



Shakespeare: The World as Stage

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At first glance, Bill Bryson seems an odd choice to write this addition to the Eminent Lives series.

The author of 'The Life and Times of the Thunderbolt Kid' isn't, after all, a Shakespeare scholar, a playwright, or even a biographer.

Reading 'Shakespeare The World As Stage', however, one gets the sense that this eclectic Iowan is exactly the type of person the Bard himself would have selected for the task.

The man who gave us 'The Mother Tongue' and 'A Walk in the Woods' approaches Shakespeare with the same freedom of spirit and curiosity that made those books such reader favorites. A refreshing take on an elusive literary master.

Shakespeare: The World as Stage Details

Date : Published November 1st 2007 by HarperCollins Publishing (first published 2007)

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Author : Bill Bryson

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From Reader Review Shakespeare: The World as Stage for online ebook

Diane says

This audiobook was a perfect companion for a long road trip. Bill Bryson, who has now written books on everything from the history of the universe to the origins of our domesticity to America in the 1920s and, perhaps most endearingly, stories of his various travels around the world, here turns his attention to William Shakespeare.

In this relatively slim volume (it's less than 200 pages), Bryson researched what few facts are known about Shakespeare and synthesized them into chapters on his childhood, his "lost years" (1585-1592), his time in London, his plays, his fame, his death and, finally, the strange claims that Shakespeare did not write the works attributed to him.

Like most Americans, I was first introduced to Shakespeare in high school, when we read Romeo and Juliet, Hamlet, and a few of his sonnets. I've read more of his plays since then, but until now I have never read a biography of the man himself. After reading Bryson's book, I feel like I know as much as any modern person can know, simply because so few facts have survived. One Shakespeare scholar told Bryson that "every Shakespeare biography is 5 percent fact and 95 percent conjecture."

Even the few surviving portraits that are purportedly of Shakespeare cannot be verified. "The paradoxical consequence is that we all recognize a likeness of Shakespeare the instant we see one, and yet we don't really know what he looked like. It is like this with nearly every aspect of his life and character: He is at once the best known and least known of figures."

I liked reading the details of Shakespeare's life, but I think my favorite chapter was the last one on Claimants. Bryson thinks he has identified the person that started what he calls the anti-Shakespeare sentiment, an American woman named Delia Bacon. Bacon became convinced that Francis Bacon actually wrote Shakespeare's plays, and in 1852 she traveled to England to try to prove that Shakespeare was a fraud. Of course, there is no evidence of this, nor of any other claimants writing Shakespeare's works, but some researchers continue to come up with theories. Bryson picks apart the claims and shows what little merit there is to them.

"The one thing all the competing theories have in common is the conviction that William Shakespeare was in some way unsatisfactory as an author of brilliant plays. This is really quite odd. Shakespeare's upbringing, as I hope this book has shown, was not backward or in any way conspicuously deprived. His father was the mayor of a consequential town. In any case, it would hardly be a unique achievement for someone brought up modestly to excel later in life. Shakespeare lacked a university education, to be sure, but then so did Ben Jonson -- a far more intellectual playwright -- and no one ever suggests that Jonson was a fraud ... When we reflect upon the works of William Shakespeare it is of course an amazement to consider that one man could have produced such a sumptuous, wise, varied, thrilling, ever-delighting body of work, but that is of course the hallmark of genius. Only one man had the circumstances and gifts to give us such incomparable works, and William Shakespeare of Stratford was unquestionably that man -- whoever he was."

I would heartily recommend this book to fans of English literature and history. It has Bryson's trademark dry wit and humorous phrasings, so Bryson fans should also be satisfied. The audio CD I had also included an interview with the author, which was delightful, as expected.

On a more alarming note, I'm nearly out of Bryson books to read. Now that will be the winter of my discontent.

notgettingenough says

OMG! :) :) :) It's a bright breezy Big Bill Bryson book about Bill!!!!!! :)

I hope I'm not maligning Bryson more than is strictly speaking necessary by saying this feels like a book one could write in a week or three via google. Shakespeare scholarship? He pretty much sweeps the lot aside as being out to lunch. For example, of these lines from *Love's Labour's Lost*:

KING. O paradox! Black is the badge of hell,
The hue of dungeons, and the school of night;
And beauty's crest becomes the heavens well.

he says 'What exactly he means by 'the school of the night' is really anybody's guess.'

This suggests to me a complete ignorance of the idea of The School of Night which for a period kept some academics in wages and the masses like me entertained. It's a lovely romantic idea that completely fits the period. Indeed, Cambridge University Press saw fit to reissue *The School of Night A Study in the Literary Relationships of Sir Walter Ralegh* by M. C. Bradbrook as recently as 2011.

It's no wonder Bryson's book is so short.

Rest here:

<https://alittleteaallittlechat.wordpress.com/2011/07/13/the-school-of-night/>

Murugesh Selvaraju says

Only one man had the circumstances and gifts to give us such incomparable works, and William Shakespeare of Stratford was unquestionably that man- whoever he was.

