

= Pilgrim at Tinker Creek =

Pilgrim at Tinker Creek is a 1974 nonfiction narrative book by American author Annie Dillard . Told from a first @-@ person point of view , the book details an unnamed narrator 's explorations near her home , and various contemplations on nature and life . The title refers to Tinker Creek , which is outside Roanoke in Virginia 's Blue Ridge Mountains . Dillard began writing Pilgrim in the spring of 1973 , using her personal journals as inspiration . Separated into four sections that signify each of the seasons , the narrative takes place over the period of one year .

The book records the narrator 's thoughts on solitude , writing , and religion , as well as scientific observations on the flora and fauna she encounters . Touching upon themes of faith , nature , and awareness , Pilgrim is also noted for its study of theodicy and the inherent cruelty of the natural world . The author has described it as a " book of theology " , and she rejects the label of nature writer . Dillard considers the story a " single sustained nonfiction narrative " , although several chapters have been anthologized separately in magazines and other publications . The book is analogous in design and genre to Henry David Thoreau 's Walden (1854) , the subject of Dillard 's master 's thesis at Hollins College . Critics often compare Dillard to authors from the Transcendentalist movement ; Edward Abbey in particular deemed her Thoreau 's " true heir " .

Pilgrim at Tinker Creek was published by Harper 's Magazine Press shortly after Dillard 's first book , a volume of poetry titled Tickets for a Prayer Wheel . Since its initial publication , Pilgrim has been lauded by critics . It won the 1975 Pulitzer Prize for General Non @-@ fiction , and in 1998 it was included in Modern Library 's list of 100 Best Nonfiction Books .

= = Background and publication = =

Dillard , the daughter of an oil company executive , grew up in an upper middle @-@ class home in Pittsburgh . She read voraciously ; one of her favorite books was Ann Haven Morgan 's The Field Book of Ponds and Streams , which she compared to the Book of Common Prayer ; in painstaking detail , it instructed on the study and collection of plants and insects . She attended Hollins College in Roanoke County , Virginia , receiving both a bachelor 's (1967) and a master 's degree (1968) . At Hollins she came under the tutelage of poet and creative writing professor Richard Henry Wilde Dillard , whom she married in 1965 . She would later state that Richard taught her everything she knew about writing . Her master 's thesis , " Walden Pond and Thoreau " , studied the eponymous pond as a structuring device for Henry David Thoreau 's Walden . Dillard 's knowledge of Thoreau 's works was an obvious inspiration , although critics have pointed to many differences between their two works . However , in a nod to his influence , Dillard mentions within the text that she named her goldfish Ellery Channing , after one of Thoreau 's closest friends .

After graduating in 1968 , she continued to live in Virginia , near the Blue Ridge Mountains , where she wrote full @-@ time . At first she concentrated solely on poetry , which she had written and published when she was an undergraduate . She began keeping a journal in 1970 , in which she recorded her daily walks around Tinker Creek . Her journals would eventually consist of 20 volumes . In 1971 , after suffering from a serious bout of pneumonia , she decided to write a full @-@ length book dedicated to her nature writings . Dillard wrote the first half of Pilgrim at her home in spring 1973 , and the remaining half the following summer in a study carrel " that overlooked a tar @-@ and @-@ gravel roof " at the Hollins College library . She would later explain her choice of writing location as stemming from her wanting to avoid " appealing workplaces One wants a room with no view , so imagination can meet memory in the dark . " When she first began writing the book , Dillard would only dedicate one or two hours a day to the task ; by the last two months , however , she was writing nearly 15 ? 16 hours a day .

Dillard 's primary reader for Pilgrim was a Hollins professor called John Rees Moore . After finishing a chapter , she would bring it to Moore to critique . Moore specifically recommended that she expand the book 's first chapter " to make clear , and to state boldly , what it was [she] was up to , " a suggestion that Dillard at first dismissed , but would later admit was good advice . Previous to publication , chapters of the book appeared in publications including Harper 's Magazine , The

Atlantic , and The Living Wilderness . Pilgrim at Tinker Creek was published by Harper 's Magazine Press in 1974 , and was dedicated to Dillard 's husband . Editor in chief Larry Freundlich remarked upon first reading the book : " I never expected to see a manuscript this good in my life The chance to publish a book like this is what publishers are here for . "

