

# GQ Words from the wise.

## Bill Bryson 55, Author.



**He's alchemised the travelogue, stripped the English language down to the tiny parts of its sum and nailed the cosmos in digestible prose. Now, the master life-decoder offers his memoirs: a honey-glowed look at America's post-war salad days, seasoned with Bryson's bittersweet humour and satirical swipes at the fear, greed and prejudice that have stolen his nation's innocence. *GQ* caught up with Bryson on the eve of the book's release.**

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Publishers tend to get you to write the same book over and over. They were practically begging me not to write *Down Under*. The only reason they let me do it was because of the Sydney Olympics.

**The 'me' in this book is part creation, part real deal. We're all a bit of both.**

Americans tend to be very earnest. A much higher proportion of people there don't really look for jokes in life, and if you write books designed to be funny, you pay for it because you say something in jest and they take it seriously. The Bill Bryson who wants to treat little nipping dogs as hacky sacks gets me in trouble at home.

I used to think it had to be a non-stop gag-fest — a joke in every paragraph. But I realised after a while that this just doesn't work. A funny book is a completely different commodity to a stand-up comic routine, where you do need rapid-fire gags.

**We had something in the Fifties. The way the world was packaged was nice, and if we'd built on that we'd have a much better world... Instead, we decided we wanted suburbs and freeways and, for any retail event, to get behind a wheel and park within 10 feet of the shop. We've ruined the built environment in which we all live.**

Many commentators would not agree this book is apolitical. I make digs about a country that overthrew a complete democracy in South America; they'd say I'm much too slapdash about things like the communist threat, that it's still there, and that we still need to be vigilant — and that it's because of pussy liberals like me that we could be in grave trouble.

**We live in a world where, if a right-wing person doesn't agree with you, they take it as an attack on 'core values'.**

I grew up in unsettling times, yet I had no sense of that. I was struck by this disparity between the safe, anxiety-free, innocent world I lived in and an outside world that seemed full of anxiety and anger and threat. We vaguely knew there was a possibility atomic bombs could go off and kill us, but we never expected it to happen.

One of the basic changes to our lives is how we perceive the future. When I was a kid we couldn't wait to get there. All these fantastic things were just around the corner — underwater cities off every coast, Mum, Dad and the kids looking out of the spaceship as they came in to land on a red planet. Now we think about terrorist attacks, bird flu, global warming.

**We've made the terrorist threat much worse with the actions we've taken.**

It's not Australia that Americans aren't interested in — they're interested in nothing. **GQ**

***The Life and Times of the Thunderbolt Kid* (Random House, \$49.95) is out now.**

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