



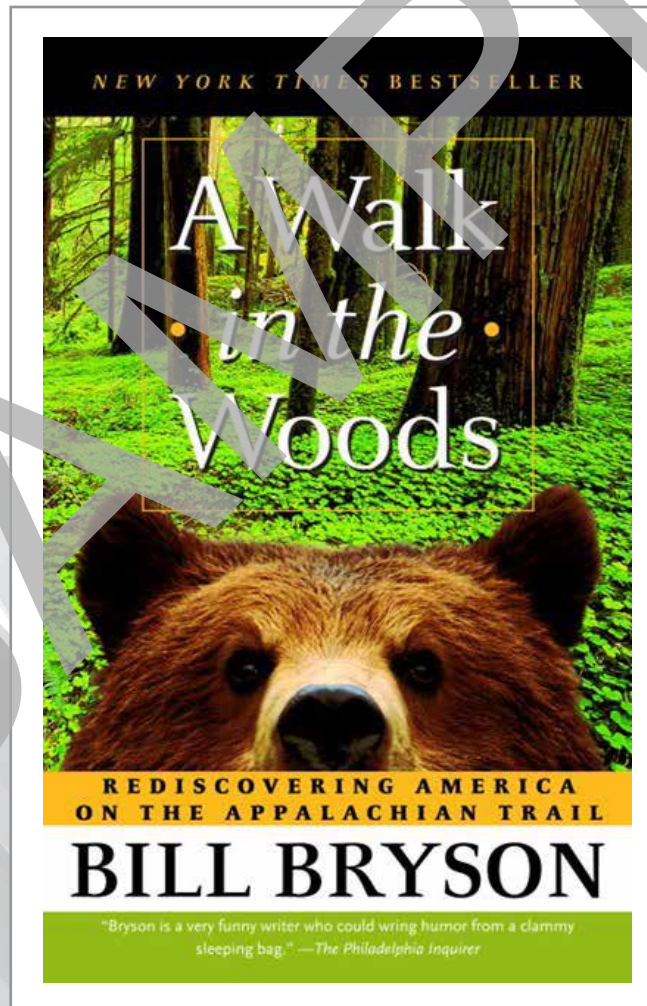
TEACHER GUIDE

GRADES 9-12

COMPREHENSIVE CURRICULUM BASED LESSON PLANS

A Walk in the Woods

Bill Bryson



READ, WRITE, THINK, DISCUSS AND CONNECT

A Walk in the Woods

Bill Bryson

TEACHER GUIDE

NOTE:

The trade book edition of the novel used to prepare this guide is found in the Novel Units catalog and on the Novel Units website. Using other editions may have varied page references.

Please note: We have assigned Interest Levels based on our knowledge of the themes and ideas of the books included in the Novel Units sets, however, please assess the appropriateness of this novel or trade book for the age level and maturity of your students prior to reading with them. You know your students best!

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Skills and Strategies

Literary Elements

Simile, metaphor, paradox,
symbolism, irony, theme,
characterization, setting

Writing

Poetry, newspaper article,
prose, journal, critique, essay

Comprehension

Cause/effect, predicting,
inference, decision-making

Thinking

Analysis, compare/contrast,
brainstorming, research

Listening/Speaking

Discussion, reports, interview,
speech

Vocabulary

Target words, definitions,
applications

Across the Curriculum

Art—brochure, poster;
Drama—TV script; Music—
appropriate selections, song
lyrics; Current Events—
newspaper and magazine
articles

Genre: nonfiction—travel, natural history, geography

Setting: the American wilderness along the Appalachian Trail, which extends from Springer Mountain in Georgia to Katahdin in Maine, a distance of about 2,100 miles

Themes: independence/interdependence, conservation, ecology, pollution, friendship

Conflict: person vs. nature, person vs. person, person vs. self, person vs. society

Style: narrative

Tone: insightful, humorous, sarcastic, pessimistic, and optimistic

Date of First Publication: hardcover edition, Broadway Books, 1998

Summary

Upon returning from a 20-year stint in England, Bill Bryson decides that he wants to become better acquainted with the United States, his native country. He plans to do so by hiking the Appalachian Trail, an approximately 2,100-mile trek that stretches from Georgia to Maine. Stephen Katz, a former buddy of Bryson's from Iowa who is physically and mentally unprepared for such a hike, joins him. After a tense beginning, the two men develop their own pace and bond over the challenges and beauty of the wilderness. With humor and insight, Bryson recounts their initial shared hike of 500 miles, his solo hiking experiences, and his and Katz's reunion for the final phase of their journey. Throughout the trek, the two men meet a number of fascinating characters, and Bryson shares with the reader his insights into history and ecology. Bryson and Katz eventually realize that they will not be able to hike the trail end to end, and in fact do not ever reach Katahdin, but the personal journeys the two make transcend the physical journey of the trail. Bryson eventually concurs with Katz that they have "hiked the Appalachian Trail" (p. 271).

About the Author

Personal: William "Bill" Bryson was born December 8, 1951, in Des Moines, Iowa, the youngest of three children of William and Mary Bryson. He attended college at Drake University but dropped out in 1972 to travel around Europe for four months. In 1973 he returned to Europe with his high school friend, Matt Angerer (who appears in Bryson's books under the pseudonym "Stephen Katz"). He first visited England that same year and chose to stay after getting a job in a psychiatric hospital. While working there he met a nurse named Cynthia, who would later become his wife, and they returned to the United States so that Bryson could finish his college degree. In 1977, they moved back to England. Bryson worked as a journalist and eventually became the chief copy editor of the business section of *The Times*. He left the field of journalism in 1987 to pursue an independent writing career. His books include *The Lost Continent: Travels in Small-Town America* (1989), *Neither Here Nor There: Travels in Europe* (1991), *Notes from a Small Island* (1995), *Down Under* (2000), *A Short History of Nearly Everything* (2003), and *The Life and Times of the Thunderbolt Kid* (2006). Bryson and his family lived in Hanover, New Hampshire, from 1995 to 2003 but currently reside in England in Wymondham, Norfolk.

