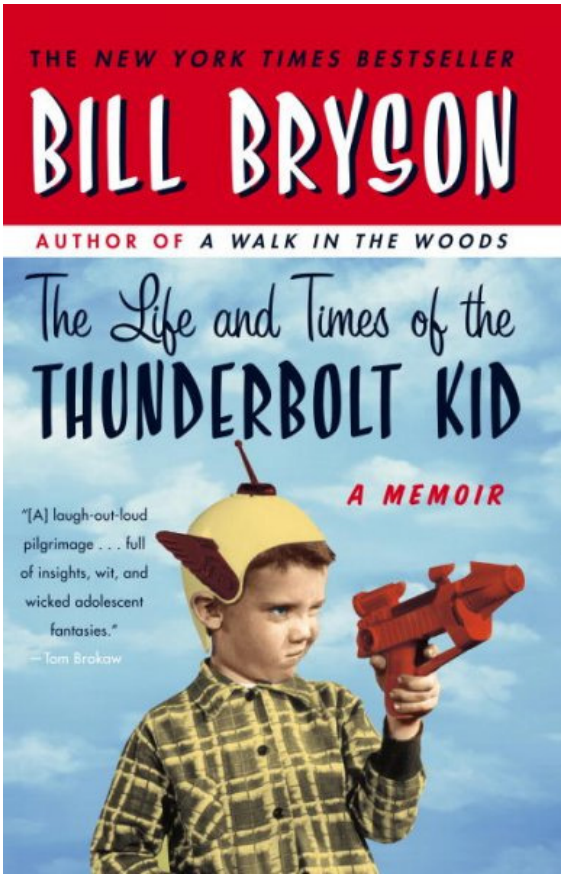

Books in a Box

Reading Guide

Blaine
Bookmobile
Deming
Everson
Ferndale
Island
Lynden
Maple Falls
Point Roberts
Sumas
wcls.org

the best place to begin

whatcom county
library system

Books in a Box Information

We hope you will enjoy the convenience of having multiple copies of the same title to share—either with your official book group or with an unofficial friends-and-family group!

Some general information about the kits:

- Kits check out for six weeks.
- Kits are available to reserve, but we cannot guarantee their availability for specific dates.
- One person in the group is responsible for the kits full return.
- Return kits in person at any Whatcom County library

How do I find a list of all your kits?

- Go to www.wcls.org
- Click on “catalog”
- In the Subject Keyword Search type “book club kit”

This list includes kits owned by both Whatcom County and Bellingham Library Systems. Please note that the Bellingham kits must be picked up and returned to the Bellingham Library. Whatcom County kits can be reserved and sent to any location for pickup.

Suggested Discussion Questions

1. What are some of the strongest memories of your own childhood or adolescence? Why have they stood the test of time?

2. Why do you think the 1950s foster such nostalgia among those who lived through the decade and even those who didn't?

3. What are some characteristics of the 1950s that endure today—for better or worse? Are there any that have all but disappeared?

4. "I can't imagine there has ever been a more gratifying time or place to be alive than America in the 1950s" (page 3). What do you think of this statement?

5. Bryson also calls the 1950s an "endlessly imaginative" decade. Do you agree or disagree?

6. Who were some of the characters in the book who stood out for you? What made them memorable?

7. "The best I can say is that I saw the last of something really special. It's something I seem to say a lot these days" (page 178). In this passage, Bryson is describing the evolution of his grandparents' town of Winfield, Iowa, from a tight-knit farming community to an empty landscape, because of the decline of family farming and small businesses at the hands of big corporations. Have you seen this type of change in your hometown or current community? How do you feel about it? Do you think Bryson is lamenting the passing of his childhood in this statement?

8. What other memoirs written by baby boomers have you read? How do they compare with

Thunderbolt Kid?

9. Bryson paints the 50's as an innocent, almost idyllic time. Was it?

10. Does the childhood Bryson describes take place in a lost America? He paints a rich portrait of community ties and identity. To what degree do those ties still exist? What has been lost? Consider the effects of TV and the computer.

11. Discuss Bryson's mother, a professional woman, and his father, who was also absent a good deal of the time. How did their manner of parenting strike you? Do we have a different concept of parenting today?

(Source: AARP Magazine website; LitLovers Lit Guides)

Photos of Bill Bryson and 1950s Nostalgia

(from www.booksattransworld.co.uk/billbryson)

Reviews

Publishers Weekly

★ *The Life and Times of the Thunderbolt Kid.* Bill Bryson. Broadway Books, $15.99 (270p) ISBN 978-0767919371

For most of his adult life, Bryson has made his home in the U.K, yet he actually entered the world in 1951 as part of America's postwar baby boom and spent his formative years in Des Moines, Iowa. Bryson wistfully recounts a childhood of innocence and optimism, a magical point in time when a distinct sense of regional and community identity briefly—but blissfully—coexisted with fledgling technology and modern convenience. Narrating, Bryson skillfully wields his amorphous accent—somehow neither fully British nor Midwestern—to project a genial and entertaining tour guide of lost Americana. In portraying the boyish exploits of his "Thunderbolt Kid" superhero alter ego, he convincingly evokes both the unadulterated joys and everyday battles of childhood. As an added bonus, the final CD features an interview with Bryson in which he reflects on the process of writing his autobiography and discussing the broader social and cultural insights that he gleaned from the experience.

"Bill Bryson's laugh-out-loud pilgrimage through his Fifties childhood in heartland America is a national treasure. It's full of insights, wit, and wicked adolescent fantasies."—**Tom Brokaw**

"Bryson is unparalleled in his ability to cut a culture off at the knees in a way that is so humorous and so affectionate that those being ridiculed are laughing too hard to take offense." —***The Wall Street Journal***

"A cross between de Tocqueville and Dave Barry, Bryson writes about…America in a way that's both trenchantly observant and pound-on-the-floor, snort-root-beer-out-of-your-nose funny." —***San Francisco Examiner***

"Bill Bryson could write an essay about dryer lint or fever reducers and still make us laugh out loud." —***Chicago Sun-Times***

Suggested Readalikes

Warriors Don't Cry: A Searing Memoir of the Battle to Integrate Little Rock's Central High, by Melba Patillo Beals.

The Lost Continent: Travels in Small-town America, by Bill Bryson.

The Guinness Book of Me: A Memoir of Record, by Steven Church.

An American Childhood, by Annie Dillard.

Too Close to the Falls, by Dolores Gildiner.

Wait Till Next Year: A Memoir, by Delores Kearns Goodwin.

Rocket Boys: A Memoir, by Homer H. Hickam, Jr..

Kira-kira, by Cynthia Kadohata.

On the Road, by Jack Kerouac.

Gilead, by Marilynne Robinson.

The Prize Winner of Defiance, Ohio: How my Mother Raised 10 Kids on 25 Words or Less, by Terry Ryan.

Blooming: A Small-town Girlhood, by Susan Allen Toth.

This Boy's Life: A Memoir, by Tobias Wolff.

Web Resources

Random House Bill Bryson page: www.randomhouse.com/features/billbryson/

Bill Bryson official UK website: www.booksattransworld.co.uk/billbryson/index.html

Thunderbolt Kid video: www.youtube.com/watch?v=NgQZ0dnZH9A

American Cultural History 1950-1959: http://kclibrary.lonestar.edu/decade50.html