



Travel writer Bryson goes to edge of the universe

By Gideon Long

LONDON, June 6 (Reuters) - Bill Bryson has trekked the mountains of the United States and driven to the heart of the Australian outback to research his travel books, but his latest adventure has taken him further.

Much further.

In "A Short History of Nearly Everything", Bryson transports his readers to the moon, the planets, the stars, the sun and the weird, curved and indefinable edges of the universe.

He delves to the earth's sizzling core, splits atoms, measures earthquakes, dissects the human brain and zips back through several billion years of history.

And all in 500 pages.

Bryson's latest book is an ambitious attempt to make science come alive and, when he speaks about it, his admiration for the scientists who have shaped our knowledge is palpable.

"Someone hands you a bone that looks like a bit of broken crockery. They tell you it's 3-1/2 million years old and they can reconstruct the whole human being from this one little piece of cranium," he told Reuters in an interview.

"I just think that's so cool, so impressive!"

At first glance, A Short History... has little in common with Bryson's whimsical travel books about Europe, Britain, the United States and Australia.

But the author's enthusiasm for his subject is the same.

"Take Isaac Newton and the laws of motion," he says, leaning forward in his chair to make his point.

"This guy looks out to space and sees all these dots and realises they're all holding each other in place. The planets are orbiting because of gravity, this great invisible force.

"That's quite an insight. It's one of those huge leaps of human knowledge."

Bryson, 52, has spent months grappling with concepts that turn most people's minds to jelly.

"I find anything to do with particle physics difficult," he smiles.

"If someone came and sat next to you on the park bench and starting talking about this stuff you'd kind of get nervous and start edging away from them."

Bryson made his name with "The Lost Continent" and "Notes from a Small Island" - sharp and funny travel books about his native America and his adopted homeland Britain.

Born in Iowa, he first came to Britain in 1972 and later settled here with his British wife. Now, after eight years back in the United States, he is moving back to Britain to live in rural Norfolk, in eastern England.

"I'm very comfortable here. I'm emotionally attached to the place. I even cheer for England at the World Cup," he says.

Bryson, a father of four, denies he is leaving the United States because he is fed up with American politics under President George W. Bush.

"I'm not infatuated with Bush and his policies. I don't like a lot of the stuff he's done and I was against the war in Iraq," he says. "But our coming back to Britain actually has nothing to do with that. We were coming anyway."

He accepts that moving his life across the Atlantic again will entail "six months of chaos, whether we like it or not," and doesn't envisage starting another book until at least Christmas.

"I haven't decided what to do next but it will be a travel book," he says. "I'm not that much of a library geek. I want to get out and get some fresh air, move my legs and see things. I'm fed up of breathing book dust."

Bryson has hinted he might venture into the developing world for his next book, although he admits his breezy, satirical humour might prove ill-suited to the slums of India or the impoverished villages of Africa.

"I just don't see much scope for jokes about beggars and people sleeping under bridges, or kids with distended stomachs and flies all over them," he says.

"This is not obvious material for a comedy book," he adds, with a good dose of adopted British understatement.

He has also suggested he might travel in the Middle East but, again, it could prove tricky.

"It's an area of the world that's rather touchy," he says with a smile.

"It's much easier to make jokes about Belgians."

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