= = Summary = =

Written in a series of internal monologues and reflections , the book is told from the perspective of an unnamed narrator who lives next to Tinker Creek , in the Blue Ridge Mountains near Roanoke , Virginia . Over the course of a year , the narrator observes and reflects upon the changing of the seasons as well as the flora and fauna near her home . Pilgrim is thematically divided into four sections ? one for each season ? consisting of separate , named chapters : " Heaven and Earth in Jest " , " Seeing " , " Winter " , " The Fixed " , " The Knot " , " The Present " , " Spring " , " Intricacy " , " Flood " , " Fecundity " , " Stalking " , " Nightwatch " , " The Horns of the Altar " , " Northing " , and " The Waters of Separation " .

The first chapter , " Heaven and Earth in Jest " , serves as an introduction to the book . The narrator describes the location as well as her connection to it :

I live by a creek , Tinker Creek , in a valley in Virginia 's Blue Ridge . An anchorite 's hermitage is called an anchor @-@ hold ; some anchor @-@ holds were simple sheds clamped to the side of a church like a barnacle or a rock . I think of this house clamped to the side of Tinker Creek as an anchor @-@ hold . It holds me at anchor to the rock bottom of the creek itself and keeps me steadied in the current , as a sea anchor does , facing the stream of light pouring down . It 's a good place to live ; there 's a lot to think about .

In the afterword of the 1999 Harper Perennial Modern Classics edition , Dillard states that the book 's other , two @-@ part structure mirrors the two routes to God according to Neoplatonic Christianity : the via positiva and the via negativa . The first half of the book , the via positiva , beginning with the second chapter , " accumulates the world 's goodness and God 's . " The second half , the via negativa , ends with the chapter " Northing " which Dillard notes is the counterpart of the second chapter , " Seeing " . The first and last chapters of the book serve as the introduction and conclusion , respectively . The narrative is composed of vignettes detailing the narrator 's wanderings around the creek . In " The Present " the narrator encounters a puppy at a gas station off the highway , and pats its belly while contemplating the view of the nearby mountain range ; the reflective act of " petting the puppy " is referred to in several other chapters . In " Stalking " , the narrator pursues a group of muskrats in the creek during summer . One of the most famous passages comes from the beginning of the book , when the narrator witnesses a frog being drained and devoured by a water beetle .

= = Style and genre = =

Pilgrim at Tinker Creek is a work of creative nonfiction that uses poetic devices such as metaphor , repetition , and inversion to convey the importance of recurrent themes . Although it is often described as a series of essays , Dillard has insisted it is a continuous work , as evidenced by references to events from previous chapters . Although the chapters are separately named ? several have also been published separately in magazines and anthologies ? she referred to the book in a 1989 interview as a " single sustained nonfiction narrative " . Dillard has also resisted the label of " nature writer " , especially in regard to Pilgrim . She stated , " There 's usually a bit of nature in what I write , but I don 't consider myself a nature writer . "

The book often quotes and alludes to Walden , although Dillard does not explicitly state her interest in Thoreau 's work . Critic Donna Mendelson notes that Thoreau 's " presence is so potent in her book that Dillard can borrow from [him] both straightforwardly and also humorously . " Although the two works are often compared , Pilgrim does not comment upon the social world as Walden does ; rather , it is completely rooted in observations of the natural world . Unlike Thoreau , Dillard does not make connections between the history of social and natural aspects , nor does she believe in an

ordered universe . Whereas Thoreau refers to the machine @-@ like universe , in which the creator is akin to a master watchmaker , Dillard recognizes the imperfection of creation , in which " something is everywhere and always amiss " .