Jerzy says

There's nothing wrong with Bryson's writing... but he just doesn't say very much, because there ISN'T anything to say. Apparently NOBODY knows anything interesting about Shakespeare's life or personality -- all we have are 3 bad portraits (one sketch from memory, one statue that was whitewashed of all detailed features, and one decent portrait that might be of someone else entirely); a few legal documents (with only 6 signatures, 3 of which may have been forged for him since he was too ill to write much then); almost nothing whatsoever about his wife (except her name and date of death); etc, etc... Nobody even interviewed his surviving relatives and friends about him -- the first biography came out a hundred years after his death and has been proved to be mostly wrong anyway.

So you can't get any image of this guy at all, unless you read way too far into his plays/sonnets and assume

that he's speaking as himself (which, if you try it, just gets you tons of contradictions).

Oh, and even the plays/poems themselves -- there's no real definitive version: he never published his works himself, so all the versions we have are either heavily edited by his contemporaries or bad transcriptions by audience members. It almost seems useless to think of Shakespeare as a person -- he's more of a social construct, a general name used to link together "his" plays/sonnets.

Finally, at least so far, Bryson has had very little to say about WHY Shakespeare is considered such a genius today. If we don't know shit about the guy and can't even agree on whether he wrote some of the plays he did, then please at least discuss why people think the plays themselves are so hot. But he just repeats the same general blurbage ("genius", "masterpieces", etc) without analyzing what's so great about it.

PS -- there's an interesting book, *Highbrow Lowbrow*, that talks about how Shakespeare's plays used to be general popular entertainment (at least throughout the States, performed to cheering and heckling crowds, interspersed with cheesy stuff like minstrel music or trained animals between acts) before somehow they transitioned into their current state as some kind of delicate art that needs to be protected from the public, where you're barely allowed to cough during a performance, and where kids fall asleep to it in class. So it's always been "valued", just in different ways... I wish Bryson would have pursued how those ways have changed over time.

Roy Lotz says

This man was so good as disguising his feeling that we can't ever be sure that he had any.

In many ways Shakespeare is the perfect subject for a Bryson book. Shakespeare scholars have included some colorful and eccentric characters—such as Delia Bacon and J. Thomas Looney—which is one of Bryson's specialties. Shakespeare is also sufficiently mysterious, most of his life being buried in the oblivion of history—an important thing for Bryson, who is attracted to gaps in our knowledge. Two more of Bryson's fixations come into play: his interest in the history of the English language, and in daily life of bygone days.

The book is refreshing for Bryson's deflating humor. More than any other author, Shakespeare attracts untold myths, legends, theories, and pure idolatry; but Bryson's approach is cool and investigative. He is constantly reminding the reader of the limits of the available evidence. What thus emerges is a portrait of Shakespeare's times, a bare outline of his life, and refutations of unfounded notions. You might say the book is limited to this investigative track. Bryson is no literary critic and does not attempt any serious appreciation of Shakespeare's works. But this is just as well since so many great works of criticism already exist elsewhere. Bryson does what he's good at, and that's good enough for me.

Jason Koivu says

Really short, but really enjoyable!

It's not a surprise that this is short. First off, it belongs as part of a series of concise biographies. Secondly, there isn't much known about Shakespeare, so biographies of him *should* be short. Why go on and on about something if there's nothing to go on about?!

The larger of them tend to devote many pages to dissecting the plays. Bryson does not. That was a little bit disappointing...but only a little. I've spent enough time dissecting them. I'd rather just work on *enjoying* these days, not analyzing them.

I'm glad Bryson touched on the authorship question. "Did Shakespeare write all this stuff?" I entertained the notion when I encountered it back in school, but having looked at the evidence and given it a good think, I've come to the conclusion that it is a ludicrous question. Bryson agrees and lays out why.

Is this a scholarly work? No. But have you seen some of what passes for such? I'm okay with this. It seems like sound logic deduced from absorbing sound work on the topic. After all (and for example) one of the leading proponents of the anti-Shakespeare movement was a woman who wanted to claim all of the plays for her cousin Sir Francis Bacon. She was biased and, as it turns out, crazy. Her book on the subject was widely dismissed at the time of publication as ridiculous, but the idea lingered, took shape and went on to have a long second life in quarters that rely on scanty evidence or none at all. And yet they persist. It all seems absurd.

Anyhooode. Looking for a basic bio on Shakespeare? Here it is!

Kalliope says

If you wanted to know more about William Shakespeare, his life, his writings, his times...etc, you would have to embark in the reading of an endless amount of written material that would fill trucks and trucks. Alternatively, you could choose a more expedite path. If instead of rummaging through tons of printed paper one could find a capsule of uncorrupted and distilled Shakespeare, would you not pick this?

And this is what Bill Bryson offers us with his book, *Shakespeare The World as Stage*.

Why another biography on WS? Bryson himself says that the world does not need yet another biography but the series *Eminent Lives* by Harper-Collins did.

And we are glad they did. They define this biography series according to Strachey's stated objective of: "To preserve a becoming brevity which excludes everything that is redundant and nothing that is significant".

