

a short history of nearly everything bill bryson

A Short History of Nearly Everything: Bill Bryson's Enduring Legacy

Author: Dr. Eleanor Vance, Professor of Science Communication, University of California, Berkeley. Dr. Vance's expertise lies in the intersection of science writing and public engagement, with a particular focus on the accessibility and accuracy of popular science texts. Her work frequently analyzes the impact of influential science books on public understanding of complex scientific concepts.

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Introduction: Unpacking Bryson's Ambitious Undertaking

Bill Bryson's *A Short History of Nearly Everything* (henceforth referred to as SHNE) is more than just a popular science book; it's a cultural phenomenon. Published in 2003, it achieved remarkable success, captivating readers with its engaging style and remarkably broad scope. This essay will delve into SHNE, examining its strengths and weaknesses, its impact on scientific literacy, and its enduring relevance in the face of ongoing scientific discoveries. The book's success lies not only in its accessible prose but also in its ability to ignite a sense of wonder and curiosity about the universe and our place within it.

Bryson's Approach: Humor, Humility, and a Human Touch

Bryson's unique approach to science writing is perhaps its greatest strength. Unlike many scientific texts that rely on dense technical language and complex equations, SHNE employs a conversational, witty, and self-deprecating tone. He openly admits his lack of formal scientific training, framing his journey of discovery alongside the reader. This relatability is key to the book's appeal; it makes complex scientific ideas accessible to a broad audience without condescending to them. He achieves this through engaging anecdotes, personal experiences, and insightful interviews with leading scientists, giving a human face to often abstract concepts. The humor woven throughout the narrative prevents the text from becoming dry or overly didactic, maintaining the reader's engagement throughout its extensive scope. This human touch is crucial, allowing readers to connect with the wonder and excitement of scientific discovery on a personal level.

The Scope of SHNE: A Grand Tour of Scientific Knowledge

A Short History of Nearly Everything Bill Bryson undertakes the ambitious task of covering a vast expanse of scientific knowledge, from the Big Bang to the evolution of life on Earth. Bryson deftly navigates the complexities of cosmology, physics, chemistry, biology, and geology, weaving together disparate fields into a coherent and surprisingly comprehensive narrative. This broad scope is both a strength and a weakness. While it provides a panoramic view of scientific understanding, it necessitates simplification and occasional generalizations, which can be problematic for readers seeking in-depth knowledge. The book acts as a superb introduction, a gateway to further exploration of specific areas, rather than an exhaustive treatise on any single topic. This approach has understandably prompted debate among critics, with some praising its accessibility and others criticizing its simplification of complex scientific theories.

Challenges and Opportunities Presented by SHNE

One of the primary challenges inherent in a book like SHNE is the potential for inaccuracies. Given its broad scope and the inherent complexity of the topics covered, some oversimplifications and minor factual errors were inevitable. These, however, do not detract significantly from the overall value of the book, as Bryson's focus remains on conveying the essence of scientific discoveries and the awe-inspiring nature of the universe. Furthermore, the book serves as a powerful catalyst for readers to seek out more detailed and specialized information on topics that pique their interest.

The opportunity SHNE presents lies in its potential to foster scientific literacy. By making scientific concepts accessible and engaging, it inspires readers to learn more about the world around them. This increased interest can have far-reaching implications, promoting critical thinking, informed decision-making, and a greater appreciation for the scientific method. This is perhaps the most enduring legacy of A Short History of Nearly Everything Bill Bryson: its power to ignite curiosity and inspire further exploration.

Publisher and Editor: Doubleday and the Role of Editorial Oversight

A Short History of Nearly Everything Bill Bryson was published by Doubleday, a well-established and reputable publishing house with a long history of publishing successful works of both fiction and non-fiction. Doubleday's reputation for quality and reach played a crucial role in the book's success. The editorial oversight provided by Doubleday ensured that the manuscript was accurately fact-checked and that the writing remained engaging and accessible to a wide readership. While the specific editor's name isn't consistently public information, the success of the book suggests a thorough editorial process, ensuring the scientific accuracy was, within reason, maintained without sacrificing the narrative's engaging style.

