

# The Mother Tongue: English And How It Got That Way



## Synopsis

[Read by Stephen McLaughlin] With dazzling wit and astonishing insight, Bill Bryson -- the acclaimed author of *The Lost Continent* -- brilliantly explores the remarkable history, eccentricities, resilience, and sheer fun of the English language. From the first descent of the larynx into the throat (why you can talk but your dog can't) to the fine lost art of swearing, Bryson tells the fascinating, often uproarious story of an inadequate, second-rate tongue of peasants that developed into one of the world's largest growth industries.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Who would have thought that a book about English would be so entertaining? Certainly not this grammar-allergic reviewer, but *The Mother Tongue* pulls it off admirably. Bill Bryson--a zealot--is the right man for the job. Who else could rhapsodize about "the colorless murmur of the schwa" with a straight face? It is his unflagging enthusiasm, seeping from between every sentence, that carries the book. Bryson displays an encyclopedic knowledge of his topic, and this inevitably encourages a light tone; the more you know about a subject, the more absurd it becomes. No jokes are necessary, the facts do well enough by themselves, and Bryson supplies tens per page. As well as tossing off gems of fractured English (from a Japanese eraser: "This product will self-destruct in Mother Earth."), Bryson frequently takes time to compare the idiosyncratic tongue with other languages. Not only does this give a laugh (one word: Welsh), and always shed considerable light, it also makes the reader feel fortunate to speak English. --This text refers to an out of print or

unavailable edition of this title.

Bryson's blend of linguistic anecdotes and Anglo-Saxon cultural history proves entertaining but superficial. "While his historical review is thorough. . . he mostly reiterates conventional views about English's structural superiority," said PW. "He retells old tales with fresh verve . . . but becomes sloppy when matters of rhetoric and grammar arise." Copyright 1991 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

This breezy book, based mostly on the scholarly contributions of others, examines the English language from many different angles. There are chapters on how the language developed, on slang, on names, on the development of dictionaries and crossword puzzles, on pronunciations and spelling, what constitutes good English and what constitutes bad , on the way foreigners speak English, on swearing and puns -- you name it,. It is very comprehensive and very entertaining. Bryson is a skilled story-teller and has obviously read widely and studied hard. One can learn here that the word "deer" once meant all animals (from the German Tier), that sweetheart was once "sweetard" (as in dullard and dotard), that the word "boondocks" comes from the Tagalog language of the Philippines; that canal and channel were once the same word; that sordid and swarthy come from the same Latin word meaning to be soiled or dirty -- and much more. My one criticism (which really isn't a criticism) is that the book is a bit dated. It appeared in the early 1990s before we really entered the Internet age and most of the examples comes from the 1980s and earlier. Obviously, everything in the book remains valid -- but the language has developed by leaps and bounds since then. We now communicate through texting, tweets and emoticons. I think there is a good case for this book to be updated.

I learned a lot about the English language from reading this book, even though I had already read other books on the subject. I recommend it even though it is somewhat out of date, having been written about 30 years ago. Also, I get the impression that the author is not a scholar of the field, but rather has done an excellent job of presenting the work of others in a most accessible and entertaining manner.

Bryson is my favorite author. I've never been more entertained, excited, informed, and amazed by anyone else as much as I am by his wonderful books. I bought and read this in paperback format, but decided to read it again on Kindle, as I did "A Short History of Nearly Everything", and several

others. Gaining a greater depth of understanding of our Language can expand your grasp of so much more, and even assist in an understanding other tongues. I could not recommend this book more highly.

While my graduate degree is in Economics, I've long been interested in language. Having read two of his books now, I can say that he strikes me as being a Renaissance Man. While the book contains a bit more detail than I wanted, it's generally very well written and interesting. Anyone who wants to know more about language in general and both British and American English in particular would do well to read this book.

This is one of Bryson's earlier works and he was still feeling his way. It could have been edited down a bit. I have rarely if ever skipped sections of his later books; but this one had some tedious sections which I scanned. The dilemma is that the book is loaded with nuggets and skipping sections made me worry I was missing out. I'm sure I did but I was not willing to plow as often as the book demanded.

Bill Bryson's book may be 25+ years old but it apparently has only been out electronically for a year or so. I took advantage of this to read it again. It had not dated at all, which says something about how little the internet has really affected the English language. The book is pretty thorough and I believe in its time it has gotten a LOT of readers and perhaps English students to come to love their language a little more. Bryson brings his crusty humor to English as much as he has to travel. And what a language! He delves not only into its rather invasion-laden history but into its richness, depth, and robber baron nature (few if any languages steal as ruthlessly as English has done.) The book is filled not just with charming anecdote but with knowledge. It's still a great read -- not just for word mavens but anyone who really likes to read. How lucky we are who were born into this language!

"Let me tell about the peculiarity of one (or a few) words." How could you fill a whole book with these? OMG, apparently the English language has so many peculiarities that the tale is endless. Riveting, because each example is interesting, and it is like I'm standing on the edge, wondering when he will run out of examples!

A light look at the history of English. Far from scholarly and a little dated but great fun. You will never find linguistics and etymology so accessible and entertaining.

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