

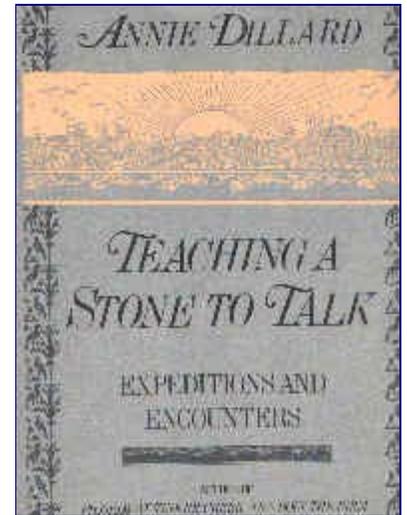
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A READER'S JOURNAL

Teaching a Stone to Talk
by
Annie Dillard

Expeditions and Encounters
Published by Harper & Row in 1982
A Book Review by Bobby Matherne
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Why did I read another Annie Dillard

book? Because I could. This is a writer *par excellence*. Each book is like a banquet of verbal delights, and while I consume the feast set before me, the prandial speaker is giving this wonderful lesson in how to write. Forget the famous writers correspondence course, just pick up any one of Annie's books, if you want to learn to write.

[page 11] A weasel is wild. Who knows what he thinks?

Annie Dillard is wild. Who knows what she thinks? We, her faithful readers, do because writing what she thinks is her real work. This book is a collection of her "Expeditions and Encounters" as the subtitle quickly informs us. She takes expeditions to the Pole, to the jungle, to a solar eclipse, to the Galapagos, to a cabin in the woods; she encounters a weasel, silence in a field, God in a doorway, mirages, and a nine-year-old girl. And she grabs hold of each expedition and encounter, not daring to let it go, ever. She is like the weasel whose limp, empty skin was found dangling from its bare skull, still clamped onto the neck of an eagle that had been shot from the sky. She clamps onto these expeditions and encounters and will not let go, until either she or the eagle is dead.

[page 16] I think it would be well, and proper, and obedient, and pure, to grasp your one necessity and not let it go, to dangle from it limp wherever it takes you. Then even death, where you're going no matter how you live, cannot you part. Seize it and let it seize you up aloft ever, till your eyes burn out and drop; let your musky flesh fall off in shreds, and let your very bones unhinge and scatter, loosened over fields, over fields and woods, lightly, thoughtless, from any height at all, from as high as eagles.

Whether it takes her to bleak Arctic polar regions where "the sun rolls round the sky like a fish in a bowl" or the South American jungle where the primitive natives sleep naked in hammocks and awaken in the middle of the night to warm their bodies in the river, she writes lucidly and informatively. We learn that the running of a deer prior to shooting it builds up the lactic acid level and tenderizes the meat. The real meat of Dillard's writing for me is in the pithy comments she inserts at intervals, like the following:

[page 70] It is difficult to undo our own damage, and to recall to our presence that which we have asked to leave.

[page 71] Just the other day a chimp told us, if we can believe that we truly share a vocabulary, that she had been sad in the morning. I'm sorry we asked.

And these completely unexpected images:

[page 111] It is a fantastic utterance, as though I were to open my mouth and emit a French horn, or a vase, or a knob of tellurium.

[page 128] This is what life is all about: salamanders, fiddle tunes, you and me and things, the split and burr of it all, the fizz into particulars.

[page 135] There was only silence. It was the silence of matter caught in the act and embarrassed.

[page 172] He has aged. The bones of his skull are tent poles from which his skin hangs in catenary curves.

She closes this book of lovely images and deep thoughts with a ripple of wind coming down from the woods, smelling of November.

[page 177] The gust crosses the river and blackens the water where it passes, like a finger closing slats.