Bryson has then set himself to follow Strachey's (and Harper-Collins) recommendation. He has strived "to see how much of WS we can know, really know, from the record". In an almost investigative style and in a clear and dispassionate fashion, he presents to us in an orderly chronology the evidence that he has extracted. He also presents samples of the musings and multiple conjectures that have sprouted generously. But then, without much ado, dismisses them in a very elegant, and sometimes funny, way.

So, his conclusion is that as so very little is known his book can be only 196 pages long.

In reality there is some sugar and other flavors added to the capsule, for we can also taste quite a bit of extraneous material, such as Shakespeare's times and places. We get to hear about urban development and palaces in London, about the state of its hygiene and health, about life expectancy and children death-rate, about the set-up of schools and academic curricula, about the making of books and theatrical practices, and about the functioning of the legal system, etc.

For a better assimilation of the capsule, Bryson needs to correct our modern expectations, and remind us that to know so little about a sixteenth century craftsman is nothing out of the ordinary. Most of the material from the sixteenth century has been lost. What is most miraculous about surviving in Shakespeare is that, given the frightful odds, he withstood childhood and got to be an adult. Bryson insists on the very exceptional situation that so much of his works have survived, and this is thanks to the initiative of two of WS's friends and colleagues, Henry Condell and John Heminges, who decided to publish the First Folio posthumously.

The parts I enjoyed most were the discussion on the various remaining First Folios, and particularly the last chapter, the one on the Claimants. All success stories invite detractors. These come across as really foolish.

We should be glad that Harper-Collins chose Bryson, whose writing style, so very limpid and fluid and clear, is entirely suitable for the making of this capsule.

But of course, the capsule has not entirely satisfied my appetite. My curiosity has now been awoken and it will continue to sniff around the World and Stage of William Shakespeare.

Luís C. says

It is by choosing a gift to the biography department that my eye has been attracted by this little pocket lost in the middle of other historical bios. I knew the author for his humorous side, and I was intrigued by the gender gap, so I bought it for myself.

This book supposed to be "antibiographical", because, of Shakespeare, one knows practically nothing. This was the case with most of the known authors of the 16th century in England who left no trace of them either. Apart from his plays, there are only signatures at the bottom of acts of baptism, marriage, birth, and minutes during a neighborhood suit brought by his father. Three portraits of him were made. But all that is very little. This book tells us in great lengths that there is nothing to affirm, about the man Shakespeare was, on his emotional side, about his sexuality. Many biographers have, however, speculated, and things very different. He seems to have been a handsome man. His mind was keen, he was sweet. When he was an actor and actor in London, he had a busy schedule. One can imagine without being mistaken that he was a very active man. It is believed that he retired to his native village to write his plays. When his plays were successful, he led a comfortable life.

Bryson imagines Shakespeare in the hard times of the 16th century. The usages and customs and the historical context are really interesting to discover. It was another world, which made me think of science fiction. The diseases were multiple: the plague, the syphilis, & c. In the 16th century, England experienced the transition from Catholicism to Protestantism. Shakespeare married Anne Hathaway in 1582, while she was pregnant. A whole period remained obscure (between 1585 and 1592), it is the lost years, where the biographers are lost in conjectures in order to identify its course. Some say he traveled to Italy, others say he was a traveling comedian.

I have greatly appreciated the passages in which the Elizabethan theaters, edifices different from other theaters, are described, and of which there are no traces left, apart from one or two rough drafts of drawings. It's fascinating. The theatrical activity was enormous at the time, which involved a lot of competition between the different rooms. Shakespeare played comedy while writing plays.

We also talk about his great rival, C. Marlowe. In 1598: Shakespeare joined the troop of the Chamberlain, whom he would never leave. They were actors of the king later. It is also specified that for the majority of his plays, Shakespeare sought his ideas elsewhere, while sublimating the text. But all the authors did that at that time. Dream of a Summer Night, Love's Labour's Lost and The Tempest are three pieces only of his own. I

was fascinated to learn that Shakespeare created new words for his time as "excellent, vast, lonely, frugal, ..."

I strongly advise this small book exciting and instructive, and that also fun of the genre of biography in general.

Shovelmonkey1 says

Well, that was a quick and easy read, very pleasant too thank you Mr Bryson. After reading this book I have learned loads about Shakespeare - NOT! Having been forced to study him for A-Level English and worship at the alter of Shakespeare like a good student I was also surprised how little is known about him. My best memory of learning about Shakespeare was being asked to write an essay on the use of natural symbolism in "A Winters Tale". Being a slightly cocky and beligerent teenager I turned in an essay entitled "Why Shakespeare is literatures greatest plagiarist", obviously this was not well received but having read this book I think some of my points were pretty salient.

This book essentially poses more questions rather than answers; Was Shakespeare gay? Did he really wear an earring? Are any of the paintings of him actually, you know, him? How should we really spell his name? Where was he a lot of the time? What's up with only leaving your missus a second rate bed?

