern Georgia to Maine, the "AT" is the setting of *A Walk in the Woods.* Author Bill Bryson decides to hike the trail as a way of reconnecting with the American landscape and witnessing aspects of that landscape that are disappearing.

Springer Mountain

Springer Mountain is the southern trailhead of the AT. Bryson and Katz start their trek there after hitchhiking from the airport in Atlanta.

Snickers

A recurring luxury throughout the story, Katz brings an entire duffel bag full of Snickers with him when they start their trek and always seems to have some on hand. After Katz throws out much of their food in the beginning, they often eat Snickers for breakfast. Bryson is initially bothered by the presence of the Snickers, because he has heard that bears love them.

Walking Stick

Bryson's children give him a knobby walking stick as a gift when he sets out. He loses the stick somewhere in Virginia toward the end of their trip's first leg.

Amicalola Falls Lodge

The night before setting out on the AT, Bryson and Katz spend the night at the Amicalola Falls Lodge, seven miles from their starting point at Springer Mountain in northern Georgia.

Noodles

After Katz throws much of their food out in the beginning, most of their meals consist of noodles.

Walasi Yi Inn

The Walasi Yi is Bryson's and Katz's first chance to shower and stock up on food after entering the woods at Springer Mountain. It is at Neels Gap, where they try and fail for the first time to lose their unwanted companion Mary Ellen.

Big Butt Mountain

While they are still in northern Georgia, the trail takes Bryson and Katz over a narrow ledge along Big Butt Mountain. They reach it just as a snowstorm is setting in and have a frightening experience negotiating the ledge in the storm.

Franklin, North Carolina

While waiting for two feet of snow to melt, Bryson and Katz hole up in Franklin, which is so dull that they end up pushing on even though the snow drifts are still high.

Clingman's Dome

Clingman's Dome is the highest peak on the AT. Bryson and Katz reach it after a laborious trek through the Smoky Mountains and decide they need a dose of civilization.

Gatlinburg, Tennessee

Eight miles from Clingman's Dome, Gatlinburg is a tourist trap complete with shops, motels, tacky museums and expensive fast food. Bryson and Katz hitchhike there after deciding they need a dose of civilization, and while there they decide they aren't making fast enough progress to hike the whole AT. They decide to skip over the rest of the Smoky Mountains and resume the trail in Virginia.

Blue Ridge Mountains

The Blue Ridge Mountains is chain of mountains Bryson and Katz walk while in Virginia.

Waynesboro

On their sixth night hiking in the Blue Ridge Mountains, they spot Waynesboro in the distance, beckoning with signs for motels and restaurants. Once there, Katz makes a date with a married woman and spends the rest of their stay hiding from her gun-toting husband.

Shenandoah National Park

A narrow, 101-mile-long park in the Blue Ridge Mountains, Shenandoah is the last thing Bryson and Katz hike before parting ways for the summer. It is flatter than the Smokies and instantly becomes their favorite part of the trip.

Front Royal, Virginia

Bryson's wife meets him and Katz in Front Royal, from where they take Katz to the airport and part ways for the summer.

Centralia, Pennsylvania

While doing day hikes throughout the Northeast, Bryson happens on the town of Centralia, which is abandoned, because it sits on an anthracite coal bed that was ignited in the 1960s and has been burning ever since. Perhaps unwisely, Bryson pokes around the town, which seems to still have one or two determined residents.

Stratton Mountain

Regarded as the spiritual birthplace of the Appalachian Trail, Stratton Mountain in Vermont is one of the peaks Bryson climbs in the early summer before rejoining Katz in Maine.

Mt. Lafayette

While hiking Mt. Lafayette with his neighbor from Hanover, Bryson has a frightening experience when the weather turns and he has forgotten his weatherproof gear.

Mt. Washington

Perhaps the crowning glory of the New England trail, Mt. Washington is difficult, beautiful, and a huge tourist attraction. Bryson and his neighbor hike it and find every tourist comfort at the summit, including a noisy cafeteria.