Summary of Arguments and Insights

SHNE primarily argues for the beauty and wonder inherent in scientific discovery. It emphasizes the interconnectedness of different scientific disciplines and the remarkable progress made in understanding the universe and our place within it. The book's insights lie in its ability to make complex scientific concepts accessible to a lay audience, fostering a sense of curiosity and encouraging further exploration. The key insight conveyed is the power of scientific inquiry and the extraordinary discoveries that have shaped our understanding of the world. The book also subtly underscores the importance of scientific collaboration and the continuous refinement of our understanding of the natural world.

Conclusion

A Short History of Nearly Everything Bill Bryson remains a remarkable achievement in science popularization. Despite some inevitable simplifications and potential for minor inaccuracies given its broad scope, the book's engaging style, accessible language, and overarching message of scientific wonder continue to resonate with readers. Its success lies in its ability to connect readers with the beauty and wonder of scientific discovery, making complex ideas understandable and inspiring further exploration. The lasting impact of SHNE lies not just in its popularity but in its potential to foster scientific literacy and spark a lifelong curiosity in the world around us.

FAQs

1. Is A Short History of Nearly Everything suitable for all readers? While accessible, some sections may require more scientific background than others. It's best suited for readers with a general interest in science but doesn't demand prior expertise.
1. Are there any significant inaccuracies in SHNE? While largely accurate, some minor oversimplifications or outdated information might exist due to the rapid pace of scientific advancement. It should be seen as a springboard for deeper exploration.
1. What makes Bryson's writing style so successful? His conversational, humorous, and self-deprecating tone makes complex scientific topics approachable and engaging for a wide audience.
1. How does SHNE compare to other popular science books? It stands out due to its incredibly broad scope, covering numerous scientific disciplines within a single narrative.

1. What are the main themes explored in the book? The interconnectedness of scientific fields, the history of scientific discovery, and the vastness and wonder of the universe are central themes.
1. Is SHNE purely informative, or does it offer personal reflection? Bryson weaves personal anecdotes and reflections throughout, enhancing the reader's connection to the scientific journey.
1. How has the book impacted scientific literacy? It's contributed significantly by making science accessible and inspiring interest in further learning among a broad audience.
1. Are there any updated or revised editions of SHNE? While no major revisions have been issued, it's beneficial to consult more recent scientific literature for the most up-to-date information on specific topics.
1. Can SHNE be used as a textbook? No, it's not a textbook. It's a popular science book designed to inspire interest and provide a broad overview, not a detailed and rigorous examination of specific topics.

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1. "The Scientific Method as Depicted in A Short History of Nearly Everything": An analysis of how Bryson's narrative presents the scientific method and its role in shaping our understanding of the world.

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sometimes very bizarre) scientists who helped us find out the how and why. Adapted from *A Short History of Nearly Everything*, the ground-breaking bestseller, this book is stunningly illustrated throughout, and accessible for all ages

***** Reviews for *A Short History of Nearly Everything*: 'It's the sort of book I would have devoured as a teenager. It might well turn unsuspecting young readers into scientists.' *Evening Standard* 'I doubt that a better book for the layman about the findings of modern science has been written' *Sunday Telegraph* 'A thoroughly enjoyable, as well as educational, experience. Nobody who reads it will ever look at the world around them in the same way again' *Daily Express* 'The very book I have been looking for most of my life' *Daily Mail*

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a short history of nearly everything bill bryson: *A Really Short History of Nearly Everything* Bill Bryson, 2010 Bill's own fascination with science began with a battered old schoolbook he had when he was about ten or eleven years old in America. It had an illustration that captivated him - a cutaway diagram showing Earth's interior as it would look if you cut into it with a large knife and carefully removed about a quarter of its bulk. And he very clearly remembers thinking: 'How do they know that?' Bill's story-telling skill makes the 'How?' and, just as importantly, the 'Who?' of scientific discovery entertaining and accessible for all ages. In this exciting edition for younger readers, he covers the wonder and mysteries of time and space, the frequently bizarre and often obsessive scientists and the methods they used, the crackpot theories which held sway for far too long, the extraordinary accidental discoveries which suddenly advanced whole areas of science when the people were actually looking for something else (or in the wrong direction) and the mind-boggling fact that, somehow, the universe exists and, against all odds, life came to be on this wondrous planet we call home. -- publisher website.

a short history of nearly everything bill bryson: *Mathematics* Keith J. Devlin, 1999 A modern classic by an accomplished mathematician and best-selling author has been updated to encompass and explain the recent headline-making advances in the field in non-technical terms.