I suppose the answer nowadays is, who really cares apart from some very obsessed academics? The main thing is to appreciate the legacy we were left and to use the words he created to the fullest!

Cecily says

This is a very strange and frustrating book:

- It reads like a lighthearted text book for teenagers/high school - except that it has no index (a cardinal sin for any non-fiction book).
- It is about a wordsmith, but the first chapter focuses on what he may have **looked** like.
- Its mission and content is to tell us about Shakespeare, yet it tells us in exhaustive and repetitive detail that almost nothing is or can be known about the man ("a wealth of text but poverty of context").

Irrelevant Facts

There are pages of disjointed facts about life in Elizabethan and Jacobean England. Some of them are staggeringly banal ("At the top of the social heap was the monarch") and others are weirdly specific (e.g. the laws about hat wearing).

Absence of Facts

All the way through, Bryson alternates between cataloguing all the unknowns of Shakespeare's life and trying to describe it; consequently, his text is heavily sprinkled with "probably" and other, even weaker caveats. It makes it all seem rather pointless and distracts from the few interesting insights he does have. He describes his subject as "ever elusive", despite stressing the fact that we know far **more** about Shakespeare

than almost anyone else who lived at that time. Equally contradictory is the claim that "More than for any other writer, Shakespeare's words stand separate from his life" - but surely we can't know that because, as Bryson keeps saying, we know so little about his life!

Bryson identifies three options for researchers in the absence of hard facts: "pick minutely over legal documents... to speculate... or to persuade themselves they know more than they actually do". It's not clear which option Bryson took. As he says, "A devoted reader can find support for nearly any position he or she wishes in Shakespeare".

Vocabulary: Words and Phrases

The only really interesting points were that estimates of Shakespeare's vocabulary are usually huge overestimates because they include each variant of word form and spelling: take, takes, tak'n, taken etc. It's not the size, but what he did with it that mattered; his true skill was as a phrasemaker, demonstrated by the fact that 10% of the entries in the Oxford Dictionary of Quotations are from his works.

Related to that, Shakespeare is credited with coining huge numbers of words, but in truth, it's often just that his texts are the oldest authentic documents to use them; we don't know if he actually coined them, or they were common parlance down his way (as Blackadder said to Dr Johnson in my favourite episode: Ink and Incapability - but the link isn't to that line).

Fortunately this was a quick, easy read. I only read it at the behest of my father-in-law: I am not a big Bryson fan, rarely read biographies and am not a huge history enthusiast either. Reading it has not changed those preferences.

Ted says

We thrill at these plays now. But what must it have been like when they were brand new, when all their references were timely and sharply apt ... Imagine what it must have been like to watch *Macbeth* without knowing the outcome, to be part of a hushed audience hearing Hamlet's soliloquy for the first time, to witness Shakespeare speaking his own lines. There cannot have been, anywhere in history, many more favored places than this.

London Bridge, around the time of Shakespeare's death.

a short biography

The book is in the Eminent Lives series by HarperCollins. These are "brief" biographies, roughly one half of an average biography, and considerably less than the doorstop biographies often written today. *The World as Stage* comes in at 199 pages, so not a long read. This is not a disadvantage (for me) at all; and particularly for a biography of Shakespeare, a man about whom, Bryson never tires of reminding us, the provable facts concerning his life are not numerous. Hundreds of speculations and theories have been proposed to explain the mysteries and fill in the unknowns; the evidence for most of these is little more than a fervent desire by

the proposers that they be true.

an enjoyable read

Bill Bryson (not a historian, of course) is a very entertaining writer. His first big hit in the U.S. was *A Walk in the Woods*. But both before and after that came a wide, eclectic series of non-fiction works. He was born in the U.S., has lived most of his adult life in Britain, and has a dedicated fan base of readers on both sides of the Atlantic.

The book is quite packed with delightful facts (or near-facts) about Shakespeare and the England/London of his day. The size of London, the way it nestled inside the city walls, people packed in there like sardines; the diseases that swept the city (and England) every few years, particularly the Plague; the fact that the first theaters were made to locate outside the city walls, in a horrible “suburbs” filled with tanning houses, brothels, graveyards, and other dreadful establishments and waste areas that must have presented theater-goers with a number of sensory (olfactory) challenges.

Bryson presents a great number of interesting comparisons between the Shakespeare we know, and his fellow playwrights of the era: John Fletcher, Ben Johnson, Christopher Marlowe, Thomas Kyd, Thomas Decker, John Webster, Cyril Tourneur and others. He informed me (I knew it not) that Shakespeare was an actor as well as a writer, and appeared frequently in the plays he wrote – which, by the way, were not his property. In those days a play had to be registered before it could be performed, and it could only be registered to an acting company. After that, the company owned the play, and it could only be performed by them.

This sort of interesting stuff comprises the bulk of the book, and caused me to underline quite frequently.

but

There are a couple of bad points about the book which occasioned my rating. The penultimate chapter, titled *Shakespeare’s Death*, is a hodge-podge of stuff thrown together that varied considerably in interest, from my point of view: his will; the later deaths of his family; the subsequent popularity of theater in London (until shut down by the puritans in 1642); *many* pages devoted to the first publication of the folio edition of his works, and on and on with that folio topic; etc. What I found interesting in all this could have been done in half the thirty pages devoted to it, so seemingly (to me) a lot of padding.

