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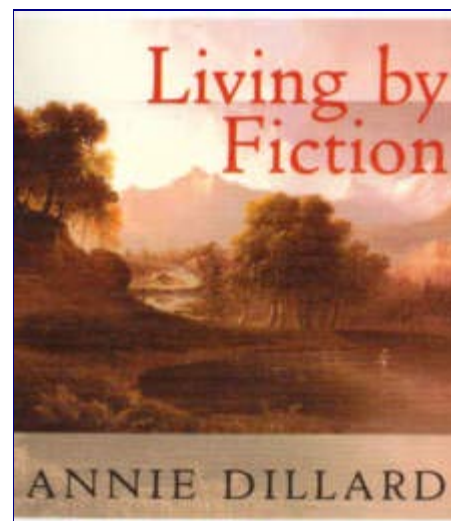
A READER'S JOURNAL

Living by Fiction

by
Annie Dillard

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A Book Review by Bobby Matherne
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Do you read and love fiction, but

always skip any prefatory notes such as Prefaces, Dedications, Prologues, and Introductions when reading non-fiction? Too bad. This next quote appears from a dedication made by the author on a page without a visible page number, directly facing the half-title page, without a title adorning it. It is written for you and you missed it.

[page 5] This book is dedicated to people whose names are, for the most part, unknown to me. They are men and women across the country who love literature and give it their lives: who respect literature's capacity to mean, who perhaps teach, who perhaps write fiction or criticism, or poetry, and who above all read and reread the world's good books. These are people who, if you told them the world would end in ten minutes, would try to decide — quickly — what to read.

Thank you for the dedication, Annie Dillard. You don't know me, but I know your works and have loved them. My goal has been for the past thirty years, since I became a writer full-time, to buy more books in a month's time, than I can read in a month *and* to live long enough to read them all. I daresay that I might read them all in a month, if, and that's a big "if", if I did nothing else but read them; unfortunately life gets in the way with its importunities of eating, sleeping, meeting with friends, cooking, taking photographs, and traveling, all of which strive to take me away from reading, importunities which I fight by carrying a ready volume with me, already dog-eared from a reading in progress to fill any gaps in time when I'm waiting for a friend to arrive for lunch, etc. For twenty years, I read while driving my automobile, safely, without an accident, and, by doing so, managed to scrape time for reading while commuting an hour each way to work during the horrendous 7-days-a-week, 12-hours-a-day shifts during outages at a nuclear plant. If an announcement had come that the world was to end in ten minutes during one of those commutes, I would have already been reading.

Metaphysics in a teacup! What a lovely metaphor, calling up the ubiquitous Gypsy Tea Rooms, Madame Rosie and the ilk, of an innocent bygone age, before flow-through tea bags. Sip a cup of leaf and get your fortune conjured up from the

tea leaves left in your teacup, all for pocket change. A time of *Shave and a Haircut, Two Bits* and *Get Your Fortune Told, Fifty Cents*.

[page 11] This is, ultimately, a book about the world. It inquires about the world's meaning. It attempts to do unlicensed metaphysics in a teacup. The teacup at hand, in this case, is contemporary fiction.

Why read fiction to think about the world? You may, like most of us most of the time, read fiction for other things. You may read fiction to enjoy the multiplicity and dazzle of the vivid objects it presents to the imagination; to hear its verbal splendor and admire its nimble narrative; to enter lives not your own; to feel, on one hand, the solemn stasis and immutability of the work as enclosed art object — beginning and ending the same way every time you read it, as though a novel were a diagram inscribed forever under the vault of heaven — and to feel, on the other hand, the plunging force of time compressed in its passage, and that compressed passage like a river's pitch crowded with scenes and scenery and actions and characters enlarged and rushing headlong down together. You may, I say, enjoy fiction for these sensations and turn to nonfiction for thought.



What a magnificent sentence, the penultimate one of the above passage! She uses this sentence to set up the last sentence, but her dichotomy between fiction and nonfiction is belied by her own skillful evocation of sensations in her ever-thoughtful nonfiction, such as [Holy the Firm](#).

