

Among the Funniest Books Ever Written - *The Life and Times of the Thunderbolt Kid* by Bill Bryson

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For those of a certain age, from the Mid-West and given to wonderment at what is now considered an antique, Bill Bryson's *The Life and Times of the Thunderbolt Kid: A Memoir*, is a journey back to the 1950s and 60s. Born in 1951 in Des Moines, Iowa to a newspaper sports writer father and a home furnishings editor mother, Bryson's description of the times and items is dead-on. He writes of his father's discovery of the pronunciation of what every middle class American family had in their back yard or on the patio, a chaise lounge. It is listening to this dialogue between his parents that convinces him that he is not from planet Earth and these people are not his real parents, but people who have been hypnotized to care for him.

Bryson is the Thunderbolt Kid, a superhero he imagines when he finds an old "deep bottle green, slightly moth eaten woolen jersey" in the basement of their home. Splashed across the front is a jagged satin thunderbolt. This long overlooked garment, the Sacred Jersey of Zap from the Planet Electro, is the clue to his true self. Once aware of this identity he is able to zap teachers who make him park under his desk during air raid drills, send him to the library for not bringing a permission slip for some unknown field trip or forgetting the day when money was collected for U.S. Savings Stamps.

Bryson describes events from a childhood where he tries to avoid masses of strange adults attempting to kiss him on the cheek and trying to fill a flimsy paper plate with mounds of unidentifiable Jell-O salads, to movies in downtown Des Moines theaters and vacations at relatives' homes, to sitting on his bike on the street corner and instantly having kids to play with, to the eccentricities of his parents. Bryson presents a time long gone, never to return. He describes automobiles that were large enough to hold the family plus suitcases of every size, vibrant downtown areas where people actually shopped and dined, and the appliances that began to make everyday life easier and were regarded with awe by family members and neighbors.

The Life and Times of the Thunderbolt Kid: A Memoir is filled with smiles, laughter and the uncontrollable laughter that is accompanied by hiccupping and crying. Ever so quickly as the absurdity or quirkiness builds, there is also the inevitable loss of farm land, innocence and friends. This is more than a memoir, it is a look at America in the mid-century just past, with all of its warts and growing pains. The delicate balance between humor and the actual seriousness of events of the time, dances across the page as the reader dashes to find what the next chapter will bring. Those who remember this time will have their own stories to tell of the family's first color television, the dreaded family vacation, and the foods with no flavor.

Literally capturing the voice of the author, one can hear Bryson read his book on CD, but be careful when driving, because one may find themselves running off the road laughing from the description of the daily dose of cottage cheese or the doctor that makes house calls. This is a book to be savored.