FFBC

First Friday News & Views

Monthly Newsletter of the *First Friday Breakfast Club, Inc.*

September 2019 | Volume 24 | Issue 9

The next FFBC meeting is Friday, September 6, 2019 7:00 a.m.

FFBC Meeting Location: Hoyt Sherman Place, 15th & Woodland, Des Moines

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or the website
by Tuesday, September 3.

FFBC Website: www.ffbciowa.org

The Church's Amish Problem

by Jonathan Wilson

So-called Christians in churches that continue to condemn homosexuality have an Amish problem. I say that with no disparagement of the Amish; collectively theirs is a remarkable, sometimes enviable, culture.

I say it because the Amish don't continence owning and driving motor vehicles, and, as a result, they don't have occasion to teach their children responsible automobile driving practices; they are busy teaching them that it's not okay to drive a motor vehicle in the first place.

Churches (you pick a denomination) typically hold themselves out as a, if not the, source of moral authority. It is, in fact, in that very tradition that some churches assert their condemnation of homosexuality. In so doing, those churches exclude LGBTQ children of God from their congregations. What self-respecting gay persons would continue attending a church where their very essence is regularly debated and condemned. I'd venture it's only those with a persecution complex, or some other form of dysfunctional personality disorder. Hell, I find it off-putting to attend a church that is still "working" on the issue. Churches where, in the name of civility, community, just-getting-along, and/or wanting to maximize donations to cover budgeted operating expenses, anti-gay congregants are left in their ignorance on the topic and, respectfully, told that they have a legitimate, Biblically supported viewpoint in their condemnation of LGBTQ "life styles."

I can't confidently speak to non-Christian religious traditions, but I am very familiar with Christian religious traditions, and I believe that both condemnation of LGBTQ "life styles" and indulging church members who espouse such condemnation, are decidedly NOT "Christian" as I understand the teachings of Jesus.

Jesus's Biblically reported embrace of the oppressed, the despised, and the disadvantaged, is decidedly contrary to condemnation of LGBTQ people in churches that claim his teachings as their spiritual and moral foundation. A perfect example is the story told by Jesus of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:29). Jews of Jesus' day despised Samaritans; the reasons have been lost in the dustbin of history. I wouldn't know a Samaritan if I tripped over one. But, for whatever reason, they were hated in Jesus' day.

[continued on page two]

[“The Church’s Amish Problem” / continued from page one]

When asked to define “neighbor,” Jesus told of someone robbed, beaten, and left in a ditch to die. He told of a priest and a Levite who passed by without helping. Jesus told of a Samaritan, a perfect stranger, who helped the victim. He then asked his questioner, “Who in that story was the neighbor?” The questioner replied, “The one who showed mercy” -- as reported, the questioner couldn’t even bring himself to say, “The Samaritan.” And Jesus replied, “Go and do likewise.”

Jesus confronted the established religion of his day and reportedly threw money changers out of the synagogue. Indulging congregants of today, who remain ignorant and judgmental on LGBTQ issues in the hope that those congregants won’t be offended by enlightenment and will continue giving money to the church, is indulging modern-day “money changers.”

Until churches, that call themselves Christian, can get their act together on the subject of LGBTQ children of God, they will have no moral authority to offer the LGBTQ community, nor insights to share for enhancing same-sex relationships. LGBTQ people will be left on their own to sort out what is moral, immoral, responsible, irresponsible, wise, or unwise as they navigate their lives.

We forgive the Biblical writers’ mistakes in believing that the earth is flat, and that the earth is the center of the universe, and that the sun goes around the earth rather than the earth circling the sun. We should be equally forgiving of the Biblical writers’ mistaken belief that all of God’s children are straight. Some children of God are *not* straight (no need to debate the percentage). So long as churches cling to the condemnation of homosexuality, they perpetuate their Amish problem and forfeit having anything meaningful to say to LGBTQ people about morality or otherwise.

A Tribute to My Father

by John Schmacker

My father passed away 54 years ago today. At age 51, he died much too young, especially for one who so much enjoyed living. His life was full of friends, family, and organic gardening. His home brew was something I learned to like at an early age, even after spending so many hours washing out brown quart bottles for his next batch or holding the siphon hose while he filled those bottles. His woodworking shop was a place that fascinated me despite his warnings not to touch anything. Basement poker games with his post office cronies, September fishing trips to northern Minnesota with other buddies, assuming leadership in several organizations: he was an extroverted and busy man fully engaged with life. But I can’t describe him in these few sentences. He died from cancer in an era when nobody talked about cancer. His funeral was standing room only. And now he has been gone for longer than he lived.