Hundred Mile Wilderness

In August, Bryson and Katz meet up in Maine to hike the famed and daunting Hundred Mile Wilderness, 99.7 miles of trail with no towns, restaurants, stores, or any real convenience at all. It is the most difficult part of their AT journey, and ultimately they find they are unable to complete it.

Shaw's

In the town of Monson, Maine, Bryson and Katz emerge from a three-day hike designed to let them limber up and get used to the trail again. They spend the night at Shaw's guesthouse, which is famous for being the last place to get a bed, groceries, or anything else of luxury before entering the Hundred Mile Wilderness.

Milo

After finding they cannot complete the Hundred Mile Wilderness, Bryson and Katz hitchhike to Milo, where they spend a night at the Bishop boarding house.

Bishop Boarding House

Run by the cheerful Joan Bishop, the boarding house welcomes Bryson and Katz as they emerge from the Maine woods. Mrs. Bishop assures them that the woods will still be there if they decide to try again.

Social Sensitivity

In telling of his relationship with one of America's great gifts to hikers, the Appalachian Trail, Bill Bryson investigates numerous issues pertaining to the environment. He discusses both the extent of America's environmental crisis and some of its causes. He also points out that one is never immune from the social problems endemic throughout the United States, even while hiking through some of the country's most remote and inaccessible wilderness.

In the opening chapter, Bryson gives a variety of reasons for his foray into the woods. The most compelling reason, though, is that "the Appalachians are the home of one of the world's great hardwood forests ... and that forest is in trouble." Acid rain and the gradual warming of the earth's atmosphere both spell doom, Bryson observes, for the delicate ecosystem atop the eastern mountains. Many species of tree are in trouble, and others are already gone from their historic range. Bryson goes into minute scientific detail to make the point that trees, for all their size and stability, are actually quite fragile life forms. Tiny changes in the air, soil, and water they need to can lead to the extinction of entire tree species.

Thus, Bryson calls his reader to action by giving a compelling new view on current practices in environmental management.

Not only specific varieties of trees but nature in general is in crisis, Bryson argues.

He points out that, at many of its points, civilization is crowding the Appalachian Trail. It has been variously shortened, rerouted, and stripped of some of its greatest vistas by the encroachment of industry, tourism, and residential development. Many of these intrusions are caused by nothing short of insensitivity. Americans want easy access to resorts in the wilderness. What this means, Bryson tells us, is that the woods are destroyed in the very process of their appreciation.

Another cause of the environmental crisis Bryson points to is the lack of economic support for the various bureaucratic bodies which manage wilderness. "In constant dollars," Bryson writes, "the Park Service budget today is $200 million a year less then it was a decade ago." Without the proper resources, the United States Park Service does not have the wherewithal to maintain shelters, groom trails, or treat the forests' diseases. Furthermore, Bryson argues that this shortage of resource reveals two problems. First, that politicians are unwilling to stand up for the environment and make hard choices about how to allocate resources for the Park Service and the agencies it supports. Second, and perhaps more disturbing, it betrays the American people's apathy. In Bryson's opinion, Americans should be, but are clearly not, furious about the fact that more is spent on a handful of military planes than the preservation of all the country's woods.

In addition to poor funding, America's woods suffer, in Bryson's opinion, from gross mismanagement. Bryson pokes fun at the Forest Service's obsession with building

roads. Citing statistics that the Forest Service has built 378,000 miles of roads through American wilderness, Bryson concludes that "to say that these guys like to build roads barely hints at their level of dedication."

The problem with all this building is that the roads give access to the private logging companies Bryson sees as parasites eating away at America's reserves of pristine wilderness.

Bryson acknowledges that wood needs to come from somewhere. But for him, the aesthetic beauties of untouched wilderness are too valuable to be destroyed by practices such as clear cutting. He advocates for a more robust, efficient management of America's forests. This social concern is both environmental and political for Bryson.

Mismanagement of America's forests, he argues, is not only unsightly but costly. By allowing the Forest Service to become little more than the puppet of the logging industry, Bryson believes that the environment's bureaucratic safeguards have been destroyed.

Moreover, the destruction of forests comes without a fully realized economic benefit.

