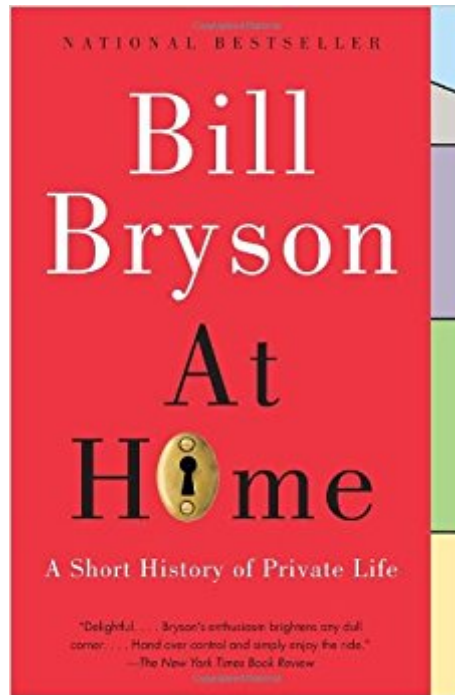


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At Home: A Short History Of Private Life



Synopsis

With his signature wit, charm, and seemingly limitless knowledge, Bill Bryson takes us on a room-by-room tour through his own house, using each room as a jumping off point into the vast history of the domestic artifacts we take for granted. As he takes us through the history of our modern comforts, Bryson demonstrates that whatever happens in the world eventually ends up in our home, in the paint, the pipes, the pillows, and every item of furniture. Bryson has one of the liveliest, most inquisitive minds on the planet, and his sheer prose fluency makes *At Home* one of the most entertaining books ever written about private life.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Is there anything Bill Bryson isn't interested in? He moves from one subject to the next with equal amounts of genuine enthusiasm. And we're not talking about just the really remarkable stuff - a lot of what gets Bryson going seems quite mundane. Mousetraps, for instance. Once he has you hooked, you too realize that even mousetraps are pretty fascinating after all. There's no point looking for a theme to *At Home*, even though it's nominally a social history of the home, specifically Bryson's home, a former rectory in Norfolk, built in 1851. Going from room to room is just an excuse for Bryson to expound on whatever he finds interesting. It might be best to take the book as a series of loosely connected magazine articles or short essays. You can skip around without losing the thread, because there isn't one. Most of the history is Victorian, but there are side trips to the prehistoric Britain, 19th century America, and the recent past. This is not an academic book, so there are no

footnotes, which is a shame. Although Bryson usually credits sources within the text, now and then he makes an outrageous statement without attribution. One that had me scrambling for some supporting evidence was a claim that Elizabeth I admired, then scooped some silverware into her purse at dinner in a nobleman's house while on her annual royal progress. Even more remarkable was a statement that one third of all women in London aged 15-25 in 1851 were prostitutes. Really?! After browsing through the lengthy and excellent bibliography, I found the instruction to go to Bryson's website for notes and sources, but found only that they are "coming soon." Chances are you won't be interested in everything that takes Bryson's fancy, but no worry.

I adore this book. I sat up late reading it, and I woke up at 4:30am (really) to continue reading it. I expect to press the book into the hands of several friends with a stern warning about returning it *immediately* after they finish. Yet, I have a hard time summarizing the book in a manner that will make you understand my enthusiasm. When I tried to explain to someone why this book was so wonderful, she crinkled up her nose and gave me a "You gotta be kidding" look. This book discusses so many topics, from the history of the toilet to the reasons behind the 1851 Great Exhibition to the impact of world exploration on furniture building, that any description sounds like Bryson threw a jumble of facts into a book and had done with it. On the other hand, I explained to my friend just one of the anecdotes (the one that ends with "Nothing -- really, absolutely nothing -- says more about Victorian Britain and its capacity for brilliance than that the century's most daring and iconic building was entrusted to a gardener") and she got interested. And she giggled. Because somehow, amazingly, Bill Bryson ties together this collection of historical anecdotes and "what really happened" within a clear and recognizable structure: the Victorian parsonage in which he and his wife live, which was built in 1851. The chapters walk us through each room and the items within it.

There are two major factors that make this one of the least entertaining books by Bill Bryson. First, it's nearly humorless. One can't read *In a Sunburned Country*, *A Walk in the Woods*, or *I'm a Stranger Here Myself* without laughing until you cry at least a few times, and snorting in amusement often enough that you think twice about reading in public. This book, though, had a handful of lines that might provoke a quirk at the corner of your mouth, and that's about it. Second, it's not at all what it claims. Despite repeated assertion that this book is about how all history ends up in the home, it's much more an exercise in *History Through the Lens of the Home*. Most chapters have nearly nothing to do with the room to which they're linked. The chapter on the Larder is entirely about servitude in England. The two are linked only in that the larder is one of the rooms typically visited

only by servants. The chapter on the Garden, possibly the most tightly coupled example of chapter room and topic, dabbles briefly in the history of artificial fertilizers, but then spends the majority of its words on parks, public and private.

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