I do miss him every day, even though I didn’t much get along with him then. He left when I was in that awkward and unattractive stage when my young man pretty much resented our relationship. We didn’t have much of anything to say to each other, and I hadn’t yet discovered or felt any gratitude for all that had been handed to me. I do now, much too late.

Today the battery ran out on my nice Seiko watch. I am someone who can’t get along without knowing the time, and I knew it could take a couple days to get the watch fixed. I rooted through a box of stuff I have accumulated over many years and found three old watches that could possibly tide me over for a couple of days. The only one of those old watches I could get to work was his, an old wind-up Timex that he wore every day. Idle for fifty-four years, and yet I could put my hands on it in a matter of minutes.

I have often said that the extent of my inheritance from my father was the harmonica he used to play in idle moments, and which I have never learned to play. It sits on a shelf in my basement. But I know the inheritance also includes a sense of humor and a work ethic. And now I know that it also includes an old Timex watch. Still running.

All Aboard the Rainbow Railroad

by Bruce Carr

Our guest speaker on Friday morning, August 2, 2019, was Chicagoan Bruce Koff of the All Aboard USA Committee, an arm of Rainbow Railroad (**www.rainbowrailroad.com**), a Toronto-based, international organization whose sole mission is to rescue LGBTQI individuals fleeing state-sponsored or -enabled persecution and bring them to safety.

Koff's message to us was to urge our support for Rainbow Railroad's efforts to help persecuted LGBTQI individuals get away from danger. Over 70 countries across the world, he noted, have anti-homosexuality laws, and in many more countries, the governments, media, police, and religious institutions routinely discriminate on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity. In at least ten countries, same-sex intimacy can be punishable by death! Most of the time, persons who might want to seek refuge abroad can find nobody to trust for help, since family (even if they are sympathetic) and friends are likely to place themselves in danger of prosecution if they are seen to support sexual "criminals."

In the spirit of the American Underground Railroad of the 1850s, Rainbow Railroad was founded in 2006 to help effect solutions to this world-wide refuge crisis. Since then Rainbow Railroad volunteers have helped over 600 desperate individuals to escape to safety – not only with emigration documents and travel funds, but also with arrival and settlement referral, resources, and advice for asylum claimants. And it's an expensive process; Koff noted that the cost comes close to $10,000 for each individual rescue.

Last year Rainbow Railroad received requests for aid from over 1300 people in 90 countries, and it is expecting double that number this year. With amazing community support, the charity has been able to increase its budget significantly each year, and to aid ever larger numbers: for 2019 their goal is to help well over 200 with a budget of $2,700,000. "You know what to do to become part of Rainbow Railroad's vital operations," he said. ***And you can listen, or re-listen, to an audio recording of Bruce Koff's presentation on the Rainbow Railroad by clicking on the Speakers tab at our Web site, <ffbciowa.org>.***

Photo by Gary Moore

Dave Robbins introduces our June speaker, Bruce Koff, from the Rainbow Railroad organization.

Photo by Gary Moore

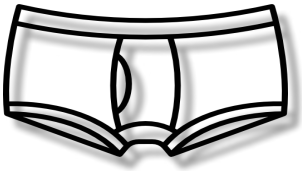
Bruce Koff introduced himself as the grandson of four refugees from European political oppression – so he knows from persecution! He is a lifelong resident of Chicago, except for the four years he spent at Grinnell College, where he majored in political science and Russian, and received his bachelor's degree in 1975. In 1979, he earned his Master's of Social Work from the Jane Addams College of Social Work of the University of Illinois in Chicago. Already in 1976 he had begun volunteering for the LGBT social-service agency Gay Horizons (now the Center on Halsted), and he served for six years (1984-1990) as the agency's first full-time, paid executive director. (The Center is now the largest LGBT community center in the Midwest, serving over 1,000 persons *per day*.) In the field of mental health, Koff maintains a full-time private practice, with a significant outreach to gay and lesbian clientele. He has served as clinical director of the Evelyn Hooker Center for Gay and Lesbian Mental Health (affiliated with the University of Chicago); teaches at the Illinois School of Professional Psychology; and continues to volunteer with Horizons' Psychotherapy Program. In 1994 Koff was inducted into the Chicago LGBT Hall of Fame.

