**Linnea Saukko on Writing**

"After I have chosen a topic," says Linnea Saukko, "the easiest thing for me to do is to write about how I really feel about it. The goal of 'How to Poison the Earth' was to inform people, or, more specifically, to open their eyes. As soon as I decided on my topic, I made a list of all the types of pollution and I sat down and basically wrote the paper in less than two hours. The information seemed to pour from me onto the page. Of course I did a lot of editing afterward, but I never changed the idea and the tone that I started with."

**For Discussion**

When have you had the experience of writing on a subject that compelled your words to pour forth with little effort? What was the subject? What did you learn from this experience?

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**BILL BRYSON**

Bill Bryson was born in Des Moines, Iowa, in 1951. After graduating from Drake College, he moved to England, where he lives now with his wife and four children. Bryson at first worked in a psychiatric hospital and then embarked on a journalism career in the British press. In 1987 he left regular newspaper work to write books, notably volumes on language, such as *Mother Tongue: English and How It Got That Way* (1990), and perceptive and amusing travel writing, such as *The Lost Continent* (1989), recounting a search for the perfect small American town; *A Walk in the Woods* (1998), detailing an 870-mile hike along the Appalachian Trail; and *In a Sunburned Country* (2000), chronicling travels in Australia. Bryson's latest book, *Short History of Nearly Everything* (2003), travels through time more than space. It won the Aventis Prize for Science Books.

**How You Became You**

"How You Became You" (editors' title) is the opening of *A Short History of Nearly Everything*. Providing an eye-popping tour of our own chemical and biological origins, Bryson uses his trademark perceptive humor to make clear and immediate a complex and lengthy process.

Welcome. And congratulations. I am delighted that you could make it. Getting here wasn't easy; I know. In fact, I suspect it was a little tougher than you realize.

To begin with, for you to be here now trillions of drifting atoms had somehow to assemble in an intricate and intriquingly obliging manner to create you. It's an arrangement so specialized and particular that it has never been tried before and will only exist this once. For the next many years (we hope) these tiny particles will uncomplainingly engage in all the billions of debt, cooperative efforts necessary to keep you intact and let you experience the supremely agreeable but generally underappreciated state known as existence.

Why atoms take this trouble is a bit of a puzzle. Being you is not a gratifying experience at the atomic level. For all their devoted attention, your atoms don't actually care about you—indeed, don't even know that you are there. They don't even know that they are there. They are mindless particles, after all, and not even themselves alive. (It is a slightly arresting notion that if you were to pick yourself apart with tweezers, one atom at a time, you would produce a mound of fine atomic dust, none of which had ever been alive but all of which had once been you.) Yet somehow for the period of your existence they will answer to a single overarching impulse: to keep you you.

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The bad news is that atoms are fickle and their time of devotion is fleeting—fleeting indeed. Even a long human life adds up to only about 650,000 hours. And when that modest milestone flashes past, or at some other point thereafter, for reasons unknown your atoms will shut you down, silently disassemble, and go off to be other things. And that's it for you.

Still you may rejoice that it happens at all. Generally speaking in the universe it doesn't, so far as we can tell. This is decidedly odd because the atoms that so liberally and congenially flock together to form living things on Earth are exactly the same atoms that decline to do it elsewhere. Wherever else it may be, at the level of chemistry life is curiously mundane: carbon, hydrogen, oxygen, and nitrogen, a little calcium, a dash of sulfur, a light dusting of other very ordinary elements—nothing you wouldn't find in any ordinary drugstore—and that's all you need. The only thing special about the atoms that make you is that they make you. That is of course the miracle of life.

Whether or not atoms make life in other corners of the universe, they make plenty else; indeed, they make everything else. Without them there would be no water or air or rocks, no stars and planets, no distant gassy clouds or swirling nebulae or any of the other things that make the universe so usefully material. Atoms are so numerous and necessary that we easily overlook that they needn't actually exist at all. There is no law that requires the universe to fill itself with small particles of matter or to produce light and gravity and the other physical properties on which our existence hinges. There needn't actually be a universe at all. For the longest time there wasn't. There were 30 atoms and no universe for them to float about in. There was nothing—nothing at all anywhere.

So thank goodness for atoms. But the fact that you have atoms and that they assemble in such a willing manner is only part of what got you here. To be here now, alive in the twenty-first century and smart enough to know it, you also had to be the beneficiary of an extraordinary string of biological good fortune. Survival on Earth is a surprisingly tricky business. Of the billions and billions of species of living things that have existed since the dawn of time, most—99.99 percent—are no longer around. Life on Earth, you see, is not only brief but dismaying tenuous. It is a curious feature of our existence that we come from a planet that is very good at promoting life but even better at extinguishing it.

The average species on Earth lasts for only about 4 million years, so if you wish to be around for billions of years, you must be as fickle as the atoms that made you. You must be prepared to change everything about yourself—shape, size, color, species affiliation, everything—and to do so repeatedly. That's much easier said than done, because the process of change is random. To get from "protoplasmic primordial atomic globule" (as Gilbert and

\[ \text{For a reading quiz, sources on Bill Bryson, and annotated links to further readings on the evolution of life, visit bedfordstmartins.com/thesoundreader.} \]

**Journal Writing**

Bryson writes about the chemical and biological process that made you. But other processes have led to your becoming a unique personality with certain abilities, likes and dislikes, quirks, and so forth. In your journal explore the most important stages or events in your personal history that influenced who you are. (To take your journal writing further, see "From Journal to Essay" on the next page.)

