

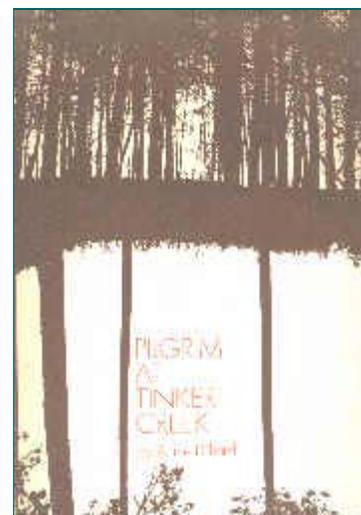
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A READER'S JOURNAL

Pilgrim at Tinker Creek by Annie Dillard

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A Book Review by Bobby Matherne ©1999



A huge water bug grabbed the end of a frog, injected a dissolving enzyme, sucked out the inside of the frog as Annie watched in horror, and left only a limp greenness floating on the surface of the water. Annie

grabbed hold of Tinker Creek, sucked out the life from it, and left only a limp greenness floating on the surface of these pages. The stories she tells are not for the faint of heart.

[page 263] Downstream at the island's tip where the giant water bug clasped and ate the living frog, I sat and sucked at my own dry knuckles. It was the way that frog's eyes crumpled. His mouth was a gash of terror; the shining skin of his breast and shoulder shivered once and sagged, reduced to an empty purse; but oh those two snuffed eyes! They crinkled, the comprehension poured out of them as if sense and life had been a mere incidental addition to the idea of eyes, a filling like any jam in a jar that is soon and easily emptied; they flattened, lightless, opaque, and sank.

Annie paints vivid literary images of nature, at times serene, at times red in tooth and claw, many times, both. When her old fighting tom cat would jump through her open window in the middle of the night upon her sleeping body, she'd sometimes awaken to find herself covered with bloody paw prints. "I looked as though I'd been painted with roses." [page 1] Always her words flash like lightning across the page and strike deep, like an Indian's arrow plunging into the heart of game. She likens herself to such an arrow, its wooden shaft with "lightning marks," fissures carved along the shaft to allow blood to drip from the wound to provide a trail to the wounded game.

[page 12] I am the arrow shaft, carved along my length by unexpected lights and gashes from the very sky, and this book is the straying trail of blood.

Unexpected sights explode before our eyes as we follow Annie into the woods surrounding Tinker Creek. We approach the Osage orange tree and from the stillness of its leaves, a hundred red-wing blackbirds take flight and disappear. "It was as if the leaves of the Osage orange had been freed from a spell in the form of red-winged blackbirds; they flew from the tree, caught my eye in the sky, and vanished."

When she is not showing us Tinker Creek, she shows us her favorite books and authors: Thoreau, Pliny, Edwin Way Teale, Farley Mowat, and others. Marius von Senden collected in his book *Space and Sight* dozens of cases of adults who received their sight for first time after cataract operations. "One patient called lemonade 'square' because it pricked his tongue as a square shape pricked on the touch of his hands." Most of the eye patients saw only flat patches of color upon receiving sight for the first time. As I detail in my novel *The Spizznettm File*, human seeing involves the creating of a three-dimensional image from flat color patches and aligning it with the world. Annie tried to walk along Tinker Creek and see the flat color patches. She succeeded for a bit. She finally saw a cedar tree "with lights in it", but had no success with the peach tree full of peaches.

[page 29] But I couldn't sustain the illusion of flatness. I've been around too long. Form is condemned to an eternal danse macabre with meaning: I couldn't un-peach the peaches.

[page 30] Why didn't someone hand those newly sighted people paints and brushes from the start when they still didn't know what anything was?

The process of art is the process of destruction - destruction of the deadly dance of kitsch in which form and meaning are intertwined - when Picasso interrupted the dance, cubism happened.

Always metaphors, some from nature, some from man. She tells us Farley Mowat's story of how Eskimos keep from getting lost during long treks over the flat bleakness of the North. They pile rocks the height of a man, then walk until they can barely see the top of the rocks, then make another pile of rocks as a beacon. These stone men remind me of the books I've read, that like beacons, lead me back to where I first began my journeys into understanding.

More metaphors from nature: snow clouds so low and heavy they might drop with a thud. "Birds migrate for food, not for warmth as such." Honeybees winter "according to Edwin Way Teale, by buzzing together in a tightly packed living sphere." "Ladybugs hibernate under shelter in a huge orange cluster sometimes the size of basketballs."

One more metaphor, both earthy and spiritual, as in this story of the seed of the spirit:

[page 52] A wind like this does my breathing for me; it engenders something quick and kicking in my lungs. Pliny believed the mares of the Portuguese used to raise their tails to the wind, "and turn them full against it, and so conceive that genital air instead of natural seed: in such sort, as they become great withal, and quicken in their time, and bring forth foals as swift as the wind, but they live not above three years."

The idea of a Son of the Spirit Wind that can live for only three years finds deep resonance in the biblical story of Jesus of Nazareth, who can only live for three years after being filled with the Christ Spirit during his baptism in the Jordan river.

