



A Walk in the Woods, by Bill Bryson

About the book...

In the grand tradition of the travel memoir, writer Bill Bryson tells the story of his trek through the wilderness along the Appalachian Trail. *A Walk in the Woods'* main character is, of course, the author. Bryson acts variously as guide, participant, and commentator; he relates events, usually involving himself, and offers his interpretations of them. Though the opinions expressed in his commentary are subjective, he does speak from a position of authority, having experienced both the trail's splendor and its hardships.



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:

1. One of the most interesting aspects of this book is the unlikely friendship between Bryson and Katz. What is the relationship based on? Consider, especially, the episode in Maine when Katz gets lost: somehow the friendship is altered. How does Bryson's attitude toward Katz change over the course of the book? How does Katz himself change? Or does he? What was Katz's motivation, anyway, to walk the AT?
2. The book offers an excellent microscope through which to examine the meaning of friendship—our own friendships. Do the two men remind you of friends who tested your patience, but who exhibited intense loyalty?
3. In fiction a journey usually symbolizes a journey of self-discovery—at the end the protagonist comes to learn something about him/herself. Although *A Walk* isn't a novel, do either of the men come to greater self-awareness by the end of their journey?

4. The tone of the book veers back and forth between humor and seriousness, even anger. In fact, the book is a sort of jeremiad against environmental threats to the great wilderness areas of the country. Is Bryson's anger justified? He criticizes, but does he offer solutions? Are there solutions?
5. Katz pokes fun at rural Southerners, which some readers find funny, others find offensive. You? What about the interactions between them and the other characters in the book? Did you find the relationships humorous?
6. Bryson ponders the attraction of hiking: "You have no engagements, commitments, obligations, or duties; no special ambitions and only the smallest, least complicated of wants; you exist in a tranquil tedium, serenely beyond the reach of exasperation." If you're a hiker, backpacker, camper, are your experiences similar to or different from Bryson's? For those who aren't hikers, are there other avenues to "exist in a tranquil tedium"?
7. You might also talk about the numerous characters Bryson and Katz meet on the trail. Mary Ellen is one, for instance: how do you feel about their treatment of her? Do you view these "asides" as positive or negative in the structure of the book?
8. Do you feel that their hike really counts as hiking the Appalachian Trail even though it was only 39% of the trail?
9. What do you think of the author's sense of humor? His opinions? His writing style?
10. Do you think that readers could find this book offensive or controversial? In what ways?
11. 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?
12. 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?
13. 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?