

100 WORD ideas to change MALTA

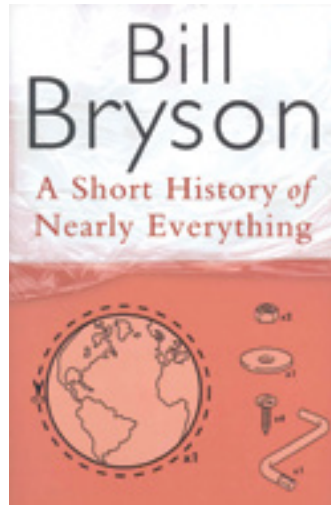
A think-tank
for humour

by
DR GÖRG MALLIA

Maltese society tends to take itself much too seriously. This is not unique to the Maltese nation, but still becomes problematic when even the slightest hint of humour comes into politics, football, local feasts, and a large number of other social functions. Humour becomes an affront to staunch, deep-rooted beliefs and reacted to vehemently. A think-tank is proposed that will discuss, educate and suggest scientific ways in which humour can be installed in every aspect of society, from the old stalwart of seriousness, the school, all the way to the echelons of administration, replacing excessive pompousness with smiles and laughter. ●

BOOK REVIEW

by The Editor



A Short History of Nearly Everything

Bill Bryson

BILL BRYSON was a ‘bad science student’, dropped out of University, and wrote one of the best popular science books. After five years of gruelling research, which mostly involved asking: ‘I’m sorry, but can you explain that again’ to dozens of scientists, out popped a near masterpiece: *A Short History of Nearly Everything*.

The book was published in 2003 and desperately needs an update. It also mentions controversies that have now been settled and it has at least 28 errors. In an over 600-page book (paperback), that’s not so bad.

Now to the good points, it’s easy to read, a great laugh and jam-packed with quirky errata about your favourite scientists. After reading this book you might become the life of many a dinner table. It talks about evolution, astronomy, quantum physics, and everything in between. An achievement that deserves every award Bryson has received, including becoming a bestseller — not an easy feat for a popular science book.

First he goes through the history of science picking some great stories. About Carolus Linnaeus, who penned ‘long and flattering portraits of himself, declaring that there had never ‘been a greater botanist or zoologist’, [who had] a feverish—preoccupation with sex’. On ‘Adonis’ a.k.a. Edwin Hubble, ‘he was a strong and gifted athlete, charming, smart and immensely good-looking, [...] a large mass of ego [and] an inveterate liar’ who built

his best work on others without acknowledging them. He found out ‘how old is [the universe] and how big?’ by using the work of two computers, Henrietta Swan Leavitt and Annie Jump Cannon. Back then, computers spent their lives studying photographic plates of stars and making computations.

The number of scientists he talks about is startling. There is activist scientist Clair Patterson (male) who figured out the age of the Earth, the grenade swinging J.B.S. Haldane, one of the best evolutionary biologists, other greats: Einstein, Marie Curie (unfairly ostracised from the scientific community for her long-term affair), Newton, and countless others. Bill Bryson has found a scientist for everyone.

He also explains science simply and elegantly. Everyone can understand how he talks about Newton’s three laws of motion and universal law of gravitation, the uncertainty principle, the peculiar world of the atom, and how chemistry was saved by the Periodic Table. If only I’d read this book when I was younger.

After these wonderful pieces, he starts picking rather random topics: dinosaurs (great chapter), volcanoes, water and talks about each topic’s history always from the point of view of its greatest researchers. This is the magic of Bill Bryson and his book, a must read for anyone—you won’t look at the world (and its scientists) in the same way again. ●