But this is a personal peeve, which certainly wouldn’t be shared by all. Far worse (and perhaps a consequence of Bryson coming up against the stops for the publisher’s “short” requirement) was the fact that, for a non-fiction work, the format of the book is dreadful. There is no index. There is no Table of Contents. The headings at the top of the pages are identical, from first page to last - *Bill Bryson* on the left page, *SHAKESPEARE* on the right. Well that sure is useful, isn’t it, just in case you forget what book you’re reading, and don’t care to look at the cover.

In other words, there’s really no way of finding *anything* in the book. *How many chapters are there? What was that one called? And where the hell was it?* Well, mount an expedition.

But don’t let that put you off. **A very worthwhile book.**

Previous review: Jerry Dantzig: Billie Holiday at Sugar Hill *Zadie Smith's Appreciation*

Random review: Shakespeare: The Complete Works *yes, really random!*

Next review: Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America

Pouting Always says

I'm really not a fan of Shakespeare but reading this book really did help explain his popularity, at least in my mind. Everything we know about him seems to be questionable and when you don't know anything conclusive about someone, that leaves a lot up to discussion. Also I never really appreciated how he changed the way English is spoken, probably because I don't know enough about the history of spoken English. I enjoyed the book though, I learnt a lot I didn't know before and I think the author did a good job going over the information we have about Shakespeare as well as the popular theories involving him, especially all the things about who actually wrote the plays attributed to Shakespeare. Also I really appreciated that he acknowledged that Shakespeare doesn't make any sense some times because for some reason everyone seems resistant to agreeing when I mention it, but come on some times the writing is incoherent.

James says

This one is somewhat of a departure for Bill Bryson – 'Shakespeare' being a biography of sorts and Bryson being overwhelmingly and ostensibly a popular travel writer. Although the central premise here is that, as Bryson freely acknowledges indeed almost relishes, is that what we do know about the life of William Shakespeare is surprisingly very, very little.

What Bryson does do here is provide us with (as his regular readers would expect) a very witty, insightful, but unsentimental portrait of Shakespeare and his burgeoning and everlasting literary genius.

With 'Shakespeare' what Bryson has successfully managed (presumably consciously) to avoid is the ground covered by the overwhelming majority of other books written Shakespeare the man – ordinarily being either academic/quasi-academic tomes and as such impenetrable to all but Shakespeare/literary scholars, or highly speculative popular writings based on the various conspiracy theories and myths that now surround the life, works and legend of William Shakespeare.

Here Bryson as usual entertains us with, amongst other things, various tales of those who have seemingly dedicated years of their lives attempting to get to the heart of and establish some hitherto unknown truths about Shakespeare and his works. As well as being utterly frank about what we do (or more to the point) do not know about William Shakespeare.

As a reader of Bryson's books and somewhat of a Shakespeare obsessive (it took me around 30 years to see theatre productions of all 37 of his plays – many several times) I had high hopes for this book and wasn't disappointed.

Above all, what Bryson has given us here is a celebration and a very good one, of the staggering and awe inspiring literary genius that was and always will be William Shakespeare.

Jason Pettus says

(Reprinted from the Chicago Center for Literature and Photography [cclapcenter.com:]. I am the original author of this essay, as well as the owner of CCLaP; it is not being reprinted here illegally.)

No matter where on the planet you're from, it seems that there is at least one figure from the early Renaissance period (1400-1600 AD) who's had a huge and profound impact on your society's culture ever since: here in the English-speaking world, for example, that would be playwright and poet William Shakespeare, and in fact it's guessed that a huge majority of all new novels and movies coming out in English these days are based or inspired in one way or another on something from "The Bard"s old works. But that's the ultimate irony about Shakespeare; that although he is one of the only Elizabethan playwrights in history to have almost all his works preserved and reproduced over the ages (a main factor behind him being as influential as he now is), hardly any facts about the man himself exist, and in fact apart from his creative writing you would scarcely even know he was a physical human who actually once lived. Over the centuries, then, it has led to wild speculation about Shakespeare's life on the part of thousands, and an entire wing of academic study about the man so in the center of all Western artistic thought.

So for those like me who hardly know anything about the subject, Bill Bryson's new book *Shakespeare: The World as Stage* is going to be a godsend; it is a tight, funny 200-page overview of what exactly we factually know about the man and what we don't, peppered with a lot of anecdotes about the various crackpots over the years who have gotten obsessed with the question. And in fact this is the entire reason for the book to exist in the first place, is to give a short and tidy overview of a famous person's life; it is in fact the latest installment of James Atlas' "Eminent Lives" series, where for years he's been asking intriguing writers in other fields to pen short accessible works about various famous thinkers in history. For example, for those who didn't know, Bryson himself is mostly known in the publishing world for extremely sharp, funny and bitter travelogues; and here he puts that style to good use, taking us from one interesting historical and academic site to the next, as he with us unravels the mystery of this playwright we know so little about.

