

# 'Pilgrim at Tinker Creek' Lets Life Be Her Teacher

"I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived."  
— Walden, Henry David Thoreau

Young Annie Dillard lives by Tinker Creek in Virginia's Blue Ridge. It's a good place to live, she says — there's a lot to think about.

The creeks — Tinker and Carvin's — are an active mystery, fresh every minute. The mountains — Tinker and Brushy, McAfee's Knob and Dead Man — are a passive mystery, the oldest of all.

"I propose to keep here," she writes, "what Thoreau called 'a meteorological journal of the mind' telling some tales and describing some of the sights of this rather tamed valley and describing in fear and trembling, some of the unmapped dim reaches and unholy fastnesses to which those tales and sights so dizzily lead."

Pleading that she is no scientist, Annie explores her neighborhood with a loving, sometimes horror-stricken eye and before she's done, you will have learned, as Ernest Hemingway used to say, "plenty" about the matings of praying mantises and luna moths, the meanderings of muskrats, locusts, eels, snakes and the migrations of Monarch butterflies.

"It's all a matter of keeping my eyes open. Nature is like one of those line drawings of a tree that are puzzles for children: Can you find in the leaves a duck, a house, a boy, a bucket, a zebra and a boot. Specialists can find the most incredibly well-hidden things."

The specialists she means, one assumes, are the specialists she quotes throughout the book. Thoreau and Edwin Way Teale, Peter Freuchen and Farley Mowat. Arthur Koestler. Joseph Ward Krutch. Rachel Carson. Sir James Jeans. Pascal, Einstein.

She figures you have to get out and stalk nature — all the squirmings and turnings and flickers and pulses — the whole terrifying, living creation. And you have to do it as a child does it. Only children keep their eyes open.

"When we lose our innocence," she writes, "when we start feeling the weight of the atmosphere and learn that there's death in the pot, we take leave of our senses."

She recounts visiting a great university, and wandering, a stranger, into the subterranean halls of its famous biology department. A sign on a door read: **Ichthyology Department**. The door was open a crack, and she glanced in.

"I saw just a flash," she recalls. "There were two white-coated men seated opposite each other on high lab stools at a hard-surfaced table. They bent over identical white enamel trays. On one side, one man with a lancet, was just cutting into an enormous preserved fish he'd taken from a jar. On the other side, the other man, with a silver spoon was eating a grapefruit. I laughed all the way back to Virginia."

Her laughter is that of the solitary walker who can find a universe in the back forty.

"I am a wanderer," she says, "with a background in theology and a penchant for quirky facts."

She puts you in mind of Loren Eiseley and Sigurd Olson as she spins out the "quirkies:"

- This is a salamander metropolis. If you want to find a species wholly new to science and have your name inscribed Latinly in some secular version of an eternal roll book, then your best bet is to come to the southern Appalachians, climb some obscure and snakey mountain where as the saying goes, "the hand of man has never set foot," and start turning over rocks.

- Or look at a rotifer's translucent gut: something orange and powerful is surging up and down like a piston, and something small and round is spinning in place like a flywheel. Look, in short, at



## BOOKS of the TIMES

by GEORGE VUKELICH

### Pilgrim at Tinker Creek

By Annie Dillard, Harper's Magazine Press, 271 pages.

practically anything — the coot's feet, the mantis' face, a banana, the human ear — and see that not only did the creator create everything but that he is apt to create **anything**. He'll stop at nothing.

- Of all known forms of life, only about ten per cent are still living today. All other forms — fantastic plants, ordinary plants, living animals with unimaginably various wings, tails, teeth, brains — are utterly and forever gone.

- That is a great many forms that have been created. Multiplying ten times the number of living forms today yields a profusion that is quite beyond what I consider thinkable. Why so many forms? . . . The creator goes off on one wild, specific tangent after another, or millions simultaneously . . . What is going on here?

- What if God has the same affectionate disregard for us that we have for barnacles? I don't know if each barnacle larva is of itself unique and special, or if we the people are essentially as interchangeable as bricks. My brain is full of numbers; they swell and would split my skull like a shell. I examine the trapezoids of skin covering the back of my hands like blown dust motes moistened to clay. I have hatched, too, with millions of my kind, into a milky way that spreads from an unknown shore.

You must get this book and absorb it and cherish it. And we must cherish the young Annie Dillard. Had Henry David Thoreau had a daughter, she would be the one.

Annie Dillard grew up in Pittsburgh, Pa., attended Hollins College, and has lived since 1965 in the Roanoke Valley of Virginia. She is a contributing editor to **Harper's Magazine** and columnist for The Wilderness Society. This is her first book of prose; a book of poems, **Tickets for a Prayer Wheel**, was published by the University of Missouri Press.