Honors: *Notes from a Small Island* selected by voters in Britain as the book that best sums up the nation's state and British identity, appointed a Commissioner for English Heritage (2003), *A Short History of Nearly Everything* awarded the Aventis Prize for best general-science book (2004), appointed Chancellor of Durham University (2005), received an honorary Order of the British Empire for his literary contributions (2006), named the Schwartz Visiting Fellow of the Pomfret School in Connecticut (2007); named president of the Campaign to Protect Rural England (2007)

Chapters 10–12

Bryson and Katz begin their hike through the Blue Ridge Mountains. They stop in Waynesboro, where Katz flirts with a woman named Beulah and is threatened by her husband. The duo reaches Shenandoah National Park, which becomes Bryson's favorite part of the Appalachian Trail. There they have both positive and negative encounters with other hikers, and Bryson loses his walking stick. This marks the end of the first part of their journey.

Vocabulary

prodigious
rapacious
benign
temerity
judiciously
capacious
surfeit
patrician
cacophony
convivial
patently
insipid

Discussion Questions

1. Examine the cause/effect of the Appalachian woods' decline. *(The woods had an abundance of flora unknown in the Old World; European botanists collected a large number of plants, and many reaped a monetary reward. The American woods seemed inexhaustible; the woods were transformed as some species of wildlife became endangered or extinct and pecan trees were haphazardly chopped down. An Asian fungus attacked the American chestnut tree; chestnut trees were wiped out in the Appalachians. Pollution, e.g., acid rain, prevails in the Appalachians; it sweeps through the forests, destroying trees of all species indiscriminately.)*
2. Discuss the "great luxuries" Bryson and Katz experience as they hike through the Blue Ridge Mountains. *(Bryson and Katz are thrilled to have shelters to themselves every night with very basic amenities. Each shelter features wooden platforms on which to sleep, a picnic table, a good water source, a privy, and a broom. They appreciate not having to sit on damp logs to prepare their meals and even enjoy sweeping the shelters [which are new and clean]. Bryson states that he is "sublimely gratified" to discover that someone left a book in one of the shelters.)*
3. On returning to hiking after their trip to Virginia, Bryson remarks, "It was splendid...to be enveloped once more in our familiar surroundings" (p. 123). How is this statement ironic? How may it relate to Bryson's problems in Waynesboro? *(The quote, apart from being a comment on the scenery, implies that they have come to feel most comfortable in a natural setting. This is ironic since not that long ago the pair were decidedly out of their element in the woods and most comfortable living suburban/urban lives with all of the conveniences of modern technology. Answers will vary, but it is not unreasonable to suggest that Bryson's problems in Waynesboro can be traced to his cultural displacement. Bryson finds himself in a city, but he is no longer of the city. He insists on walking everywhere, resulting in a stressful and dangerous journey to and from Kmart. He returns from the store disgusted, looking every inch a hiker, with torn clothes covered in mud and burrs. The incident highlights the disparity between the "real world" and the "forest world" and the ongoing conflict between the two.)*
4. Examine the positive and negative aspects of Shenandoah National Park. *(The park suffers from a chronic shortage of funds and several miles of trails are deteriorating or closed. Other problems include overcrowding, with 2,000,000 people annually hiking a narrow trail along the ridgeline. Pollution limits the visibility, and acid rain is destroying the fish. Destructive insects and an untreatable fungal disease are destroying thousands of the trees. On the other hand, Bryson says Shenandoah may be his favorite national park. It features the Skyline Drive and has very nice shelters. Most importantly, it is well run and is abundant in many different kinds of wildlife, including the largest density of black bears anywhere in the world.)*

5. The Skyline Drive has long been subject to criticism from hikers and others. Why does Bryson like it? *(He says the Skyline Drive is a beautiful piece of architecture and one of the few instances in which human handiwork actually complements a natural landscape. It features litter bins and information boards and provides amazing views. In the off-season, it is feasible for a hiker to use it as an alternative to the AT.)*
6. Analyze why the stopover at Big Meadows is significant to Katz. *(He finds an audience of people who are intrigued by his tales of hiking the trail. He demonstrates the use of his equipment and poses for pictures for the appreciative crowd. This becomes one of the proudest moments of his life.)*
7. Analyze why Bryson thinks the next to last day on the trail is “awful...in nearly every way” (p. 154), and tell how Katz demonstrates his loyalty to Bryson. *(Cold rain pelts Bryson and Katz, and Bryson discovers that he has lost his backpack rain cover and the walking stick his children gave him. Everything in his pack is wet to varying degrees. The rain does not relent, and they arrive at the shelter soaked and miserable. They are later joined by six noisy, obnoxious, self-centered hikers. Crowded conditions and disgust with the group force Bryson and Katz to pitch their tents in the rain. Katz offers to hike back four miles and retrieve Bryson’s walking stick.)*
8. **Prediction:** Will Bryson and Katz resume their hike together on the Appalachian Trail?

Supplementary Activities

1. Working in a small group, complete one of the following: (a) Research information about Shenandoah National Park since 1996. Write a report about changes that have taken place, number of visitors, and other pertinent information. (b) Research living conditions in the Blue Ridge Mountains today. Write a report about the socio-economic circumstances, educational opportunities, and other pertinent information.
2. Continue adding to your Metaphors and Similes chart. Examples: **Similes**—“(Following the old hiker) was like following a ghost” (p. 124); “every neuron...was...dashing around...like ants” (p. 140)