In fact, that's about the only big drawback to this book as well, if you want to look at it that way; that a 200-page manuscript simply isn't enough to fully get into the mysteries behind Shakespeare and his work, and that the main enjoyment Bryson's book contains is with all the astounding trivia-style facts he rattles off throughout. (Did you know that there are only fourteen words in existence actually written in Shakespeare's hand? That of 3,000 plays written in the Elizabethan Era, we only have printed copies of 200 of them, with nearly 40 of them being from Shakespeare himself? That his collected work contains 884,647 words, 15,785 question marks, and 10 instances of the term "dunghill?") As far as I'm concerned, though, that's what's to like about this book, not dislike; it's no scholarly treatise by any means, but Bryson's *Shakespeare* is definitely a pleasant little unintimidating ladder into the endless underground cavern which is Shakespearean study. And given that other titles in this series deal with such other fascinating characters from history as Thomas Jefferson, Muhammad, and Machiavelli, I'm also looking forward to reading more.

Out of 10: **9.2**

Jeanette "Astute Crabbist" says

Shakespeare's biography is sketchy, and ever thus it shall remain. This little book represents Bill Bryson's attempt to collect what scant information exists, and to debunk a few spurious claims. I can't say I know much more about Sweet Will now than I did before reading the book, but Bryson is not to blame. People didn't reliably keep records 400 years ago. There were no standardized spellings for English words, so a lot of what *was* written down is indecipherable. Furthermore, no one anticipated Shakespeare's enduring popularity, so they weren't clamoring to write his biography while he was still alive. In fact, "playwriting was not an esteemed profession, and its practice, however accomplished, gained one little critical respect."

It's a wonder Will's works survived at all. If not for the dedicated efforts of John Heminges and Henry Condell in compiling the First Folio, eighteen of Shakespeare's plays would probably have been lost to us. Imagine our world without *Macbeth*, *Julius Caesar*, *Twelfth Night*, *As You Like It*, *The Tempest*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, and a dozen others. It's our good fortune that Heminges and Condell weren't procrastinators. Both men were dead by 1630, only seven years after the First Folio was published.

Bryson succeeds admirably in providing a context for Shakespeare's life and works. He describes what was happening in England throughout The Bard's lifetime, and how those events and attitudes might have shaped his choices and influenced his writing. For instance, the issue of Queen Elizabeth's succession was a national preoccupation for much of Shakespeare's life. It's no surprise, then, that one quarter of his plays deal with questions of royal succession.

Don't be put off by my three-star rating. I'm not enough of a snob to think of 3 stars as a "low" rating. It means "I liked it." Nothing more, nothing less. I've always found English history to be rather dry, but I'm glad I read the book. It will add a new layer of subtext to my future reading of Shakespeare's works. Just knowing that audience members were sometimes allowed to sit on the stage during a performance alters my perspective. How distracting that must have been for the actors! Imagine allowing that on Broadway.

My favorite chapter was the last one, entitled "Claimants," in which the author presents an array of stunningly ridiculous and insupportable claims regarding the authorship of Shakespeare's plays and sonnets. Bryson gave free rein to his famous wit in this chapter. I found myself laughing hysterically at some of his observations. Regarding the popular claim that Christopher Marlowe wrote Shakespeare's works, Bryson dryly concedes that Marlowe "had the requisite talent, and would certainly have had ample leisure after 1593, *assuming he wasn't too dead to work.*" (Italics mine.)

After handily dismissing all the myths for lack of evidence, Bryson concludes:
"Only one man had the circumstances and gifts to give us such incomparable works, and William Shakespeare of Stratford was unquestionably that man--whoever he was."

Laure says

What a great entertaining listen! I listened to it on my way to work and doing the dishes this week. I did not get bored one minute - full of interesting facts about Shakespeare's life and his times. Entertaining, erudite and fun. Now, that's a combo hard to beat.

Diane Barnes says

I am not a big fan of either audio books or Shakespeare, but I needed a short something to listen to recently. So on a trip to the library I chose this one because:

1. Bill Bryson wrote it
2. Bill Bryson read it
3. It was only 5.5 hrs long

So I listened to this one and was pleasantly entertained and learned a lot of very interesting things presented in an amusing way. One of the things I learned is that Bill Bryson has a very British accent after having lived in England for many years, despite the fact that he was born and raised in Iowa.

Not a bad way to spend a few hours, but still not a fan of audio books.

Caroline says

The Droeshout engraving of Shakespeare, authenticated as a true likeness by Ben Jonson.

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When I worked as a secretary on a tabloid newspaper, many years ago, journalists writing stories based only on a few facts would say they were 'cooking with gas'. This is a cheerful and entertaining read where Bryson is doing just that - so little is known about Shakespeare's life. Yet I think he does a great job. He talks about Tudor England - and the general experiences of playwrights, actors and audiences during this period. We are able to get an excellent flavour of the theatre scene in late 16th century, early 17th century London. Bryson also talks about the research and scholarship attached to Shakespeare's works - some of it an ever-expanding celebration of extraordinary minutiae. (This cheers me up. There are apparently people in this world a whole lot crazier than me.)

