

“Where Words Comes From” does a great job of taking what seems boring—grammar—and makes it a subject with many stories to tell. The chapter is to inform, and the author looks at all the ways words come into existence. Bryson uses historical references (such as the Japanese song American soldiers changed), literary passages, and technical data from dictionaries. Bryson offers example after example to make his point, using many foreign words and word pairs. For all the meticulous detail, I wasn’t bogged down or bored because the chapter moves along with sidenotes, funny stories, and trivia that the reader can repeat to show off their knowledge. The piece is jam-packed with minutiae; it’s impossible not to come away from the piece without learning a few obscure facts. One of the best anecdotes was the example of Browning’s use of “twat” in his poem to mean a nun’s headgear. Words are important to Bryson, and the reader becomes more aware of the oddities of the language. It is obvious that an incredible amount of research went into this one chapter. But, Bryson’s anecdotes gives a light touch to a wealth of information. By using “you,” “we,” and “us,” Bryson identifies himself with the common native speaker and though he is an authority, he doesn’t use an superior tone or become overly verbose.