

One Summer: America, 1927

Bill Bryson, 2013

Summary

In *One Summer* Bill Bryson, one of our greatest and most beloved nonfiction writers, transports readers on a journey back to one amazing season in American life.

- The summer of 1927 began with one of the signature events of the twentieth century: on May 21, 1927, Charles Lindbergh became the first man to cross the Atlantic by plane nonstop, and when he landed in Le Bourget airfield near Paris, he ignited an explosion of worldwide rapture and instantly became the most famous person on the planet.
- Meanwhile, the titanicly talented Babe Ruth was beginning his assault on the home run record, which would culminate on September 30 with his sixtieth blast, one of the most resonant and durable records in sports history.
- In between those dates a Queens housewife named Ruth Snyder and her corset-salesman lover garroted her husband, leading to a murder trial that became a huge tabloid sensation.
- Alvin “Shipwreck” Kelly sat atop a flagpole in Newark, New Jersey, for twelve days—a new record.
- The American South was clobbered by unprecedented rain and by flooding of the Mississippi basin, a great human disaster, the relief efforts for which were guided by the uncannily able and insufferably pompous Herbert Hoover. Calvin Coolidge interrupted an already leisurely presidency for an even more relaxing three-month vacation in the Black Hills of South Dakota.

- The gangster Al Capone tightened his grip on the illegal booze business through a gaudy and murderous reign of terror and municipal corruption.

- The first true “talking picture,” Al Jolson’s *The Jazz Singer*, was filmed and forever changed the motion picture industry.

- The four most powerful central bankers on earth met in secret session on a Long Island estate and made a fateful decision that virtually guaranteed a future crash and depression.

All this and much, much more transpired in that epochal summer of 1927, and Bill Bryson captures its outsized personalities, exciting events, and occasional just plain weirdness with his trademark vividness, eye for telling detail, and delicious humor. In that year America stepped out onto the world stage as the main event, and *One Summer* transforms it all into narrative nonfiction of the highest order

Author Bio

- Birth—December 8 1951
- Where—Des Moines, Iowa, USA
- Education—B.A., Drake University
- Awards—(see below)
- Currently—lives in Norfolk, England, UK

William McGuire "Bill" Bryson is a best-selling American author of humorous books on travel, as well as books on the English language and on science. Born an American, he was a resident of North Yorkshire, UK, for most of his professional life before moving back to

the US in 1995. In 2003 Bryson moved back to the UK, living in Norfolk, and was appointed Chancellor of Durham University.

Early years

Bill Bryson was born in Des Moines, Iowa, the son of William and Mary Bryson. He has an older brother, Michael, and a sister, Mary Jane Elizabeth.

He was educated at Drake University but dropped out in 1972, deciding to instead backpack around Europe for four months. He returned to Europe the following year with a high school friend, the pseudonymous Stephen Katz (who later appears in Bryson's *A Walk in the Woods*). Some of Bryson's experiences from this European trip are included as flashbacks in a book about a similar excursion written 20 years later, *Neither Here Nor There: Travels in Europe*.

Staying in the UK, Bryson landed a job working in a psychiatric hospital—the now defunct Holloway Sanatorium in Virginia Water in Surrey. There he met his wife Cynthia, a nurse. After marrying, the couple moved to the US, in 1975, so Bryson could complete his college degree. In 1977 they moved back to the UK where they remained until 1995.

Living in North Yorkshire and working primarily as a journalist, Bryson eventually became chief copy editor of the business section of *The Times*, and then deputy national news editor of the business section of *The Independent*.

He left journalism in 1987, three years after the birth of his third child. Still living in Kirkby Malham, North Yorkshire, Bryson started writing independently, and in 1990 their fourth and final child, Sam, was born.

Books

Bryson came to prominence in the UK with his 1995 publication of *Notes from a Small Island*, an exploration of Britain. Eight years later, as part of the 2003 World Book Day, *Notes* was voted by UK readers as the best summing up of British identity and the state of the nation. (The same year, 2003, saw Bryson appointed a Commissioner for English Heritage.)

In 1995, Bryson and his family returned to the US, living in Hanover, New Hampshire for the next eight years. His time there is recounted in the 1999 story collection, *I'm A Stranger Here Myself: Notes on Returning to American After 20 Years Away* (known as *Notes from a Big Country* in the UK, Canada and Australia).

It was during this time that Bryson decided to walk the Appalachian Trail with his friend Stephen Katz. The resulting book is the 1998 *A Walk in the Woods: Rediscovering America on the Appalachian Trail*. The book became one of Bryson's all-time bestsellers and was adapted to film in 2015, starring Robert Redford and Nick Nolte.

