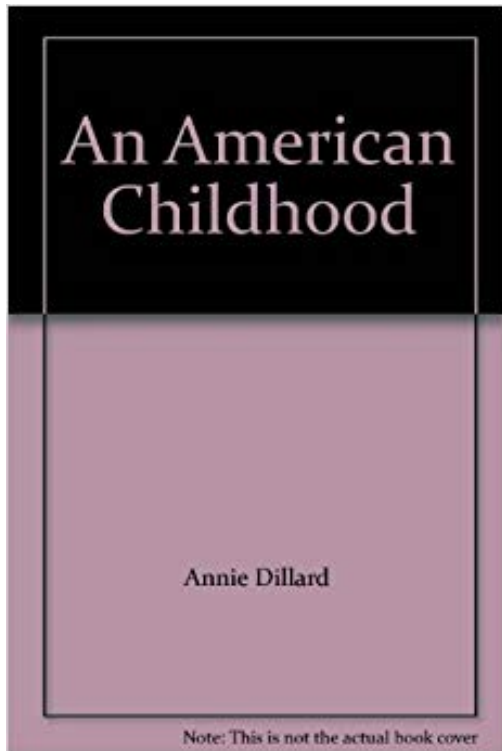


An American Childhood *by* Annie Dillard



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A book that instantly captured the hearts of readers across the country, *An American Childhood* is Pulitzer Prize-winning author Annie Dillard's poignant, vivid memoir of growing up in Pittsburgh in the 1950s. "Dillard's luminous prose painlessly captures the pain of growing up in this wonderful evocation of childhood. Her memoir is partly a hymn to Pittsburgh, where orange streetcars ran on Penn Avenue in 1953 when she was eight, and where the Pirates were always in the cellar. Dillard's mother, an unstoppable force, had energies too vast for the bridge games and household chores that stymied her. Her father made low-budget horror movies, loved Dixieland jazz, told endless jokes and sight-gags, and took lonesome river trips down to New Orleans to get away. From this slightly odd couple, Dillard acquired her love of nature and taut sensitivity." -- *Publishers Weekly*



Reviews of the *An American Childhood* *by* Annie Dillard

Kison

With the 1987 publication of *An American Childhood*, Annie Dillard, novelist, critic and woman of all trades helped ushered in the age of the memoir. For this alone we should thank her.

Non traditional in many ways, Dillard begins her work by claiming, "When everything else has gone from my brain...what will be left is topology: the dreaming memory of land as it lay." From this emerges a rich and generous history of Pittsburgh, the landscape upon which Dillard's childhood is inscribed. She takes the reader on a journey through every rock she overturned with a popsicle stick in hopes of finding buried treasure, through the alleyways where childhood games were played with ferocity, to the hallowed halls of Junior League dances where children are manufactured to become the city's elite. Her personal history is so entwined with that of the city that they are artfully rendered one in the same.

Unlike other memoirs, *An American Childhood* flouts the traditional coming of age trope. Instead, Dillard focuses on awakening from the self absorption of early childhood and entrance into the greater world. In a sense, she chronicles the Lacanian moment of self awareness, and does so lyrically and deftly. However, such an exploration of inner experience necessitates the sacrifice of a clear narrative structure. This work is more of a meditation on childhood, rather than a straight forward account of her life.

For me, her work most resonates when she speaks of the importance of books and reading in forming her malleable psyche and material interactions with the world. In her words, "The visible world turned me curious to books; the books propelled me reeling back to the world." For Dillard, reading becomes a love "most requited" (according to Wetherell's Post review). It is the medium through which boundaries are shattered, hopes are realized, and escapes are planned.

In this memoir, Dillard's prowess as a poet shines through. Her lyrical recollections of the past seem as if they are memories from your own childhood. Even if you have not read any of her previous works, read *An American Childhood* in order to relive the innocence and wonder of your own youth.

Ausstan

To notice along with Annie is to notice myself, my story. Her words fell like rocks in a mountain lake and my emotions and memories became ripples. One, then another, then a third. These were amusing. I forgot I was reading. The ripples stopped. I felt the silence. I started reading again.

Peace fills the heart.

Minha

That question propels *AN AMERICAN CHILDHOOD* by Annie Dillard, which is among the better of the many memoirs I have read. It is set in Pittsburgh, and it begins in 1950 when Dillard was five and ends when she goes off to college. At one level, *AN AMERICAN CHILDHOOD* is a wonderful tale of growing up in America in the 1950's. To be sure, Dillard grew up in a loving family, which also happened to be relatively affluent (maid, 24-foot-cabin-cruiser, vacations on Sanibel Island and at the grandparents' summer home on Lake Erie, country clubs, and private girls' school). Which betokens, of course, that Annie Dillard's was not the American childhood of most Americans born in 1945. But what really distinguishes her memoir is not the story of a relatively privileged childhood, but the exuberance and wonder with which she lived it. And for that reason, *AN AMERICAN CHILDHOOD* is worth reading by one and all, regardless of generation or socioeconomic background.

One of the treats of Dillard's memoir is how she portrays the "interior life" or life of imagination of a small child, and how that very solipsistic world is gradually fragmented by and then integrated with the exterior world of other people, and of history and the passage of time. A mission of Dillard's as a girl was to experience as much as she could, as fully as she could, and then remember as much of it as she could. "How much noticing could I permit myself without driving myself round the bend? * * * Too little noticing, though--I would risk much to avoid this--and I would miss the whole show. I would wake on my deathbed and say, What was that?" So Dillard pushed herself to observe - and remember - all kinds of details. Such things as the skin on her mother's hands, people's faces, games of "capture the flag", throwing snowballs at cars, air raid drills with heads pressed against the walls and arms folded over heads, ballroom dancing with the awkward other-worldly boys, and the exploits of Roberto Clemente in right field. But, as Dillard remarks near the end of the book, the particulars are not important. "What is important is anyone's coming awake and discovering a place, finding in full orbit a spinning globe one can lean over, catch, and jump on."

AN AMERICAN CHILDHOOD is the antithesis of - and an antidote for - those all-too-common contemporary memoirs of victimhood.

Xava

Admittedly, I am late to the ball here. No reviews since 2015 hmhhh. I came to this book quite unexpectedly: my best friend who lived a parallel life here in the South stumbled upon this book as an audio. She knew that I had grown up in Pittsburgh at the same time as Annie Dillard and felt I'd enjoy it. Well, I found it to be a captivating book. And not just because it was a nostalgia read for me, but rather because it details the physical, emotional, and spiritual life of growing up in a big, multi cultural city during the fifties and sixties. And Dillard does not over glorify the baby boomer experience, but rather shows the hidden side of a restless generation that saw right through mid-century consumerism and the prevailing philosophy that everyone 'has his place.' (Her grandmother's black chauffeur had his own glass) Pittsburgh was definitely a melting pot and nationalities 'stuck together' and settled in their own neighborhoods where they worshipped, ate, and celebrated like they did in the 'old country.' Dillard does an exceptional job with character development and transitions the emotions of those around her back to herself as she ponders and develops her own positions. I found the book to be interesting and insightful.

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