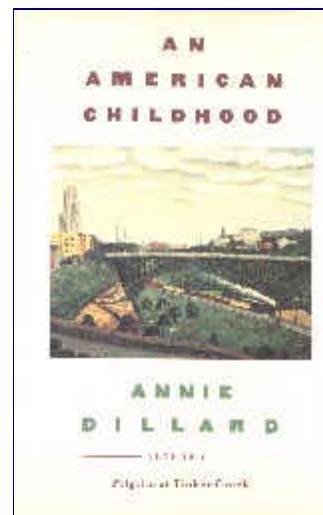


Site Map: [MAIN](#) / [A Reader's Journal, Vol. 2](#) [Webpage](#) [Printer Ready](#)

A READER'S JOURNAL

An American Childhood by Annie Dillard

Published by Harper & Row in 1987
A Book Review by Bobby Matherne ©2002



[page 3] When everything else has gone from my brain — the President's name, the state capitals, the neighborhoods where I lived, and then my own name and what it

was on earth I sought, and at length the faces of my friends, and finally the faces of my family — when all this has dissolved, what will be left, I believe, is topology: the dreaming memory of land as it lay this way and that.

In this wonderful book Annie Dillard writes about the "dreaming memory of the land" and conjures up her past in this reader as his very own "dreaming memory." A memory of Ben Franklin's Pennsylvania when "a squirrel could run the long length of Pennsylvania without ever touching the ground." A memory of her beloved Pittsburgh in the 1950's.

If a book like this one ever gets in your head, you just gotta set out to see the territory that it portrays. *Life on the Mississippi* got into her father's head and he had to set out down the river. He never made it all the way to New Orleans, but his daughter grew up, woke up, and found herself at home in Pittsburgh. In the following metaphor she describes how consciousness converged with her at 10 years old:

[page 11] Like any child, I slid into myself perfectly fitted, as a diver meets her reflection in a pool. Her fingertips enter the fingertips on the water, her wrists slide up her arms. The diver wraps herself in her reflection wholly, sealing it at the toes, and wears it as she climbs rising from the pool, and ever after.

She was repulsed by the limp, coarse skin on her parents and grandparents.

[page 24] Adults were coming apart, but they never noticed nor minded. My revulsion was rude, so I hid it. Besides, we could never rise to the absolute figural splendor they alone could on occasion achieve. Our beauty was a mere absence of decrepitude; their beauty, when they had it, was not passive but earned; it was grandeur; it was a party to power, and to artifice, even, and to knowledge. Our beauty was, in the long run, merely elfin.

Annie grew to love books, particularly ones that swept her away. "When you open a book, anything can happen" her library's poster proclaimed. Some books were bombs that exploded in your head and others duds, she tells us. The only way to find out was "to throw yourself at them headlong, one by one." (page 83) Some of them "fell apart halfway through" such as *Jude the Obscure*: "Halfway through its author forgot how to write." But Dillard doesn't forget how to write — this book stayed at the top of my fun-book read-list for the summer, even though a six-week re-modeling of my house intervened to separate us. On page 85 she wrote, "Books swept me away, one after the other, this way and that." Below her words I wrote this short note:

**Books sweep me away
carry me on a wave of surging delight or suspense.**

Books start out swell, but often, like promising waves,

go flat just as the fun begins.

How wonderful the book that sweeps me away to myself again.

On the next page, her first sentence beckoned me to complete it with my own words:

**"The interior life expands and fills,"
like the inside of a book, a work in progress.**

**First blank, then gradually its inner life expands
and fills the blank pages until it is ready
to release itself into the world.**

The story of the Polyphemus moth is a central metaphor for Annie in her growing up. The cocoon in the mason jar opens to reveal this large moth, as big as a small mouse, whose wings could not unfurl because of the small jar, and "they hardened while still crumbled from the cocoon." They took the jar outside to let the moth go, and it began walking pendulously down the asphalt driveway on its tiny six legs, its broad wing-clumps heaving as it went. Later, grown-up and graduated, Annie remembered the moth as she walked down that driveway for the last time. Much of her time in school was like the moth's time in the mason jar.

The moth story reminded me of Rudolf Steiner's claim that the age of maturity is now about 27 years old — that is — unless one makes extraordinary efforts past the age of 27, one never matures further. Now I envision such a 27 years-matured, 63 year-old lawyer, doctor, or judge as a moth who never finished unfurling its wings, and I watch as the moth meets with its crumpled-wing peers in the 19th Hole of the country club, fresh from a six-legged crawl around the golf course.

If you enjoy pouncing on new words like *swivet*, *plinth*, and *quondam*, you'll love this book — as new words are apt to pop-up in unexpected places. Try using all three of them in a sentence just for kicks. "If your *quondam* friends get you in a *swivet*, go sit on a large *plinth* in the shade to cool off." If you enjoy a sparkling metaphor such as, "Now feelings lasted so long they left stains," you'll love this book.

Annie quotes C. S. Lewis about suffering: "There is plenty of suffering, but no one ever suffers the sum of it." I misread it as "no one suffers the lack of it." And the thought occurred to me: Ah! "No one suffers from the lack of suffering!" This is a marvelous self-evident tautology that qualifies for addition to Matherne's Rules. C. S. Lewis suffered a lot about suffering and I prefer to suffer from a lack of it.

**[page 250] And still I break up through the skin of awareness a thousand times a day, as dolphins
burst through seas, and dive again, and rise, and dive.**

Yes, Annie Dillard still breaks up through the ocean-skin of awareness and splashes us with wet, salty life — she makes us "Feel life wipe our face like a big brush." (page 249)

Jack Kerouac in *On the Road* found a little bar in Mexico where, for once, he found the music loud enough. In New Orleans, the place Annie's father wanted to go, but never made it to, he wondered, "In New Orleans — if you could get to New Orleans — will the music be loud enough?"

Yes, and even more.

