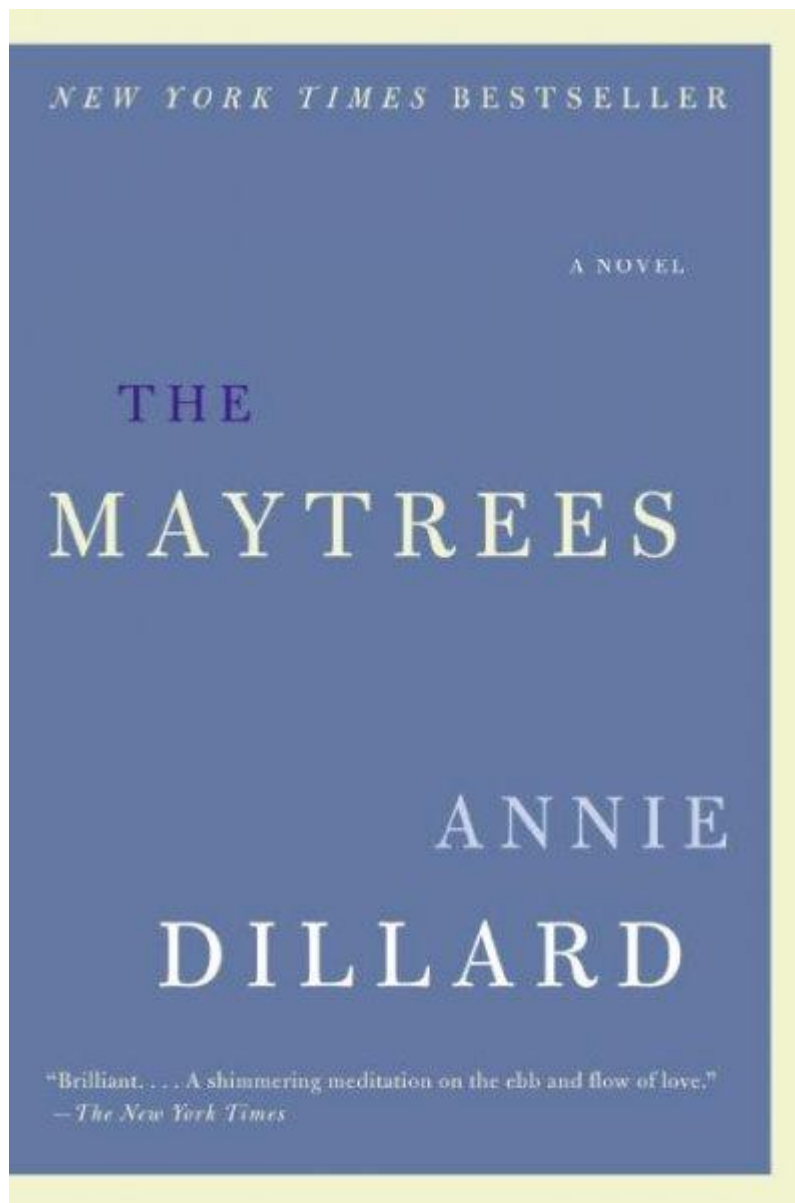


Ann Arbor District Library: Book Club to Go Discussion Guide

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1328057>

About the Book



In post World War II Cape Cod, Toby Maytree falls in love with Lou Bigelow, a reserved, Ingrid Bergman-like beauty. The two lovers marry and live among their bohemian friends in a shack on the Provincetown seaside. The Maytrees need very little to pass their days: books, poetry, painting. The arrival of their young son Petie seemingly completes them. Years later, Toby leaves Lou for their friend, free-spirited Deary. Lou stays in Provincetown with her grief, living alone, and even enjoying her solitude, while Toby and Deary move to Maine. When Toby finally returns, it's to ask Lou the unthinkable: to care for dying Deary. A story of love and affection, *The Maytrees* follows the ebb and flow of life and forgiveness, and our very tenacious existence on this planet.

