

Book Reviews

One Summer: America 1927. By Bill Bryson. (New York: Doubleday, 2013, Pp. 1, 528. \$28.95.)

Bill Bryson's latest historical encyclopedic anthology focuses on the summer of 1927. It might seem surprising that one summer, in one nation, can fill nearly 500 pages of text; the eventful summer, in the hands of a skillful storyteller, was more than enough.

In the first part, "May: The Kid," Bryson explores the truly incredible feat of Charles Lindbergh. He flew solo, first from California to New York, then from New York to Paris, in a plane with no brakes, no forward visibility and only the most rudimentary instruments. He safely landed where he planned and when he planned. To put his success in context, over the next couple weeks other teams (always with more than one person in the cockpit) would try to duplicate Lindbergh's journey. Some would get hopelessly lost, landing hundreds of miles off course. Others would crash land miles away from their destination. It was no wonder that upon landing in Paris, Lindbergh became the focus of the world's attention and adulation.

Simultaneously in New York, Babe Ruth - perhaps the only man on the planet who could get some attention during Lindbergh-mania - was in the midst of his greatest season ever. Ending the season with a record 60 home runs (something not bested until the recent "Steroid Era"), Ruth's success on the diamond was the thing of childhood dreams. Babe Ruth's popularity, as recounted by Bryson, was... well... Ruthian. His chapter, "June: The Babe," focuses on the rise of baseball and the incredible team that played with the Babe in Yankee pinstripes in '27.

"August: The Anarchists" covers the execution of Sacco and Vanzetti, two Italian immigrants with anarchist tendencies who are arrested for robbery and murder outside Boston years earlier. Bryson retells the story of the crime, their arrest, their trial, and the various attempts by the governor to overturn the verdict. Eventually the author resigns himself to the conclusion of many other experts on Sacco and Vanzetti: they were probably guilty of the crime for which they were tried and convicted, and almost certainly guilty of other acts of terrorism including sending bombs through the mail.

Bryson brilliantly weaves these together with each other and with other stories, such as the rise of "Talking Pictures" in Hollywood; the boxing

career of Jack Dempsey; the career of Al Capone during the time of Prohibition; the role of eugenics and racial prejudice and anti-Semitism; Henry Ford's belief that he should start a rubber farm in Brazil; Herbert Hoover's attempt to single-handedly solve the worst flood in national history; and many others. No section of the book is isolated to one topic.

As a history book *One Summer* has some flaws. First of all, it has no footnotes. The sourcing Bryson does include is found in the back of the book, where he neatly addresses the main sources for each chapter. He also includes a link to his website where one can go for the rest of the sources. While I appreciate that the sources are available, it would be nice to see them without need of the Internet.

I also wonder about his coverage (or lack thereof) of the African American community. He discusses their presence, in connection with many other minority groups (primarily Jews), who are the targets of hatred in the 1920s. But, for example, in discussing the greatness of the 1927 Yankees, he fails to mention that baseball was entirely segregated at this time and that Ruth and Gehrig couldn't possibly be given the title as the best when an entire segment of the population was systematically excluded from competing against them.

I think, in the final balance, however, that while these flaws are real, they are more than made up for by the fact that this book is highly informative and simultaneously entertaining in a way few history books are.

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