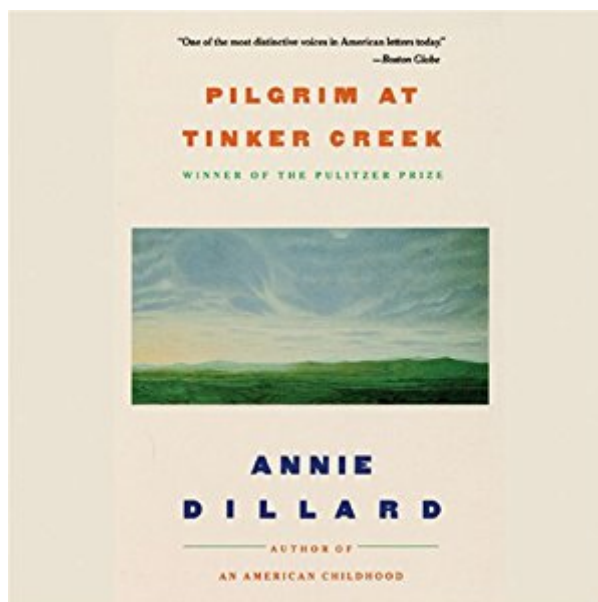


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Pilgrim At Tinker Creek



Synopsis

Pilgrim at Tinker Creek is the story of a dramatic year in Virginia's Roanoke Valley. Annie Dillard sets out to see what she can see. What she sees are astonishing incidents of "beauty tangled in a rapture with violence." Her personal narrative highlights one year's exploration on foot in the Virginia region through which Tinker Creek runs. In the summer, Dillard stalks muskrats in the creek and contemplates wave mechanics; in the fall, she watches a monarch butterfly migration and dreams of Arctic caribou. She tries to con a coot; she collects pond water and examines it under a microscope. She unties a snake skin, witnesses a flood, and plays King of the Meadow with a field of grasshoppers. The result is an exhilarating tale of nature and its seasons. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I read this book every ten years or so. It may well be my favorite; it's right up there, anyway. (At my age, picking a favorite book is dangerous: I've probably forgotten about half the strong candidates.) It is, if you will, a connected series of "nature" essays. Each one is strong, and can stand alone, but all are bound by many threads into a larger whole. Annie Dillard moved to Tinker Creek, in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia, in her mid-twenties (or, at any rate, this book achieved final published form when she was twenty-nine). Like Thoreau, she came to the woods to "keep a meteorological journal of the mind". Indeed, "Walden" is the model: a person of reflective tendency steps out of the stream of life, as it were, to go to the woods, just to see what he or she can see. It turns out that

one's own mind is a large part of the scenery when one gets away from the rough-and-tumble of society. Big mysteries are at stake here; it is somehow appropriate that looking with all attention at minute creatures and giving oneself over momentarily to ephemeral events provide clues. Why is nature cruel? Why is there beauty? Could these be related? I put it baldly, but these and other questions are more the expression on her writing's face than the subject of it. There are details, and funny descriptions, and a rifling through the wonders of her library of naturalists. But, always, there is a person doing all this: walking, having a sandwich, creeping up on a copperhead for a closer look (after patting her pocket to make sure the snakebite kit is there), or just lying in bed remembering a horrifying or glorious experience of that particular day, in the woods, on the banks of Tinker Creek. Have I mentioned the quality of the writing? It's glorious.

I was assigned to read Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* for my AP English III class. We had just finished reading Henry David Thoreau's *Walden, or Life In The Woods* a few weeks prior, and our teacher had told us that Dillard's writing style was similar to Thoreau's. Now, I'm not a big Thoreau fan (as my test grade proves), so this was not consoling to me. Over spring break I picked up the book and began to read it. She starts simply "I used to have a cat, an old fighting tom, who would jump through the open window by my head in the middle of the night and land on my chest." From that sentence on, I was hooked. There are two parts to this book, a *via positiva*, and a *via negativa*. The beginning is filled with life, positive imagery, and numerous quotes from Thoreau and van Gogh. Dillard covers her perspectives on Heaven and earth, seeing, winter, and "the fixed" in this section using such qualities as listed before. The *via negativa* begins somewhere in chapter five or six. It creeps in, slowly taking over the positive images and feelings, until you finally find that you are reading about children abusing newts in a state park, or caterpillars walking in the same circle around the same vase for seven full days, because their leader was taken away without their knowledge. Death is a reoccurring theme here. A main question in my class was what happened to make her change styles? Was it planned, or was it the effect of some event--the death of a friend or loved one perhaps? Either way, we read on through the spring and summer, and into the fall. She leads us into a flood, where she says, "I like crossing the dam. If I fall, I might not get up again...I face this threat every time I cross the dam, and it is always exhilarating."

Dillard describes herself as "a wanderer with a background in theology and a penchant for quirky facts." Published thirty years ago, "*Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*" is a pleasant if somewhat aimless journal that combines a rather jejune spirituality with lots of those "quirky facts"--anecdotes and

observations that flavor the accounts of her wanderings through the fields, meadows, and woods surrounding her home. Monitoring a flood caused by a hurricane, stalking an unwary muskrat, tracking the life cycle of a mantis--little escapes her attention, and she supplements her explorations with fascinating tidbits she has gathered from her readings. Although the book ostensibly cycles through the seasons, from winter through summer and back again, her recollections are randomly presented, if organized very loosely by theme. I'll add my two cents to the Dillard vs. Thoreau debate. While many readers--especially high school students--don't see much of a resemblance (mostly because Dillard is so much easier to read), Dillard herself invites comparison by mentioning Thoreau's work half a dozen times. Her style, like Thoreau's, is informal, and her powers of observation are keen. Yet, in my view, there is one important difference between the two writers: Dillard appears to have no interest with the human issues that preoccupied Thoreau: race relations, political activism, egalitarianism--and even environmentalism. In this book especially, Dillard rarely strays from "nature writing," with the exception of a few short passages pondering the role of the "creator" and the place of humans in the universe and one ill-conceived section in which she mangles quantum physics in metaphorical support of some insights on "mysticism.

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