About the Author Source: Literature Resource Center

<http://www.aadl.org/research/browse/books>

Biographical Information

Dillard was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania on April 30, 1945, to Frank and Pam Doak. The oldest of three girls, her Presbyterian childhood eventually became a subject for her writing. Dillard's early explorations of nearby Frick Park and her rebellion against certain traditions and mores of her social class are described in her book *An American Childhood* (1987). She attended Hollins College earning a B.A. degree in English in 1967 and completing an M.A. there in 1968. She married a professor and writer, Richard Dillard in 1964. Dillard later divorced and married professor and writer Gary Clevidence in 1980. Since 1988 Dillard has been married to Robert D. Richardson, Jr., also a writer and professor. She taught at Western Washington University in Bellingham as a scholar-in-residence from 1975 to 1979 and at various American universities during the 1980s. Dillard is currently a professor emeritus at Wesleyan University. Dillard wrote for *The Living Wilderness* magazine from 1973 to 1975 and was a contributing editor for *Harper's Magazine* from 1974 to 1981 and again from 1983 to 1985. She serves as a member of the usage panel at *American Heritage Dictionary*. In addition to her 1975 Pulitzer Prize in the general nonfiction category for *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, Dillard was nominated for the National Book Critics Circle award in 1987 for *An American Childhood*. She received the Milton Prize in 1994 and the Academy Award in Literature given by the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 1998. Dillard was inducted into the Connecticut Women's Hall of Fame in 1997 and was the recipient of grants from the National Endowment for the Arts in 1982-1983 and the Guggenheim Foundation in 1985-1986.

Major Works

Dillard is known for her work in many genres. Initially, she wrote poetry; her first published book of poems, *Tickets for a Prayer Wheel* (1974), explores many of the major themes also contained in her later works, including spiritual faith, science, nature, and time. Dillard returned to writing poetry in *Mornings Like This* (1995), an experimental collection utilizing bits of text from such sources as the letters of Vincent Van Gogh and a 1926 junior high school English textbook in the creation of new poems. Dillard is best known, however, for her nonfiction works on nature and spirituality such as *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, *Holy the Firm* (1977), *Teaching a Stone to Talk* (1982), and *For the Time Being* (1999). *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* chronicles four seasons Dillard spent at Tinker Creek in Virginia's Roanoke Valley. She vividly describes the beauty and horrors extant in the natural world--a bloody tomcat that climbs through a window to jump on her chest in the middle of the night; a water bug that eats a frog by sucking its insides out. Dillard employs a scientific approach in her examinations of Tinker Creek, even looking at the creek water under a microscope. In the process of her exploration, Dillard ponders the meaning of her own existence and her relationship to God and the universe. All of

Dillard's writings share this spiritual quest. *Holy the Firm* was inspired by a passage in one of Emerson's letters to Margaret Fuller which became the epigraph for the book: "No one suspects the days to be gods." After reading this passage, Dillard decided to make the next three days a test case. On the second day in her test, a neighbor's seven-year-old child was badly burned in a plane crash, an event Dillard uses as a springboard to reflect on the metaphysical aspects of pain. She sets off on a two-year sojourn on an island in Puget Sound, attempting to come to terms with senseless suffering. *Teaching a Stone to Talk* includes fourteen essays covering travels to such places as the Galapagos and South America while also detailing everyday happenings. In one essay, "Total Eclipse," Dillard describes a February 1979 visit to central Washington to watch a total eclipse of the sun. She details the trip, the hotel, and the eclipse itself, to which she has a powerful reaction. In *For the Time Being*, Dillard ponders her trips to China and Israel, all the while considering life and death in the presence or absence of God. Dillard is also known for her memoir *American Childhood*, which documents her growing awareness of the world around her, exploring her rebellions against both the Presbyterian Church and the constraints of her upper-middle class upbringing. *The Living* (1992) is a historical novel set in Washington Territory in the nineteenth century which provides a picture of frontier life at the time. Dillard has also authored works of literary criticism and essays on writing. *Living by Fiction* (1982), *Encounters with Chinese Writers* (1984), and *The Writing Life* (1989) examine Dillard's own need to write, her desire to motivate writers to fully commit to their art, and her exploration of literature's role in society.