This is a quick and entertaining read that will give anyone pleasure. I end with some extracts from the book that I particularly enjoyed....

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### **Barry Pierce says**

A short, witty, highly readable biography of the Bard by one of the our best beloved writers. Bryson doesn't go incredibly in-depth with this work but I applaud him on that. A lot of biographies can be bogged down by completely unnecessary information which causes the page number to rise to the thousands. This 200-page biog contains about as much information as we casual readers need on Shakespeare. I would definitely include it on a list as one of my most enjoyable biographies in recent memory.

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### **Tracey says**

Bill Bryson is an old friend. His approach to history makes the standard tome all the more flat and dull by comparison – Bryson knows his stuff well enough to not only present it to an audience but to play with it, to have fun with it, to make it fun. He genuinely loves his subjects, and it is infectious. He's like the teacher you always hoped to get – the brilliant, funny, cool one who (to use a real example) sat cross-legged on the table at the front of the room and told the most amazing stories and made you sorry when the class was over, rather than the one who turned the lights off and showed irrelevant slides to a group of uninterested and often napping art students at the deadly time of 3:00 in the afternoon.

With *The World as Stage*, Bryson has succumbed to the lure of adding to the groaning shelves of Shakespeare biography, with the excuse (if he needs one) that herein will lie only what is known beyond doubt. Shakespeare biography is, he tells us, 90% conjecture, and about 5% fact; here he tries to gather together "just the facts" (I said that, he didn't), and talk about where they originated and about the conjecture they've sparked and the probabilities therein.

For example, he begins with the visual image of Shakespeare as we know it. He efficiently dissects the three images most closely associated with him, the three on which all others are based: the Chandos portrait (which may not be Shakespeare); the engraving which appeared as the frontispiece of the First Folio (which is bloody awful); and the bust that is part of his memorial (many of the details of which have been obliterated). Did he look like any or all of these? Maybe. What, exactly, did he look like? We don't really know.

When was he born, and where? We're not sure.

How did he do in school? We don't even know that he went – though it's probable.

How was his marriage to Anne Hathaway? We have no idea – we don't even know that "Anne" was her name; her father's will refers to her as Agnes. I never knew that.

And so forth. Data is so very scarce for many reasons. It's been four hundred years; records have deteriorated or gone up in flames; what records there are can be next to impossible to locate and once located to read and/or decipher. Shakespeare's name was spelled dozens of different ways, including by himself, and never "Shakespeare". Even with all that, a researcher simply can't expect so very many mentions of Shakespeare in the public record: unless he was getting married, baptizing a child, or involved in an arrest or lawsuit (or

dying), there simply would be no official documentation. If for no other reason, I would treasure this book for two things: first was the story of the husband and wife team of Charles and Hulda Wallace who, driven in the early 1900's by the husband's obsession with Shakespeare, spent 18 hour days poring over the public record from Will's lifetime and made some discoveries (and then he lost his mind and went paranoiac and into oil). I know it marks me out as a bit freaky, but I'll admit it anyway: I would give a lot to be able to go and spend 18 hours a day studying cramped and often faded and illegible 16th century documents looking for mentions of Shakespeare. Sounds like a dream job. Seriously. The second gift Bryson gives me in this is the concept that if there really was a *Love's Labours Won*, there were probably enough copies made that it could still be found one day. (Way to reduce a Shakespeare geek to tears, Bryson.) (Sadly, in the interview which serves as Chapter 10, he contradicts that. But hope springs, and all that.)

I call myself a Shakespeare geek, and probably shouldn't; for me it refers to my deep affection and fascination for the man and his work – thirst for knowledge, not necessarily possession of knowledge. I know more than the average bear, but not enough to truly qualify me as a geek. For example, I had no idea that Will's brother Edmund was an actor (and died at only 27 in the same year as their mother, both of unknown causes). I also didn't know Walt Whitman was a rabid anti-Stratfordian (which Bryson doesn't mention, but which I discovered in related reading.) I do know enough not to trust any single source – not even Bill Bryson ...

Bill Bryson reads his own words, and I enjoy his voice, lightly deep, young and humorous and pleasant. He reads naturally and easily, with healthy pauses where they're needed and not where they are not. And it's fun to listen to the British influence on his accent (he was born in Des Moines, lived there from 1977 to 1995, moved back to the US, then returned to England in '03, where he remains). It's not wholly a British accent, but there is British in it; I feel like Sherlock Holmes tracing his travels through his enunciation, except that I'm going about it backwards.

Much as I enjoy Bryson's reading, though, I'm not sure audio is the best format for this, for me. For a book like this I need to be able to flip back and see what year the will was found, and remind myself of names of the Folger Library archivists Bryson talked to, and how many Shakespeare-related publications he mentioned were there, and so on. It's a lot harder to do this with audio, even the comparatively flexible medium of a digital file on my iPod. Also, I suspect there are illustrations in the tangible editions; there usually is an insert in exactly this sort of book.