If your preference is non-fiction and the life of thought, as mine is, Annie says "one day you will find yourself on the receiving end of an 'idea for a story.'" (Page 12) That happened to me when I discovered the way in which dolphins communicate with one another, by receiving and speaking 3-D holographic images, and it seemed that writing a fictional novel to describe my insight was preferable to some dry non-fictional essay. My journey to the production of my novel, [The Spizznet File](#), certainly led me to appreciate the work of fiction writers in a way I hadn't before, exactly as she predicts.

[page 12] Then you will understand, in what I fancy might be a blinding flash, that all this passionate thinking is what fiction is about, that all those other fiction writers started as you did, and are laborers in the same vineyard.

Narrative collage, as Annie describes it in the passage below, was a new term to me, but it brought up memories of a poem I wrote about what it is "To Be a Writer" in my review of [Building Great Sentences](#). I was surprised and delighted by the audience response when I read it in public — the presuppositions and juxtaposition of images created spontaneous outbursts of laughter as each phrase of the collage was

layered upon the previous one. It was a "world shattered" perhaps, but with the express purpose of creating a bit of fun.

[page 24] The use of narrative collage, then, enables a writer to recreate, if he wishes, a world shattered, and perhaps senseless, and certainly strange. It may emphasize the particulate nature of everything. We experience a world unhinged. Nothing temporal, spatial, perceptual, social or moral is fixed.

New fiction styles since the early 1900s are bewildering at times, confronting us with authors who are confronted by the question, "Why are we here?", which leads to their producing novels in which we ask ourselves "Why are we reading this?"

[page 26] At any rate, our contemporary questioning of why we are here finds a fitting objective correlative in the worst of the new fictions, whose artistic recreation of our anomie, confusion, and meaninglessness elicits from us the new question, Why am I reading this?

The feeling is similar to many people's reaction to what is called Modern Art, "Why am I looking at this?" If that is the response the artist wished to elicit in viewers of his art, then he has certainly succeeded, but to what end? Do we look at art to be baffled or to enjoy a pleasant experience?

[page 27] What can a writer do when his intention is to depict seriously a boring conversation? Must he bore everybody? How should he handle a dull character, a hateful scene? (Everyone knows how the hated voice of a hated character can ruin a book.) Or, in the big time, how can a writer show, as a harmonious, artistic whole, times out of joint, materials clashing, effects without cause, life without a depth, and all history without meaning?

The answer Annie comes up with is simple: it's magic.

[page 28] Art may imitate anything but disorder. The work of art may, like a magician's act, pretend to any degree of spontaneity, randomness, or whimsey, so long as the effect of the whole is calculated and unified. No subject matter whatever prohibits a positive and unified handling.

Magritte puts limits on how one may juxtapose images, as Annie explains it so well.

[page 28] Magritte says we know birds in a cage. The image gets more interesting if we have, instead of a bird, a fish in the cage, or a shoe in the cage; "but though these images are strange they are unhappily accidental, arbitrary. It is possible to obtain a new image which will stand up to examination through having something final, something right about it: it's the image showing an egg in the cage."

In my essay, [Art is the Process of Destruction](#), I make the claim that true art is the process of destroying the sameness which exists in the current state of art, and that to do anything less is to create *kitsch*, even if it is a smoothly executed copy of a true artist's work. In literature, it also true that art is the process of destruction, according to Annie Dillard. She names modern writers like Nabokov, Borges, Beckett, Barth, and Calvino and adds:

[page 32] That other writers may produce fictional surfaces similar to theirs, but without their internal integrity, does not in any way dim their achievement. But someone must distinguish between art and mere glibness.

In other words, a reader must distinguish between true art and glib copies of true art. As soon as one notices the *copy aspect* (process) of an author, we know we are dealing with kitsch; it may be fun to read,

but it is the writing equivalent of shopping mall art, namely, *kitsch*. When we encounter the bland taste of such pieces of writing, we may look around for some *Kitschup* to spice it up, to make it palatable so we can consume it, but no spicing up will ever turn it into true art.

