

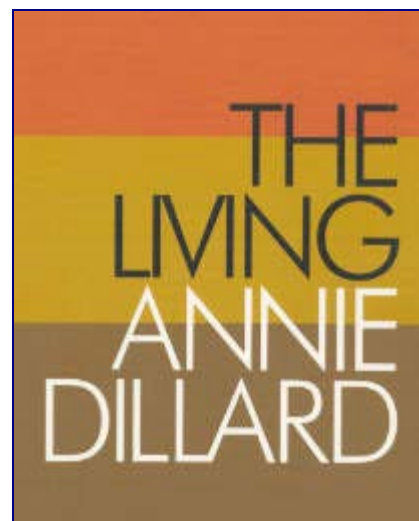


A READER'S JOURNAL

The Living

by
Annie Dillard

ARJ2 Chapter: Reading for Enjoyment
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On several drives we took from Seattle to Whistler, B. C., we drove through Bellingham, Washington, which seemed to be a typical suburban metropolitan area with Interstate 5 running through it. Next time we take this drive, we will drive through the city down to Bellingham Bay, to the area where the Ada and Rooney Fishburn disembarked in 1855 to find tall trees coming down to the edge of the stony waterline.

[page 4] . It was the rough edge of the world, where the trees came smack, down to the stones. The shore looked to Ada as if the corner of the continent had got torn off right here, sometime near yesterday, and the dark trees kept on growing like nothing happened. The ocean just filled in the tear and settled down. This was Puget Sound, and some straits that Rooney talked about, and there was not a thing on it or anywhere near it that she could see but some black ducks and humpy green islands. Salt water wet Ada's shoes if she stood still. Away out south over the water she made out a sharp line of snow-covered mountains. From the boat she had seen a few of such, mountains poking up out of nowhere, including a big solitary white mountain that they had sailed towards all morning, that the forest now hid; it looked like its sloping base must start up just back there behind the first couple rows of trees. God might have created such a plunging shore as this before He thought of making people, and then when He thought of making people, He mercifully softened up the land in the palms of his hands wherever He expected them to live, which did not include here.

Ada had to sleep with her husband Rooney beside her on her feather-bed which had been carried by train from Baltimore, then by wagon train over the mountains from St. Louis, on the floor of Lura Rush's cabin.

[page 7, 8] Ada opened her eyes and saw black darkness over the room. There was a bit of color, a burnt red, that spread from the dying fire, and by its glow she made out a log stool by her head. Nothing stirred. Whenever things calmed down like this, Ada's mind became aware of the prayer that her heart cried out to God all day and maybe night, too, that He would lend her strength to bear affliction and go on.

She had already survived the lost of her beloved son Charley who fell from the oxen-led wagon and its wheels rolled over his mid-section. Her husband took to snoring beside her as she looked up at the ceiling and thought of the blanket, roof, forest cover, and clouds which lay between her and the heavenly night

sky. It was a sky that she see would see little of due to the rain and the mist which covered this area called Bellingham Bay. Rooney soon filed a beachfront claim of 320 acres about a mile north, and would have to remove huge trees just to build the smallest cabin there, tall cedar and fir trees so close together than often one had to turn sideways to walk between two adjacent trees.

The local Indians were the Lummis, and tribes from the Canadian and Alaskan coast were sending raiding parties to capture some them for slaves and to kill the rest of them. With Russian traders buying pelts from them for guns and powder, these Indian raiders were deadly to the local Indians.

About fifteen years later, after Rooney had felled the huge firs which took two good men five hours, finally clearing enough of them to build a cabin and plant things, he and George Judd were digging a well near the cabin when Rooney dug into side of the well expecting water to pour out and instead a deadly gas hissed out and when Rooney fell over, George jumped in to save him and both of them died in the bottom of the well. Ada was soon left with her son Clare and her daughter Nettie (who died of complications from an earache at age 4). In a book entitled *The Living*, we encounter a lot of *the dead* and dying along the way.

There are occasional lighter moments, such as when Axel Obenchain wanted to learn English as a fellow German on the train had advised him to do, as quickly as possible. He contracted for a year's work in Olympia, Washington at a logging camp and learn to speak quite well with them. When he came out of the mountains, he went into a bar and asked for a whiskey. The salon keeper asked him a question and they quickly found out that neither could understand the other.

