

Bill Bryson lives in Norfolk and has just been made President of the Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE). He hopes to use his new position to do something about litter. Bryson was a sub editor on a financial magazine before becoming a best-selling author. He has written numerous travel books including *Notes from a Small Island* and an award-winning science book, *A Short History of Nearly Everything*. He recently published a memoir of his childhood in Iowa, *The Thunderbolt Kid*, which explores the world of 1950s America. Although he can't write without a keyboard, he dislikes email and his mobile phone is ten years old. His hobbies include reading and gardening.

Why are you campaigning in particular against litter? You have 60 million acres in this small island, intensively used for centuries, but you've still managed to keep it beautiful. It's heartbreaking to see it trashed. There's lots of things more important in the world, but to me this is the issue I want to do something about. If I'm out for a walk in the country, I'll pick up litter and it would be really nice to find a bin I can put it in. Litter bins have been taken away all over the place and people are expected to take their litter home with them and this is an experiment that's failed. And I'm told there are tips which won't take microwave ovens.

Do you rant about food packaging? There ought to be a litter levy. Crisp packets seem to be foil-lined and they catch the sun and glint at you – I don't understand the economics of food packaging; there should be ways to make packaging disappear more quickly. The classic example is chewing gum: surely in the 21st century we can make gum that dissolves in the rain?

Do you find that OAPs are starting to look younger to you?

Yes – everybody is starting to look young to me! It's kind of scary; doctors and people. These days I'm meeting lots of people of influence and you realise they're just normal people and there's just enough of the boy from Iowa in me to be astounded by that. It can be slightly alarming.

Ever experienced ageism in work or leisure? Not personally, because I'm self employed but a lot of people I knew in journalism have been made redundant – very few of my intake are still working. The kind of thing I do in my leisure time, you can't be too old, like sitting quietly reading a book. It's not as if I'm aching to go paragliding.

Any benefits of being an oldie? Yes a lot. I really like being old, though physically I wish I had more energy and it's rather depressing that when things go wrong physically they tend to stay wrong. The creakiness of ageing is slightly depressing. But I much prefer the sense of satisfaction – I can look at my life and see it's been wondrously free of catastrophe. I feel a lot wiser and more confident.

Is it easier to be old in the US? I think people in Britain are more comfortable with ageing. In the US there's more pressure on people to deny their age. My mother recently went into a care facility and I was slightly stunned to see that a lot of her fellows have had cosmetic surgery, dress younger, and do very ambitious things with their hair.

I've been 60 years old ever since I came to England – the sorts of things I do at weekends are gardening and walking.

Do you have at least three remote controls you don't know how to use? Have you been talking to my wife? We have a video recorder that we have no idea how to control. I know it's only oldies who have video recorders.

Have you ever heard of Chantelle? I was recently waiting for my family and picked up one of my children's magazines about celebrities and was astounded I didn't know a single one of the people! It was all about people I hadn't heard of and most of them were not even a little bit attractive.

Do you not only talk to yourself, but see nothing odd about it? All the time. My kids tell me I've been doing it for years as I walk down the street but I didn't realise I was visibly moving my lips. I rehearse things like a stage presentation. I talk to myself all day long, recite whatever I'm writing. It's not like I'm having a conversation with an imaginary person. My mother used to sit at the ironing board and have conversations where she would be arguing with her boss. I don't do that.

Have you now forgotten where you were when Kennedy died? No I do remember. I was an evening paper boy and when I unwrapped my bundle of papers I saw the headline 'President Kennedy slain in Dallas'. And my blood actually ran cold.

*Do you know quite a lot of poems by heart? I can't hang on to that sort of information. But I can remember where things are. *A Short History of Nearly Everything* was jammed full of facts which I couldn't tell you now but I know exactly where to find the information.*

Are you worried about the state of literacy? Very much. In a sense it's a skill people can do without but the absence of punctuation is getting worse. I find that dispiriting. It's a discipline which shows respect for the language otherwise you become ambiguous. Sometimes people send me manuscripts and it's amazing how badly punctuated and how unappealing it is to look at – people can't even be bothered to capitalise the first letter of a sentence. It's a sloppiness.

*Are you frightened of going to the Barbican? No! I used to work for *Financial Weekly* and the print works were just by the Barbican; I'm really quite fond of it. I do very much like modern architecture*

Have you ever downloaded a ringtone? No, but my teenage son has played pranks by downloading ringtones onto my mobile phone he knew I wouldn't be able to modify.

Do you own an iPod? Yes and my kids have them, but I'm not that musical. I end up listening to Radio 4 instead.

Do you email? With great and increasing reluctance. I absolutely hate emails for talking to somebody unless they're abroad.

Do you know what a trojan is? [IT answer: a virus] A Trojan is a condom in America.

On seeing a 'new' fashion style, do you think 'I wore those in the '60s!' I long ago realised there was no point taking much notice of fashion because no matter how hard I tried no one was ever going to use the word 'dapper' to describe me, even in a brand new suit. As soon as I get dressed I kind of deteriorate.

Frothy mocca cappuccino, or a nice cup of tea? Choice is a great thing but in America, everything has to be individually manufactured for the consumer – every person in the queue wants a type of coffee that's never been made like that before – an extremely specific requirement. This just drives me mad. I think, just give me a f***ing cup of coffee!