One of Annie's "bald assertions" on page 32 is "Art is the creation of coherent contexts." As an example she applies this assertion about coherent context to the meaning of a whale in the context of *Moby Dick*, all of which I agree with. As I explain in my essay, "Art is the destruction of coherent contexts," and that would seem to put me at odds with her. My operant phrase is "Art is the process of destruction of sameness". Her *coherent contexts*, as I understand it, refer to coherence within a particular piece of writing, which I agree is necessary. My *sameness* refers to the coherent contexts of all of the current state of art and literature. A true artist arrives when his writing or painting breaks the rules (coherent contexts) of all the present and previous artists going back to antiquity. That is the destroying of sameness which I see as the hallmark of the true artist. And such a true artist's work will have a coherent context within itself, but one which the world has not seen or experienced before in other contexts.

In the context of Cubist art and some modern writers, we find an inversion of the concepts of "deep" and "shallow". We cannot become involved deeply with their alien or grotesque creatures, axolotls and dinosaurs, so we remain shallow in our relationship to them as characters and get deeply involved with the tale itself. We find ourselves as if inside of a Cubist painting when we read authors like Calvin, Cortázar, and Roth.

[page 43] Their odd voices and viewpoints deepen our involvement in what would traditionally be considered the works' more or less invisible *surface*, the tale's teller. Yet at the same time they flatten what would traditionally be the deep part of the work, the tale itself. And so by making the deep parts shallow and the shallow parts deep, they bring to the work an interesting and powerful set of tensions, like Cubist intersecting planes.

Annie says on page 47 that in modernist fiction, "fictional objects revolve about each other and only each other, and shed on each other and only each other a lovely and intellectual light." This hints at Edna St. Vincent Millay's poem of the candle burning at both ends which will not last the night, "But, oh my foes, and ah, my friends, it gives a lovely light."

[page 48] A good story and a good representation have wide appeal. But this is a cheap shot. The more interesting comparison between storytelling in literature and representation in painting is this: that each was considered for centuries the irreducible nub of its art, and is no longer.

The lesson I get from this period of art and literature is to enjoy the lovely light they shed and know that this soon shall pass.

On pages 51 to 53, Annie discusses art which breaks the frame and mentions itself within the art work. Writing this around 1980, she missed the recent trend where this happens, in of all places, comic strips. The best examples are in Stephan Pastis "Pearls" strip. He has had his characters walk through the side panel into another comic strip, he has imported characters from a competing strip, prominently from Bil Keane's Family Circus, and made fun of Cathy after Cathy Guisewite folded her strip. In addition, Pastis' characters stomp upon his drawing desk and complain in the last panel, usually when he uses an egregious pun in the current strip. The effects of modernist fiction has even infiltrated the comics pages, but there is hope for fiction to survive the modernist trend and even thrive.

[page 65] Here are many writers of serious fiction — including the majority of writers in the Americas, Britain, and Europe whose work is widely known, as well as many other excellent and great writers as yet uncelebrated — who are writing novels and stories of depth and power, novels and stories which penetrate the world and order it, which engage us intellectually and move us emotionally, which render complex characters in

depth, treat moral concerns and issues, make free use of modernist techniques, and astonish us by the fullness and coherence of their artifice. This is still, if only by volume, the mainstream.

In the aerospace industry, when I worked for Lockheed, there were things called unk-unk's. The phrase stood for the unknown-unknowns of some project. Typical unknowns could be planned for and anticipated, but the unk-unk's came out of the blue like an earthquake or tsunami. Japan had planned for both, but the combination when it hit, wiped out their nuclear power plants because of the earthquake's size and proximity to the shore created a tsunami which overtopped the levees constructed to hold large waves back. Language also has unk-unks in it, as Annie admits.

[page 70] I cannot tell you, because I do not know, what my language prevents my knowing. Language itself is like a work of art; it selects, abstracts, exaggerates, and orders. How then could we say that language encloses and signifies phenomena, when language is a fabricated grid someone stuck in a river?

This grid is a semantic net, and like a real net set up in a river full of fish of different sizes, we can only know the fish caught in the net, not those which blithely swim through it. This is a key aspect of knowledge as postulated by A. S. Eddington in [The Philosophy of Physical Science](#). Language forms a grid across the river to catch knowable concepts, but the words of language are themselves invisible when they are being used. Another paradox. Language makes its nets out of a complex of invisible words. How so, *invisible*?

[page 71] If I write, "apple," I can make you think of a mental apple roughly analogous to the one I have in mind. But I am hard put to make you think of a certain arrangement of alphabet letters or phonemes. The word itself all but vanishes, like Vermeer's paint.