[page 63] Only when the other men returned from their drinking did he determine something that — he ultimately told Martha, and she told John Ireland, laughing helplessly and rocking by the stove — he should have determined earlier; the loggers were Finns, and he had learned Finnish in the logging camp.

That so many of these pioneers died was due more to the hazards of life, not to any lack of hardiness of the men and women who arrived to the western edge of the north Pacific territories. Take this example.

[page 100] The difficulty and expense of reaching Puget Sound at all, from anywhere on the planet earth including Oregon, had drawn men and women hard as mules, whose arrival proved their endurance. Ada Fishburn told Mintz Honer that she was there one night on the dock in Whatcom when Mr. H. I. Hoolihan, who owned the only bank in Whatcom, tripped on a sack of potatoes and fell from the deck of the steamer just outside the bay. Hoolihan swam a mile back to the dock through the freezing water wearing his clothes and hat, clasping a packet of papers in his teeth, and carrying a rolled umbrella in one hand. He was eighty-five years old, he told the crowd on the dock, and he had no intention of buying another umbrella.

Minta lost her husband and was waiting for her family to arrive from Baltimore. It would be her first chance to see them for eleven years. She waited anxiously for the steamer Doris Burn to arrive at the dock and we live the moment with her through the prose of Annie Dillard.

[page 124] The steamer was late. Hugh gave Bert and Lulu their supper, then lit into the dishes, standing sad-eyed at the sink with his hat on. Minta put Bert and Lulu to bed; she sat with them in their room upstairs. She listened at the window for the steamer whistle and heard the tree frogs' sharp droning. She felt the fullness of time, its expectancy, and the unbreathing, sham beauty of the world. The sun had dropped behind the forest and cast its blue shade on the farmhouse clearing. The long northern twilight was beginning to pool on the clearing; it leached yellow from goldenrod, blued the asters, and blackened the woods.

Though the novel is fictional, there can be little doubt that Annie had lived in such forests at the edge of Puget Sound and knew that area well(1).

In a very tragic turn of events, Minta lost her home and two of her children when her family finally arrived, and Senator Green Randall of Baltimore has to sleep in a strange farmhouse that night, having lost two grandchildren he had never met the night before. The next night their Indian friends came over and began squeezing Minta's forearms, elbows, and upper arms. The Senator asked what the Indians were doing to his daughter, and Clare responded, "They are ridding her of ghosts. . . . they will squeeze them out of her toes." Minta had lost her home, her husband, two of her children, and the Nooksack Indians "knew that ghosts were particularly harsh in the presence of other ghosts." (Page 132)

Clare and the senator got to know each other better, but was there a mutual respect between them? The author raises an interesting point about urbane courtesy such as Senator exhibited and that of the frontier-raised Clare.

[page 137, italics added] Here were two men who each assumed that the other was intrinsically nobody and who, upon recognizing the assumption in the other, revised their views. Clare, however, mistook courtesy for the respect it simulates, and did not know that the senator, upon greater acquaintance, still judged him a nobody.

When Beal Obenchain got it in his mind to kill a person at random, he chose Lee Chin a Chinese servant, and bound him to a wharf at low tide so that he would die overnight. Later Beal was upset by how simple the whole thing was, lacking any drama or extent in time, like a movie that only lasts fifteen minutes, which might leave you wondering, "Why the bother?" So the next time the thought comes into Beal's mind, he decides to pull a name out of a hat and tell a man that he will kill him, but with no plans to actually kill him, only a sadistic plan to prolong the drama and the suffering of his victim. The man he chose was Clare Fishburn, and yes, the threat worked on him, but he shared his trepidations with his wife June, who wanted to uproot their family and move to Portland, away from the scary reprobate, Beal Obenchain. Suddenly two plots are stirring in the subtext, Lee Chin's brother notices Beal using a handkerchief just like he and Lee owned. And Clare was avoiding the presence of Beal, and fending off June's suggestion either to kill the crazy guy or to move away from the area.

[page 207] Every day was a day which Clare expected to die. When he awoke at first light on Sunday, January 6, he regarded his sleeping wife gravely. Her head lay lightly on the mattress and smoothly, flush, as a clam rests in its shell. There was a perfection and composure in her pale, round face: her long eyelids fitted over her eyes precisely; her lashes spread in radiating arc over her cheeks.

Clare dealt with the threat as best he could; he vowed to "eat boldly and hope yet more boldly". Beal Obenchain was leaving behind him a chain of karmic events to be balanced, a long series of miseries he caused Clare Fishburn with his threat to kill him, which was exactly what Beal, in his warped mind, wished after the death of Lee Chin went so quickly and easily.

