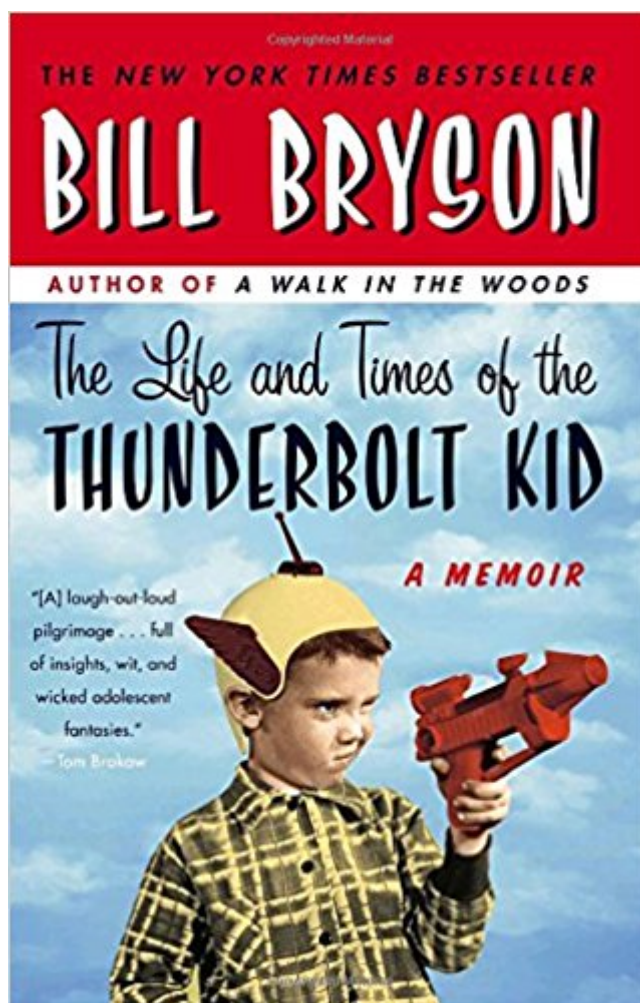




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The Life And Times Of The Thunderbolt Kid: A Memoir



Synopsis

From one of the world's most beloved writers and New York Times bestselling author of *One Summer*, a vivid, nostalgic, and utterly hilarious memoir of growing up in the 1950s Bill Bryson was born in the middle of the American century—1951—in the middle of the United States—Des Moines, Iowa—in the middle of the largest generation in American history—the baby boomers. As one of the best and funniest writers alive, he is perfectly positioned to mine his memories of a totally all-American childhood for 24-carat memoir gold. Like millions of his generational peers, Bill Bryson grew up with a rich fantasy life as a superhero. In his case, he ran around his house and neighborhood with an old football jersey with a thunderbolt on it and a towel about his neck that served as his cape, leaping tall buildings in a single bound and vanquishing awful evildoers (and morons) in his head—as "The Thunderbolt Kid." Using this persona as a springboard, Bill Bryson re-creates the life of his family and his native city in the 1950s in all its transcendent normality—a life at once completely familiar to us all and as far away and unreachable as another galaxy. It was, he reminds us, a happy time, when automobiles and televisions and appliances (not to mention nuclear weapons) grew larger and more numerous with each passing year, and DDT, cigarettes, and the fallout from atmospheric testing were considered harmless or even good for you. He brings us into the life of his loving but eccentric family, including affectionate portraits of his father, a gifted sportswriter for the local paper and dedicated practitioner of isometric exercises, and of his mother, whose job as the home furnishing editor for the same paper left her little time for practicing the domestic arts at home. The many readers of Bill Bryson's earlier classic, *A Walk in the Woods*, will greet the reappearance in these pages of the immortal Stephen Katz, seen hijacking literally boxcar loads of beer. He is joined in the Bryson gallery of immortal characters by the demonically clever Willoughby brothers, who apply their scientific skills and can-do attitude to gleefully destructive ends. Warm and laugh-out-loud funny, and full of his inimitable, pitch-perfect observations, *The Life and Times of the Thunderbolt Kid* is as wondrous a book as Bill Bryson has ever written. It will enchant anyone who has ever been young.

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Customer Reviews

Though billed as memoir, Bryson's follow-up to *A Short History of Nearly Everything* can only be considered one in the broadest sense. Sure, it's filled with Bryson's recollections of his Des Moines, Iowa, childhood. But it's also a clear foray into Jean Shepherd territory, where nostalgia for one's youth is suffused with comic hyperbole: "All sneakers in the 1950s had over seven dozen lace holes," we're told; though all the toys were crummy, it didn't matter because boys had plenty of fun throwing lit matches at each other; and mimeograph paper smelled wonderful. The titular Thunderbolt Kid is little more than a recurring gag, a self-image Bryson invokes to lash out at the "morons" that plague every child's existence. At other times, he offers a glib pop history of the decade, which works fine when discussing teen culture or the Cold War but falls flat when trying to rope in the Civil Rights movement. And sometimes he just wants to reminisce about his favorite TV shows or the Dick and Jane books. The book is held together by sheer force of personality—but when you've got a personality as big as Bryson's, sometimes that's enough. (Oct. 17) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to the Preloaded Digital Audio Player edition.

