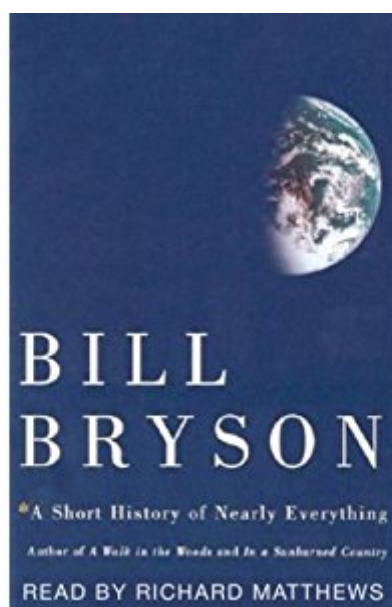


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A Short History Of Nearly Everything



Synopsis

Bill Bryson describes himself as a reluctant traveller, but even when he stays safely in his own study at home, he can't contain his curiosity about the world around him. This book is his quest to understand everything that has happened from the Big Bang to the rise of civilization - how we got from there, being nothing at all, to here, being us. Bill Bryson's challenge is to take subjects that normally bore the pants off most of us, like geology, chemistry and particle physics, and see if there isn't some way to render them comprehensible to people who have never thought they could be interested in science. It's not so much about what we know, as about how we know what we know. How do we know what is in the centre of the Earth, or what a black hole is, or where the continents were 600 million years ago? How did anyone ever figure these things out? On his travels through time and space, he encounters a splendid collection of astonishingly eccentric, competitive, obsessive and foolish scientists, like the painfully shy Henry Cavendish who worked out many conundrums like how much the Earth weighed, but never bothered to tell anybody about many of his findings. In the company of such extraordinary people, Bill Bryson takes us with him on the ultimate eye-opening journey, and reveals the world in a way most of us have never seen it before.

--This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Book Information

Audible Audio Edition

Listening Length: 17 hours and 48 minutes

Program Type: Audiobook

Version: Unabridged

Publisher: Books on Tape

Audible.com Release Date: October 17, 2003

Language: English

ASIN: B0000U7N00

Best Sellers Rank: #1 in Books > Science & Math > Nature & Ecology > Natural History #1

in Books > Science & Math > Essays & Commentary #1 in Books > Science & Math >

Astronomy & Space Science > Astronomy

Customer Reviews

I picked this one up expecting "good". Instead, I got one of the most delightful reading experiences in science that I have ever had. What a wonderful surprise. Bryson tries to do what most school textbooks never manage to do, explain the context of science in a way that is relevant to the

average person. At the beginning of the book, he recalls an event from his childhood when he looked at a school text and saw a cross-section of our planet. He was transfixed by it, but noticed that the book just dryly presented the facts ("This is the core." "This part is molten rock." "This is the crust.", etc.), but never really explained HOW science came to know this particular set of facts. That, he quite correctly points out, is the most interesting part. And that is story he sets out to tell in this book. Bryson obviously spent a great deal of time and effort developing and checking his facts and presentation. He obviously enjoyed every minute of it too, and it shows. Never have I read a book where the author conveyed such joyful awe of what we have learned as a species (with the possible exception of some of Richard Feynman's books). My benchmark for this kind of book is usually; How well does it explain modern physics? There are few books out there that manage to explain relativity, quantum mechanics and string theory in a way that doesn't make your eyes glaze over. The Dancing Wu Li Masters by Gary Zukav is the best of the lot in my opinion. While this book did not change my opinion, Bryson's explanations of these mind-bending theories are not only lucid and sensible, they are also full of his telltale tongue-in-cheek side comments and therefore are just plain fun to read. However, Bryson goes way beyond Zukav, focusing not only on physics, but on the full panoply of scientific disciplines. He also focuses more on the discoverers themselves, and the process of discovery. One of the things I like about this book is that Bryson again and again makes sure credit is given where credit is due. For many discoveries, he tells us the "official" story, but also tells us the often untold story of the small-time scientist who got the idea first but, for whatever reason, never got credit. This happens a great deal in science, and Bryson appears to be on a quest to set the record straight when he can. The result is not only charming storytelling, it's got a certain justice that just feels good. I didn't have huge expectations for this book, but I am delighted to report that it is one of the best of its kind. Hurrah to Bryson for writing it, and hurrah to me for stumbling on it.

Bryson's "A Short History of Nearly Everything" is beautifully written, very entertaining and highly informative--and now, it is lavishly illustrated as well. Bryson is not a scientist, but rather a curious and observant writer who, several years ago, realized that he couldn't tell a quark from a quasar, or a proton from a protein. Bryson set out to cure his ignorance of things scientific, and the result was "A Short History of Nearly Everything," which was originally published in 2003. For readers who are new to science and its history, "A Short History of Nearly Everything" contains one remarkable revelation after another. It is amazing how enormous, tiny, complex and just plain weird the universe is. Learning about "everything" is a humbling experience, and I kept thinking of Stephen Crane's

blank verse: "A man said to the Universe: 'Sir, I exist!' 'However,' replied the Universe, 'the fact has not created in me a sense of obligation.'" Just as engaging as Bryson's story of what we know is the parallel story of how we know it--from the first clever experiments to figure out how much the earth weighs to today's ongoing efforts to describe the origins of the universe itself, it becomes obvious that science is not an answer but a process, a way of learning about a world that always seems to have one more trick up its sleeve. Whatever else may be said about the universe, Bryson explains that learning about its mysteries is a very human endeavor. The book is peppered with tales of the odd turns, like Percival Lowell, the astronomer who saw canals on Mars when in fact there are none (and whose initials figured in the naming of "Pluto, the ninth planet); the Askesian Society, a learned 19th century body devoted to the study of laughing gas; and the knock-down, drag-out personal battles between scientists whose genius was rivaled only by their lack of civility. This is a superb book and a quick read despite its length. The illustrated edition makes the journey all the more enjoyable.

I am a big fan of Bill Bryson's travelogues. I was therefore surprised when I came across this, somewhat more weighty, tome. But I am pleased that I picked it up. The author says he didn't do very well in science when he was in school because the teachers and texts seemed to be hiding all the good stuff. Now, as an adult, he's gone after the good stuff. And he's the guy to write it so the rest of us can understand. Not only does he write clearly, but he's very good at explaining as much as a normal person can understand (of relativity, for example), while pointing to the stuff that's weird, and setting aside the stuff that you have to be a specialist to understand. He also is very good at giving credit to people who thought of things but were ignored until someone else came along and took credit. This has happened all too frequently, and it's good for the record to be set straight. If you too were afraid of science, this is a wonderful book. If you already know a lot of this but just like to read enjoyable writing--it's also a wonderful book.

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