In her review for The New York Times , Eudora Welty noted Pilgrim 's narrator being " the only person in [Dillard 's] book , substantially the only one in her world Speaking of the universe very often , she is yet self @-@ surrounded " . Dillard seemingly refers to the idea of an " invisible narrator " in the sixth chapter of Pilgrim at Tinker Creek ; while referring to the " infinite power " of God , the narrator notes that " invisibility is the all @-@ time great ' cover ' " . Nancy C. Parrish , author of the 1998 book Lee Smith , Annie Dillard , and the Hollins Group : A Genesis of Writers , notes that despite its having been written in the first person , Pilgrim is not necessarily autobiographical . The narrator , " Annie Dillard " , therefore becomes a persona through which the author can experience and describe " thoughts and events that the real Annie Dillard had only heard about or studied or imagined . " Critic Suzanne Clark also points to the " peculiar evasiveness " of Dillard @-@ the @-@ author , noting that " when we read Annie Dillard , we don 't know who is writing . There is a silence in the place where there might be an image of the social self ? of personality , character , or ego " . While most critics assume that the narrator is female , mostly due to the autobiographical elements of the book and the assumption that the narrator is Dillard herself , Clark questions whether the narrator is male . Stating that Dillard uses " a variety of male voices , male styles " throughout the book , Clark asks , " When Dillard quit writing Pilgrim at Tinker Creek in the persona of a fifty year old man , did she then begin to write as a woman ? "

= = Themes = =

= = = Religion and nature = = =

Pilgrim is often noted for its study of theodicy , or its defense of God 's goodness in the face of evil . The narrator attempts to reconcile the harsh natural world , with its " seemingly horrid mortality , " with the belief in a benevolent God . Death is repeatedly mentioned as a natural , although cruel progression : " Evolution " , the narrator states , " loves death more than it loves you or me . " A passage in the second chapter of the book describes a frog being " sucked dry " by a " giant water bug " as the narrator watches ; this necessary cruelty shows order in life and death , no matter how difficult it may be to watch . The narrator especially sees inherent cruelty in the insect world : " Fish gotta swim and birds gotta fly ... insects , it seems , gotta do one horrible thing after another . I never ask why of a vulture or a shark , but I ask why of almost every insect I see . More than one insect ... is an assault on all human virtue , all hope of a reasonable god . " While she remains drawn to the ultimately repugnant and amoral natural world , she also questions her place in it . The narrator states , " I had thought to live by the side of the creek in order to shape my life to its free flow . But I seem to have reached a point where I must draw the line . It looks as though the creek is not buoying me up but dragging me down . "

The title of the book suggests a pilgrimage , and yet the narrator does not stray far from her home near the creek : the journey is metaphysical . Margaret Loewen Reimer , in one of the first critical studies based on the book , noted that Dillard 's treatment of the metaphysical is similar to that of Herman Melville . While " Melville 's eyes saw mainly the darkness and the horror " of the natural world , possibly stemming from his New England Puritan roots , Dillard 's " sinister " vision of the world comes " more from a horror at the seeming mindlessness of nature 's design than from a deeply pervasive sense of evil . " Unlike Melville , however , Dillard does not moralize the natural world or seek to find parallels in human cultural acts ; focusing largely on observation as well as scientific analysis , Dillard follows the example of Charles Darwin and other naturalists .

The " pilgrim " narrator seeks to behold the sacred , which she dedicates herself to finding either by " stalking " or " seeing " . At one point , she sees a cedar tree near her house " charged and transfigured , each cell buzzing with flame " as the light hits it ; this burning vision , reminiscent of creation 's holy " fire " , " comes and goes , mostly goes , but I live for it . " Critic Jenny Emery

Davidson believes that Dillard 's act of " stalking " allows her to rewrite the hunting myth , a popular theme in nature writing which mediates the space between nature and humans . Although a long tradition of male nature writers ? including James Fenimore Cooper , Jack London and Richard Nelson ? have used this theme as " a symbolic ritual of violence " , Dillard " ventures into the terrain of the hunt , employing its rhetoric while also challenging its conventions . "

= = = Seeing and awareness = = =

While some critics describe Pilgrim at Tinker Creek as being more devoted to speculation of the divine and natural world than to self @-@ exploration , others approach the work in terms of Dillard 's attention to self @-@ aware analysis . For example , critic Mary Davidson McConahay points to Dillard 's Thoreauvian " commitment to awareness " .

