

Autobiography as History: A Study of Bill Bryson's the Life and Times of the Thunderbolt Kid

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Abstract: *Rarely do we come across a novel which enthrals us with mundane details of life, from the kind of food that people ate at that time and the TV shows that they watched to the American atomic competition with Russia, more than half a century ago. Bill Bryson manages to do so in this travel narrative. In the present novel, The Life and Times of the Thunderbolt Kid, Bryson deals with his life and the 1950s simultaneously. The novel is funny, informative, educative and entertaining at the same time. The narration of one's childhood can rarely be complete without the description of the background setting, which is usually the country and times in which the person lived in. The present paper deals with the narrative aesthetics of history being narrated using autobiography without losing the audience at any given point. His narratives give a glimpse of his love and understanding for children and their importance in society. The narrative on his childhood also includes simple joys such as playing with kids of his age, reading comic books and visits to the departmental stores to the more important issues like the civil rights movement, progress in nuclear science, and the cold war era. The present novel also allows the readers understand the importance of education and books. Moreover, a must read for any parent, this novel guides the parents about the pitfalls in the paths of their children.*

Keywords: *Travelogues, growing up in USA in the 1950s, travel memoirs, autobiography as history*

I. Full Paper

In *The Life and Times of the Thunderbolt Kid*, Bryson recounts his childhood, his world of fantasy, and the events, times and people of America. Born in 1951, Bryson like many of his contemporaries visualizes himself as a superhero and lives in a fantasy world. His imagination runs riot on spotting an old football jersey with a picture of a thunderbolt on it in the basement of his home. He pictures that he is the son of King Volton of Planet Electro and thunder vision is his special gift using which he can vaporise people who exasperate him. Using this creative gift helped him cope with unpleasant people and situations beyond his control in his childhood. He would imagine that he vaporised people who troubled him with his thunder vision. The novel takes its title from this imagination. The extent to which this creativity helped him deal with difficult situations can be understood by the fact that he retained this memory for years and used it as the title of the novel.

The novel is divided into 14 chapters and every chapter begins with an authentic news article from Des Moines Tribune, Des Moines Register, or Time Magazine, which heralds the events that unfold in the following chapters. Bryson also shares some of his childhood photographs and photographs of his parents as well.

Hyperbole, exaggeration and matter of fact journalistic approach are some of the narrative techniques that Bryson uses in narrating this novel. When he recounts his childhood experiences he uses exaggeration or hyperbole. When he narrates the happenings in the country he uses a matter of fact journalistic approach. The narrative technique he uses depends upon the issues he discusses in the novel. He takes his liberty and lets his imagination soar when talking about personal details whereas he is extremely careful to present the facts when he narrates about any innovations like refrigerators, TV sets and programs, TV dinners; landmarks in history like civil rights and political issues like the dealing of communism and communists. A few examples from the novel:

Journalistic approach with a touch of humor:

“In 1950, not many private homes in America had televisions. Forty per cent of people still hadn't seen even a single programme. Then I was born and the country went crazy (though the two events were not precisely connected). By late 1952, one third of American households - twenty million homes or thereabouts - had purchased TVs.” (112)

Hyperbole:

“And when you got to the Trestle or the Vacant Lot or the Pond there would already be six hundred kids there. There were always six hundred kids everywhere except where two or more neighbourhoods met - at the Park, for instance - where the numbers would grow into the thousands. I once took part in an ice hockey game at the lagoon in Greenwood Park that involved

four thousand kids, all slashing away violently with sticks, and went on for at least three quarters of an hour before anyone realized that we didn't have a puck." (64)

Bryson also writes about his school days, his teachers and the manner in which these schools performed. He mentions his mother's and his forgetful nature which led him to be treated as an outsider in his school. Bryson gives a very dismal picture of the teachers who seem to be apathetic, vague and cruel. He talks particularly about one incident where he is supposed to collect money for US Saving Stamps and as usual both he and his mother forget.

"Each year the teacher held up my pathetically barren book as an example for all the other pupils of how not to support your country and they would all laugh – that peculiar braying laugh that exists only when children are invited by adults to enjoy themselves at the expense of another child. It is the cruellest laugh in the world." (211)

History is documented simultaneously with his story like the testing of Hydrogen bomb, the ignorance of people who swarmed the testing site, the nuclear war with Russia, the competition to send satellites into the earth's orbit. An "unsettling new phenomenon, the two-income family" (31) also marked its arrival at this stage. According to Bryson, during the end of 1950s and the beginning of the 1960s, the Soviets were launching satellites into the space, whereas four major launches "crashed spectacularly or refused to take to the air" (334). In 1961, Soviet Russia sent Yuri Gagarin successfully to space and within one week America led the Bay of Pigs invasion in Cuba causing embarrassment to the entire nation (334).

Bryson does not omit the atrocities committed on the Blacks in the Deep South. He mentions the planting of illicit liquor and a bag of stolen chicken feed in the car of a former Army sergeant and paratrooper, Clyde Kennard. Kennard's repetitive requests to get admission into Mississippi Southern College in Hattiesburg in 1955 made the University officials plot and plant illicit liquor and stolen chicken feed in his car and convict him for seven years on grand theft charges (330).

