

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Annie Dillard (1945-) *An American Childhood*

Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (1974) was a book of nature essays and personal meditations based on a year's residence, in 1972, in the Roanoke valley of rural Virginia. It won the Pulitzer Prize and was often compared to Thoreau's *Walden*.

More extensively autobiographical than *Tinker Creek* is her *An American Childhood* (1987), which is about her childhood and adolescence in upper-middle-class Pittsburgh in the prosperous, confident 1950's and early '60s. It is a story of her dawn of memory and consciousness, running on into a very privileged education and self-education. She collects butterflies and classifies rocks and minerals, studies drawing, practices the piano, reads omnivorously, and spends comfortable vacations with her wealthy paternal grandparents on Lake Erie and in Florida. She also rebels against her family's respectable Presbyterian church and the class traditions enshrined in country clubs and private schools. Like other young artists from other cities, she dreams of someday escaping. But Annie Dillard (Dillard was the name of her first husband) also seems grateful for the advantages she had as Annie Doak, eldest daughter of Pam and Frank Doak and big sister to Amy and Molly.

The following untitled chapter balances these joys and frustrations of being brilliant and spontaneous, and troubled and troublesome, in a town which is stuffy but also comforting and nurturing. It is also humorous. But was the humor felt at the time or only seen later?

The escape which Annie Doak did make was to Hollins College in Roanoke, Virginia, where she majored in English and graduated Phi Beta Kappa in 1967.

The selection below is from *An American Childhood* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988). There is no biography of Dillard. The sketch in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography, Yearbook* (1980) is informative, however, and the sketch in *Contemporary Authors* (New Revision Series, vol. 3) has a lengthy survey of reviews of her work.

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