If for no other reason, I owe Bill Bryson for a wonderful quote which I am adopting. I may have it tattooed somewhere. Written in a letter to a friend upon having written a preface to Delia Bacon's dense and nutty anti-Stratfordian book (without having read it): "This shall be the last of my benevolent follies, and I will never be kind to anybody again as long as I live." ~ Nathaniel Hawthorne. (In L.M. Montgomery, the only people who share my last name are nasty cows. In *The World as Stage*, the city of my birth is the home and gravesite of Delia Bacon. \*sigh\*) I kind of want to go lay Hawthorne's quote, in illuminated calligraphy and elaborately framed, on her grave. (I just might.)

Bryson devotes a chapter – a funny, sardonic, bubble-popping chapter – to what is often called the Authorship Question. To wit: that actor guy who couldn't even spell his own name couldn't have written the finest works in the English language. Bryson happily takes that concept apart, and then takes its component pieces apart. I'm a Stratfordian, and ... honestly, as a rock-solid Stratfordian, I'll admit, I have a sneaking affection for the Oxfordian theory of authorship. It's fun. It's balderdash, but it is fun. Not, however as much fun as the Marlovian theory – who doesn't love the idea of someone faking his death so as to become a better spy, as well as to go off and write the finest plays and poetry the English language has ever produced? I would love to play with that story ... But the Kit-Marlowe-didn't-die-at-Deptford story is mostly wishful

thinking for me, because I have an unaccountable fondness for the man.

But when all is said and done, I can only marvel at the insistence of so many otherwise intelligent people that Shakespeare could not have had the education or breadth of experience to write his plays. First of all – no one knows that. Bill Bryson takes great pains to enumerate all the things we do not know about William Shakespeare. (And even at that we know more about him than about 99% of his contemporaries.) Second of all ... A large plank in the platform of many of the Theorists is that the author of the plays has to have been a lawyer because of the extent to which the law is referenced in the plays, and/or has to have traveled extensively because of the non-English settings of so many plays ... et cetera. I can only conclude that the people who hold those beliefs have never written fiction. I know next to nothing about cars, but if I decided to create a character like Mercedes Thompson I could crack a book or talk to a mechanic (or use the internet), and present a reasonable simulation of expertise. I am not now nor ever have been a forensic analyst, but I can talk (within very strict limits) about petechial hemorrhaging and lividity and epithelial cells and loops and whorls and so on without making a total fool of myself, because of exposure to stories about forensic analysts. If I needed more artistic verisimilitude for an otherwise bald and unconvincing narrative, I could – again – crack a book or talk to a CSI (or wander the internet). If I want to set a book in Katmandu, I don't have to go there; it's a wonderful thing to be able to do so, but - - it's called "research".

Oddly, it's an defense I haven't seen used in what I've read about the Authorship Question. It just seems so obvious...

Shakespeare was not writing in a vacuum, all alone and armed only with his own direct experience. If fiction was written under those rules, science fiction, fantasy, most mystery, and a large percentage of non-subgenre novels would be impossible. In *Bird by Bird*, Anne Lamott writes a wonderful account of calling up a local vintner to ask what the wire gadget is called that anchors the cork in a champagne bottle. As she points out, most people are delighted to talk about their vocations. All those reference to the law? Shakespeare went out and observed, and read, and talked to lawyers. All those Italian settings? Shakespeare went out and read, and talked to sailors and other travelers (and either did not pay close attention or got bad information, as his geography is way off in several cases). Every single one of the objections that "Shakespeare couldn't have known that" can be knocked down with two simple sentences: "We don't know what he knew", and "If he didn't know, he asked". It's just all so foolish.

What's rather alarming, reading about the theories, is reading in turn about this new movie that came out right around the time I listened to this, "Anonymous". (Which, not to be obtuse about it, is rather an idiotic name, isn't it, if the theory is that in order to disseminate his work Edward DeVere made use of some guy named Shakespeare as a front for the plays? They're not by "Anonymous", after all.) It was part of the Oxfordian cabal's arsenal – and the worrying bit was that they spread high school and college study guides as far and wide as they could. Not, from what I understand, insisting that DeVere was actually the author, but raising the question suggestively. "Make your own decision," they seem to say, "was it Sir Edward DeVere 17th Earl of Oxford ... or was it that guy Wilm Shaksper whose father made gloves?"

In the end, for me the Authorship Question has the kind of interest of one of those alternate histories: what if the South had won the Civil War, or if Hitler had won WWII? Or (not that I've seen this one, yet) what if the moon really was made of green cheese? The South and Hitler didn't, and the moon isn't, and while what-if's are entertaining, they're not otherwise productive. And, in the end, did the world desperately need one more book about Shakespeare? Well, no. But am I for one happier because Bill Bryson wrote one? Yeah. I am.

And for heaven's sake, Shakespeare wrote Shakespeare.

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