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THE WRITING LIFE

Annie Dillard

Harper & Row. 109 pp.

Annie Dillard's contribution to the cluster of books on how and why writers do what they do invites the suspicion that only authors have the luxury of using their medium to explain their craft. Can the painter create a canvas about painting, the composer write a concerto about music?

Yes. They do so all the time. Every canvas and concerto confesses a conviction about the nature of its medium by embodying what its creator believes art to be. In fairness, then, we may ask that a book about writing should itself be a work of art. That is exactly what Annie Dillard offers in this thin but superlative book.

This is not a book for everybody, but anyone hoping to see inside the process of the literary artist may seldom get a more lucid, sensitive and poetic view.

Like a qualifying exam of the reader's resolve, Dillard's opening chapter details the onerous toil that goes into careful writing. She delivers the bad news that just when we think we've sweated through the tough part and have a fine draft before us, the tough part begins: "Process is nothing; erase your tracks. . . . The part you must jettison is not only the best-written part; it is also, oddly, that part which was to have been the very point. . . . and from which you yourself drew the courage to begin."

Those who still have the tenacity to write can proceed to the rest of the book, where they'll find no sanction to ask indulgence for the labor of writing. What came the hardest is often what must be expunged: "How many gifts do we open from which the writer neglected to remove the price tag? Is it pertinent, is it courteous, for us to learn what it cost the writer personally?"

Dillard can be brutally frank: "The obverse of this freedom [of the writing life], of course, is that your work is so meaningless, so fully for yourself alone, and so worthless to the world, that no one except you cares whether you do it well, or ever." She can be wry: "The written word is weak. Many people prefer life to it. Life gets your blood going, and it smells good. Writing is mere writing, literature is mere." She can be ebullient: "The sensation of writing a book is the sensation of spinning, blinded by love and daring. It is the sensation of rearing and peering from the bent tip of a grass blade, looking for a route."

To speak of writing as approaching rapture is pure Annie Dillard, recalling the voice of her 1975 Pulitzer Prize-winning *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. In *The Writing Life*, too, her reflective self-awareness, as authoritative and it can be rhapsodic, evokes memories of the best passages of Peter Matthiessen's *The Snow Leopard*. There is barely any separation of herself from the external world. She merges with it like a literary mystic and sees its lessons in unlikely places. She learns about beauty from watching the intricate routine of stunt pilot Dave Rahm: "Even the Boston Museum of Fine Arts was never more inspiring than this small northwestern airport on this time-killing Sunday afternoon in June. Nothing on

earth is more gladdening than knowing we must roll up our sleeves and move back the boundaries of the humanly possible once more."

Always unified by its central objective, to take us inside the writing life, the book's variety is remarkable. Dillard's mood ranges from confessional to playful to pontifical. Often, *The Writing Life* is a writing manual, however profound: "Write as if you were dying. At the same time, assume you write for an audience consisting solely of terminal patients. That is, after all, the case. What would you begin writing if you knew you would die soon? What could you say to a dying person that would not enrage by its triviality?"

At other times, this is a writer's journal sharing what the writing life has been like. Dillard tells of composing a particularly difficult book whose prose "was so intense and rhythmical, and the world it described so charged with meaning, that the very thought of writing it made me tired. How could I add a sentence or two a day to this work I myself could barely understand?" She does not so much "write a book as sit up with it, as with a dying friend."

Advising how to select a workplace--"Appealing workplaces are to be avoided. One wants a room with no view, so imagination can dance with memory in the dark"--she recalls her own various workplaces that did and did not fit that requirement: the library study carrel on the Hollins College campus where she completed *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, the pine shed on Cape Cod where parts of *The Writing Life* were written, the cabin on a remote island in the Puget Sound where she learned by splitting firewood one of her most crucial lessons. In a dream, she realized she had been making a mistake by aiming for the wood, that if she'd aim for the chopping block she could split the wood instead of merely chipping it.

No potential metaphor gets lost on Dillard. Musing later on what is the only thing that can teach us how to write, she says it must be the blank page itself, "the page in the purity of its possibilities; the page of your death, against which you pit such flawed excellences as you can muster with all your life's strength: that page will teach you to write.

"There is another way of saying this. Aim for the chopping block. If you aim for the wood, you will have nothing. Aim past the wood."

She finds cogent analogies everywhere, in an Algonquin woman hunting for food, the Hanna-Barbara Road Runner, schedule-making, clipping a clothespin onto a finger to remind her when her tea will be ready, alligator wrestling, an old typewriter exploding, painters (not odd for a writer whose own manuscript pages are often richly embellished with sketches), and the book's closing metaphor of pilot Rahm about whom Dillard writes with an awe that would feel gushing if it were even a shred less compelling.

Bookstores often shelve Dillard's books in the Nature section. And they do belong there in the same sense that Thoreau's *Walden*, to which *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* was aptly compared, belongs there. Certainly few writers observe nature with more astuteness and scientific accuracy. In *The Writing Life* she frequently draws on animals for her metaphors: the starfish whose parts, like a book's, sometimes break off and wander away to die; male butterflies preferring large cardboard female butterflies to living smaller ones; moths supercharging their muscles with oxygen to enable them to begin flight; the

plodding nitwit inchworm too earthbound to glide before he is a butterfly; a swallow inspired by but unequal to Dave Rahm's art.

Many of these metaphors deal with flying, possibly because Dillard intends her writing to take wing. So, like a stunt pilot, she must risk crashing. Crop-duster pilots, she reports, have a life expectancy of five years before the end. There are no crashes in this book, but there is a nosedive or two, a moment of self-conscious artfulness or stilted syntax: "Your manuscript, on which you lavish such care, has no needs or wishes; it knows you not." But such slight flaws count for nothing here, for this is a breathtakingly wonderful book.

Annie Dillard writes stunning prose. She places words into her sentences like gems in a tiara. She has a capacity to savor life simultaneously in its minutest detail and in all its fullness. She never fears to soar, risking absurdity, and if ever there is a moment of absurdity it is lost within the abundant recompense of our soaring with her. Her rhapsodic moments are never blunted by the effusiveness of, say, a Shelley. No need for apology stands between us and their power.

Annie Dillard's guide to and example of the writing life challenges the insensibility of current literary fashion and shames its champions for their incapacity to feel as alive as she. Part of mature toughmindedness embraces true opportunities for joy and even rapture. This, then, is not only a beautiful but a courageous book, one that dares to use a voice as sublime as its subject.