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"Astute and funny . . . an amusing guide to the U.K.'s foibles, as well as a tribute to its enchantment." —*New York Times Book Review*

bill bryson

The *New York Times*-bestselling author of
A WALK IN THE WOODS

notes from a small island



By:
Bill Bryson

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What people Say:

Diane

This book combines several of my favorite things: travelogues, England, and the charm of Bill Bryson.

It is the book version of comfort food.

So you can understand why I instinctively reached for this audiobook on the the first day of my new job. I wanted something comforting. And humorous. And British.

I was instantly gratified. Bryson begins his book about touring England by describing how intensely Brits will argue about distance and driving routes:

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"If you mention in the pub that you intend to drive from, say, Surrey to Cornwall, a distance that most Americans would happily go to get a taco, your companions will puff their cheeks, look knowingly at each other, and blow out air as if to say, 'Well, now,

Alissa

Bill Bryson likes hedgerows, yelling at people, the English language, complaining, pretending to be a hiker, the fifth Duke of Portland, W.J.C. Scott-Bentinck, and

. He tries too hard to be clever, and although you're being introduced to some interesting mental pictures ("a mid-face snack dispenser" for instance), and it's positively obvious how much he loves

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. He tries too hard to be clever, and although you're being introduced to some interesting mental pictures ("a mid-face snack dispenser" for instance), and it's positively obvious how much he loves the English language and the art of writing, the lengths to which he goes can be tiring. The long-winded, irritating tangents he goes on add to this eye-clawing frustration. He seems to be bipolar, or maybe hypoglycemic, for his like or dislike of a certain village or city appears to be related to how much he's eaten or how much sleep he's had. (And please answer, who goes to see the best of England in the

?) He is rude to a McDonald's cashier and the owner of a guest house, which I simply cannot tolerate. I have a soft spot for the Scots, and the way Bryson pokes fun at the gentlemen in a local pub is unfathomable. On top of everything else, there is very little mention of my home for 6 months, Norwich, and the closest he seems to get is a switch at Newmarket. Still, I didn't completely hate this book, and it had me laughing out loud at some points because he hit it

. Interesting about the hedgerows and the former Duke of Portland, too. Mustn't grumble, or so they say.

Algernon

Newsflash: I have a new entry into my Top Ten Authors (past and present) that I would like to invite to a night out at the pub for a session of heavy drinking and tall tales.

Bill Bryson, with his sly humour and irreverent attitude towards tourism, is a strong contender for the top position right after my first experience of travelling in his company through the twisted back lanes of historical hamlets of his cherished island. Being both a personal journal and a travel guide, his Notes have been

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The secret of Bill Bryson success is easy to discern from the pages of this journal: He fell in love with the island from the first moment he landed in Dover in 1973, and his enthusiasm is as fresh and as catching two decades later as he prepares for a farewell trip before returning to America.

Sometimes it takes a long trip away from home or the perspective of a stranger to make you realize the beauty of the land and of the people around you, and Bill Bryson is for me the best kind of guide possible. He shares my love for walking, an impulsive nature that can change routes on the spur of a moment, and equal interest in the highbrow amusements of historical monuments or art galleries and the popular amusement parks and drinking pubs, for the statistical trivia and for the scandalous bit of gossip about the local worthies.

Time and time again the words that describe the places, the people, the cuisine and the culture of Britain turn into a song of joy at the chance to witness the marvels of his adopted country. Not even the constant bad weather (roughly about two thirds of his out of season journey by my count) can keep his buoyant mood down for more than one evening. Inevitably, the next stop on the railway line or the next hill to be climbed will bring back the cheerful hiker who likes to remind the reader to count his blessings and be happy to be alive, to be healthy and to live in a peaceful period of history that makes lonely travelling an attractive proposition.

For seven weeks in 1994, Bill Bryson will try to rediscover Britain from the southern Downs to the last desolate northern moors, travelling alone on foot or by public transport, a decision that I will let him explain with his usual mix of militancy and self-deprecating humour:

With great enthusiasm comes also great indignation at the carelessness and disrespect for the heritage of Britain, as witnessed in the ugliness of modern cement office blocks, proliferation of cars and highways, loss of diversity and globalization, mass tourism and the trivialization of history. In a way, Notes from a Small Island is also a snapshot of a world in danger of being swallowed up and zombified into a characterless, generic shopping mall.

and,

Cecily

After 20 years in England, Bill Bryson decided to tour Britain in 1995 by public transport over ~6 weeks and write a book about it.

HUMOUR

There are snippets of great humour and insight (â€œa young man with more on his mind than in itâ€; â€œcarpet with the sort of pattern you get when you rub your eyes too hardâ€; in Liverpool, â€œThey were having a festival of litter... citizens had taken time off from their busy schedules to add crisp packets, empty cigarette boxes and carrier bags to the otherwise blan

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BRYSON HERUMPHING

The lack of trains in remote areas is a particular bugbear, but what I don't understand is his outraged surprise - he'd lived in and travelled around the country for 20 years! He argues that they shouldn't have to be profitable because traffic lights, drains and parks don't. And at a practical level, he often changes his mind about where he's going once he's on the station platform or even on the train itself (i.e. after he should have bought a ticket), yet he never mentions encountering any problems with ticket collectors etc.

Modern architecture and urban planning are his other pet hates. He bemoans the homogeneity of high streets full of chains (rather than family shops), yet is annoyed at the lack of 24 hour opening and gives Marks and Spencer so many favourable mentions, I wondered if they sponsored him in some way.

ME HERUMPHING

Lisa Vegan

It took me forever to read this because I was constantly picking it up and putting it down, not because I wasn't enjoying it, but because it's one of those books where it works to read it in this way, and I read so many other books during the times I took breaks from reading this book.

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Sometimes I just don't like Bill Bryson as a man. There's a smattering of things he writes that are cruel, crass, and otherwise makes him unappealing to me, and he sure drinks a lot of beer, but the nasty material is a tiny minority of the book's content.

He's basically a likeable and interesting guy who is an explorer, much of it done via walking, and he has a refreshing sense of what constitutes adventure.

He's a skilled writer. He's very, very funny; I laughed out loud and chuckled many times.

I've always wanted to go to Britain so for me this was a bit of armchair traveling. Unfortunately, much of this book made me wish I'd visited the place (and most other places) at least a few decades ago. Bryson makes clear the homogenization that's taken place at various British locales, and this book was written 15 years ago so who knows what he'd say now. I'd still love to go but I'd skip some of his destinations. He also writes much about the history of his destinations and I found most of the information fascinating.

One thing that tickled my funny bone is that when he was in one small English town, he saw the old "This is Cinerama" movie, a movie I remember from my childhood, and brought me right back to the United States of America. I hadn't realized the movie was already old the first time that I saw it, but I do remember loving that film and other Cinerama movies.

There's a glossary of English (vs. American English) words in the back of the book. Given that I'm a bit of an Anglophile, I already knew the definition of most of the words, but having it in the book was a fun touch.