Critical Reception

Dillard earned resounding critical acclaim over time, though she noted that *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* was not an immediate critical success. *Kirkus Reviews* panned the book and Eudora Welty wrote in the *New York Times Book Review*: "I honestly do not know what [Dillard] is talking about." However, as time passed, the book earned a reputation as a masterpiece. Critics called *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* an unorthodox book that defies genre. Unlike Thoreau's *Walden*, where the author's imagination speaks for nature, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* allows nature itself to reveal the divine. James A. Papa, Jr. stated that, "For Dillard nature is an oracle: she wants it to speak to her." Not surprisingly, criticism has centered on the concept of vision in her work with great attention paid to Dillard's reliance on Emerson's "transparent eyeball," but as Gretchen Legler noted, "The unself-conscious position is rare and hard to maintain." Critics praised Dillard's explorations of spirituality in *Holy the Firm* and *Teaching a Stone to Talk*. Commentators focused on the unusual structure in *For the Time Being*, where each chapter covers ten subjects, creating a circular narrative. Critics questioned the generalized title of *An American Childhood*; many consider Dillard's childhood as relatively privileged.

This book focuses on beliefs Dillard developed during her teen years. The work examines her notions concerning society's expectations for girls, traditionally regarded as inferiors, and Dillard ultimately rejects such categorizations. Most scholars have concurred Dillard's work is thought-provoking, insightful, and enthusiastic, asserting it effectively draws from her own experiences and her passion for writing.

Awards

The Maytrees was a finalist for the PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction in 2008 (<http://www.penfaulkner.org/>).

Reviews

Publishers Weekly *Starred Review*

Lou Bigelow meets her husband-to-be, Toby Maytree, when Toby returns to Provincetown following WWII. In the house Lou inherits from her mother, they read, cook soup, play games with friends, vote and raise a child. Toby writes poetry and does odd jobs; Lou paints. Their unaffected bohemianism fits right in with the Provincetown landscape, which Dillard, who won a Pulitzer Prize for *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, describes with an offhand but deep historical sense. Years into the marriage, Toby suddenly decamps to Maine with another local woman, Deary Hightoe; flash forward six years to Lou reading Toby's semimonthly letters (and Deary's marginal notes) "with affectionate interest." Dillard, stripping the story to bare facts-plus-backdrop, is after something beyond character and beyond love, though she evokes Lou and Toby's beautifully. Thus, when Deary's heart falters 20 years later and Toby brings her home to Lou for hospice care, Lou puts up water for tea and gets going. She feels too much, not too little, for mere drama, although people who don't know her misread her. In short, simple sentences, Dillard calls on her erudition as a naturalist and her grace as poet to create an enthralling story of marriage—particular and universal, larky and monumental.

Library Journal

Pulitzer Prize winner Dillard (*Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*) is best known for her nonfiction; this 11th book, set on Cape Cod, is a fictional account of a broken family. The plot follows the courtship and marriage of Toby Maytree and Lou Bigelow, who fall in love and settle near Provincetown shortly after World War II. Good-looking, unconventional, and brainy, Toby and Lou share an intense appreciation of the natural world—the Cape's wild sand dunes are major players in the novel—yet husband and wife live most vividly within their own minds, a trait

strongly reflected in Pete, their only child. When Toby impulsively leaves with another woman to settle in Maine, none of the Maytrees really knows how to cope. Many years pass before tragedy propels them to achieve reunion and redemption based on selfless love. The poetic language, close observations of nature, and moving, family-centered theme in this short, low-key novel should appeal to a wide readership.