School children learn that the female praying mantis eats her mate, but surely they are not given the graphic detail of the act that Annie provides us from Fabre:

[page 58] While the male is making up what passes for his mind, the female tips the balance in her favor by eating his head. He mounts her. Fabre describes the mating, which sometimes lasts six hours, as follows: "The male, absorbed in the performance of his vital functions, holds the female in a tight embrace. But the wretch has no head; he has no neck; he has hardly a body. The other, with her muzzle turned over her shoulder continues very placidly to gnaw what remains of the gentle swain. And, all the time, that masculine stump, holding on firmly, goes on with the business! . . . I have seen it done with my own eyes and have not yet recovered from my astonishment."

Insects with their soft-side in and their hard chitin shells out are the opposite of humans. "They lack the grace to go about as we do, softsideout to the wind and thorns." [page 64] Annie tells us how dragonflies seem to dip their tails into water to see if it's really wet, and how they get stuck in the La Brea Tar Pits when they try it there. Also she tells us about the processionary caterpillars with whom Fabre did extensive experiments, causing them to form a loop and wander endlessly around a vase.

[page 67] "The caterpillars in distress," he concludes, "starved, shelterless, chilled with cold at night, cling obstinately to the silk ribbon covered hundreds of times, because they lack the rudimentary glimmers of reason which would advise them to abandon it."

Fabre is wandering in a processional circle himself in that last sentence. It is *reason* that *keeps* the caterpillars in their endless loop. They are as locked in a state of paradoxical paralysis as anyone who attempts to use unwavering reason to determine whether the barber who shaves every man in the village who doesn't shave himself shaves himself. Only the doffing of reason or the sheer madness of a Van Gogh would enable them to break their kitschy pattern and stray off the path and explore. Such a craziness might allow us to "sit on the hillside, or lie prone under the trees of the forest, or sprawl wet-legged on the shingly beach of a mountain stream, [and as we sit] the great door, that does not look like a door, opens." [page 80, Dillard quoting Stephen Graham in *The Gentle Art of Tramping*] "The great door opens on the present, illuminates it as with a multitude of flashing torches." [page 80]

[page 102] This old rock planet gets the present for a present on its birthday every day. Here is the word from a subatomic physicist: "Everything that has already happened is particles, everything in the future is waves." [RJM NOTE, 2013: Just as particles from the past meet us in the now, waves from the future also meet us in the now. See [MR#36](#)].

Thus the past is particles, the future is waves, and only in the present is our living moment of change, in which what we suppose sets up a living wave approaching us from the future. Annie cups our head in her hands and gently returns our gaze again and again into the present moment in Tinker Creek, whispering into our ears as she does so, "Experiencing the present purely is being emptied and hollow; you catch grace as a man fills his cup under a waterfall." [page 81] "*Spend* the afternoon," she tells us on page 269, "You can't take it with you."

"Lick the finger, feel the now."

"This is our life, these are our lighted seasons, and then we die.

**(You die, you die;
first you go wet,
and then you go dry.)" [page 128]**

She writes so well of the things of nature and equally well of things of the spirit, but even great ships strike hidden icebergs and founder, as she does in this next passage:

[page 80] That Christ's incarnation occurred improbably, ridiculously, at such-and-such a time, into such-and-such a place, is referred to - with great sincerity even among believers - as "the scandal of particularity."

The hidden iceberg is Rudolf Steiner's grand scheme of evolution in which he details how the events of the Mystery of Golgotha could not have happened earlier nor later. To have happened sooner, it would have been too soon; to have happened later, it would have been too late. One who is unaware of the evolution of consciousness and humankind's fall into materialism would be unable to understand this pivotal point of human evolutionary history that occurred in the exactly the right place at exactly the right time to rescue humanity from the otherwise fatal thrall of materialism.

There is much, much more in this book than I can do justice to in a short review. As soon as I finish typing this, I will go through the dictionary and look up the following words: unwonted, ribband, dun(as an adjective), jeté, weft, runnels, unkeeled, penepain, frangible, stridulation, towhee, ciliated rotifers and burgeon. I will have new words, but more than that, I will have new grasps at the meaning of things: visions of the teen-aged boy as "king of the world" [page 90], I will know to look for a child to accompany me if I wish to find arrowheads "a child will pick up *everything*" [page 90], and I will think of every being I encounter that it made it through the throes of evolution, so "it gets a stet." [page 135] I will hear the murmurs of this book after I close it on my shelf in the hall as it continues to "whisper to itself its own inexhaustible tale." [page 68] And I will always remember how from Annie Dillard I came to understand how books whisper down the hallways of time. If you want a wonderful read, spend a year with Annie along Tinker Creek. Soon you'll be walking out in nature like her, with your left foot stamping

"Glory" and your right foot "Amen".

"The meadow was clean, the world new, and I washed by my walk over the waters of the dam." If I may paraphrase Annie Dillard's wonderful words: When I finished this book, the rain had stopped, the ground was wet, the air clear, and I washed by my walk along Tinker Creek.