In the book , the narrator is not only self @-@ aware , but also alert to every detail around her . Pilgrim 's second chapter defines two types of seeing : as " verbalization " (active) and as " a letting go " (passive) . The narrator refers to the difference between the two methods as " the difference between walking with and without a camera . " Whereas the former requires the need to " analyze and pry " , the latter only requires rapt attention . The act of seeing is exhaustive and exhausting , as one of the chapters relates : " I look at the water : minnows and shiners . If I am thinking minnows , a carp will fill my brain till I scream . I look at the water 's surface : skaters , bubbles , and leaves sliding down . Suddenly my own face , reflected , startles me witless . Those snails have been tracking my face ! Finally , with a shuddering wrench of the will , I see clouds , cirrus clouds . I 'm dizzy . I fall in . This looking business is risky . " Sandra Johnson refers to the structure of the book itself leading to an epiphany of self @-@ awareness , or a " mystical experience " ; as the narrator watches a falling maple key , she feels " lost , sunk ... gazing toward Tinker Mountain and feeling the earth reel down " .

= = Reception and awards = =

The book was a critical and financial success , selling more than 37 @,@ 000 copies within two months of publication . It went through eight separate printings in the first two years , and the paperback rights were quickly purchased . Dillard was unnerved by the crush of attention ; shortly after the book was published , she wrote , " I 'm starting to have dreams about Tinker Creek . Lying face down in it , all muddy and dried up and I 'm drowning in it . " She feared she had " shot my lifetime wad . Pilgrim is not only the wisdom of my 28 years but I think it 's the wisdom of my whole life . "

The initial consensus among reviewers was that it was " an unusual treatise on nature " . The book was published soon after her poetry collection Tickets for a Prayer Wheel (1974 , University of Missouri Press) . Reviewing both volumes for America , John Breslin noted the similarities between the two : " Even if her first book of poems had not been published simultaneously , the language she uses in Pilgrim would have given her away . " The Saturday Evening Post also praised Dillard 's poetic ability in Pilgrim at Tinker Creek , noting that " the poet in her is everywhere evident in this prose @-@ poem of hers : the reader 's attention is caught not only by the freshness of her insights , but by the beauty of her descriptions as well . " Melvin Maddocks , a reviewer for Time , noted Dillard 's intention of subtle influence : " Reader , beware of this deceptive girl , mouthing her piety about ' the secret of seeing ' being ' the pearl of great price , ' modestly insisting , ' I am no scientist . I explore the neighborhood . ' Here is no gentle romantic twirling a buttercup , no graceful inscriber of 365 inspirational prose poems . As she guides the attention to a muskrat , to a monarch butterfly , a heron or a coot , Miss Dillard is stalking the reader as surely as any predator stalks its game . "

Despite being a bestseller , Pilgrim received little academic attention until more than five years after its publication . Early reviewers Charles Nicol and J. C. Peirce linked Dillard with the Transcendentalism movement , comparing her to Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson . Author and environmentalist Edward Abbey , known as the " Thoreau of the American West " , stated that Dillard was the " true heir of the Master " . He wrote , " she alone has been able to compose ,

successfully , in Thoreau 's extravagant and transcendental manner . " In his 1992 book critic Scott Slovic wrote that *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* eventually " catapulted [Dillard] to prominence among contemporary American nonfiction writers ? particularly among nature writers ? and stimulated a wealth of reviews and a steadily accumulating body of criticism . " Gary McIlroy believed that Dillard 's work is distinctive for its " vibrant rediscovery of the woods . [She] studies the wildest remnants of the Virginia woodlands , stirring all the dark and promising mysteries of the American frontier .

Pilgrim at Tinker Creek won the Pulitzer Prize for General Non -@-@ fiction in 1975 , when Dillard was 29 years old . The jury noted in its nomination that " Miss Dillard is an expert observer in whom science has not etiolated a sense of awe ... Her book is a blend of observation and introspection , mystery and knowledge . We unanimously recommend it for the prize . " Since its initial publication , portions of the book have been anthologized in over thirty collections . Subsequent editions included those published by Bantam Books (1975) and Harper Colophon (1985 ; 1988) . The Harper Perennial 25th @-@ Anniversary edition , which included an afterword by the author , was released in 1999 . The first UK edition was released in 1976 . The book has been translated into many languages throughout the years , including Swedish , Japanese , French , and German . In 1998 it was listed in Modern Library 100 Best Nonfiction Books , both on the board 's and the reader 's lists .