

# Bill Bryson

## A Walk in the Woods

'This is a seriously  
funny book'

*Sunday Times*



Bill Bryson was born in Des Moines, Iowa, in 1951. He settled in England in 1977, and lived for many years with his English wife and four children in North Yorkshire. He and his family then moved to America for a few years but have now returned to the UK. He is the bestselling author of *The Lost Continent*, *Mother Tongue*, *Neither Here Nor There*, *Made in America*, *Notes From a Small Island*, *A Walk in the Woods*, *Notes From a Big Country*, *Down Under* and, most recently, *A Short History of Nearly Everything*. He is also the author of the bestselling *African Diary* (a charity book for CARE International).

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'It rarely fails to amuse'

Roy Hattersley, *The Times*

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Julia Llewellyn Smith, *The Times*

'Here is a man who suffers so his readers can laugh ... as entertaining as anything Bryson has written'

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William Dalrymple, *Sunday Times*

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*Sunday Telegraph*

*Also by Bill Bryson*

THE LOST CONTINENT  
MOTHER TONGUE  
NEITHER HERE NOR THERE  
MADE IN AMERICA  
NOTES FROM A SMALL ISLAND  
NOTES FROM A BIG COUNTRY  
DOWN UNDER  
AFRICAN DIARY  
A SHORT HISTORY OF NEARLY EVERYTHING

A WALK  
IN THE WOODS

Bill Bryson

Illustrated by David Cook



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*To Katz,  
of course.*







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## Chapter 1

Not long after I moved with my family to a small town in New Hampshire I happened upon a path that vanished into a wood on the edge of town.

A sign announced that this was no ordinary footpath, but the celebrated Appalachian Trail. Running more than 2,100 miles along America's eastern seaboard, through the serene and beckoning Appalachian Mountains, the AT is the granddaddy of long hikes. The Virginia portion alone is twice the length of the Pennine Way. From Georgia to Maine, it wanders across fourteen states, through plump, comely hills whose very names – Blue Ridge, Smokies, Cumberlands, Catskills, Green Mountains, White Mountains – seem an invitation to amble. Who could say the words 'Great Smoky Mountains' or 'Shenandoah Valley' and not feel an urge, as the naturalist John Muir once put it, to 'throw a loaf of bread and a pound of tea in an old sack and jump over the back fence'?

And here it was, quite unexpectedly, meandering in a dangerously beguiling fashion through the pleasant

New England community in which I had just settled. It seemed such an extraordinary notion – the idea that I could set off from home and walk 1,800 miles through woods to Georgia, or turn the other way and clamber over the rough and stony White Mountains to the fabled prow of Mount Katahdin floating in forest 450 miles to the north in a wilderness few have seen. A little voice in my head said: ‘Sounds neat! Let’s do it!’

I formed a number of rationalizations. It would get me fit after years of waddlesome sloth. It would be useful – I wasn’t quite sure in what way, but I was sure none the less – to learn to fend for myself in the wilderness. When guys in camouflage pants and hunting hats sat around in the Four Aces Diner talking about fearsome things done out of doors I would no longer have to feel like such a cupcake. I wanted a little of that swagger that comes with being able to gaze at a far horizon through eyes of chipped granite and say with a slow, manly sniff, ‘Yeah, I’ve shit in the woods.’

And there was a more compelling reason to go. The Appalachians are the home of one of the world’s great hardwood forests – a relic of the richest, most diversified sweep of woodland ever to grace the temperate world – and that forest is in trouble. If the global temperature rises by 4°C over the next fifty years, as is evidently possible, then the whole of the Appalachian wilderness below New England could become savannah. Already trees are dying in mysterious and frightening numbers. The elms and chestnuts are long gone, the stately hemlocks and flowery dogwoods are going, and the red spruces, Fraser firs, hickories, mountain ashes and sugar maples may be about to follow. Clearly if ever there was a time to experience this singular wilderness, it was now.

So I decided to do it. More rashly, I announced my intention – told friends and neighbours, confidently informed my publisher, made it common knowledge among those who knew me. Then I bought some books and talked to people who had done the trail in whole or in part and came gradually to realize that this was way beyond – way beyond – anything I had attempted before.

Nearly everyone I talked to had some gruesome story involving a guileless acquaintance who had gone off hiking the trail with high hopes and new boots and come stumbling back two days later with a bobcat attached to his head or dripping blood from an armless sleeve and whispering 'Bear!' in a hoarse voice, before sinking into a troubled unconsciousness.

The woods were full of peril – rattlesnakes and water moccasins and nests of copperheads; bobcats, bears, coyotes, wolves, and wild boar; loony hillbillies destabilized by gross quantities of impure corn liquor and generations of profoundly unbiblical sex; rabies-crazed skunks, raccoons and squirrels; merciless fire ants and ravening blackfly; poison ivy, poison sumac, poison salamanders; even a scattering of moose lethally deranged by a parasitic worm that burrows a nest in their brains and befuddles them into chasing hapless hikers through remote, sunny meadows and into glacial lakes.

