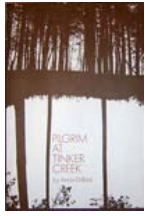


## Pilgrim at Tinker Creek by Annie Dillard

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Surely the most spiritual and meditative of the books in this series, Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* won the 1975 Pulitzer Prize for general nonfiction. Her solitary "pilgrimage" along the creek that borders her property in the Blue Ridge Mountains near Roanoke, Virginia, does not resemble that of Chaucer's Canterbury pilgrims, who appear to have been more attracted to communal recreation than to serious reflection on nature and the understanding of the self. But in the free play of her mind over what she sees and investigates, Dillard does enjoy a sort of recreation. Whether we read the book as religious or mystical, perhaps even specifically Christian, may not matter. Certainly she is as likely to cite Thoreau, the *Koran*, or Pliny as she is to quote the *Bible*. Very much of this book reflects what Dillard sees, what she teaches herself to discern in the world around her; she regards herself not as a scientist, but as an "explorer." The second chapter is entitled "Seeing." Reflecting on the praying mantis and other insects, she notes, "Fish gotta swim and bird gotta fly; insects, it seems, gotta do one horrible thing after another" (63). But just twenty pages later we encounter a very different voice: "What I call innocence is the spirit's unself-conscious state at any moment of pure devotion to any object" (82). Although she uses various kinds of humor throughout, Dillard concludes, "Divinity is not playful. The universe was not made in jest but in solemn incomprehensible earnest" (270). One must either "ignore it, or see," she observes. Some books may be read casually; this one requests to be read carefully.

### Author Information



Born Meta Ann Doak in 1945 to affluent parents in Pittsburgh, [Annie Dillard](#) recorded her girlhood experiences in *An American Childhood* (1987). Her parents were tolerant and open-minded, but she proved rebellious in high school. Dillard prospered at Hollins College (B.A., 1967), where she studied English, creative writing, and religion. She married one of her writing teachers, R.H.W. [Richard] Dillard, who has authored more than half a dozen books of poetry. They later divorced, and she has since remarried and is the mother of a daughter born in 1984. She received her master's degree at Hollins in 1968, writing a thesis on Henry David Thoreau, whose thinking and writing has profoundly influenced her work. Dillard began writing *Pilgrim of Tinker Creek* while recovering from a nearly fatal case of pneumonia in 1971. Following receipt of the Pulitzer Prize in 1975, Dillard taught for three years at Western Washington University. She taught subsequently at Wesleyan University in Middletown, Connecticut, where she is an emeritus professor of creative writing. Her dozen published books include *Tickets for a Prayer Wheel* (1974), poems; *Holy the Firm* (1977), narrative nonfiction; *Living by Fiction* (1982), which she

describes as “unlicensed literary theory”; *The Living* (1992), an epic novel set in the Pacific Northwest; and most recently a novel set on Cape Cod, *The Maytrees* (2007), which has been praised for its “stark and lyrical awareness of the profundity of the physical world.”

## Discussion Questions

1. At one point Dillard writes, “I am . . . passionately interested in where I am” (128). Does it seem to you that this is what she asks of us as readers? Do you think she succeeds in that aim? Where in this book do you find that your interests in where you are and what lies about to be most fully aroused? That is, where does Dillard succeed in making you want to put down her book, take a walk outside, and look about you?
2. In the chapter entitled “Intricacy” Dillard asserts, “That there are so many details seems to be the most important and visible fact about the creation” (129). “It’s all in the details,” we sometimes say, jokingly. This book is teeming with intricate details. What might be the drawback in that? What are the advantages?
3. One might say this book is dominated by verbs of seeing (see/saw, look, watch, notice) and by the apposite nouns (scene, view, eye, light). “It’s all a matter of keeping my eyes open,” she observes early in her book (17). Can you locate two or three passages where such language predominates? What do you suppose is Dillard’s intention? How does she get from the visual to the visionary?
4. In her chapter on fecundity Dillard asks herself (and us) what it is about that subject that “so appalls.” She has just awakened from a nightmare that involved mating Luna moths and a bed full of fish swarming “in a viscid slime” (160). Many episodes in this book involve procreation and they appear to be at least equally balanced by scenes of death, like the memorable one early on in which a giant water bug devours a frog. What do you think she is getting at here?
5. Does it seem to you that Dillard emphasizes the beauty in nature, or something else (not necessarily its opposite)? In *A River Runs through It* Norman Maclean describes the brown trout as “being beautiful by being partly ugly.” Where do you think you might see evidence of that sort of attitude in this book?
6. What are, for you, the most memorable episodes in this book? Do they possess any features in common? Do you find yourself drawn more, for example, to the episodes involving insects, or trees, or birds, or maybe muskrats? In short, when Dillard is writing at her best, as you see it, what sort of thing is she saying? What is she seeing or thinking about?