In 2003, the Brysons and their four children returned to the UK. They now live in Norfolk.

That same year, Bryson published *A Short History of Nearly Everything*, a 500-page exploration, in nonscientific terms, of the history of some of our scientific knowledge. The book reveals the often humble, even humorous, beginnings of some of the discoveries which we now take for granted.

The book won Bryson the prestigious 2004 Aventis Prize for best general science book and the 2005 EU Descartes Prize for science communication. Although one scientist is alleged to have jokingly described *A Brief History* as "annoyingly free of mistakes," Bryson

himself makes no such claim, and a list of nine reported errors in the book is available online.

Bryson has also written two popular works on the history of the English language—*Mother Tongue: English and How It Got That Way* (1990) and *Made in America: An Informal History of the English Language in the United States* (1994). He also updated his 1983 guide to usage, *Bryson's Dictionary of Troublesome Words*. These books were popularly acclaimed and well-reviewed, despite occasional criticism of factual errors, urban myths, and folk etymologies.

In 2016, Bryson published *The Road to Little Dribbling: Adventures of an American in England*, a sequel to his *Notes from a Small Island*.

Honors

In 2005, Bryson was appointed Chancellor of Durham University, succeeding the late Sir Peter Ustinov, and has been particularly active with student activities, even appearing in a Durham student film (the sequel to *The Assassinator*) and promoting litter picks in the city. He had praised Durham as "a perfect little city" in *Notes from a Small Island*. He has also been awarded honorary degrees by numerous universities, including Bournemouth University and in April 2002 the Open University.

In 2006, Frank Cownie, the mayor of Des Moines, awarded Bryson the key to the city and announced that 21 October 2006 would be known as "Bill Bryson, The Thunderbolt Kid, Day."

In November 2006, Bryson interviewed the then Prime Minister of the United Kingdom Tony Blair on the state of science and education.

On 13 December 2006, Bryson was awarded an honorary OBE for his contribution to literature. The following year, he was awarded the

Bryson covers [1027 historical events] in characteristically sparkling prose. These notable happenings are worth relating and recalling, but others have done so, and more authoritatively and fully. Here, there's not much connection between them; a string of coincident (and there are many of those each day) hardly justify a book. So this isn't history, nor is it really a story with a start, finish, and thematic spine. No analysis, only narrative—it's diverting but slight.

Publishers Weekly

The summer of 1927 offers the prolific Bryson a prepared canvas on which to paint a narrative of well-known, unknown, and little-known events and personalities of the Twenties.... The book's strength is in showing the overlap of significant events and the interaction of personalities. But the author's approach keeps the reader from gaining a real sense of the landscape; this is more a spatter painting. —Charles K. Piehl, Minnesota State Univ., Mankato

Library Journal

(Starred review.) Bryson's inimitable wit and exuberance are on full display in this wide-ranging look at the major events in an exciting summer in America. Bryson makes fascinating interconnections...[and] offers delicious detail and breathtaking suspense about events whose outcomes are already known. A glorious look at one summer in America. —Vanessa Bush

Booklist

A popular chronicler of life and lore vividly charts a particularly pivotal season in American history. Bryson reanimates the events and principal players across five key months in 1927.... While he may be an

expatriate residing in England, Bryson's American pride saturates this rewarding book. A distinctively drawn time capsule from a definitive epoch.

Kirkus Reviews

1. Of all the stories that Bryson tells in *One Summer*, which one do you find most interesting—which engaged you more than others? Which story most surprised you (e.g., President Coolidge's four-hour work day)?
2. Of all the heroes covered in the book, whom do you have the most sympathy for? Maybe Philo Farnsworth? Which hero do you most admire? Most despise?
3. How did Ruth Snyder and Judd Gray bungle the cover up of their murder?
4. What about Robert Elliott, America's top executioner—how would you describe him? What in his background shaped him to do his job? Would you want him as a father...or husband?
5. Bryson's trademark humor is on display in *One Summer*. What parts, in particular, did you find funny?
6. How much, if anything, have you learned from *One Summer*? If you've read Bryson's previous *A Brief History of Nearly Everything*, how does this book compare?
7. Is there anything about the episodes in this book that mark them as distinctly American? Is there something that links them together in a way that defines the culture of this country?

8. The book has been criticized as "light"—lacking any deeper analysis—that it's merely a collection of disparate historical anecdotes whose purpose is to amuse. Hmm... Do you agree...or disagree?

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