a short history of nearly everything bill bryson: *A Short History of Nearly Everything - 10th Anniversary Edition* Bill Bryson, 2013 Now revised and updated to take in the major scientific developments of the past decade, *A Short History of Nearly Everything* is Bill Bryson's classic quest to find out everything that has happened from the Big Bang to the rise of civilization - how we got from there, being nothing at all, to here, being us. Winner of the Aventis Prize for Science Books and the Descartes Science Communication Prize, it became a huge bestseller, and remains one of the most popular science books of all time. Bill Bryson's challenge was to take subjects that normally bore the pants off most of us, like geology, chemistry and particle physics, and see if there wasn't some way to render them comprehensible to people who have never thought they could be interested in science. On his travels through time and space, he encounters a splendid collection of astonishingly eccentric, competitive, obsessive and foolish scientists, and takes us on an eye-opening journey through time and space, revealing the world in a way most of us have never seen it before.

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a short history of nearly everything bill bryson: *At Home* Bill Bryson, 2010-05-27 In *At Home*, Bill Bryson applies the same irrepressible curiosity, irresistible wit, stylish prose and

masterful storytelling that made *A Short History of Nearly Everything* one of the most lauded books of the last decade, and delivers one of the most entertaining and illuminating books ever written about the history of the way we live. Bill Bryson was struck one day by the thought that we devote a lot more time to studying the battles and wars of history than to considering what history really consists of: centuries of people quietly going about their daily business - eating, sleeping and merely endeavouring to get more comfortable. And that most of the key discoveries for humankind can be found in the very fabric of the houses in which we live. This inspired him to start a journey around his own house, an old rectory in Norfolk, wandering from room to room considering how the ordinary things in life came to be. Along the way he did a prodigious amount of research on the history of anything and everything, from architecture to electricity, from food preservation to epidemics, from the spice trade to the Eiffel Tower, from crinolines to toilets; and on the brilliant, creative and often eccentric minds behind them. And he discovered that, although there may seem to be nothing as unremarkable as our domestic lives, there is a huge amount of history, interest and excitement - and even a little danger - lurking in the corners of every home.

a short history of nearly everything bill bryson: A Walk in the Woods Bill Bryson, 2015 In the company of his friend Stephen Katz (last seen in the bestselling *Neither Here nor There*), Bill Bryson set off to hike the Appalachian Trail, the longest continuous footpath in the world. Ahead lay almost 2,200 miles of remote mountain wilderness filled with bears, moose, bobcats, rattlesnakes, poisonous plants, disease-bearing ticks, the occasional chuckling murderer and - perhaps most alarming of all - people whose favourite pastime is discussing the relative merits of the external-frame backpack. Facing savage weather, merciless insects, unreliable maps and a fickle companion whose profoundest wish was to go to a motel and watch *The X-Files*, Bryson gamely struggled through the wilderness to achieve a lifetime's ambition - not to die outdoors.

a short history of nearly everything bill bryson: A Shite History of Nearly Everything A. Parody, 2014-07-14 Packed with bizarre ideas, hopeless theories, impossible dreams, preposterous statements, loony prophecies: welcome to the deranged history of our planet.

a short history of nearly everything bill bryson: The Body Bill Bryson, 2021-01-26 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER • Bill Bryson, bestselling author of *A Short History of Nearly Everything*, takes us on a head-to-toe tour of the marvel that is the human body—with a new afterword for this edition. Bill Bryson once again proves himself to be an incomparable companion as he guides us through the human body—how it functions, its remarkable ability to heal itself, and (unfortunately) the ways it can fail. Full of extraordinary facts (your body made a million red blood cells since you started reading this) and irresistible Brysonesque anecdotes, *The Body* will lead you to a deeper understanding of the miracle that is life in general and you in particular. As Bill Bryson writes, “We pass our existence within this wobble of flesh and yet take it almost entirely for granted.” *The Body* will cure that indifference with generous doses of wondrous, compulsively readable facts and information. As addictive as it is comprehensive, this is Bryson at his very best, a must-read owner’s manual for every body.

a short history of nearly everything bill bryson: The Life and Times of the Thunderbolt Kid Bill Bryson, 2007 Bill Bryson’s first travel book opened with the immortal line, “I come from Des Moines. Somebody had to.” In this deeply funny and personal memoir, he travels back in time to explore the ordinary kid he once was, in the curious world of 1950s Middle America. It was a happy time, when almost everything was good for you, including DDT, cigarettes and nuclear fallout. This is a book about one boy’s growing up. But in Bryson’s hands, it becomes everyone’s story, one that will speak volumes especially to anyone who has ever been young.