The Forest Service's process of accepting bids from loggers to manage the forests is, Bryson asserts, so backward that it results in enormous financial losses every year.

The logging industry is only one group which, to Bryson's mind, misuses America's natural resources. Bryson's list of groups plundering the woods includes tourists and hunters as well. Bryson's attention to the social concern of how natural resources are used raises, probably without his intending it to, a more complex question: who determines the correct way to use the forest and how do class differences influence opinions about the validity of any given plan for the woods' use? Though Bryson claims the authorial privilege of having the last word, it is important to keep in mind that his status as a member of the middle class (made evident by his disparaging comments about Appalachian "hillbillies") colors his views on environmental management. One with the luxury to enjoy the woods aesthetically will not necessarily view their conservation in the same way as one who depends on them for a living.

Bryson is concerned with both the effects of tourism and with the inability of most tourists to appreciate nature fully. When he completes an arduous trek up Mount Washington, for example, Bryson is shocked by the way tourism has blighted the landscape: There may be more demanding and exciting summits to reach ... than Mount Washington but none can be more startling. You labor up the last steep stretch of rocky slope to what is after all a considerable eminence and pop your head over the edge, and there you are greeted by, of all things, a vast, terraced parking lot.

The uncanny appearance of this parking lot is only one of many intrusions by casual tourists that Bryson,a long distanced hiker, experiences. The parking lot is an eyesore for Bryson as are the other conveniences and tourist traps placed along the Appalachian Trail. Parking lots, roads, and visitors' centers detract from the purity of the

experience of a walk through the woods and make easy something that, in Bryson's view, is pleasurable precisely because it is difficult.

In addition to besmirching pristine wilderness, tourism demonstrates what Bryson considers a fundamental flaw in the American character. Citizens of the United States do not, according to Bryson, walk anywhere. Citing statistics that Americans walk, on average, barely "1.4 miles a week," Bryson expresses his concern with America's dependence on the automobile. When people rely on their cars for even short journeys of half a mile or so, Bryson believes they have lost the will to be selfsufficient. More importantly, they contribute to the destruction of the environment and the very wilderness Bryson celebrates throughout his book.

Bryson is concerned with more than our laziness, however; he is also troubled by American tourists' penchant for showing extremely bad taste. Coming out of the woods for a brief visit to Gatlinburg, Bryson finds that it lacks everything the trail offers while giving Americans all they want. He cites it as an example of the fact that "when Americans load up their cars and drive enormous distances to a setting of rare natural splendor what most of them want when they get there is to play a little miniature golf and eat dribble food." Here, perhaps, lies the base cause of all that troubles the American landscape: apathy. Though granted access through the Park Service to vast tracts of pristine wilderness, the tourists who come to it cannot appreciate it. Instead, they want convenience and diversion regardless of their environmental impacts.

In addition to the apathetic tourists, Bryson also accuses hunters of environmental degradation. While hiking the Maine wilderness, Bryson encounters his first moose, which he considers a stately animal.

He takes this opportunity to note, with palpable horror, that Maine has recently reintroduced moose hunting. Even while citing statistics that show the necessity of hunting to cull a quickly exploding population, Bryson is unable to accept that any self-respecting naturalist would kill such a dopey animal. Here, Bryson's aesthetic vision obscures his understanding of wilderness management.

In addition to these environmental concerns, which are somewhat peculiar to natural areas like the Appalachian Trail, Bryson considers larger issues which, by virtue of the fact that they touch even the backwoods, shock him by their pervasiveness.

Specifically, Bryson dwells on the violence which has occurred on the trail over the years in order to make a statement about the extent of the problem in the United States. In the year Bryson hiked the trail, 1996, someone savagely murdered two young women. In all, nine cases of murder have been confirmed on the Appalachian Trail over the years. The isolated surroundings in which they occurred made them all, including the most recent, virtually impossible to investigate and prosecute. Bryson's account of these murders confirms the notion that retreating from urban areas is not enough to safeguard the individual from acts of violence. These acts are an endemic problem, impossible, in the present day, to escape from. Though isolated from society's benefits, Bryson asserts, the Appalachian Trail is not isolated from society's ills.

