

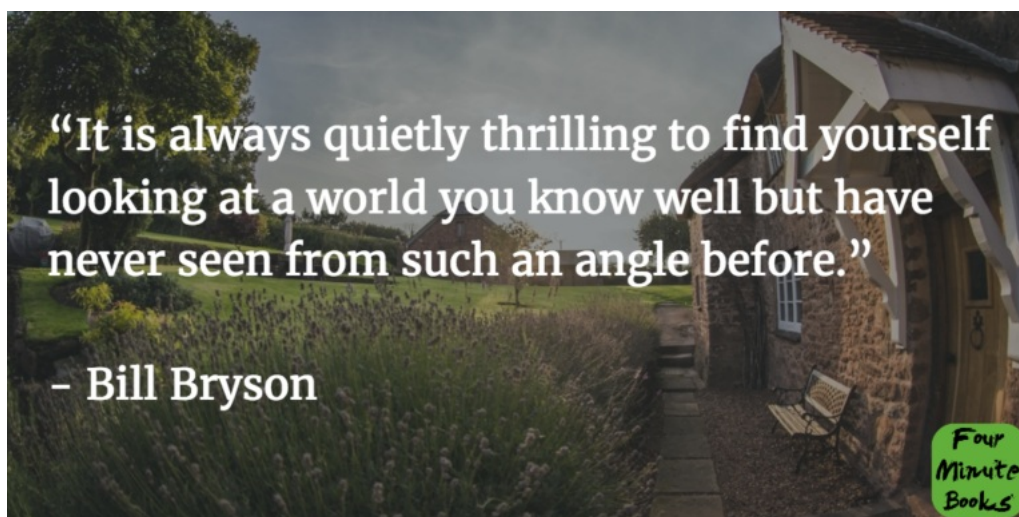
At Home Summary

 fourminutebooks.com/at-home-summary

1-Sentence-Summary: *At Home takes you on a tour of the modern home, using each room as occasion to reminisce about the history of its tradition, thus enlightening you with how the amenities and comforts of everyday life you now take for granted have come to be.*

Read in: 4 minutes

Favorite quote from the author:



Bill Bryson is the megastar of curious, inquisitive, entertaining writing. Whatever the topic, he manages to make it come to life for the reader, as if he or she was the one doing all the exploring. A Short History Of Nearly Everything revealed a few mind-blowing facts about the universe and showed me even more reasons to be grateful than I already knew were out there.

At Home is a historic sketch of “private life” – you know, what happens behind those precious four walls we all call home. Bill takes you on a tour of his house, telling a story in each room about how it grew into the purpose we know and use it for today.

Here are my 3 favorite lessons:

1. Fighting harder for longer: food didn’t come easily until very recently.
2. Rodents and rings made sleep much less regenerative 100 years ago.
3. There are two very different reasons why there’s a salt and a pepper shaker on every kitchen table.

Are you in for a different kind of house tour? Forget MTV Cribs, this is the real deal!

Lesson 1: Shoot the cans! The struggle for food lasted longer than you think.

You know the neanderthals had a tough time filling their stomachs. Hunting, gathering, learning what's edible and what's not through trial and error. These were tough times, no doubt. I have to admit though, that in my mind, somewhere around the 1600s, making sure you ate 2-3 times a day "must have become fairly easy."

Ha! I could not have been more wrong.

Easy access to food is predicated on one thing: making it preservable. This process didn't even *start* until the late 1700s. A confectioner from Paris, Nicolas Appert, was the first to try and can foods, sealing them in containers made of glass with a wax seal. However his seals weren't really airtight, so the food could still be contaminated.

Bryan Donkin improved upon his concept, even launching the first commercial iron tin cannery, but wrought iron cans were heavy and almost impossible to open. Some even came with instructions to open them with hammer and chisel, and soldiers, well, they just shot the cans open with their rifles!

The first true relief at scale came with the invention of the can opener as we know it today: in 1925.

What none of this accounts for is that people rarely knew with certainty what they were eating, as food labeling has been required by law only since 1990 (!). Chalk was added to milk, dirt to tea and sand to sugar, to get more money out of less product. We now live in good times!

Lesson 2: Whatever sleeping problems you have, they're not a big deal.

Today, mattresses are stuffed mainly with either springs or foam, and sometimes with a bladder filled with air or water. None of these were invented until the early 1900s – so what did people put into their beds before?

Oh, all kinds of stuff: straw, feathers, horse hair, cotton, even sea moss and sawdust. Those were all pretty natural, but you know what nature attracts? Animals!

Bedbugs, moths, mice, rats and other rodents were all too common companions while trying to get some shut-eye back then. When not all rustling beneath the sheets was of the good kind, you did well to keep a shoe close by, in case you needed to strike.

Speaking of reproductive activities, they were considered a mere practical act back then. Having kids was good, but having fun while conceiving them? Nah-uh. Women were told to avoid board games and reading, as those could arouse them, and since masturbation was also considered filthy and unhealthy, men had to keep their hands to themselves too.

Worse even, to avoid leaky "accidents" at night (referred to as "nocturnal emission"), a penile pricking ring for men was invented: if your wiener swelled at night, its sharp pins would prick it to kill the arousal – yuck!

So the next time you think your mattress is too hard or too soft, remember: this is nothing compared to what people had to deal with just a few short decades ago.

Lesson 3: Salt to survive, pepper 'cause it's popular: why we spice things up.

Have you ever thought about why, of all spices, salt and pepper are the one on every kitchen table?

Salt might be easy to guess, after all, **it's crucial for human bodies to function**. And even though we've only known that for a comparatively short time, we've been consuming salt for thousands of years. Some ancient, indigenous people went as far as drying urine to extract it. For many kings, amassing lots of salt was also a sign of power.

However, there was one condiment with which it was even easier to show how wealthy and mighty you were: **pepper**. Originally popularized by the ancient Romans, who couldn't get enough of this stuff, prices reached crazy heights even back then. At one point, they offered an invading army as much as 3,000 pounds of pepper as a peace agreement.

In 1468, the Duke of Bourgogne used pepper as a decoration for his wedding: 380 pounds of it! Way to show who's boss, huh? Of course we've gotten smarter about using pepper more resourcefully, but it remains, to this day, a little status symbol atop our kitchen tables.

At Home Review

The summary of *At Home* was refreshing. When you have an "I want to learn something new, something totally unrelated, but no idea what" moment, this is the one to grab. Everything we take for granted today was once a life-changing innovation. It's important to not forget and this surely will help you remember.

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What else can you learn from the blinks?

- Why early settlers cut off only the top of trees for housing wood
- What building material early Americans turned to when limestone and timber were in short supply
- Why Britain instated a brick tax at one point
- How fashion fads impacted the design of houses
- Why the downfall of Roman bathing culture was bad for following generations

Who would I recommend the At Home summary to?

The 16 year old who's too lazy to warm her frozen food when mum isn't home, the 43 year old hotel guest, who regularly complains to the staff how "hard" his mattress is, and anyone who never asked why salt and pepper always show up together.