When we are talking to each other, we are in same situation as two fish when one of them says, "We are in water." The other cannot comprehend what "water" is. We live and breathe with words, both mentally and orally, paying as little attention to it as the average fish to water. It is invisible to them and more importantly, unknowable to them. They have to die or nearly so by being taken out of water to know of its existence.

One way to call attention to a word as a thing, is to coin a word, a new word that no one had heard of before. I did that with the word "Spizznet" which refers to a computer system which allows humans to speak to dolphins. Dolphins have two phonation devices, one for seeing and one for speaking. When they phonate with one, they convert the signals bounced back the way we humans do with the light bounced back to us: make a 3-D holographic image of their surroundings. Since they can repeat what they heard/saw with the other phonation device, they can speak-visual images, actually real-time movies. This process I needed a word to describe, so I coined "spizzualize" which means to speak-visualize. From that came the word, Spizznet, which is as much of a question as a word to people hearing it the first time. The word itself announces, "Something New Is Afoot".

We teach our kids *now* and they want *next*. It is a problem for colleges everywhere, in all the arts.

[page 89] Colleges and graduate schools educate both painters and writers; but art and literature curricula differ. Students infer from art history courses this notion of a cutting edge history of science, as a series of innovations, or even corrections. Worse, they can see nineteenth- and twentieth-century art history as a series of liberations, as a systematic destruction of one barrier after another. How could those who become painters resist seeking the next barricade? In contemporary practice courses, students may paint grids or make mud huts; but they certainly realize that whatever the schools teach them is what is now and not what is next, and their only hope is to be next. The historical direction is abundantly clear. It moves from representation of the spiritual

world to the secular world, from the secular world to increasingly abstracted forms, and from abstract forms to idea bare. But the line narrows, and it travels only forward. And there is nowhere to go from here.

Here's where I beg to differ with Annie assessment of where we go from here. I see a live end not a dead end. This progression from the spiritual world to the secular world has already begun to move back to the spiritual world because, rightly understood, thinking is a spiritual function. The extreme move to abstract forms and bare ideas will return like a boomerang to spiritual realities perceived by live, vivid thinking which will replace the dead abstract thinking and barren ideas. Goethe gives us his *Urpflanze* visualizations in which we are enabled to visualize plants as living forms going through stages where leaves form into flowers which create seeds for future plants. This kind of living thinking is being infused into humanity by the spiritual science of Rudolf Steiner in which he carries forward Goethe's living thinking into the twentieth century and beyond.

Annie herself could take her own advice, "That we are much informed does not mean that we are well informed." To be "in-formed" means to have ideas and concepts living inside of one. [Father Brown](#) was an expert in the area of becoming informed and used his skill in masterful feats of deduction. To become informed with the life of a plant as it goes through various stages requires a living thinking process which is highly spiritualized and represents the vanguard of a movement away from "abstract forms" and "ideas bare". Students in Waldorf Schools are a natural part of this vanguard because their early schooling through High School is based on educational principles designed by Rudolf Steiner for the whole human being.

Meanwhile, in the other school systems, our children are *canon fodder*, i.e., an educational canon is being taught which would lead to the "narrowed line" with "nowhere to go from" as Annie postulated on Page 89. To restate my postulate about true art, I might say "Art is the process of the destruction of the canon." Yes, students are being taught the canon, but on the sly, every new generation is dodging the destructive force of the canon!

Here she focuses on the canon in the academy and reveals the generational destruction of the canon, yes, on the sly, that is, what students are actually reading when there are no professors around.

[page 95] Let us say first that criticism keeps fiction traditional in several ways. As it influences curricula it most often defends the notion of canon and keeps students reading Trollope and Fielding, Hardy and Dickens, Cooper and Hawthorne. Students also study Joyce, Faulkner, and Woolf in the classroom, but they usually read Nabokov and Pynchon on their own, just as our professors a generation ago read Joyce on the sly.

Fine writing, by that expression, I think immediately of Annie Dillard and her books, so I would give credence to whatever opinion she expresses about fine writing.