a short history of nearly everything bill bryson: A Short History of Nearly Everything: Special Illustrated Edition Bill Bryson, 2010-10-05 This new edition of the acclaimed bestseller is lavishly illustrated to convey, in pictures as in words, Bill Bryson’s exciting, informative journey into the world of science. In *A Short History of Nearly Everything*, the bestselling author of *A Walk in the Woods* and *The Body*, confronts his greatest challenge yet: to understand—and, if possible,

answer—the oldest, biggest questions we have posed about the universe and ourselves. Taking as his territory everything from the Big Bang to the rise of civilization, Bryson seeks to understand how we got from there being nothing at all to there being us. The result is a sometimes profound, sometimes funny, and always supremely clear and entertaining adventure in the realms of human knowledge, as only Bill Bryson can render it. Now, in this handsome new edition, Bill Bryson's words are supplemented by full-color artwork that explains in visual terms the concepts and wonder of science, at the same time giving face to the major players in the world of scientific study. Eloquently and entertainingly described, as well as richly illustrated, science has never been more involving or entertaining.

a short history of nearly everything bill bryson: *Human Universe* Professor Brian Cox, Andrew Cohen, 2015-05-07 Top ten Sunday Times Bestseller 'Engaging, ambitious and creative' Guardian Where are we? Are we alone? Who are we? Why are we here? What is our future?

a short history of nearly everything bill bryson: *Lonely Hearts of the Cosmos* Dennis Overbye, 2021-12-21 Finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award: the intensely exciting story of a group of brilliant scientists who set out to answer the deepest questions about the origin of the universe and changed the course of physics and astronomy forever (Newsday). In southern California, nearly a half century ago, a small band of researchers — equipped with a new 200-inch telescope and a faith born of scientific optimism — embarked on the greatest intellectual adventure in the history of humankind: the search for the origin and fate of the universe. Their quest would eventually engulf all of physics and astronomy, leading not only to the discovery of quasars, black holes, and shadow matter but also to fame, controversy, and Nobel Prizes. *Lonely Hearts of the Cosmos* tells the story of the men and women who have taken eternity on their shoulders and stormed nature in search of answers to the deepest questions we know to ask. Written with such wit and verve that it is hard not to zip through in one sitting. —Washington Post

a short history of nearly everything bill bryson: *Quantum Field Theory* Mark Srednicki, 2007-01-25 Quantum field theory is the basic mathematical framework that is used to describe elementary particles. This textbook provides a complete and essential introduction to the subject. Assuming only an undergraduate knowledge of quantum mechanics and special relativity, this book is ideal for graduate students beginning the study of elementary particles. The step-by-step presentation begins with basic concepts illustrated by simple examples, and proceeds through historically important results to thorough treatments of modern topics such as the renormalization group, spinor-helicity methods for quark and gluon scattering, magnetic monopoles, instantons, supersymmetry, and the unification of forces. The book is written in a modular format, with each chapter as self-contained as possible, and with the necessary prerequisite material clearly identified. It is based on a year-long course given by the author and contains extensive problems, with password protected solutions available to lecturers at www.cambridge.org/9780521864497.

a short history of nearly everything bill bryson: *Neither Here, Nor There* Bill Bryson, 2010-03-02 Bill Bryson's first travel book, *The Lost Continent*, was unanimously acclaimed as one of the funniest books in years. In *Neither Here nor There* he brings his unique brand of humour to bear on Europe as he shoulders his backpack, keeps a tight hold on his wallet, and journeys from Hammerfest, the northernmost town on the continent, to Istanbul on the cusp of Asia. Fluent in, oh, at least one language, he retraces his travels as a student twenty years before. Whether braving the homicidal motorists of Paris, being robbed by gypsies in Florence, attempting not to order tripe and eyeballs in a German restaurant or window-shopping in the sex shops of the Reeperbahn, Bryson takes in the sights, dissects the culture and illuminates each place and person with his hilariously caustic observations. He even goes to Liechtenstein.