Twelve days after Beal threatened him, Clare's life was changed, as Annie describes using this apt fishing metaphor.

[page 212] Time was a hook in his mouth. Time was reeling him in jawfirst; it was reeling him in, headlong and breathless, to a shore he had not known was there.

Beal's evil mind was calculating and perverse, not at all like Bad Jim, who was just bad. Clare enjoyed this old story, likely because the twisted ways of Beal contrasted with the simplicity and directness of Bad Jim.

[page 220] He was an Indian man who pushed a settler off a cliff. When the sheriff came for him he played dumb, and asked the sheriff to show him the scene of the crime. The dim-witted sheriff took him to the cliff, and Bad Jim pushed him off.

June had left for Baltimore in a tizzy over Beal's threat against Clare, but it was for her father's funeral, and she even thought to herself, that, well, her father would not miss her. The trip back home did not require oxen-pulled wagons, as steam-powered trains now wove their way through the labyrinthine Cascade range and yet, there were some curious hazards like the soft railroad bridges.

[page 286] They highballed down the green Pacific slope, through snow-sheds, and their air brakes hissed. Their locomotive paused before a trestle so unpromising that many passengers, including June and the Honers, chose to walk, in the rain. Conducted by Mr. Tommy Cahoon himself, they spent two hours crossing the wet ravine, where devil's club caught June's skirts, and Minta and Ardeth walked close and laughed over nothing. Cahoon told them that on some local freight lines the hemlock trestles were so soft that the engineer routinely set the throttle and jumped off with all the crew. The men raced down the ravines and up them, and jumped on the moving train.

Clare loved June, but was not going to give in to her uxorious request that he kill Beal — even though he loved and respected her. Both Clare and June had a strong soul force of will.

[page 291, 292] He saw she acted from an unmentioned source of feeling, a source that, he discovered, he tapped as well. It had been there all along. He asked himself if she was conscious of it and understood at once that she was, that she probably had been since Mabel's birth, when their courting talk had hushed and let go, loosing them to drift into the great silence. She had been waiting for him to notice it, and she forgave his doltishness in advance. Wherever he found himself, in whatever deep caves and vaulted mazes of understanding, he discovered her already there before him, her arched eyes glinting with amused sensibility, her lively, small form seeming to beckon him onward. She mocked him, guided him, understood him, tantalized him, at every level of depth he reached. What else did she know that he did not?

Clare was standing in Seattle near Commercial Street, waiting for his wife June to return from Baltimore as these thoughts of her percolated through his mind.

[page 292] Marriage began to strike him as a theater, where actors gratefully dissimulate, in ordinary affection and trust, their bottom feeling, which is a mystery too powerful to be endured. They know and feel more than life in time can match; they must anchor themselves against eternity, so they play on a painted set, lest they swing out into the twining realms. He was acquiring a taste for those realms, for the cold strata of colors he saw from the beach, for the crack of thin darkness that spread behind the thick sky.

Was love blind, Clare wondered, it is a popular belief. No, he was not a deep thinker, but he had his own view, that "lovers alone see what is real".

[page 292, 293] The lover is simply enabled to see — as if the heavens busted open to admit a charged light — those virtues the beloved does possess in their purest form. June was a marvel, and she smelled good. These weeks' long absence of June, he was not unaware, abetted this view.

Love, writing about love, is Annie's forte, and she is here at her shining best writing of Clare's thoughts about June while waiting for her to rush into her arms in the middle of the busy street in Seattle.

[page 293] What could other people know of June's courage in loss, her upwelling hopefulness, her defiant will, her quick, startling wit that made play of even ardent moments? The skin of her temple, that dipped across the hollow, and the soft ruddiness over her hard forehead bone?

Clare was writing a love song to his beloved in his mind, where it was likely to remain — unsung — but lived out in the life he and June will share together. Only a couple who have been together for decades can understand what Clare was talking about, the words which Annie Dillard was putting in his mind and sharing with us. Annie Dillard knows such a love, my wife and I know such a love, and we can recognize that each other knows such a love.