[page 105, 106] Fine writing, with its elaborated imagery and powerful rhythms, has the beauty of both complexity and grandeur. It also has as its distinction a magnificent power to penetrate. It can penetrate precisely because, and only because, it lays no claims to precision. It is an energy. It sacrifices perfect control to the ambition to mean. It can penetrate very deep, piling object upon object to build a tower from which to breach the sky; it can enter with courage or bravura those fearsome realms where the end products of art meet the end products of thought, and where perfect clarity is not possible. Fine writing is not a mirror, not a window, not a document, not a surgical tool. It is an artifact and an achievement; it is at once an exploratory craft and the planet it attains; it is a testimony to the possibility of the beauty and penetration of written language.

In my youth I read every science fiction book in our local library and I can report that by the age of 15, I had entered many exploratory crafts and the planets they attained. I estimate that I spent more time on the

Moon and on Mars than I spent on Earth during this early reading period with Robert Heinlein, Theodore Sturgeon, and other classic science fiction writers of the 1940s. I no longer read the genre, but these fine writers were my launching pad to other fine writers in non-fiction and literature.

The present tense ain't what it used to be, according to Annie Dillard.

[page 110] Oddly, the eighteenth-century novelists used the present tense for immediacy. Now we have learned to use it for distance.

Here is an example the use of present tense to distance us from the real world that she gives us from John B tki in his "the footnote as medium", full of abstractions and lack of referential indices to reality, more like a Pollock-dripped canvas than a paragraph of prose:

[page 111] In the jungle of language iridescent parrots and stern anchorites flash through the visual screen of the observer out to divine the scientific laws of the organic continuum, that speaks in an infinity of frequencies ranging from a strident Squawk! to the smoothly radiating ripples in a pool.

A yellow stream of consciousness into a cesspool of gibberish. I prefer plain writing which informs and dazzles without obfuscation, as Annie writes on page 122, "And plain writing is not a pyrotechnic display, but a lamp."

We have first generation 3-D printers which can create metallic bolts and nuts, but we are yet far away from being able to wave a wand and have leave behind a trail of fitted bolts.

[page 124] The narrative is a side effect of the prose, as our vision is a side effect of our seeing. Prose is a kind of cognitive tool which secretes its objects — as though a set of tools were to create the very engines it could enter, as though a wielded wrench, like a waved soap bubble wand, were to emit a trail of fitted bolts int its wake.

Let us not hopscotch over Annie's delicious sentence, altered slightly for brevity, from page 148, "Fiction is a tissue of lies." And one lie can lead to another and the fiction writer can write books about the lies.

[page 148, 149] The fiction writer is astonished to note that some materials fit a particular idea for order so well that he finds himself writing whole books about peripheral or random objects to which he has never previously devoted a car or a thought (which may account for the quality of much that we read).

To be a writer is to remove all traces of your craft and leave behind a structure of bricks which people can admire and praise you for, and therein lies the paradox, you wish praise for the delicate ideas, not for the pretty bricks in which you enclosed them.

[page 156] In order to make a world in which their ideas might be discovered, writers embody those ideas in materials solid and opaque, and thus conceal them. In the process of fleshing out a thought, they brick it in. The more subtle they are as artists (not as thinkers, but as artists), the more completely their structures will vanish into the work, and the more grouchy they will become the more readers tell them what lovely, solid bricks they make.

Insofar as a writer is interested in interpretation, then, he is stuck in this paradox. His role is like that of a scout whose job it is to blaze a new trail, all traces of which he must carefully obliterate.

There is a further problem if a writer strives to get down to the essentials.

[page 171] It is hard to see how anyone could think, even in the abstract, that a purging

**of inessentials is good in itself. Who would want to see the woods purified of inessentials?
... By the time the arts are down to their various irreducible nubs, they dissolve into
concepts; they lose the material energy which made them interesting.**

Who would want to read Robert Frost's poem "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" if the woods were purified, stripped to their essentials? His woods would be neither lovely, dark, nor deep and neither would the promises he had to keep. Purity is one of many intriguing questions Annie Dillard is dealing with in this book, shedding light on many of them, and closing this book with many of them unanswered, lamenting that living by fiction, while exciting, interesting, and full of life, living by fiction does not deal with the larger questions of art, nature, history, and the universe, in other words, questions whose answers living by fiction does not lead us to know.