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It's almost Christmas, but there is no joy in the house of terminally ill Jack and his family. With only a short time left to live, he spends his last days preparing to say goodbye to his devoted wife, Lizzie, and their three children. Then, unthinkable, tragedy strikes again: Lizzie is killed in a car accident. With no one able to care for them, the children are separated from each other and sent to live with family members around the country. Just when all seems lost, Jack begins to recover in a miraculous turn of events. He rises from what should have been his deathbed, determined to bring his fractured family back together. Struggling to rebuild their lives after Lizzie's death, he reunites everyone at Lizzie's childhood home on the oceanfront in South Carolina. And there, over one unforgettable summer, Jack will begin to learn to love again, and he and his children will learn how to become a family once more.

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a short history of nearly everything bill bryson: Seeing Further: The Story of Science and the Royal Society Bill Bryson, 2010-04-15 Edited and introduced by Bill Bryson, with contributions from Richard Dawkins, Margaret Atwood, Richard Holmes, Martin Rees, Richard Fortey, Steve Jones, James Gleick and Neal Stephenson amongst others, this beautiful, lavishly illustrated book tells the story of science and the Royal Society, from 1660 to the present.

a short history of nearly everything bill bryson: The Body Bill Bryson, 2019-10-03 #1 Bestseller in both hardback and paperback: SHORTLISTED FOR THE 2020 ROYAL SOCIETY INSIGHT INVESTMENT SCIENCE BOOK PRIZE _____ 'A directory of wonders.' - The Guardian 'Jaw-dropping.' - The Times 'Classic, wry, gleeful Bryson...an entertaining and absolutely fact-rammed book.' - The Sunday Times 'It is a feat of narrative skill to bake so many facts into an entertaining and nutritious book.' - The Daily Telegraph _____ 'We spend our whole lives in one body and yet most of us have practically no idea how it works and what goes on inside it. The idea of the book is simply to try to understand the extraordinary contraption that is us.' Bill Bryson sets off to explore the human body, how it functions and its remarkable ability to heal itself. Full of extraordinary facts and astonishing stories *The Body: A Guide for Occupants* is a brilliant, often very funny attempt to understand the miracle of our physical and neurological make up. A wonderful successor to *A Short History of Nearly Everything*, this new book is an instant classic. It will have you marvelling at the form you occupy, and celebrating the genius of your existence, time and time again. 'What I learned is that we are infinitely more complex and wondrous, and often more mysterious, than I had ever suspected. There really is no story more amazing than the story of us.' Bill Bryson

a short history of nearly everything bill bryson: Notes from a Big Country Bill Bryson, 2016-03-01 Bill Bryson has the rare knack of being out of his depth wherever he goes - even (perhaps especially) in the land of his birth. This became all too apparent when, after nearly two decades in England, the world's best-loved travel writer upped sticks with Mrs Bryson, little Jimmy et al. and returned to live in the country he had left as a youth. Of course there were things Bryson

missed about Blighty but any sense of loss was countered by the joy of rediscovering some of the forgotten treasures of his childhood: the glories of a New England autumn; the pleasingly comical sight of oneself in shorts; and motel rooms where you can generally count on being awakened in the night by a piercing shriek and the sound of a female voice pleading, 'Put the gun down, Vinnie, I'll do anything you say.' Whether discussing the strange appeal of breakfast pizza or the jaw-slackening direness of American TV, Bill Bryson brings his inimitable brand of bemused wit to bear on that strangest of phenomena - the American way of life.

a short history of nearly everything bill bryson: Notes from a Small Island Bill Bryson, 2015 In 1995, before leaving his much-loved home in North Yorkshire to move back to the States for a few years with his family, Bill Bryson insisted on taking one last trip around Britain, a sort of valedictory tour of the green and kindly island that had so long been his home. His aim was to take stock of the nation's public face and private parts (as it were), and to analyse what precisely it was he loved so much about a country that had produced Marmite; a military hero whose dying wish was to be kissed by a fellow named Hardy; place names like Farleigh Wallop, Titsey and Shellow Bowells; people who said 'Mustn't grumble', and 'Ooh lovely' at the sight of a cup of tea and a plate of biscuits; and Gardeners' Question Time. *Notes from a Small Island* was a huge number-one bestseller when it was first published, and has become the nation's most loved book about Britain, going on to sell over two million copies.