In addition to his work at Horizons, Koff has actively served the gay and lesbian community both in Chicago and in larger arenas, through his involvement with a variety of boards, committees, and organizations, including the National Organization for Victim Assistance's Committee on Gay/Lesbian Victim Concerns, the AIDS Foundation of Chicago's Service Providers Council, the United Way of Chicago's Priority Grants Committee, the Mayor's Committee on Youth Concerns, Teen Living Programs, AIDS Walk Chicago, the Chicago Area Lesbian and Gay Domestic Violence Project, Gray Pride, and the Grinnell College Alumni Association. In addition, Koff was for many years a member of the Windy City Gay Chorus. Bruce Koff can be contacted at Rainbow Railroad, 5733 North Sheridan Road, #11D, Chicago IL 60660, telephone (773) 550-0129 and <bruce.koff@gmail.com>.

"When you reduce life to black and white, you never see rainbows."

Rachel Houston

Briefs & Shorts:



Thanks to **Dave Robbins** for introducing our August speaker, Bruce Koff, a spokesperson for the international organization Rainbow Railroad. Thanks also to **Jordan Duesenberg** for his work on the FFBC website. Thanks to **Wade Petersen** for his work as our newsletter production editor. Thanks to **Ryan Weidner** for his work as our technology guru. *Thanks to all our contributors to the monthly newsletter!*

A special thank-you to those FFBC members and friends who have chosen to designate FFBC through the Donor Direct program of United Way. The contributions through United Way are tax deductible. Those who have chosen this means of supporting FFBC have gone to the trouble of completing their United Way campaign worksheet by designating FFBC as the beneficiary of their generosity. FFBC is an eligible recipient of such funding designations.

The next copy deadline for the FFBC newsletter will be **September 16, 2019**. If you have something on your mind, put it on paper and get it to me by the copy deadline. It'll be interesting, good therapy, or both. Caring is sharing.

Be sure to peruse the front table for a book you might like to read. **Book donations are always welcome.** Thanks to **Scott Kuknyo** for helping coordinate the book exchange.

Consider a tax-deductible contribution to the FFBC scholarship fund, or a tax exempt testamentary gift, or both. We awarded eight scholarships this year. We've awarded more than **$275,000** in scholarships to deserving Iowa high school students. Our annual fundraising drive is currently in progress.

"My cousin's gay. He went to London only to find out that Big Ben was a clock."

Rodney Dangerfield

Pete Shelley: Homosuperior

By Jordan Duesenberg

When I was in college, I discovered 70s glam rock for the first time, and was blown away by artists like David Bowie, T. Rex, Mott the Hoople, and New York Dolls (among many others). The music immediately transported me into a decade I had longed for yet never got to personally experience. It was transcendent, opulent, and most noticeably pretty damn gay. The artists themselves did everything to blur the lines of sexuality in this time – the men wore makeup, some performed in drag, mostly everyone wore extravagent outfits, and Bowie even came out as bisexual during this time (although he would later backtrack this later in his life). Beyond Bowie (who is probably my all-time favorite musician), I latched onto the New York Dolls the most and started getting more into Punk music. Although the New York Dolls were more of a Proto-Punk band, given that the Punk movement didn't kick off until mid-to-late 70s, it was my entryway into the genre that I always associated as this super macho genre and here I was learning about it from guys who decked themselves out to in drag makeup and performed on stage in dresses from time to time. Sure, I listened to the Sex Pistols, and you better believe I lived (and still live) for the Clash, but it's Buzzcocks that always stood out most to me. Buzzcocks' most famous song, is "Ever Fallen in Love (with Someone You Shouldn't've?)" – but what a lot of people may not know is that lead singer and guitarist Pete Shelley was openly bisexual, which definitely makes this song a queer anthem!