Techniques

Bryson's primary technique is humor.

He keeps his readers entertained by putting wisecracks and shrewd observations into the mouth of his characters, himself most of all. This attention to humor transforms what could be a rather dull account of day after day of walking into a lighthearted, fun narration. Even the potentially bland passages in which Bryson comments on the social and political ills threatening the Appalachian Trail are infused with his authorial personality, making it more like a friendly conversation than a journalistic report on the state of America's environment.

The alternation between narrative and background information is another important technique utilized by Bryson. Simply recounting the history of the Appalachian Trail would, for most readers, make for rather dull reading. On the other hand, only relating the particulars of his single experience with the Appalachian Trail would cheat the readers of context. Bryson gives both by alternating between storytelling and journalistic modes. When he and Katz come across a particularly nice shelter, for example, Bryson takes the opportunity to reflect back on the organization which builds and maintains shelters along the trail and to consider their performance. The result is a book at once entertaining and encyclopedic in the volume of information it offers. More or less the entire history of the trail's founding is offered in brief, readable form, as is a compelling story about two men and their backpacks.

Themes

Themes

The central theme which runs through all of A Walk in the Woods is the difference between two quite separate worlds: the civilized world of home and the wild world of the untamed wilderness. Bryson is constantly amazed at the ease with which one passes into the latter and the difficulty of returning to the former. America, he points out, is still full of vast woods in which an individual can be lost or killed. When Bryson leaves the tame confines of civilization, he experiences the psychological states which are part of life in the wild. These states become the important themes of his story.

Fear is the first psychological reaction to the woods considered by Bryson. He observes early in his narrative that "woods are spooky. Quite apart from the thought that they may harbor wild beasts and armed, genetically challenged fellows named Zeke and Festus, there is something innately sinister about them, some ineffable thing that makes you sense an atmosphere of pregnant doom."

Putting aside Bryson's derision toward the working poor who live near the trail, he has a point about the danger of hiking alone in the woods. Throughout the story he tells tales of bear attacks and hikers who succumbed to hypothermia. Both, he asserts, are real risks even to day hikers. The former, though a rather rare occurrence, is one hikers are generally somewhat powerless to protect themselves from. As a result, Bryson notes, one becomes a constantly coiled spring in the wilderness, always attuned to the smallest noise.

The trail also has benign psychological effects. After spending only a few days on the trail, Bryson becomes more attached to his traveling companion and the hikers who walk ahead, behind, or abreast them. The common hardships of isolation and depravation make all hikers more kind and giving. All of the characters Bryson passes are imbued with a strong sense of solidarity among hikers. Especially, he notes, the thruhikers. These individuals, committed to the task of walking the entire trail from start to finish, inspire awe among day hikers and comradery among themselves. Bryson describes many individuals who make substantial personal sacrifices in an effort to help another hiker.

Bryson's style of weaving information into his narrative makes themes out of such scientific or sociological concerns as the trail's history, its geography, and the nature of the wildlife that surrounds it. For Bryson, the most important feature of the Appalachian Trail's history is that it is a history of men and women who dedicated large portions of their life to its foundation. The trail started as one man's vision, but it could be neither completed nor maintained without tireless labor on the part of people driven by their love of the outdoors. Their tirelessness impresses Bryson and restores his faith in the goodness and work ethic of American people.

Though alternately funny and dramatic, A Walk in the Woods conveys a surprising amount of geological and zoological data.

Bryson is interested in the uniqueness of the Appalachian chain of mountains, so he recounts its history alongside that of the trail that runs along its spine. Bryson's great feat is to take this rather scientific thematic concern and make it highly readable, even to the casual naturalist. Scientific data about the size and nature of the Appalachian wilderness also underscores another of the trails psychological impacts. The sheer breadth of the wilderness and its primordial qualities have the effect of making the hiker feel tiny, insignificant. But this is not one of the negative effects. Instead, Bryson believes this personal annihilation, this recognition of unimportance makes the individual feel more at home in the world, a stronger part of the whole.