1The Britons William Gilbert (1544–1603) and Arthur Sullivan (1842–1900) were the librettist and composer of satirical light operas such as The Pirates of Penzance and The Mikado. —Ees.
Questions on Meaning
1. Bryson describes three stages of the process of creating "you"—the first in paragraphs 2–6, the second in paragraphs 7–8, and the third in paragraph 9. What names would you give to these three stages?
2. Why does Bryson think it is surprising that atoms are the basis of life on Earth?
3. What does Bryson mean when he says "you also had to be the beneficiary of an extraordinary string of biological good fortune" (par. 7)? What other luck does he say was necessary to make you?
4. How does the final sentence of paragraph 2 suggest Bryson's PURPOSE?

Questions on Writing Strategy
1. What is unusual about Bryson's opening? How can his comment "I'm delighted that you could make it" be taken in two ways?
2. Some sentences in paragraphs 6, 8, and 9 contain lists of things or events. What is the EFFECT of these lists?
3. How does Bryson's final phrase ("that could result...eventually, astonishingly, and all too briefly...in you") SUMMARIZE the entire essay?
4. OTHER METHODS. What role does CAUSE AND EFFECT play in paragraphs 8 and 9?

Questions on Language
1. Bryson says that atoms are "mindless particles" (par. 3), yet he uses personification to give them human attributes. (For a definition of personification, see Figures of speech in Useful Terms.) Find examples of personification of atoms. Why do you suppose Bryson chose to describe atoms this way?
2. In paragraph 3 Bryson writes that the work of atoms is "a bit of a puzzle." Where else in the essay does he use language to suggest the "puzzle" of life? How does this language contribute to his overall point?
3. Consult a dictionary if you are unsure of the meaning of any of the following: deft, supremely (par. 2); overachieving (3); milestones (4); congenially, mundanely (5); dismally, tenuously (7); sentient, abhorrant, doctored, jaunty (8); Icebeans, perpetuate (9).

Suggestions for Writing
1. FROM JOURNAL TO ESSAY. Based on your journal writing, compose an essay in which you trace the process that led to your becoming the person you are today. Focus on the important milestones in your life that helped shape your personality.
2. Do some research about a scientific process that intrigues you. Consider subjects you've come across in your courses, outside reading, or TV viewing, or try substituting another word for you in the title of Bryson's essay—for instance, "How dogs became dogs," "How stars became stars," "How flowers became flowers." Write an essay in which you analyze this process.

3. CRITICAL WRITING. Closely examine how Bryson develops the discussion of each stage in his process analysis. In an essay discuss how his approach contributes to his purpose.
4. CONNECTIONS. In "How to Poison the Earth" (p. 294), Linnea Snuklo also writes about a scientific process. In an essay of your own, COMPARE AND CONTRAST Snuklo's purpose and method with Bryson's. What similarities and differences do you find in each writer's approach to explaining his or her subject?
chubbier and scabbier but not, say, watermelon or full-service gas station, to name two equally random alternatives. Still less can I explain how nonexistent words like phase and internet would get into the program. Call me exacting, but I would submit that a computer program that wants to discard a real word in favor of one that does not exist is not ready to be offered for public use.

**For Discussion**

1. What does Bryson find objectionable about spelling checkers?
2. Have you shared some of Bryson’s problems with spelling checkers? Have you had other problems he doesn’t mention—for instance, a checker’s inability to distinguish among not and now and no or among their and there and they’re?
3. What do you think is the remedy for spelling errors when the checking program is flawed? Use the program and hope for the best? Stop using the program and hope for the best? Something else?

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**CUSTOMS**

**JESSICA MITFORD**

Born in Barentine, England, in 1917, the daughter of Lord and Lady Redesdale, Jessica Mitford devoted much of her early life to defying her aristocratic upbringing. In her autobiography Daughters and Rebels (1960), she tells how she received a gentle school at home, then as a young woman moved to Loyalist Spain during the violent Spanish Civil War. Later, she emigrated to America, where for a time she worked in Miami as a bartender. She became one of her adopted country’s most noted reporters. Time called her “Queen of the Muckrakers.” Exposing with her typewriter what she regarded as corruption, abuse, and absurdity, Mitford wrote The American Way of Death (1963, revised as The American Way of Death Revisited in 1998), Kind and Unusual Punishment: The Prison Business (1973), and The American Way of Birth (1992). Poison Penmanship (1979) collects articles from The Atlantic Monthly, Harper’s, and other magazines. A Fine Old Conflict (1976) is the second volume of Mitford’s autobiography. And a novel, Grace Had an English Heart (1989), examines how the media transform ordinary people into celebrities. Jessica Mitford died in 1996.

**Behind the Formaldehyde Curtain**

The most famous (or infamous) thing Jessica Mitford wrote is The American Way of Death, a critique of the funeral industry. In this selection from the book, Mitford analyzes the twin processes of embalming and restoring a corpse, the practices she finds most objectionable. You may need a steady stomach to enjoy the selection, but in it you'll find a clear, painstaking process analysis, written with masterly style and outrageous wit. (For those who want to know, Mitford herself was cremated after her death.)

For a complementary view of cultural practices, read the essay following Mitford’s, Horace Miner’s “Body Ritual Among the Nacirema.”

The drama begins to unfold with the arrival of the corpse at the mortuary.

Alas, poor Yorick! How surprised he would be to see how his counterpart of today is whisked off to a funeral parlor and is in short order sprayed, sliced, pierced, pickled, trussed, trimmed, creamed, waxed, painted, rouged, and neatly dressed—transformed from a common corpse into a Beautiful Memory Picture. This process is known in the trade as embalming and restorative art,