Booklist *Starred Review*

Dillard, a member in good standing of the school of Emerson and Thoreau, reads the living world with the elevated attention accorded sacred texts. This habit of mind shapes her prized nonfiction, from *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (1974) to *For the Time Being* (1999), and underlies her fiction, first, in *The Living* (1992), a historical saga set in the Pacific Northwest. And now in this rhapsodic novel of our times set on Cape Cod and portraying free-spirited characters dazzled by the sea, stars, sun, wind, and dunes. Deary, a country-club escapee, sleeps in the sand's cradling embrace. Poet Toby Maytree cherishes the beach shack his coast guard father built, which is where he takes beautiful and meditative Lou, launching a epic love. Dillard's gift for combining scientific precision with soul-stirring lyricism has never been more beguiling and philosophically resonant. Can Lou and Maytree's seaside idyll last? Yes and no. Broken bones and broken promises do not altogether slay love, or dispel osmotic understanding. The ocean gives, takes, gives back. Lou is an anchorite, free of clock time and clutter, devoted to the story of the land. Maytree is a voyager who, in old age, returns home. In this mythic and transfixing tale, Dillard wryly questions notions of love, exalts in life's metamorphoses, and celebrates goodness. As she casts a spell sensuous and metaphysical, Dillard covertly bids us to emulate may trees--the resilient hawthorn--the tree of joy, of spring, of the heart.

The Washington Post

Annie Dillard's books are like comets, like celestial events that remind us that the reality we inhabit is itself a celestial event, the business of eons and galaxies, however persistently we mistake its local manifestations for mere dust, mere sea, mere self, mere thought. The beauty and obsession of her work are always the integration of being, at the grandest scales of our knowledge of it, with the intimate and momentary sense of life lived. *The Maytrees* is about wonder -- in the terms of this novel, life's one truth. It is wonder indeed that is invoked here, vast and elusive and inexhaustible and intimate and timeless. There is a resolute this-worldliness that startles the reader again and again with recognition. How much we overlook! What a world this is, after all, and how profound on its own terms.

Dillard has always been fascinated by time -- by the fact that existence is charged with it, saturated with it, borne along by it into a future that makes the span of any life less than negligible. And time in its mystery and grandeur bestrides this novel. Its sea is wild and generative, its sky orders the constellations, and both are primordial, archaic, full of the fact of time past and persisting, unchanging, changing everything. If there were such a thing as cosmic realism, *The Maytrees* would be a classic of the genre.

I hasten to say the book is full of the kind of pleasures one looks for in fiction. The few characters are engaging, and, though nothing especially remarkable happens, the story has import, and this is as potent as suspense in engrossing the reader. The narrative is a highly localized meditation on the question, *Why are we here?* The spare landscape and potent seascape answer that question even before it is asked.

The novel is set on Cape Cod, on the most seaward curve of the hook. It transpires among a circle of people who live there through all weather over decades, people who know each other too well and are more charmed than they ought to be by their own gifts, which are nevertheless quite real. They are, in their way, fashionable, dilettantish, and yet as native to the place as they can manage to be. They embrace the rigors that go with living deeply in that landscape, and at the same time they seem idle, up to very little beyond cocktail parties, serial marriage and the reading of good books. At first glance, they and their lives seem both irritating and enviable, in other words, ripe for satire. But the novel absorbs them into a vision that ultimately blesses them all.

The Maytrees is written for the most part from the points of view of the small, fractured Maytree family -- Lou, the sometime wife; Toby, the errant husband; and Pete, their only child. And no portrait of the family would be complete without Deary, the quondam free spirit who carries Toby off to Maine for an affair that lasts 20 years. The eponymous title of the book is an assertion of acceptance and embrace.

Solid, good-hearted Pete grows up to make a local marriage, father a child and work as a fisherman. His father, Toby, remains through the years a decent, distractible man, a poet of possibly serious aspiration and minor but respectable attainment. Lou, the central character, enjoys her marriage, absorbs its shocks, and, when she has brought up her son, continues to live a life of studied simplicity there on the edge of the sea.

Maytree (Lou consistently calls Toby by his last name) receives from the author and the other characters such respect for his avocation as it always does deserve,

though nothing about him particularly suggests that he has drunk the milk of paradise. Lou, who makes no claims, is also a poet of sorts and a painter. The novel as a whole is beautiful, and the beauty is never digressive or ornamental. But when we see through Lou's eyes, it is as if the objects of her attention lift off the page. Her awareness invests the world with dimensionality and presence, summoning a sharp sense of the ontological strangeness of creation and the mystery of our place in it. She is tough-minded, therefore compassionate; free of sentimentality, therefore generous. And she is always brilliantly attentive. In the fullness of time she realizes that the world has been her meditation, that simplicity and stillness and the sea have somehow made her sufficient to her life. This is both a modest claim -- "The Maytrees performed no heroic deeds, neither Toby nor Lou, and both acted within any decent heart's scope" -- and a deep tribute to any decent heart. The novel proposes that there is an involuntary, even unconscious shaping of character, individual and social, that comes with weathering, and that, in yielding to a wisdom no one could earn or choose and for which they have no language, people conform themselves in ways something like the accommodations landscape makes to wear and time.