Journey

This book is very much about leaving home, experiencing something difficult, and returning home, in this case, so Bryson can write about the experience. Bryson and Katz leave home in March as two out-of-shape men with no real experience in the wilderness. However, the trail wears them down, making them capable of exertion and survival through the use of their wits.

For Bryson, the journey is partly about reconnecting with the home landscape, which he has not seen in twenty years. The hiking terrain of England is much different, so when he sets off in Georgia he is suddenly in an environment that will push him to the extreme physical limit - and he finds that he can take it. The trip also seems to give Katz a much-needed sense of accomplishment and competence, particularly after succumbing to his alcoholism over the summer. They both come home with knowledge and experience, as well as a lessened attachment to things indoor and material, evidenced by Bryson's compulsion to keep hiking in the months leading up to the Maine woods trip. At the same time, they learn to accept the "civilized world" as one they are unavoidably a part of.

Wilderness vs. Civilization

With the Appalachian Trail as this book's setting, it is difficult to miss the overarching theme of the wilderness versus civilization. Bryson and Katz are two soft middle-aged men who have clearly enjoyed the comforts of civilization, and they carry their unfamiliarity with effort into a realm that demands constant exertion. Bryson's trip to the sporting goods store shows how unused to being inconvenienced humans of today's world are. He spends a small fortune in the attempt to stay dry, warm and off the ground. The woods offer none of the comforts they are used to, and the men instantly sense their isolation in the woods. No ambulance can be called in the event of a serious injury, no movie theater driven to in the event of boredom. Bryson misses his family perhaps most of all, but Katz just as passionately misses cream soda and *The X-Files.*

They settle into the trail, however. After the initial shock of entering the woods, they lose their discomfort with being dirty and get used to walking for several hours straight each day. The material world of cars and telephones begins to seem a distant memory. A dividing line appears between Bryson/Katz and the "Reebok hikers," who want nothing more than an easy day hike, and the truly annoying tourist set that views the wilderness as a kind of oddity. Examples of the latter appear at the Big Meadows campground, where a camera-happy crowd gathers around them, exclaiming over the fact that they have been in the woods for weeks. They are most taken with the fact that the men are walking everywhere. Camping is one thing, but walking in the presence of motorized alternatives is truly amazing to them.

Bryson's growing alienation from the tourist set, representatives of which appear identically along the trail from Gatlinburg, Tennessee, to Mt. Washington in New Hampshire, is part of a larger discussion about how far Americans have drifted from the wilderness, even though millions of us live within two hours drive of a natural wonder. To Bryson, the woods are interesting because of their history in terms of geology, plant and animal life, human intervention and literary significance. He goes into great detail explaining how the Appalachians formed, how glaciers carved out various lakes and ponds, and how various conditions both natural and human-caused are rapidly destroying the wilderness.

Bryson is quick to remind himself, however, that while in the woods the anticipation he feels when he and Katz near a town, where they can sleep in a bed, eat in a restaurant and get clean, is great. Sometimes the trail is overwhelming, the isolation from the mass-produced and the fat-laden too great. This is the sentiment that leads them into towns like Gatlinburg, where they realize they aren't so different from Thoreau, whose idea of getting back to nature was a stroll out to Walden Pond, or indeed anyone who simply craves the comforts of home.

Style

Structure

The overarching structure of *A Walk in the Woods* is, of course, tied to the journey of Bryson and Katz along the Appalachian Trail. It is structured in two parts and twenty-one chapters. Part 1 covers the first leg of the hike, beginning at Springer Mountain in Georgia and ending at Front Royal, Virginia, where the men part ways for the summer. Part 2 begins with Bryson attempting to keep up the momentum of walking through day hikes and short camping trips in the Northeast. Part 2 also reunites Bryson and Katz as they take on the Hundred Mile Wilderness of Maine, after which their journey ends. The chapters are each essentially devoted to a specific milestone or event on the trek, such as the meeting of Mary Ellen, the trip to Gatlinburg and the hike up Mt. Lafayette.