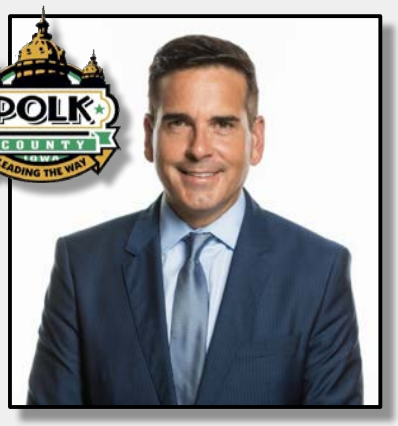
Pete Shelley formed Buzzcocks with friend and musician Howard Devoto in 1975. Their first show would be opening up for the Sex Pistols in Manchester in 1976. Devoto would leave the band in 1977 and Shelley took over as lead guitarist and vocalist and the band took off, releasing three albums and a number of hit singles, most notably "Have You Ever Fallen in Love (With Someone You Shouldn't've)". What's also so notable with this song is that Shelley was bisexual and made no attempts to hide it, so you could definitely interpret this song as a song about queer desire. Shelley rarely used "he" or "she" pronouns in his songs; instead, he left his songs ambiguous about who he was singing about, which is super progressive especially for the time. What also separated Buzzcocks from other punk contemporaries was their more melodic, dare I say Popish, way of constructing songs. They also had a more clean cut look compared to other bands of the genre. My personal favorite Buzzcocks song is "Why Can't I Touch It?"

Buzzcocks broke up in 1981, but Pete Shelley was quick to chase a solo career where he would further experiment with his sound and also became an even bigger queer icon. Shelley had another band on the side of Buzzcocks called The Tiller Boys (which also broke up about the same time as Buzzcocks) which showcased more complicated post-punk sounds. Shelley would continue down this path, and start incorporating more electronic sounds into his music. He was also more vocal about his bisexuality at this point in his life. His first and most notable solo song "Homosapien," happens to also be his gayest. It's 80s synth pop to the finest degree, with lyrics about cruising and same-sex attraction. Notably the song was banned from BBC for the suggestive lyrics "Homosuperior in my interior," which I think is absolutely hilarious. MTV however played the hell out of the video, which pushed Shelley to new career heights so the BBC ban didn't really have much of an affect. Personally, I prefer the "Homosapien (Dub)" because it's even sleazier and more fun to dance to, but you can't go wrong with either one. Actually his whole second album, *Homosapien*, is awesome and highly recommended for anyone who likes New Wave or bands like Heaven 17, Simple Minds, New Order, The Human League, or Gary Numan. He would release two more albums in the 80s, *XL1* in 1983 a solid New Wave follow-up, and *Heaven & the Sea* in 1986, but neither took as many chances as Shelley took with *Homosapien*.

Pete Shelley would get back with Buzzcocks in 1989 and perform with them on occasion throughout his life. He married a woman but always identified as a bisexual man until he died of a heart attack on December 6, 2018. While Pete Shelley might not be a name that everybody knows, his contributions to music and bisexual/queer visibility were lightyears ahead of his time.

What Can We Do About Gun Violence in America?

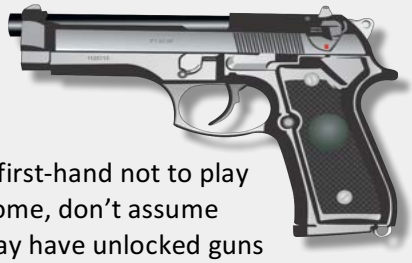
By Polk County Supervisor Matt McCoy



Americans have witnessed increasing carnage on the streets of our communities. The recent shootings in El Paso and Dayton have awakened America to this harsh reality. This has led to a broader and more serious discussion of gun violence in America. I want to share some carefully chosen statistics to help you better understand the scope of gun violence. I hate using statistics because we are really talking about human life, and often stats diminish the tragedies occurring in America.

Since 1998, gun violence has claimed the lives of 600,000 Americans. About 80,000 Americans are treated in hospitals each year for survivable gun wounds. Each day 85 Americans use a gun to commit suicide. Most of our gun violence is not mass shootings but individual shootings occurring in our communities each day. For simple comparison purposes, the Vietnam War killed more than 58,000 Americans between 1955 and 1975. I often use this statistic when talking about gun violence since individuals on the streets of America have more powerful weapons and more powerful ammunition than the American soldiers carried in Vietnam. Firearms are everywhere in America. We live in a country that has more guns than people. Estimates of more than 300 million firearms are likely understated since families have collected guns for generations with poor records supplied.

