A Short History of Nearly Everything by Bill Bryson (Doubleday, R295)

19 October 2003

A man who can make Australia seem interesting, as Bill Bryson managed to do in *Down Under*, can be counted upon to make nearly everything fascinating. And this he does, tirelessly, indeed relentlessly, in this good-humoured, hugely engaging book. His aim, according to the dust-jacket blurb, is "to take subjects that normally bore the pants off most of us … and … render them comprehensible to people who never thought they could be interested in science" – a bit, then, like writing a best-seller about Australia.

This Short History is not very short nor really a history. Bryson's method, as in his travel books, is to proceed anecdotally. There is information a-plenty – the book bristles with statistics – but by and large the figures are so unimaginably huge or so incomprehensibly small that the reader retains little except a helpless sense of awe, briskly prompted by Bryson towards the proper response. As in his travel books, Bryson's method is not to give you the facts and leave you to interpret them for yourself; he does the interpretation for you, at times in the simplest of terms: "Space you see, is just enormous – just enormous." This is good to know, of course, if you happened to think space was small or even medium-sized, but unlikely to wow the crowd at your book club.

To be fair, Bryson is most of the time a good deal more specific than this. He explains scientific concepts in lay terms as clearly, probably, as it is possible to explain scientific concepts in lay terms. It would take a scientist to determine exactly how accurate all this information is. To someone like myself who knows nearly nothing about nearly everything, Bryson's command of facts seems very impressive – or did until I came across the information that " it was such a pipe [of Kimberlite] that made Johannesburg the most productive diamond-mining city in the world." Given that the only fact of Bryson's that I could check on was wrong, I tended, possibly unfairly, to distrust all the others.

But accuracy is perhaps not that important in a book like this: nobody is likely to use it as a textbook, any more than one would use one of Bryson's travel books as a guide book; the aim is to entertain and yet to leave one feeling vaguely better-informed than all those readers of mere fiction. Nor does Bryson, in his whirlwind tour of the universe, neglect the human aspect. Although he quotes the anonymous epigram "A physicist is an atom's way of thinking about atoms," Bryson is a canny enough writer to realise that most readers are at least as interested in the physicist as in the atom, and his book abounds in anecdotes about the quirky people who devote their lives to the pursuit of abstruse information, often to the detriment of their fellow-seekers after truth. Science, it would seem, is no more free of dog-eats-dog ambition than any other field of endeavour, and Bryson's book is rich in examples of the most unscrupulous undermining of inconvenient rivals – like the dreadful Richard Owen, coiner of the term dinosaur, who hounded a rival, Gideon Mantell to suicide. A better known and still controversial case is the treatment of Rosalind Franklin, who many feel was denied her share of the credit by Watson and Crick for finding the structure of DNA.

A useful by-product of many Bryson's interest in the personalities behind the discoveries is that it becomes possible to blame individuals for at least some of the ills of society. So there is the case of " a regrettable Ohio inventor named Thomas Midgley, Junior" who patented the addition of tetraethyl lead to motor fuel and topped that bit of environmental good news by inventing CFCs – which, Bryson comments

somewhat debatably, ”may ultimately prove to be just about the worst invention of the twentieth century.” It helps in our apportioning of blame to know, too, that Midgley was thoroughly dishonest in hiding the malign effects of tetraethyl lead from a gullible public. After all this, one is somewhat ambivalent about the information that Midgley, after being crippled with polio, was strangled, in a classic instance of the invention returning to plague the inventor, by a contraption of pulleys he devised to raise himself in bed.

If the human interest stories have more appeal than the gee-whiz statistics, that may be because the latter are at times reduced to near-banality in being made “comprehensible”. Thus, clarifying the famous $E=mc^2$ equation, Bryson explains: “Since c^2 (the speed of light times itself) is a truly enormous number, what the equation is saying is that there is a huge amount – a really huge amount – of energy bound up in every material thing.” The reader is left to feel more awed than informed, though somewhat reassured by Bryson’s comforting summation of the idea of relativity: “At all events, I think we can agree that this was an awfully big thought for a young man staring out of the window of a patent office in the capital of Switzerland.”

The fact is, of course, that as relative ignoramuses, about all we can encompass is the truly enormous, the really huge and the awfully big, and Bryson knows better than to hammer us with unadulterated fact. He also knows how to make a potentially dull fact come alive – almost literally, as when he tells us that “What sets the carbon atom apart is that it is shamelessly promiscuous. It is the party animal of the atomic world.” If we forget everything else in this book, we are likely to remember the habits of the carbon atom.

A Short History, with its many anecdotes and snippets of information, and above all its tremendously readable style, is the perfect bedside book, -- though I have to report, in the spirit of gee-whiz statistics, that the book weighs in at 942 grams on my kitchen scale. This is heavy – really heavy.