As with many works involving a journey, both fiction and nonfiction, the structure is ultimately circular. The protagonists leave home, make a long trek away from what they know and are comfortable with, experience a transformation of some kind, and finally return home - in Bryson's case, to write about the experience. Bryson and Katz leave home in March as two soft middle-aged men with no real experience "roughing it." The trail wears them down, making them capable of exertion and of surviving difficult situations like getting caught in a snowstorm. The trip also seems to give Katz a much-needed sense of accomplishment and capability. They come home with knowledge and experience, as well as a lessened attachment to the indoors, evidenced by Bryson's compulsion to keep hiking in the months leading up to the Maine woods trip.

Setting

A Walk in the Woods is set exactly where the title specifies. It takes place in the woods, specifically those along the Appalachian Trail in the Eastern United States. Starting in the hills of northern Georgia, the trail's southern end carries the characters into the challenging Smoky Mountains of North Carolina and through the leisurely Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia. On the northern leg, Bryson is greeted by the rocky, rather unpleasant terrain of Pennsylvania on one trip, and the welcoming Massachusetts Berkshires on another. He scales the famed Mt. Washington and finally, reunited with his traveling companion Katz, delves into the deep and imposing Maine woods.

Throughout this book, the physical environment underscores the unique challenges the characters face with each phase of their trek. In fact, it presents the initial and overarching challenge of completing a journey of 2,200 miles from Georgia to Maine. However, in a real sense, it accompanies them on that journey. In the challenging hills of Georgia and North Carolina, the men go through a process of being reduced to their basic selves, largely stripped of their need for television and beds. They start out unprepared to "rough it," but the trail shows them that they can. Over the more leisurely

terrain of Virginia, the men are settling into the trail and beginning to truly enjoy it, particularly since it is more isolated from tourists and other human annoyances.

After this time, comes a period of transition back into their normal lives for a few months. The men separate for the summer, and Bryson works hard to get back the feeling of being immersed in the woods. He fails to find this in Pennsylvania - the terrain is unpleasant, he "dabbles" with day hikes and is annoyed by the presence of his car, and, perhaps most importantly, Katz isn't there. The Maine woods put them back where they want to be, but they also show Bryson and Katz that their adventure in the woods must end sometime. The difficulty of this leg of the trail echoes the difficulties Katz seems to be having in his personal life with alcoholism and loneliness. The Hundred Mile Wilderness, with its dangerous streams and extreme heat, also gives them the push they need back into the "real world." They realize why so few people complete the AT but come to terms with not doing so themselves, choosing instead to value the experience and feel pride in completing nearly nine hundred miles of trail.

Point of View

There are two points of view used in this book. As the story is a memoir, the main perspective is the first-person voice of Bryson, author and character. This dual role, combined with Bryson's signature comic elements, gives the story a unique fictional quality. The reader accepts the basic story arc but wonders which elements have been fictionalized or embellished. The story's dialogue is especially so, since Bryson could not have been reporting verbatim speech unless he had carried a tape recorder.

At times Bryson retreats from his first-person reporting into a more distanced narrative voice that provides historical and scientific information that goes along with the story. In tight, readable narrative, he summarizes the events surrounding the Appalachian Trail's creation as an official trail, the formation of the Appalachian Mountains themselves, the movement of glaciers across the continent, relevant facts about the plants and animals inhabiting the trail, and the connections to literature or current events that help ground the reader in the setting. This perspective enlarges the world the characters inhabit, showing the reader why he or she should care about these woods.

Language and Meaning

Bryson's use of language accounts for much of the richness and enjoyability of this story. Language and speech are used in a number of ways, from injecting humor into a situation to delineating character types, to simply communicating the majesty of the woods.

Having lived in England for twenty years prior to his Appalachian adventure, Bryson's voice has rather a unique lilt to it, never more apparent than when Katz pokes fun at him, asking him "where the deuce" he has been. In this sense, language is used to show the differences between Bryson's and Katz's personalities. Where Bryson is scholarly at times even fussy, Katz is earthy, given to swearing and raunchy sexual

remarks. However, their differences create some of the most comical scenes in the story, often sparking one of Bryson's signature speech devices, sarcasm.