Firearm injuries are the cause of death of 18 children and young adults daily. In fact, young people make up 38% of all firearm deaths and non-fatal injuries recorded each year in America. More than 75% of guns used in suicide attempts and unintentional injuries are stored in homes of a relative or friend. It is estimated that 55% of US homes with children have an unlocked firearm in the home. Seventy-three percent of children under the age of nine reported knowing the location of mom and dad's guns. More alarmingly, 36% admitted they had handled the gun when mom and dad were not around. Most accidental shooting deaths among children occur in the home and most of these deaths occur when children are playing with an unsecured loaded gun.



I propose that we do the following to deal with gun violence: restore cuts in mental health programs, remove the stigmas related to individuals who seek treatment for depression and anxiety, and improve services including suicide prevention at the local and state level.

- We should begin teaching gun safety in our schools so children learn first-hand not to play with guns in their home. Just because you don't have a gun in your home, don't assume your child is safe. If a child plays or spends nights with friends they may have unlocked guns in their home.
- Adopt standards for prevention of gun violence. Communities need to put programs in place that are workable, scalable, and non-judgmental. Gun violence is a preventable public health issue and should be treated as such. Hold community forums and conversations around gun violence.
- Establish a national uniform background check for all gun sales. No person should buy a gun without first going through a criminal check. A waiting period of 10 days should be established as part of this process.
- Ban the sale of assault-style rifles. This would include the AR-15 and AK-47. Since Republicans lifted the ban in 1998 of these weapons, more than 8 million of them have been sold in America. Mass shootings using these weapons have increased more than 237% since 1998.
- Create a maximum size of magazine for semi-automatic weapons. A maximum size magazine should not exceed 15 bullets. Ensure serious penalties for those that exceed this size of magazine through the sale, manufacturing or shipment of these large-scale magazines.

Our future depends upon electing reasonable people to pass reasonable laws to ensure the best outcomes for Americans. If you share my belief, join me in helping elect more like-minded elected officials who believe that our citizens, young and old, deserve to live in a country where their lives are not threatened by increased gun violence.

Scary Stories To Tell in the Dark

A Film Review by Mark Turnage

The original ***Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark*** anthologies by Alvin Schwartz with iconic artwork by Stephen Gammell, continue to be a staple in hometown libraries and have their own literary niche in horror the same way Franklin W. Dixon's ***Hardy Boys*** do in young adult mystery. Adapting an anthology into film is a challenge in captivation and coherence, making each separate story compelling enough for the audience to stay hooked, while weaving a thematic thread that connects them all together into one collective work. Though director André Øvredal's tale has some issues with narrative cohesion, ***Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark*** is faithful to the source material and provides genuinely terrifying monsters, suspense and story influence courtesy of producer Guillermo del Toro (***Pan's Labyrinth***).

The film's historical setting is the first clue of del Toro's influence: the small industry town of Mill Valley, Pennsylvania, during the 1968 Presidential elections. Ramon (Michael Garza), a Hispanic teenager new to town, is a connection to both past and present cultural realities in his encounters with racism and the town police chief, who concludes their dialogue at the town's auto repair shop by telling Ramon to "go back to where he came from." It'd feel a bit too on-the-nose if this film didn't wrap production in November 2018; instead, it feels creepily modern. On his drive into town, Ramon passes a block where Nixon campaign posters are defaced with Nazi swastikas. Del Toro is famous for framing his fantasy stories alongside true history, yet the first act's setup of all-too-real social issues become background noise rather than a thematic force as the film progresses. It's a disappointing reversal of del Toro's other films, where the real monsters are people, not fantastic creatures.

It's established that Ramon is harboring a secret, and a chance meeting with the school bullies introduces him to bookish teenager and horror nerd Stella (Zoe Margaret Colletti) and her friends Augie (Gabriel Rush) and Chuck (Austin Zajur). Together they explore the deserted Bellows family mansion, and Stella discovers a book of scary stories written by Sarah Bellows, a reputed witch responsible for the deaths of several Mill Valley children throughout its history. When new stories begin manifesting in the book after Stella takes it home, they summon horrifying monsters that hunt down Stella and her friends one by one, straight from their childhood fears, and an anthology of stories is compressed into a singular narrative using the sordid Bellows family history.