[page 293] Their intimacy seemed a mingling of spiritual limbs. He had re-discovered what he learned in the early days of their marriage and forgot, the life about which even the books he read were strangely silent, but which could not be new: the passion that is both possible and inexpressible, the prolongation of intimacy as a peculiar state, the touch of living skin everywhere, as if the very air and the colored world were a lover's feature that bodied a soul. This seemed to him now, as he walked the gray streets, the truest state, the highest apprehension, and he strictly hoped to keep sight of it, scorn comfort, and stay awake.

Courting June, he had thought it a privilege to wash dishes with her in river sand; he thought it a privilege to hold her cutaway coat, to look at airy Mount Baker from her side; he thought it a privilege to hear her opinions over tea and watch her eyebrows rise and fall. Now, he knew it was.

They met outside the Northern Pacific depot, June coming out after Ardeth, Hugh, Green, and Minta.

[page 294] here was small June, flushed and flustered, wearing a wrinkled duster. Her eyes found Clare's at once, and their glances' touch unstrung both. They made a blind path through the crowd to each other, and Clare took her in his arms.

Two other stories made me laugh. Eddie Mannchen was a passenger on a Seattle steamer which foundered and Eddie was the only one who stayed aboard until he was pulled underwater. After he was fetched out of the water by someone with a net, he was asked why he did such a fool thing, and he replied that he wanted to know, if only for thirty minutes, "how it felt to be a vessel owner, and fabulously rich."

The other one was told to Clare by Street St. Mary about this fellow from California.

[page 326] "He heard that up in Alaska, north of the circle, the sun never sets all summer; it just goes around. So he took his sunflower seeds up there and planted a crop. The first summer, you know what happened?" He gestured with his stump arm.

Clare had no idea.

"The sunflowers grew straight up in the spring, all right, and the first day the sun didn't set — they twisted their heads off."

Pipe tobacco used to come in a can, especially Prince Albert, whose metal can was flat with rounded corners. Everyone knew the can and a practical joke in the 1950s was for someone to call a store and ask, "Do you have Prince Albert in the can?" and if the clerk said, "Yes", to reply, "Then please let him out." But in the 1890s, when the Internet of the time was the telegraph, the can had another use.

[page 353] At the local line's depot, Whipple leaned over the table where his friend the telegrapher, Crying Johnson, kept an empty Prince Albert tobacco can to amplify incoming code so he could hear it ring over the freight clerks's typewriters. Both men made sense of the keys's dots and dashes as fast as they heard them and a fast "fist," as they called a man's personal style at the key, could transmit thirty words a minute.

If you think the recent collapse of the housing market because of wild speculation and lascivious money-lending to unqualified buyers by bankers was novel, read how things went down at the end of the nineteenth century in the Collapse of 1893.

[page 359] Every single bank in the country had failed and closed. Ignorant bank officers, who looked singularly sober, had loaned out townspeople's deposits to plungers and speculators of the wildest strip, whose ruining schemes all went belly-up, and there was no money to be had.

During the economic collapse, Clare resorted to creating cedar shingles from shakebolts, large sections of cedar, and the sound of his tapping the frow to cleave the individual shakes was constant around their house.

When Johnny Lee was out walking with young Walter, the kid disappeared around a cedar stump and Johnny found him in Beal Obenchain's cabin built into the large stump, in fact, it was Beal's only home. After they left he found Walter clutching a Tiger with a coin in its mouth, a trinket Johnny had given his brother years before he had been killed. Now he knew for sure who the culprit was and Beal's life was in jeopardy, not like the threat he laid on Clare Fishburn, but from the revenge to be exacted by the brother of the Celestial whose life he took. The locals called the Chinese by the name Celestial and it seemed that Beal would soon have a Celestial dispatch.

Gold was found in the Klondike and miners were coming back and into town carrying sacks stuffed with gold dust. Their small town of Whatcom, soon to become Bellingham, would be soaring once more, so John Ireland led Clare, June, Hugh, and others to the pond for a celebratory midnight bathe. There was a rope swing on which one could swing out over the water and drop into the pond. It was a chance for all of them to "swing out into the twining realms". The stars overhead were shining down through the pond's hole in the towering forest when Hugh, in his union suit swinging out over the pond, let go and fell into the twining realm of the stars.

A new century was coming soon, and the rough area they had cleaved from the forest was on its way to becoming Bellingham, Washington, leaving behind traces of its origin in Whatcom Falls Park.

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Footnote 1.

See her marvelous non-fiction account of living on the edge of Puget Sound in this book, [Holy the Firm](#).

[Return to text directly before Footnote 1.](#)

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