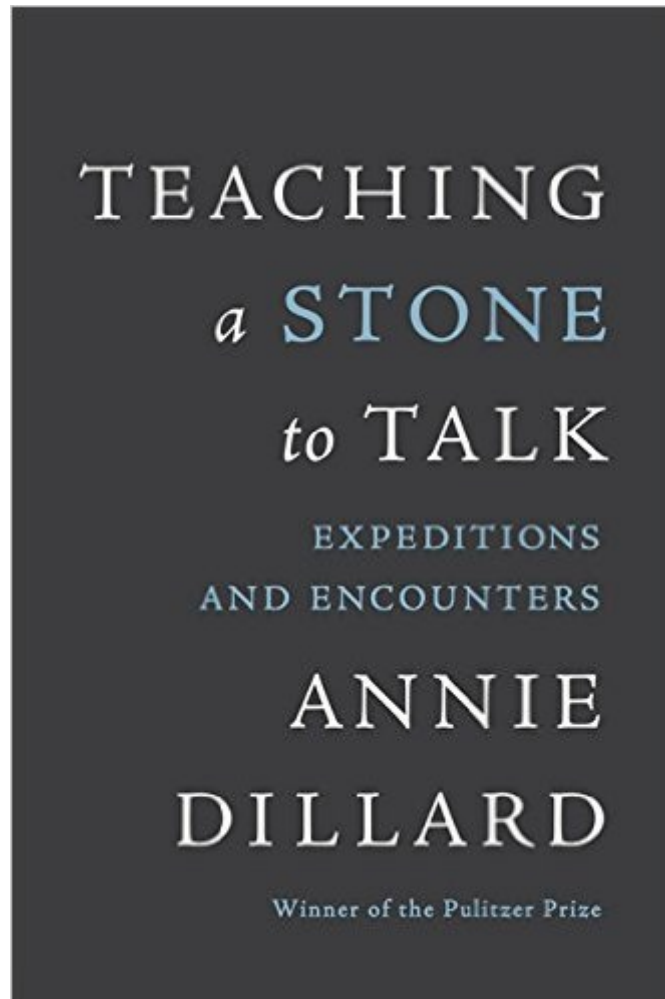


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Teaching A Stone To Talk: Expeditions And Encounters



Synopsis

Here, in this compelling assembly of writings, Pulitzer Prize-winning author Annie Dillard explores the world of natural facts and human meanings.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I remember a paradoxical statement about the Bible that I heard attributed to Karl Barth: "The Bible is not the word of God, but it contains the word of God." Well, TEACHING A STONE TO TALK is not Annie Dillard's finest book (that distinction belongs to either PILGRIM AT TINKERS CREEK or AN AMERICAN CHILDHOOD), but it contains her best work, i.e., some essays that are as good as anything that she has ever written. Almost inevitably, as in most collections, some of the essays aren't nearly as strong as the best, but the good ones make this slender volume essential reading for any fan of Ms. Dillard. My personal favorite among the fourteen comprising this book is also the longest, "An Expedition to the Pole." I consider myself to be a deeply religious person, but I also find church services to be almost unbearable (much like one of my literary heroes, Samuel Johnson). In this essay, Dillard contrasts her experiences in an utterly dreadful church service with many of the attempts in the nineteenth century to mount expeditions to reach the North Pole. The attempts of those adventurers are simultaneously tragic and laughable, in that their goal was so vastly beyond their means. The implication is that the same is true in worship: we attempt to worship god, but our efforts are clumsy and fall far short of the mark. There is nobility in both, and certainly Dillard doesn't want to imply that worship is futile. But the parallels are there. It is a brilliant essay.

Annie Dillard is one of the most satisfying essayists I know. Although I am not, generally, a reader of nature studies, Dillard's essays seem just perfect to me. If I had a single criticism, it would be that she generally ties in a theme or moral to her story to the extent that it would almost seem forced, but the language is so beautifully descriptive and the resolutions so elegant, that I am willing to forgive her for it. In "Total Eclipse" she manages to describe the experience of witnessing a total solar eclipse in ways that are otherworldly and profoundly beautiful (and even slightly terrifying). Nothing has made me want to experience a solar eclipse myself more than Dillard's essay. In the title essay, she begins by describing "...a man in his thirties who lives alone with a stone he is trying to teach to talk." From this, the essay expands eventually into a commentary on cosmology and theology and the palos santos trees on the Galapagos Islands, and yet it all seems to be a natural evolution. This is the way with all of her essays. Dillard's studies almost feel like free association, though like a perfect jazz solo, what seemed random and disconnected finds its way back home again as naturally as if it were scored. Jeremy W. Forstadt

This book truly is a well crafted and literary set of short stories; all or most of them being autobiographical. But the author does something special in this book. Her stories all center around the physical, mixed with the spiritual, mixed with the metaphysical, both alone and in concert, and finally, in the way they seem to co-exist, at least to her perception and observation. The substance of her plot is more a substance of a progression of human feelings, than events. The events just happen, the reasons, she tells us, are personal, and mostly uncontrollable. But they ARE. They exist temporally, spiritually, physically, and metaphysically all at the same time. How each of us sees these things is a bit like Albert Einstein's General and Special Theories of Relativity. It all depends on how you come to the words of Annie Dillard, and how we interpret what she is saying. Whether you can relate to it out of your own experience, or whether you can live it vicariously through Dillard's writing matters not, what matters is the attitude and state of mind that one brings to the stories. For readers interested in a mind expanding vision of reality, and non-reality, this book is beautifully written to take you to all these places. And it takes you through feelings, that almost every reader can relate to. It is worth every minute spent on it.

The first thing I think I should say is that I don't think I fully understand this book. The second thing I think I should say is that I like it anyway. Way back at Tinker Creek, Annie Dillard decided to open her eyes and see what she could see. Pilgrim is a vibrant and enthusiastic book, Annie reacting

exuberantly to the things she sees, even the puzzling and disturbing ones. Nowadays, she's been "seeing" awhile, and I don't think she really likes what she sees. In *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, there's a deep feeling of unsettledness, of discomfort. Annie sees a world that is silent, beautiful and ugly at the same time, a world that is complex and unyielding to any attempts to make it make sense without closing your eyes. There's brilliance here I think...of an unsettling sort. Some of her revelations float right over my head. But often she connects, and beautifully. "An Expedition to the Pole" brilliantly and powerfully compares the titled subject to religion and the search for God. "Total Eclipse" and "God in the Doorway" are other favorites, along with "Living Like Weasels" - probably one of her best essays ever, and the only one in this book that actually feels like *Pilgrim*. Read an excerpt. there's a link under "book info." See if you like it. I do. If you'd like to discuss this book with me, or other books, or recommend something you think I'd like, or just chat, e-mail me at williekrischke@hotmail.com. but be nice.

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