It works in the sense that the monsters are both faithfully recreated from Gammell's original artwork, and use practical effects instead of CGI, with only a couple notable exceptions. And oh, are they scary: a moving scarecrow, a zombie contortionist, and a swollen froglike woman with imagery evoking Hieronymus Bosch are just a few of these terrors. For a PG-13 film, ***Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark*** pushes the envelope of that rating without resorting to gore or even much blood—it's the execution of the monsters and their victims' deaths that are truly bone-chilling. It's here, too, that ***Scary Stories*** tries to be both a PG-13 mystery film with a Spielberg-ian Nancy Drew component and a borderline R-rated horror film with social themes as scary as its own monsters. It does both well enough, yet in doing so, it dilutes the strength of its own narrative, and one wonders what kind of film it would be if it were more cohesive with its overall themes: racism, societal horrors past and present, and being thrust into adulthood by your own childhood demons.

See it when it comes to video on a full moon around Halloween.

Movie Reviews

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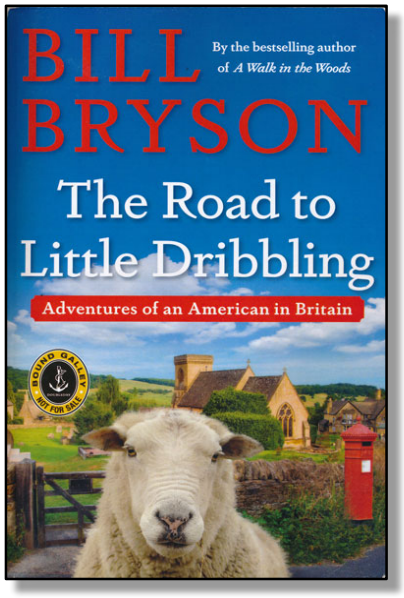
The Road to Little Dribbling

By Bill Bryson
A Book Review by Steve Person



If you have never read a Bill Bryson book, it is time for you to start. He is a prolific writer and can reel off books of amazing intellect and research—*The Mother Tongue* being a case in point or works of sarcastic splendor—*The Lost Continent,* an incisive look at the United States after an extensive car trip across this land of ours. In that book, Bryson begins by saying, "I'm from Des Moines. Somebody has to be." You get the point.

Twenty years before the publication of *The Road to Little Dribbling*, Bryon wrote *Notes from a Small Island*, an account of his walking tour around the circumference of Great Britain. (A note: Great Britain includes the lands of England, Scotland, and Wales. The United Kingdom is the official name of the country and includes England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. The British Isles refers to Great Britain and Ireland. Confused? You are not alone).

In *Dribbling* Bryon drew a line across the map of Great Britain from Cape Wrath in Scotland to Bognor Regis on the south coast of England. He named it the Bryson Line. His original idea was to stick to places along this line, but as he points out in the introduction, "It would mean, if I took it literally, going through people's houses and yards, tramping across trackless fields, and fording rivers, which was clearly crazy…but I could certainly use the Bryson Line as a kind of beacon, to guide my way,"

Bryson spent most of his adult life in England, arriving there at age 20. As of the writing of this book, he was 63. As noted earlier, he is from Des Moines. I went to Roosevelt High School with his older sister, Betty. I didn't know her well but shared an art class with her. So, who cares?

The author makes astute comments about his adopted country commenting on everything from British cooking to architecture. In speaking of the town of Eastbourne, he says, "The view over the town's sweeping seafront with its golden beach and scallops of advancing waves are very fine, too, though marred by a single high-rise apartment house called South Cliff Tower, which stands distractingly in the foreground. It's a charmless building that should never have been allowed, but there you are. The world is full of shitty things that should never have happened. Look at Sean Hannity." How I loved that observation!

His criticism of certain British institutions, such as the National Trust, I found somewhat disingenuous. He railed at the Trust's picky handling of many of Britain's treasure houses and properties but then re-instated his membership after visiting Calke Abbey in Derbyshire, a country house left in its dilapidated condition as a sort of homage to the 18th century. As a member of the National Trust, I have been to Calke Abbey, and it is by far the least favorite of the dozens of Trust properties I have been fortunate to see. I have been to about 80 percent of the places Bryson writes about in this book, so I rather enjoyed most of his insights. It is certainly worth the read.