

Be ready to go places you've never been

In A Sunburned Country, Bill Bryson, Doubleday Canada, 307 pages, \$35

When you start reading this latest book by Bill Bryson, be prepared to go places you've never been – even if you've lived there or been there before.

In A Sunburned Country is a frolicking adventure down under that is not only hilarious and fascinating, but also a window on parts of Australia seldom seen or heard.

Bryson visits all the usual suspects, including Sydney, Melbourne and Surfers Paradise, but also ventures into the outback – that “boundless blank” – going way off the beaten track to places like Broken Hill, Tanunda and Daly Waters.

“Clearly (Australia) is a place worth getting to know,” he writes, and he does so by exploring the small, the fascinating, and the downright weird – the stromatolites in Shark Bay, the audiovisual theatre in Cowra, and the pet shop in Young.

Author of the bestselling *A Walk In The Woods*, among others, Bryson is quite simply the world's funniest travel writer. He is renowned for his uncanny ability to make the simplest thing extremely funny and the dullest place intensely interesting.

And he serves up the kind of humour that makes you unexpectedly laugh out loud (boogie boarding and shark stories at Freshwater Beach), utilizing wit and hilarity in an almost underhanded way.

Bryson introduces past history, current events, personal anecdotes and some little-known facts – all with the perfect dose of artistic licence – and expertly makes them part of his adventures. As such, he succeeds in creating

extraordinary images that stay with you long after the fact – his explanation of cricket, his turmoil with Australian flies, and “experiencing” Cyclone Tracy.

For the most part, *In A Sunburned Country* moves at an enticing and continuous pace, and for most readers, the few distractions (some inappropriate language) will be inconsequential to the adventure.

Some explanation of the local jargon (coolibah and mitten) would also have helped on occasion, but Bryson makes up for that in the second half.

The only disappointment of this book is its design. Not only does the narrow format starkly contradict the image of vastness that Bryson frequently portrays, but the errors in the jacket text and the kangaroo on the front fail to do the book any justice. The errors are especially unfortunate, considering the attention to detail inside.

The title, however, is perfect, drawn from both the delightful poem by Australian Dorothea Mackellar and Bryson's encounter with one of Australia's most improbable creatures – but you'll have to read near to the end for that.

In A Sunburned Country is “packed with unappreciated wonders”, as Bryson writes of Australia, and no matter how much you think you know about the land down under, Bryson will show you have only just scratched the surface.

© Jenny Gates 2000
(Winnipeg Free Press, 2000)