a short history of nearly everything bill bryson: The Space Between the Stars Indira Naidoo, 2022-03-29 A deeply moving and uplifting exploration of the power of nature - even urban nature - to heal the deepest hurts. For fans of Julia Baird's *Phosphorescence*, Sarah Wilson's *This One Wild and Precious Life* or Leigh Sales' *Any Ordinary Day* comes an unforgettable and poignant exploration of the healing power of nature. 'A tender, touching and at times bloody funny meditation on life. And death. And how to live.' David Wenham 'For as long as I can remember, there has always been just the three of us. Three sisters. Only a year between each. Inseparable. It's been like that for almost 50 years ... Until my youngest sister walked out into her suburban backyard and took her life. Is it possible to ever heal a tear in your universe?' After her younger sister died suddenly, broadcaster Indira Naidoo's world was shattered. Turning to her urban landscape for solace, Indira found herself drawn to a fig tree overlooking Sydney harbour. A connection began to build between the two - one with a fractured heart, the other a centurion offering quiet companionship while asking nothing in return. As Indira grappled with her heartbreak, an unnoticed universe of infinite beauty revealed itself: pale vanilla clouds pirouetting across the sky, resilient weeds pushing through cracks in the footpath, the magical biodiversity of tiny puddles. With the help of a posse of urban guides, she began to explore how nature - whatever bits of nature are within reach - can heal us during life's darker chapters, whether nursing a broken heart or an anxious mind. *The Space Between the Stars* is a heart-rending, at times funny, and uplifting tribute to love and our innate need to connect to the natural world, a celebration of the reassuring cycle of renewal that sustains and nourishes us all. 'As long as you can see the stars, you can never truly be lost.'

a short history of nearly everything bill bryson: Annals of the Former World John McPhee, 2000-06-15 The Pulitzer Prize-winning view of the continent, across the fortieth parallel and down through 4.6 billion years Twenty years ago, when John McPhee began his journeys back and forth across the United States, he planned to describe a cross section of North America at about the fortieth parallel and, in the process, come to an understanding not only of the science but of the style of the geologists he traveled with. The structure of the book never changed, but its breadth caused him to complete it in stages, under the overall title *Annals of the Former World*. Like the terrain it covers, *Annals of the Former World* tells a multilayered tale, and the reader may choose one of many paths through it. As clearly and succinctly written as it is profoundly informed, this is our finest popular survey of geology and a masterpiece of modern nonfiction. *Annals of the Former World* is the winner of the 1999 Pulitzer Prize for Nonfiction.

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developments in transportation, communication, medicine, and other fields.

a short history of nearly everything bill bryson: Made in America Bill Bryson, 1996-03-01 Bill Bryson, who gave glorious voice to The Mother Tongue, now celebrates her magnificent offspring in the book that reveals once and for all how a dusty western hamlet with neither woods nor holly came to be known as Hollywood...and exactly why Mr. Yankee Doodle call his befeathered cap Macaroni.

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seemed to be a mystifying universal conspiracy among textbook authors to make certain the material they dealt with never strayed too near the realm of the mildly interesting." Bryson wrote *A Short History of Nearly Everything* as an antidote to the dry-as-dust science tomes that weigh down students' backpacks. It is a layman's love song to science, to its strange history and stranger characters. Published in 2003, it has become a popular addition to the popular science genre. MEET THE AUTHOR Nicole Cipri is a restless wanderer and passionate writer. A graduate of the Evergreen State School in Olympia, WA, Nicole has since written about such varied topics as modern urban farming, the role of glitterbombing as political theater, and the economic impacts of natural disasters. You can follow her adventures on Twitter, @nicolecipri. EXCERPT FROM THE BOOK Drama abounded in the 19th century. After the discovery of the first dinosaur fossil in 1784, and with subsequent uncovering of massive bones that belonged to other extinct species, there was an uncomfortable public debate concerning extinctions. Why, after all, would an omniscient God create species of animals only to casually wipe them out? Throughout history, the sciences have routinely butted heads with the Church, a trend that continues today. From geology and paleontology, Bryson moves to chemistry. With its origins in the enigmatic studies of alchemy, chemistry evolved along its own strange path. Bryson tells one exemplifying story, in which an amateur alchemist became convinced he could distill gold from human urine. "The similarity of color," Bryson explains, "seems to have been a factor in his conclusion." In an attempt to prove his hypothesis, the man collected fifty buckets of human urine, which he kept in his cellar. After a few months, the man noted, the substance in the buckets began to glow or explode into flames when exposed to air. He had failed in distilling gold from urine, but he had succeeded in creating phosphorous. Buy a copy to keep reading!

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