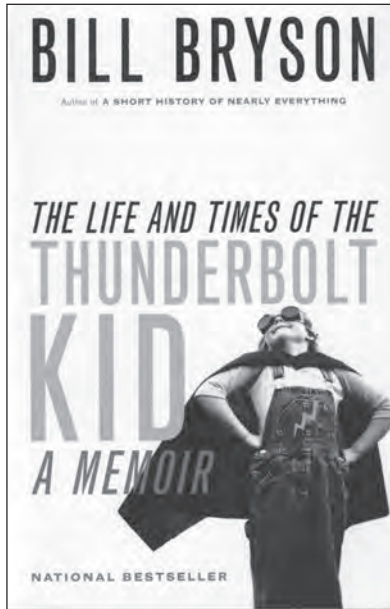


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Happy Days

The Life and Times of the Thunderbolt Kid by Bill Bryson,
Random House, 2006



I am a child of the seventies. As such a child my knowledge of the 1950s came almost entirely from television, and from one show in particular: *Happy Days*. Watching these televised saccharine morality tales was a weekly ritual in my parents' household—I'm not entirely certain, but I suspect that they thought there was a good message hidden in each episode, and watching it would somehow make me a better person. If that was their intention, I'm somewhat ashamed to admit that they were fairly far off the mark. The only message I got from the show was that leather jackets were cool, motorcycles looked like a great deal of fun, and the really pretty girls don't like the clean cut guys; they are attracted to the bad boys. My parents almost certainly wanted me to be Richie Cunningham, but I fully intended to purchase a leather jacket at the earliest opportunity. I wanted to be Fonzie.

In any case, while the unlikely dilemmas the characters found themselves in were moderately entertaining, I managed to construct a fairly complete image of what growing up in the mid 20th century was probably like: everyone was optimistic, well fed, and reasonably well behaved; even apparently hopeless problems turned out to be relatively minor and could be solved in less than an hour; and even the “bad boys” of the time weren’t really all that bad—underneath all that leather and denim, they were compassionate, caring, and always ready to lend a hand to those in need. As far as I could tell, the 1950s were, as the name of the show implied, truly happy days.

It was with great interest, then, that I procured a copy of Bill Bryson’s *The Life and Times of the Thunderbolt Kid*. I have great admiration for Bryson as a writer, largely because he has the uncanny ability to transform even the least interesting aspect of any given situation into something that can make me laugh out loud. Experience has taught my wife to insist that anything written by Bill Bryson must stay on the first floor of our house—otherwise I’ll read it in bed. Apparently, my barely stifled laughter tends to disrupt her sleeping patterns.

Like most of Bryson’s work this novel is part memoir, part fiction, and entirely enjoyable. Bryson takes us from his early childhood in the American Midwest to his departure for university. While reading the early chapters I recalled a line by Bill Watterson, of *Calvin and Hobbes* fame: “People who get nostalgic about childhood were obviously never children.” The comment seems remarkably appropriate for the kind of childhood Bryson describes. For example, the optimism I subconsciously expected (courtesy of Arthur Fonzarelli and the Cunninghams, of course) is there, but not in precisely the way that I expected:

I don’t know how they managed it, but the people responsible for the 1950s made a world in which pretty much everything was good for you. Drinks before dinner? The more the better! Smoke? You bet! Cigarettes actually made you healthier, by soothing jangly nerves and sharpening jaded

minds, according to advertisements. “Just what the doctor ordered!”

This is optimistic, but it’s not exactly the sort of wisdom Mrs. Cunningham was likely to impart to Richie and Joanie. To complicate matters even further, underneath this hectic enthusiasm for life is a kind of barely contained, almost ecstatic fear. This was a world that honestly believed nuclear devastation was very nearly a certainty; the Russians were likely to launch a pre-emptive strike at any time. Comets were likely to strike the earth without warning. Aliens were almost certain to invade. As ridiculous as many of these things seem to us today, at least some of them were taken quite seriously by the authorities in the 1950s. Bryson describes school civil defense drills where he and his classmates would dive under their desks for protection against possible (indeed, almost certain) death from atomic warheads. This was practiced as a matter of course, even though no one thought that such a drill would actually serve any useful purpose—least of all the school children. Strangely, this acceptance of almost certain death was, we are told, taken in stride by students and teachers alike; people in the 1950s apparently had the uncanny ability to reconcile a firm belief in impending death with a firm belief in a bright, happy future.

The enthusiasm of the decade is not limited merely to nuclear attacks and similar catastrophic events. Bryson also recounts the insanity of the decade’s anticommunist witch-hunts, and gives us a child’s eye view of McCarthyism. He tells us about the barmaid who was charged with indecent behaviour because she could balance two drinks at a time on her breasts. He tells us about the black man sentenced to death for stealing \$1.95. The absurdity of life in the 1950s is perhaps best characterized by a simple rule: don’t do anything half way. Apparently people in the 1950s never did anything without doing it to excess—from his perspective, the average American’s enthusiasm for a bright future was matched only by his enthusiasm for ferreting out communism in all its forms, for building bomb shelters for the nuclear warheads that were likely to fall at any moment, and

for getting as many new appliances as humanly possible. It was almost surreal. As Bryson puts it, “We didn’t need seat belts, air bags, smoke detectors, [or] bottled water.... We didn’t require child safety caps on our medicines. We didn’t need helmets when we rode our bikes.... We knew without reminding that bleach was not a refreshing drink and that gasoline when exposed to a match had a tendency to combust.” While pointing out the essential absurdity of life in the 1950s, he at the same time has a great deal of fun taking shots at our present day foibles. One gets the sense that Bryson is suggesting that in some ways the people of the 1950s had a kind of innocence and zest for life that we’ve lost. “People looked forward to the future in ways they never would again,” he says. “Soon, according to every magazine, we were going to have underwater cities off every coast, space colonies inside giant spheres of glass, atomic trains and airliners, personal jetpacks...” These same people also firmly believed that they were likely to be wiped off the face of the earth within five years, but nevertheless managed to envision a wonderful future. Today, with our over protective natures, the threat of mass extinction courtesy of climate change, and a long list of potential catastrophes, we can only look back at the wild optimism of the 1950s with a kind of longing. Life as Richie Cunningham suddenly seems a great deal more attractive.