Bill Bryson had imagined Australia as a kind of alternative southern California. Of course, what greeted him was something rather different. Australia is the world’s sixth largest country and the only island that is also a continent. It is the driest, flattest, hottest, most climatically aggressive of all the inhabited continents and still teems with life—a large proportion of it quite deadly. Ignoring such dangers, Bill Bryson journeyed to Australia and promptly fell in love with the country. And who can blame him—life doesn’t get much better than this.

My Personal Review:
My first foray into the world of Bill Bryson’s work has left an indelible mark on me—I am in love with it, and cannot get enough of it. It’s hard enough to try to get to know and write about such a great expanse of land when you’re not Australian—but Bryson for the most part successfully does so. As an Australian who has lived in the US for the past 8 years, I cannot say I would be able to write as comprehensively and accurately about his country as he has about mine!
A sharp wit combined with a wonderful sense of humor made this a real page turner; Bryson accurately captures the essence and feeling of Australia—he comes not only to appreciate and understand us, but in the little pub in Daly Waters, I believe he becomes one of us. Bryson captures all the beauty, irony, sadness, history, and geography that makes up this beautiful place I call home, and his gentle blend of fact and humor and anecdote makes this an unforgettable read. To elaborate: his ability to point out the inherent irony in losing a prime minister and subsequently naming a public swimming pool after a man who drowned is something that has always baffled me too, and I’m Australian! Or the fact that our national volume of history is only written up to the year 1935 made me question just how modern Australia really is. Bryson reports several times
throughout that it feels like 1951 - and that was interesting to learn, given that it is his American perspective. So too, i can similarly say as much about America when i see an antiquated wood-panelled wagon pass me on the most advanced road system in the world, or people signing checks at the supermarket check out (checks are no longer in use in Australia), which makes Brysons alien perspectivve on Australia all the more interesting!

I enjoyed how Bryson gently touched on sensitive points too - our general lack of confidence and identity for example - i never knew how confused we were, when Bryson accurately note that were not sure if were brits or yanks, even in the green room!

My only criticisms would extend to Brysons implication that aussies are self absorbed - something which I would strongly argue as false, given that much more international news reaches Australias four paltry television stations than it does any of the 400+ cable tv/news media in the US. Another point of contention: the implication that Australia tends to exist on the peripheries of the planet, outside of the known world(p238). I personally found this to be offensive. Brysons claims that [in Australia] it is easy to forget....that there is a world out there (p239) is blatantly untrue; in fact, i find that most Australians are very much engaged in world affairs both internally and abroad, and I would go so far as to say that I think they are more well informed on most international matters than are Americans. I tend to think it is Americans who are more disconnected, to quote Bryson here, and it is not the implied distance which is the cause, but a very controlled and closed media. The reason you dont hear anything about Australia in the US is simply because it is not of interest, it is not reported. Every Australian knows the name of the US President or the capital; however, ask the average American who is Australias Prime Minister or where Canberra is and all you will get is a blank look in return. My only other quibble is that of the voice; im puzzled why Bryson would lend an Australian tone and slang to a book written from an obviosly American perspective? I would have prefered to hear sweater not jumper etc etc. as this lends to the authenticity of the authors work.

Overall, a beautifully written, comprehensive and detailed account of Van Diemans Land. Bryson sure has done a lot of hard homework in between beers, and it, as well as his love for Australia shows. Further, i am sure all Australians will be thankful to him for many years to come for documenting this place I call home.

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