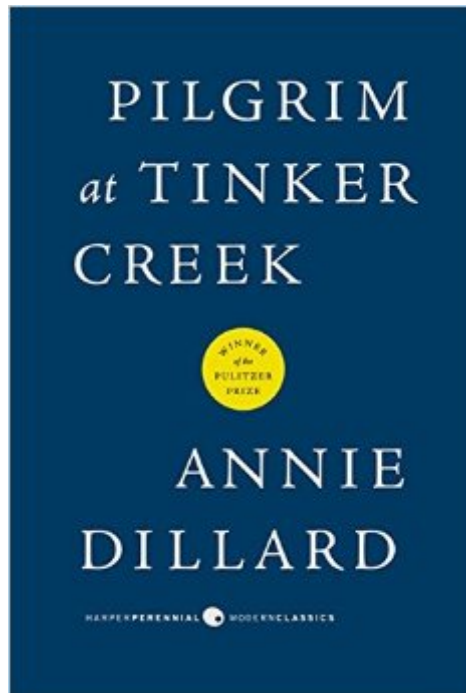


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# Pilgrim At Tinker Creek (Harper Perennial Modern Classics)



## Synopsis

Pilgrim at Tinker Creek is the story of a dramatic year in Virginia's Roanoke Valley. Annie Dillard sets out to see what she can see. What she sees are astonishing incidents of "beauty tangled in a rapture with violence." Her personal narrative highlights one year's exploration on foot in the Virginia region through which Tinker Creek runs. In the summer, Dillard stalks muskrats in the creek and contemplates wave mechanics; in the fall, she watches a monarch butterfly migration and dreams of Arctic caribou. She tries to con a coot; she collects pond water and examines it under a microscope. She unties a snake skin, witnesses a flood, and plays King of the Meadow with a field of grasshoppers. The result is an exhilarating tale of nature and its seasons.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

I read this book every ten years or so. It may well be my favorite; it's right up there, anyway. (At my age, picking a favorite book is dangerous: I've probably forgotten about half the strong candidates.) It is, if you will, a connected series of "nature" essays. Each one is strong, and can stand alone, but all are bound by many threads into a larger whole. Annie Dillard moved to Tinker Creek, in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia, in her mid-twenties (or, at any rate, this book achieved final published form when she was twenty-nine). Like Thoreau, she came to the woods to "keep a meteorological journal of the mind". Indeed, "Walden" is the model: a person of reflective tendency steps out of the stream of life, as it were, to go to the woods, just to see what he or she can see. It turns out that one's own mind is a large part of the scenery when one gets away from the rough-and-tumble of society. Big mysteries are at stake here; it is somehow appropriate that looking with all attention at

minute creatures and giving oneself over momentarily to ephemeral events provide clues. Why is nature cruel? Why is there beauty? Could these be related? I put it baldly, but these and other questions are more the expression on her writing's face than the subject of it. There are details, and funny descriptions, and a rifling through the wonders of her library of naturalists. But, always, there is a person doing all this: walking, having a sandwich, creeping up on a copperhead for a closer look (after patting her pocket to make sure the snakebite kit is there), or just lying in bed remembering a horrifying or glorious experience of that particular day, in the woods, on the banks of Tinker Creek. Have I mentioned the quality of the writing? It's glorious. Part of its appeal is her special mix of jokiness and vernacular combined with high-toned thinking and literary reference, her gee-whiz attitude toward outrageous natural facts always butting in. Part of it comes from her sheer likeability. But all that aside, words do her bidding, and always I find myself pausing and smiling at her mastery. She wonders about beauty, and reacts to beauty. She also, here, has created it. "Nature is, above all, profligate. Don't believe them when they tell you how economical and thrifty nature is, whose leaves return to the soil. Wouldn't it be cheaper to leave them on the tree in the first place? This deciduous business alone is a radical scheme, the brainchild of a deranged manic-depressive with limitless capital. Extravagance! Nature will try anything once... No form is too gruesome, no behavior too grotesque. If you're dealing with organic compounds, then let them combine. If it works, if it quickens, then set it clacking in the grass; there's always room for one more; you ain't so handsome yourself. This is a spendthrift economy; though nothing is lost, all is spent." (chapter 4)

I was assigned to read Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* for my AP English III class. We had just finished reading Henry David Thoreau's *Walden, or Life In The Woods* a few weeks prior, and our teacher had told us that Dillard's writing style was similar to Thoreau's. Now, I'm not a big Thoreau fan (as my test grade proves), so this was not consoling to me. Over spring break I picked up the book and began to read it. She starts simply "I used to have a cat, an old fighting tom, who would jump through the open window by my head in the middle of the night and land on my chest." From that sentence on, I was hooked. There are two parts to this book, a *via positiva*, and a *via negativa*. The beginning is filled with life, positive imagery, and numerous quotes from Thoreau and van Gogh. Dillard covers her perspectives on Heaven and earth, seeing, winter, and "the fixed" in this section using such qualities as listed before. The *via negativa* begins somewhere in chapter five or six. It creeps in, slowly taking over the positive images and feelings, until you finally find that you are reading about children abusing newts in a state park, or caterpillars walking in the same circle

around the same vase for seven full days, because their leader was taken away without their knowledge. Death is a reoccurring theme here. A main question in my class was what happened to make her change styles? Was it planned, or was it the effect of some event--the death of a friend or loved one perhaps? Either way, we read on through the spring and summer, and into the fall. She leads us into a flood, where she says, "I like crossing the dam. If I fall, I might not get up again...I face this threat every time I cross the dam, and it is always exhilarating." Her aesthetic sense of word choice described the monarch butterfly, "A monarch at rest looks like a fleck of tiger, stilled and wide-eyed." We notice though that while she uses such descriptive tone, it is more heavily applied during the *via negativa* section. The most enjoyable sections for me were her beginning statements, which were filled with stories. Her old tom cat, life's hidden treasures, and even the history of the starlings can be found in the opening paragraphs of each chapter. This catches the attention of the reader, because it is written in an intimate tone, and it prepares them for what lies ahead. Such stories or memories usually reoccur in the end, bringing her point full-circle. Dillard's perspective on religion is questionable. She appears to favor both religion and creationism throughout the book, yet she never sides with one more so than the other. She uses biblical references to Jacob's cattle, a scripture from the Koran, but then also personifies nature, giving it actions of its own free will. She knows stories from the Bible, yet she knows just as much about evolution. A pro-creation/ Christian perhaps? This was written during the 1970's. Perhaps Annie Dillard and Henry David Thoreau do have the same writing-style. Personally I found Thoreau too redundant and long-winded, while Dillard is more natural. One can almost hear her talking; her stories included in the book as reference to a previous statement are filled with the tone of her voice, although we have never heard her speak. That's a quality she has, making the readers feel as if they have known her for years after reading the book. So why should someone who doesn't take AP English III read *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*? Simple. It makes you look at life differently. It gives you a new respect for nature, and a new knowledge of insects and animals. It's good material for anyone doing a report on Eskimos. But overall, it will open your mind to a philosophical side of nature.

I've been meaning to try my hand at video reviews ever since they were announced, but this is my first. It was fun to make, and turned out to be a nice way to practice shooting and editing. My hope is that this short video may inspire some to pick up and read this remarkable book. The footage in the video is obviously not from Tinker Creek, but from my own "backyard" and surrounding areas in Saint Petersburg, Florida. I captured the images using the new Flip Ultra Video Camcorder, and

edited them using Apple's iMovie. The music (perhaps a bit cheesy) was composed using samples from Apple's GarageBand software. All quotations are from Dillard's book. Enjoy!

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