Dillard has often been compared to Dickinson and Thoreau. Her language in this book can recall Gerard Manley Hopkins, both in its use of compression to heighten and intensify, and in its use of words that are perhaps arcane. I am willing to take fletching and skeg on faith, since their sound and context make them evocative. Lagniappe is a word I could have lived without. But albedo, used here in reference to the look of sand by night, is so perfect that I am grateful to have acquired it. It means reflected light, and, in another context, reflected neutrons. It suggests the deep kinship between ordinary human experience and the vast, ghostly universe of being itself. This is where Dillard's imagination has always lived, in the stark and lyrical awareness of the profundity of the physical world.

Literary Criticism

Shifting hearts, shifting sands

A man of about 60 who had read the American edition of this novel--it was published there a couple of months ago--told me lately that it was a 'grown-up book'. Among other things, I take him to mean that besides recognising the difficulties of love, it embraces them; and that love is not the exclusive domain of the young and frisky.

Toby Maytree is a poet who lives by the beach on Cape Cod. He 'hauls houses' for a living, but he has an insatiably inquisitive mind: 'He pitched into the world for plunder, probed it with torches, filled his arms and brain with pieces botched--to what end? Every fact was a rune.' Lou speaks 'three languages and held her tongue in all of them'. They fall in love--he loves her 'immeasurable reserve'--and get married. 'She shipwrecked on the sheets. She surfaced like a dynamited bass ... All her life the thought of his body made her blush.' They have a child.

But after 14 years of acknowledged happiness, Toby runs off to Maine with Deary, an older woman who lives not merely by, but often on, the beach: she sleeps wrapped in a sailcloth. Twenty years later, despite being aware that he had listened 'on edge, for years and in vain, to uncover where, in any anecdote's avalanche, dropped the flake she thought might interest him', he is still committed to her. But when she is terminally ill he injures himself and cannot look after her, so he brings her back to Lou to die. Lou growls as he begins to mumble thanks and he realises that 'he was treating her like a stranger who was helping him change a tire'. She has forgiven him and he allows himself to be forgiven. She can still think of him as 'chivalrous'. As they slip again into intimacy, without forfeiting individuality they gain in dignity. When he asks where the mirror is, she tells him, 'I took it down.' 'Took it down?' 'It wanted products.'

When seriously presented--and they are--the difficulties of these struggles and transformations are immense. Could people really be like this? We all know that truth can be stranger than fiction: it is one of the challenges of fiction to persuade us that lives really might be lived and experienced in other ways. The vividness of Dillard's initial portrayal of the Maytrees' intimacy makes the shiftings of their hearts all the more startling. She achieves it by using language that might irritate some readers as mannered, but it works because the images are taut and precise. The snatches of conversation are intensely in character, never slipping into the solipsism of Ondaatje, with whom she might be compared. The Maytrees' minds, their relationships with friends and their perceptions of the natural world--'the dunes' scimitar shadows'--seem new. While some readers may regard this newness as affectation, others, like the American gentleman and I, will be persuaded by its beauty into feeling, however briefly, that the transformations Dillard depicts could be comprehended.