Language also helps Bryson carve out the characters they meet along their journey. The stereotypical clueless tourist often shows himself or herself through speech, such as the camera-happy people they meet at the Big Meadows campground in Virginia, who repeatedly exclaim, "ain't that a kick" when informed of the simple fact that the men have been walking. Language thus helps Bryson draw a line essentially between "us and them." "Us" refers to serious hikers, who appreciate the wilderness. "Them" refers to the people who think the wilderness is some kind of spectacle to be gawked at.

Quotes

"Are you saying, Dave, that I pay $250 for a pack and it doesn't have straps and it isn't water proof? Does it have a bottom in it?" (Chapter 1, p. 10)

"I gotta eat something every hour or so or I have, whadayacallit, seizures." (Ch. 2, p. 22)

"You know what I look for in a female these days? A heartbeat and a full set of limbs." (Ch. 3, p. 34)

"She said you guys were a couple of overweight wimps who didn't know the first thing about hiking and that she was tired of carrying you." (Ch. 5, p.69)

"But it's the 'X-Files' on Friday. I just bought cream soda." (Ch. 6, p. 84)

"I think I have a right to be a trifle alarmed, pardon me. I'm in the woods, in the middle of nowhere, in the dark, staring at a bear, with a guy who has nothing to defend himself with but a pair of nail clippers." (Ch. 11, p. 142)

"Ladies and gentlemen...we're going to pitch our tents in the rain, so you can have *all* the space in here, but my friend here is in his boxer shorts and is afraid of offending the ladies - and maybe exciting the gentlemen...so could you turn your heads for a minute while he puts his wet clothes back on? Meanwhile, I'll say goodbye and thank you for allowing us to share a few inches of your space for a little while. It's been a slice." (Ch. 12, p. 156)

"It's awful. Everyone's upset about it, because trust is such a kind of bedrock part of hiking the AT, you know?" (Ch. 13, p. 170)

"Trouble is...I get lost a lot." (Ch. 16, p. 206)

"Stephen, you can't walk across the Maine wilderness with a newspaper delivery bag." (Ch. 19, p. 236)

"I don't know why they couldn't have put some crocodiles in here and made a real adventure of it." (Ch. 19, p. 245)

"I try, Bryson, I really do, but...there's just this kind of hole in my life where drinking used to be."

"It was a miracle, I swear to God. Just when I was about to lie down and give myself to the wolves and bobcats, I look up and there's a white blaze on a tree and I look down and I'm *standing* on the AT." (Ch. 20, p. 266)

"Goodness me, just look at you boys! You look as if you've been wrestling bears!" (Ch. 21, p.269)

"Another mountain. How many do you need to see, Bryson?" (Ch. 21, p. 271)

Adaptations

A Walk in the Woods is available on cassette. The unabridged performance by Rob McQuay was published in 1998 by Books on Tape.

Key Questions

Bryson's journey into the woods is more than a humorous romp through the ups and downs of life on the Appalachian Trail.

It is Bryson's elegy to a disappearing wilderness and his call to arms for all those who would save it. It is a celebration of America's commitment to preservation that also critiques the apathy and greed which threaten America's natural resources.

More than giving the reader a glimpse of natural wonders, A Walk in the Woods gives Americans a glimpse of their own characters, blemishes and all. Bryson calls our attention to the bad taste and laziness of Americans, the twin causes of much of the unsightly development of the Appalachian Mountains. While he does this, he raises complicated questions about the use of forests. Are they to be enjoyed visually or used as resources? Is it possible to do both responsibly? To do the latter, Bryson informs us, requires a far greater political commitment to the environment than has been experienced in these United States since the time of Theodore Roosevelt.

In addition to exploring the quirks and flaws of America's relationship with the natural world, Bryson meditates on the psychological effects of isolation. Taking a very long walk in the woods skews one's perception, stripping the non-essential things from view and allowing for personal revelation.

More important than self-discovery was Bryson's realization that in the harsh environs of the backwoods, people showed themselves to be truly charitable and kind. Signs of solidarity were not hard to come by amidst the peaks and valleys of the Appalachian range.