Adult/High School The Thunderbolt Kid was born in the 1950s when six-year-old Bryson found a mysterious, scratchy green sweater with a satiny thunderbolt across the chest. The jersey bestowed magic powers on the wearer—X-ray vision and the power to zap teachers and babysitters and deflect unwanted kisses from old people. These are the memoirs of that Kid, whose earthly parents were not really half bad—a loving mother who didn't cook and was pathologically forgetful, but shared her love of movies with her youngest child, and a dad who was the greatest baseball writer that ever lived and took his son to dugouts and into clubhouses where he met such famous players as Stan Musial and Willie Mays. Simpler times are conveyed with

exaggerated humor; the author recalls the middle of the last century in the middle of the country (Des Moines, IA), when cigarettes were good for you, waxy candies were considered delicious, and kids were taught to read with Dick and Jane. Students of the decade's popular culture will marvel at the insular innocence described, even as the world moved toward nuclear weapons and civil unrest. Bryson describes country fairs and fantastic ploys to maneuver into the tent to see the lady stripper, playing hookey, paper routes, church suppers, and more. His reminiscences will entertain a wide audience.

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To entertain so wonderfully by telling the tales of the past with such grace is the supreme talent of Bill Bryson. The ease at which he delivers the heavy and the humorous, especially for those blessed with the audio version of his books, only opens up parts of the heart and mind that could have been dormant for ages. I highly recommend this book, in particular, but also other of his works including, but not limited to *One Summer...* It's not only history, not only entertaining, but is a subtle, gentle call out to all of us to learn, to know, and to allow the things we know to affect us beyond merely reading a book.

This is a sentimental book about the good old 1950's and growing up in them in the midwest. There are not nearly as many laughs as there are in some of Bryson's earlier books, but it's a pleasant read filled with warm memories and Bryson's obsessively researched asides. I'm curious about the concept of the Thunderbolt Kid for the book. His super-hero alter ego is mentioned maybe five times throughout the book and is completely unnecessary. In fact, it seems to be such an afterthought that I wonder if the publisher read the first draft and told him to add something that would grab the book shopper's attention. This is not at all a Bryson must-read, but if you grew up in the 50's, it may take you back.

Even though I was a "girl", but still of the same generation as the author, this book brought back many carefree memories for me. I too remember running around the neighborhood with a towel pinned around my neck, playing a Super Girl of sorts. This was before I'd ever heard of Wonder Woman. Memories as well of getting our first TV, and later the first time I actually saw a color TV! Overall, this book was highly entertaining, and provided me with far more than one moment of "burst out loud laughter". Immediately, as reading, I thought of others I would most certainly

recommend this book to. This was a time way back, when most children I knew lead carefree lives, and actually "used their imaginations" to think of ways to entertain themselves. When kids played games outside with other neighborhood kids, and were actually expected to be "highly respectful" of their elders. Very nicely done. Lovely little jabs at the quirks of his father, his mother's cooking, other family members, all sorts of friend's oddities, both young and old. A book you can pick up to read, just for the joy of escaping to a another time and place. To get a few good chuckles. Also to come to understand the viewpoint from a young boy's point of view, of stories in the local and international news, that now make me stop and realize how little I was effected by it all.

My husband received this book as a gift from my step-mother. She had no idea what a perfect gift it was for him, since he was born in Des Moines, Iowa, where the adventures in this book took place. While my husband is younger than the author, his brother was the same age and it could almost be written by him. My husband's siblings have now all read this book or will have once his last sister receives this in the mail. Had to share it with her, but did not want to give up our own copy. It's a keeper. While I, myself, grew up elsewhere, there are a lot of similarities with my own experiences of growing up in small town America, same types of businesses, just different names, same feel. It's really about growing up in the '50's and '60's all across America. If you grew up in that time era, you will most likely find similarities in your own life. Reading this book is like sitting down with the author, himself, and hearing his stories of growing up. This book is fabulously nostalgic, warmly engaging, and truly laugh-out-loud funny. While reading this book has led to reading other books by Bill Bryson, this is my husband's very favorite. Parts of it, he read aloud to me and I loved it as well. If this review has been helpful to you, please indicate below. I rely heavily on reviews of others, so have tried to review this to the best of my ability. Read the book. It's great!

If you were alive in the midwest in the mid twentieth century, many parts of this book will either have you laughing out loud or feeling sentimental. The author must have been a thoughtful child and keen observer, though he portrays his child-self as carefree and heedless. Bryson described what I believed, while growing up, was the life of everyone's family but mine. The large and small details of everyday life that are described in the book make the times come to life for the reader. I find myself telling my children about things that existed then, and I have forgotten, because the book ignited those memories for me. The book is definitely written from the perspective a boy of the fifties and sixties, which is fine. He was a boy. I would be interested to read a book from the same era written by someone who was a girl at that time. I think it would include many of the same details and events

peculiar to that time, but might be expressed in as a very different experience for the author, maybe not as humorous. That said, Bryson is also insightful in pointing out absurdities, incongruities, and consequences of the culture of that time in America.

Bill Bryson's memoir of growing up in Des Moines is not only an exercise in nostalgia for what it was like being a child in the 1950's but a wonderful recapturing of what it is like to be a child. It is also a very funny book and not one to be read in public if you dislike having people look at you oddly when you involuntarily erupt into helpless laughter. The sheer number of endearingly eccentric characters from Bryson's formative years is amazing, from his oblivious parents to budding mad scientist Doug Willoughby to the infamous Stephen Katz. This book does for this period in America what Mark Twain did for the era of Tom Sawyer: keeps it vividly alive for all time.

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