Source: de Falbe, John. "Shifting hearts, shifting sands." *Spectator* 13 Oct. 2007: 61. Literature Resource Center <http://www.aadl.org/research/browse/books>

Discussion Questions

1. When Maytree asks, "Say, Lou—here's a question. Keats put, 'Who shall say between Man and Woman which is the more delighted?' What do you think?" Lou answers "The woman." Why does Lou add later that night as Maytree is falling asleep, "If the man is John Keats" (page 38)?
2. What does Maytree feel towards Lou when Pete gets hit by the car? Why does her forgiveness of the driver so upset him, and how does her ability to forgive ultimately bring him back to her?
3. How does Toby and Lou's love for each other mimic the ebb and flow of the seaside?
4. Lou's father left her when she was young. How does this influence how she handles Toby leaving her?
5. Most of the Maytree's friends, including Deary, fall in and out of relationships. Despite the still conservative post World War II era, none of these relationships feel salacious. How and why does it take on a different feeling when it happens to the Maytrees?
6. What does the book's sparse landscape and living on the edge of a forceful sea say about our time here on Earth?
7. How does the book's title reflect its overall theme of acceptance?
8. *The Maytrees* has been hailed as a "meditation of love." How did this story make you feel about love?
9. Deary transforms herself from a Spartan bohemian to a materialistic New England matron. What do you feel triggers this abrupt change in her?
10. Does Toby misunderstand or take Lou's quietness for granted early in their relationship?

Multimedia

***Annie Dillard's Tale of Bohemian Love By the Sea* (Radio Broadcast)**

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=12241185>

A discussion with the author on NPR's *Weekend Edition*.

Further Reading

Living By Fiction by Annie Dillard

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1020932>

(Call number: 809.3 Di)

Living by Fiction is written for - and dedicated to - people who love literature. Dealing with writers such as Nabokov, Barth, Coover, Borges, Garcia Marquez, Beckett, and Calvino, Annie Dillard shows how contemporary fiction works and why traditional fiction will always move us. Like Joyce Cary's *Art and Reality*, this is a book by a writer on the issues raised by the art of literature.

The Writing Life by Annie Dillard

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1020954>

(Call number: 921 Dillard)

Annie Dillard has written eleven books, including the memoir of her parents, *An American Childhood*; the Northwest pioneer epic *The Living*; and the nonfiction narrative *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. A gregarious recluse, she is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

Teaching a Stone to Talk: Expeditions and Encounters by Annie Dillard

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1020951>

(Call number: 818 Di)

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

Author's official website

<http://www.anniedillard.com/>

Information, news, and resources from the author.

Read-Alikes

Book Club To Go! *The History of Love* by Nicole Kraus

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1241222>

(Call number: Fiction Krauss)

Leo Gursky is just about surviving, tapping his radiator each evening to let his upstairs neighbor know he's still alive. But life wasn't always like this: sixty years ago, in the Polish village where he was born, Leo fell in love and wrote a book. And though Leo doesn't know it, that book survived, inspiring fabulous circumstances, even love.

Thank You for All Things by Sandra Kring

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1320859>

(Call number: Fiction Kring)

At twelve, Lucy Marie McGowan already knows she'll be a psychologist when she grows up. And her quirky and conflicted family provides plenty of opportunity for her to practice her calling. Now Lucy, her "profoundly gifted" twin brother, Milo, her commitment-phobic mother, and her New Age grandmother are leaving Chicago for Timber Falls, Wisconsin, to care for her dying grandfather--a complex and difficult man whose failure as a husband and father still painfully echoes down through the years.

House on Fortune Street by Margot Livesey

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1307057>

(Call number: Fiction Livesey)

It seems like mutual good luck for Abigail Taylor and Dara MacLeod when they meet at St. Andrews University and, despite their differences, become fast friends. Years later they remain an unlikely pair. Abigail, an actress who confidently uses her charms both on- and offstage, believes herself immune to love. Dara, a counselor, is convinced that everyone is inescapably marked by childhood; she throws herself into romantic relationships with frightening intensity. Yet now each seems to have found "true love"-another stroke of luck?

Book Club To Go!* *Bel Canto by Ann Patchett

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1175837>

(Call number: Fiction Patchett)

Somewhere in South America, at the home of the country's vice president, a lavish birthday party is being held in honor of the powerful businessman Mr. Hosokawa. Roxane Coss, opera's most revered soprano, has mesmerized the international guests with her singing. It is a perfect evening-until a band of gun-wielding terrorists takes the entire party hostage.

Extra!

Has there ever been a time you have been asked to take on a duty you preferred not to carry out? Discuss as a group.

Summaries from AADL.org Catalog