1. How does the character of Bill Bryson change over the course of the narrative? Is he the same man after walking his last miles in Maine that he was when discovering the trail in his backyard?

2. How does Stephen Katz function as Bryson's foil? Does he offer only comic relief or does the juxtaposition of his and Bryson's character reveal more about both?

3. Does Bryson's alternation between the story and the history of the trail work?

In other words, is A Walk in the Woods a seamless narrative or is it a amalgamation of encyclopedic knowledge and old-fashioned storytelling?

4. What do you think of Bryson's tone?

Are his jokes always funny, or do they occasionally enter the realm of bad taste?

Are his observations on environmental management astute or preachy?

5. Whenever Bryson reenters civilization, he always experiences a kind of shock.

Why do you think this never goes away, even after numerous periods of isolation?

6. Is Katz right that he and Bryson "did the Appalachian Trail"? Would the book work better for you if the author had hiked all 2,100 miles of the trail?

7. After reading A Walk in the Woods, do you want to hike the Appalachian Trail?

How did the book change or strengthen your opinion on hiking the trail?

Topics for Discussion

Why does Katz make a good traveling companion for Bryson, and what effect does he have on the unfolding story?

Research and describe some of the challenges the Eastern wilderness is facing as a result of natural and human causes (e.g., acid rain, urban sprawl, loss of wildlife habitat, etc.).

What role does friendship play in the journey that Bryson and Katz take?

What optimism, or lack of it, does Bryson's story have for the future of the American wilderness?

) * A B SCH ' Why is the Appalachian Trail and the idea of a long journey through the woods a good central metaphor for Bryson's memoir?

Literary Precedents

A Walk in the Woods, along with Bryson's other accounts of his wanderings, fit into one of the oldest and most popular genres of American literature: the travel narrative.

Bryson's wry yet incisive look at America via its longest walk is somewhat different from narratives like Washington Irving's The Sketch Book (1820) and Mark Twain's Innocents Abroad (1869). Both of these titles (the latter of which was Twain's best selling working during his lifetime) relate the author's experience in Europe. Until quite recently, the cost of traveling to the old country made it prohibitively expensive for most Americans to visit Europe. It was something of a commonplace that great authors would write travel books. Even so eminent a novelist as Nathaniel Hawthorne filled much of his last novel, The Marble Faun (1860), with descriptions of the Italian landscape as a means of appealing to a larger readership. These books sold very well as they gave many Americans their only glimpse of Europe's treasures.

What distinguishes Bryson's books from these predecessors is that he turns his astute eye on America itself. Rather than teaching Americans about some distant land they may never see, A Walk in the Woods describes a domestic landscape and reveals, in the process, attributes of American society which readers may have recognized but never verbalized. Several fictional precedents exist for Bryson's precise view of American society and culture. Jack Kerouac's masterpiece On the Road (1957) relates, like Bryson's narrative, the author's adventures while traveling through America. Kerouac, unlike Bryson, fictionalizes his account, changing names and altering the order of events. Additionally, Kerouac's story takes on an epic scale which Bryson consciously avoids. A Walk in the Woods is, after all, concerned with minute experiences.

Perhaps the closest precedent to Bryson's story in the annals of American literature is Margaret Fuller's Summer on the Lakes (1844).

This book recounts Fuller's passage from New England, along the Great Lakes, to Milwaukee. Like Bryson, Fuller vacillates between recounting details of the journey and making philosophical observations about aspects of American culture ranging from the subjugation of women to western expansion.

Related Titles

Bryson has published two travel narratives since A Walk in the Woods. In the first, I'm a Stranger Here Myself (1999), Bryson gives his impressions of America after spending twenty years abroad. Thus, the normal paradigm of the travel narrative is reversed; instead of an American telling of his experience in a foreign land, the expatriate of twenty years relates how he was struck at returning home. The book is infused with Bryson's characteristic wit and insight into the workings of American society.

His most recent book, In a Sunburned Country (2000), fits, finally, into the expected dynamics of a travel narrative. For this work Bryson traveled to Australia where he found both an exotic land and one with striking affinities to his native United States.

He relates the details of his adventure with characteristic wit and humor.

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