Literally unimaginable things could happen to you out there. I heard of a man who had stepped from his tent for a midnight pee and was swooped upon by a short-sighted hoot owl – the last he saw of his scalp it was dangling from talons prettily silhouetted against a harvest moon – and of a young woman who was woken by a sinuous tickle across her belly and peeked into her sleeping bag to find a copperhead bunking down in the warmth between her legs. I heard four

separate stories (always related with a chuckle) of campers and bears sharing tents for a few confused and lively moments; of people abruptly vaporized ('tweren't nothing left of him but a scorch mark') by body-sized bolts of lightning when caught in sudden storms on high ridgelines; of tents crushed beneath falling trees, or eased off precipices on ballbearings of beaded rain and sent paragliding onto distant valley floors, or swept away by the watery wall of a flash flood; of hikers beyond counting whose last experience was trembling earth and the befuddled thought 'Now what the f—?'

It required only a little light reading in adventure books and almost no imagination to envision circumstances in which I would find myself caught in a tightening circle of hunger-emboldened wolves, staggering and shredding clothes under an onslaught of pincered fire ants, or dumbly transfixed by the sight of enlivened undergrowth advancing towards me, like a torpedo through water, before being bowled backwards by a sofa-sized boar with cold beady eyes, a piercing squeal, and a slaverous, chomping appetite for pink, plump, city-softened flesh.

Then there were all the diseases lurking in the woods — *Giardia lamblia*, Eastern equine encephalitis, Rocky Mountain spotted fever, Lyme disease, *Helicobacter pylori*, *Ehrlichia chaffeensis*, schistosomiasis, brucellosis, and shigella, to offer but a sampling. Eastern equine encephalitis, caused by the prick of a mosquito, attacks the brain and central nervous system. If you are very lucky you can hope to spend the rest of your life propped in a chair with a bib round your neck, but generally it will kill you. There is no known cure. No less arresting is Lyme disease, which comes from the bite of a deer tick smaller than a pinhead. If undetected, it can lie

dormant in the human body for years before erupting in a positive fiesta of maladies. This is a disease for the person who wants to experience it all. The symptoms begin with headaches, fatigue, fever, chills, shortness of breath, dizziness, and shooting pains in the extremities, then march on to cardiac irregularities, facial paralysis, muscle spasms, severe mental impairment, loss of control of body functions, and – not surprising in the circumstances – chronic depression.

Then there is the little-known family of organisms called hantaviruses, which swarm in the micro-haze above the faeces of mice and rats, and are hoovered into the human respiratory system by anyone unlucky enough to stick a breathing orifice near them – by lying down, say, on a sleeping platform over which infected mice have recently scampered. In 1993 a single outbreak of hantavirus killed thirty-two people in the southwestern United States, and the following year the disease claimed its first victim on the AT when a hiker contracted it after sleeping in a ‘rodent-infested shelter’. (All AT shelters are rodent infested.) Among viruses, only rabies, Ebola and HIV are more certainly lethal. Again, there is no treatment.

Finally, this being America, there is the constant possibility of murder. At least nine hikers – the actual number depends on which source you consult and how you define a hiker – have been murdered along the trail since 1974. Two young women would die while I was out there.

For various practical reasons, principally to do with the long, punishing winters of northern New England, there are only so many available months to hike the trail each year. If you start at the northern end, at Mount Katahdin in Maine, you must wait for the snows to clear in late May or June. If, on the other hand, you start in Georgia and head north, you must



time it to finish before mid-October when the snows blow back in. Most people hike from south to north with spring, ideally keeping one step ahead of the worst of the hot weather and the more irksome and infectious of insects. My intention was to start in the south in early March. I put aside six weeks for the first leg.

The precise length of the Appalachian Trail is a matter of interesting uncertainty. The US National Park Service, which constantly distinguishes itself in a variety of alarming ways, manages in a single leaflet to give the length of the trail as 2,155 miles and 2,200 miles. The official Appalachian Trail Guides, a set of eleven books each dealing with a particular state or section, variously give the length as 2,144 miles, 2,147 miles, 2,159 miles and 'more than 2,150 miles'. The Appalachian Trail Conference, the governing body, in 1993 put the trail length at exactly 2,146.7 miles, then changed for a couple of years to a hesitantly vague 'more than 2,150 miles', but has recently returned to confident precision with a length of 2,160.2 miles. In 1993, three people rolled a measuring wheel along its entire length and came up with a distance of 2,164.9 miles. At about the same time a careful measure based on a full set of US Geological Survey maps put the distance at 2,118.3 miles.

What is certain is that it is a long way, and from either end it is not easy. The peaks of the Appalachian Trail are not particularly formidable as mountains go – the highest, Clingmans Dome, in Tennessee, tops out at a little under 6,700 feet – but they are big enough and they go on and on. There are more than 350 peaks over 5,000 feet along the AT, and perhaps a thousand more in the vicinity. In a week you can cross fifty Snowdons. Altogether, it takes about five months, and five million steps, to walk the trail from end to end.