Apart from the apathy of the US Government towards the citizens, Bryson states that US had other worries in the 1950s like polio, keeping up with the Joneses, African Americans moving into their neighbourhood, UFOs, communism and teenagers. He asserts that the teenagers were the No. 1 fear of American citizens in the 1950s (185). Apart from this, Bryson documents the antagonism regarding communism in this chapter and points out the facts that even Nobel prize winners, Dr. Ernest Chain and Linus Pauling were troubled by the Government and treated in a shabby manner as they were thought to be liberal. This chapter covers the fear of Communism in the American citizens - from the ravings and rantings of Joseph R. McCarthy, Republican senator, Wisconsin to the shabby treatment of playwright, Arthur Miller. Bryson affirms that the detrimental views regarding communism and the US government's tendency to react excessively made America the "first nation in modern history to build a war economy in peacetime (193)."

The Life and Times of the Thunderbolt Kid narrates the tale of a kid who lived in times immediately after the two World Wars and the Great Depression. The effect of the Great Depression can be seen in the frugality Bryson's parents followed. Food was never thrown out in their home. There were always 'leftovers.' From what or when they were left over was mysterious to Bryson and also his mother. Bryson Sr.'s tight fist was well documented. In fact, he gives credit to his father as "the twentieth century's cheapest man" (54). Bryson pictures his mother as extremely forgetful, soft, kind, patient and generous. She, Bryson says, "is entirely without suspicion or malice" (84). Yet, the people of America were highly optimistic and extremely enthusiastic about their future due to the various inventions that brought in lifestyle changes. Bryson states that "[e]very week brought exciting news of things becoming better, swifter, more convenient. Nothing was too preposterous to try" (106).

By the year 1952, one third of the American homes had TV and gave an opportunity for the materialization of products such as sportswear to watch TV and TV dinners.

Another interesting fact he writes about is the area of parking lot at Disneyland which covered 100 acres. This parking lot which can hold 12,175 cars was built after uprooting an equal number of orange trees during construction.

Times were such that children were left free to themselves. Smoking and drinking to some extent were considered good. The dense smoke of DDT into which children ran into was supposed to be good for their health. Atomic toilet seats in a mall were cherished. Bryson recollects the age as a magical age replete with the presence of children. He recalls the company of children everywhere in the town of Des Moines. On the curb side, in the playgrounds, in the malls, in the outskirts, in the movies, at home, everywhere there were a lot of children to play with.

Bryson emphasizes that his childhood was filled with times when "time didn't move forward at all. It just hung" (53).

Bryson's childhood can be easily related to and engages the readers' attention throughout. The path of electronic gadgets like refrigerators, televisions and commodities like TV dinners are humorously traced by Bryson. The dangers of his childhood like cicada killers and poison sumac were narrated in this novel.

Bryson employs hyperbola, exaggeration and journalistic approach to create amusing anecdotes of his childhood and simultaneously recounts the history of the times. Every chapter has a prologue in the form of a news article of that particular time which acts as a harbinger of the events that would be narrated in that chapter. The plot line is strong and Bryson's amazing dexterity in interlacing the history of the times with his childhood is admirable. Bryson is focused on the characters, characterization and events that are narrated. Bryson's narrative holds the readers' attention throughout, makes the readers relate to his anecdotes, stay amazed at the facts that he disseminates and laugh out at the same time [2].

In one of his interviews with Scott Simon, Bryson mentions thus:

“And yet, you know, when you look at - when you read histories of the period, you realize that it was a time of - exactly the opposite in the wider world, that it was a time of really quite a lot of ugliness. There was huge amounts of racism, I mean really, really virulent racism with lynchings still quite common in the South. And you know, the Cold War and communist witchhunts and fears of polio and all of that. But happily, I was so small that most of that slipped me by” [3].

He accepts the fact that the world was riddled with issues that were beyond his comprehension as he was young at that time; nevertheless, he correlates them with his childhood anecdotes.

In fact, Chapter 7 starts with a news article from Des Moines Register about the death sentence on an African American handyman, Jimmy Wilson for robbing a white woman Mrs. Esteele Barter of \$1.95. This was also a period of testing nuclear weapons. Bryson reveals that “[a]ltogether between 1946 and 1962, the United States detonated just over a thousand nuclear warheads, including some three hundred in the open air, hurling numberless tons of radioactive dust into the atmosphere” (183). Other powerful countries like USSR, China, Britain and France detonated more nuclear warheads. It was a time when the values, integrity and prudence of the Americans were questioned.

In conclusion, it can be said that the novel, the *Life* can be considered not only as amusing but also relevant. It is not only a bildungsroman but also a faithfully recorded history of the country in the context of the world. A fusion of his childhood and the history of the world especially America, the *Life* is a narrative that brings out the innocence of the people and the perils they exposed themselves due to lack of awareness. He talks about the beauty of the times and the cruelty of the times. He narrates the majestic school buildings, malls, kiddie corrals filled with comic books, neighbourhood filled with children and the adolescent delinquency which led some of them astray. He also depicts his parents' quirks and whims, their lovable traits and his father's remarkable writing skills. Bryson's skill in narrating history through autobiography is absolutely remarkable. The relevance of the novel lies in the fact that it is a narrative which at times amuses, at times questions, and at times fondly reminds us of our nostalgic childhood.

References

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