



## A Walk in the Woods

by Bill Bryson

### About the book...

The subtitle of the book is *Rediscovering America on the Appalachian Trail* and rediscover America is just what the author did, after having lived in Europe for many years. There are so many aspects to this tale: the author's sense of humor, observations, experiences on the trail, and the different people he met along the way. As one reviewer wrote, Bill Bryson "did his...homework." No wonder that *Walk in the Woods* was on the *New York Times* bestsellers list for over a year! It will make a great discussion.



PHOTOGRAPH: JERRY BAUER

### About the author...

Bill Bryson was born in Des Moines, Iowa. For twenty years he lived in England, where he worked for the *Times* and the *Independent*, and wrote for most major British and American publications. His books include travel memoirs (*Neither Here Nor There*, *The Lost Continent*, *Notes from a Small Island*), and books on language (*The Mother Tongue*, *Made in America*). He now lives in Hanover, New Hampshire, with his wife and four children.

## Discussion Questions:

What some readers find appealing, are viewed by others as flaws. Please consider the following discussion questions:

1. What do you think of the title of the book, *A Walk in the Woods: Rediscovering America on the Appalachian Trail*?
2. What did you think of the scene where they discovered on a map that they had only hiked two inches of the four feet of trail?
3. Do you agree with the author's statement, "If we couldn't walk the whole trail, we also didn't have to?"
4. Do you feel that their hike really counts as hiking the Appalachian Trail even though it was only 39% of the trail?
5. What do you think of the relationship between Bryson and Katz?
6. What about the interactions between them and the other characters in the book? Did you find the relationships humorous?
7. What do you think of the author's sense of humor? His opinions? His writing style?
8. Do you think that readers could find this book offensive or controversial? In what ways?
9. What do you think of the informational tidbits/tangents on history (of the trail, of the National Park Service, etc.), geology (of Centralia and the mountainside in Lehigh Valley), ecology (the effects of global warming, zinc mining, dam building), and social customs (the interaction and views of different people) in the book? Did any ignite your interest? Which ones? Why?
10. Do you view these "asides" as positive or negative in the structure of the book?
11. Did the ending of the book "feel right" to you? What do you think the author meant about it not feeling right about cutting grass after hiking the Appalachian Trail?
12. In an interview with the author, Bryson mentioned that Katz said "Oh, Bryson, you know, it's all bullshit, but it's really funny!" In the same interview, Bryson said "Everything I say in the book is absolutely true." What do you think?

*Questions prepared by Manitowoc Public Library staff*

On the eve of the publication of his hilarious new book, *A Walk in the Woods*, *Bold Type* spoke with Bill Bryson by phone about the trials and tribulations of hiking the Appalachian Trail.



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**Is hiking something you've always enjoyed doing?**

Yes, though I've never done it in the States, and it's a completely different experience here because of the scale of everything. If you go out on the Appalachian Trail you have to bring so much more equipment--a tent, sleeping bag--but if you go hiking in England, or Europe, generally, towns and villages are near enough together at the end of the day you can always go to a nice little inn and have a hot bath and something to drink. It's a much more rigorous activity here.

**Is there a difference between the culture of hikers here and in Europe?**

Well, that's a good question. Essentially they're the same: people who like to go out and walk up hills and go through that sort of vigorous exercise.

**What made you choose Katz as your companion? It would seem to be impossible to pick a more ill-suited hiking partner.**

(Laughs) It was really a question of Katz choosing me. I quite genuinely didn't want to go out there on my own, I would have been grateful for any kind of companionship. I was just sort of wildly inexperienced at this sort of hiking. I had never camped outside before, never pitched a tent. So I was grateful to have anyone come along, and Katz was willing to do it. I remain very grateful to him, even now. For all the problems he had adjusting to it, he was a very loyal hiking companion. He stuck with me.

**Do you still enjoy hiking, or did you get your fill on this adventure?**

Oh yes. I haven't done any extensive hiking since then, but I still go out on the trail around here quite a bit [Hanover, NH].

**Your book is filled with humor, but there is also a serious side to it. You document the loss of woodlands and bemoan the job the National Parks Service has done protecting our natural treasures. What do you think we should do to protect our environment?**

Golly, I'm certainly no expert. The only point I was trying to make is that in this country we're very, *very* lucky to have this incredible resource, this great, vast track of wilderness that is still there. And as is widely know, these wilderness areas are greatly stressed by the incursion of shopping malls and logging, and a whole variety of things. They haven't been looked after as lovingly as you would hope and once they go, they're gone forever. That shopping mall is not going to return to woodland. What I was simply trying to do was draw people's attention to this fact so that we might try to preserve the Appalachian woods.

**What has this adventure meant to you? What lessons has this experience taught you?**

The real surprise to me was the friendship that developed with Katz, because, as you say, on the face of it I couldn't have chosen a more incompatible hiking companion. And yet, for all the squabbling we did en route, we became really good friends because of the shared deprivation and challenges. This tends to happen with people on the trail: they go out and whoever they're hiking with, they form a really strong bond. The other thing was an appreciation for the size of the world and for the glory of nature in a way that I could never have appreciated before. If you drive to say Shenandoah National Park, or the Great Smoky Mountains, you'll get some appreciation for the scale and beauty of the outdoors. When you walk into it, then you see it in a completely different way. You discover it in a much slower, more majestic sort of way. It made all of the aches and pains completely worth it.

**Now that you've spent some time getting reacquainted with the United States after living in England for several decades, what observations can you offer?**

The incredible extent to which the car has continued to overtake American life in every sort of way. My whole life it's been like that, but it seems even more so all the time. Roads get wider and busier and less friendly to pedestrians. And all of the development based around cars, like big sprawling shopping malls. Everything seems to be designed for the benefit of the automobile and not the benefit of the human being.

**That's one of the reasons I enjoy living in New York City--people actually walk here.**

It's becoming a lost art. It's really sad.

**Last question, what are your hiking plans for this summer? Are you going to try for Katahdin?**

I've got work commitments all through the summer so I'll be lucky to do a few short hikes. But in terms of Katahdin, that's my one really sincere and profound regret. We got very close, but didn't make it, and that was something that I had wanted to do very much. I've been talking a lot with my neighbor Bill Abdu, who I hike with in the book, and at some point he and I will go and hike the last of the Hundred-Mile Wilderness and go up Katahdin. I cannot die without having done this.

Maine is wonderful. It can be very hard. I mean, if you look at the profile maps it doesn't look it, but somehow when you get out there it's really steep and hard. But the payoff is that you really are in the middle of nowhere and you see these views that make you feel as though you are the first person to ever see them. Obviously, you're not, but you feel like Lewis and Clark.