An American Childhood Study Guide

An American Childhood by Annie Dillard

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

Anne Dillard, now a middle-aged woman, recalls her childhood, from the time she was five all the way through high school. Over these years, she provides her own childhood as a model for happiness in adulthood. Adult needs not leave behind the spirit that causes children to stand in perpetual awe of the world; rather, to be truly happy, one must resist the world's attempt to stamp that spirit out.

The account begins with what are probably Anne's youngest memories. She is a five year old who is just starting to be conscious of herself and the world around her. She compares the differences between herself and her parents, how their skin is loose and saggy, while her own is beautiful and taut. She loves her parents but is especially enthralled by her mother. Her mother is a vibrant, brilliant woman who, by the conventions of the 1950s, is locked away in the household, destined to be a housewife until she dies. She amuses Anne and her sisters constantly with clever jokes and elaborate pranks. During these early years of Anne's life, her father quits his job and attempts to take a boat down the Mississippi to New Orleans. The voyage fails, however; it is too long and too lonesome. He sells the boat and returns home.

As a child, like any other child, Anne is filled with curiosity. The world amazes her and what might seem mundane to others is often an object of intense study for her. During these childhood years, Anne studies, among other things, the French-Indian War, mineralogy, biographies of famous biologists, insects, drawing, and forensics. As she grows up and becomes more aware of the way the world works, she realizes that hardly any adults retain this same spirit of wonder. Most get married, find jobs, and work until they die. However, Anne finds hope in some few individuals, most of all, her mother.

As Anne grows older and enters into adolescence, she watches with horror as she starts to turn into an adult. Boys had always delighted her and she would look at them with awe, but now they had a different, more mature appeal to her. As she started high school she become obsessed, like all her friends, with wearing the most fashionable clothes and having the best tan. This fixation on worldly pursuits coincides with a darkening of her world. For the first time in her life—at least, for any extended period of time—Anne is unhappy. She seems to have lost the childish wonder of years past which made her so happy, and she nearly resigns herself to her fate. She is filled with anger during these years, though it is not clear towards what. As a result, she starts getting into trouble. She gets into a drag-racing accident, starts smoking, and writes a letter to the church's Reverend, angrily citing the reasons why she is quitting the church. As the story ends, Anne is finishing high school and preparing for college life.

Lest the book ends in this gloomy fashion, the epilogue vindicates the curiosity of young Anne. It is necessary to compromise with the world after all. Rather, Anne found that she could be happy, no matter what her circumstances and no matter how old she is, by simply living in her own consciousness and admiring the beauty of the world as it is.

Prologue

Prologue Summary and Analysis

The last thing the author will forget is the layout of the lands in which she lived. Pittsburgh sprung up as a settlement in the early 18th century covered from border to border in rugged trees and vegetation. It was founded at the meeting of two rivers, at a spot first scouted out by George Washington.

As early as she can remember, Anne's father dreamed of the Mississippi and New Orleans. He read books about the lives of men who traveled up and down the River and dreamed of leaving Pittsburgh for New Orleans, the home of the kind of original, gritty jazz that he loved so much. He finally decided that he would quit his comfortable job as an executive in his family's business and take the river voyage he had dreamed of to New Orleans. It would be a long voyage—several months, at least—and his initial boyish excitement faded gradually into loneliness and regret. He sold the boat in Louisville and returned home.

At the same time, Anne, still quite young, was starting to have trouble sleeping. In her periods of restlessness, she became more reflective and began to think about the world and, most importantly herself. It was in this time that Anne grew into her consciousness and realized that she—like the world around her—was something that could be pondered and analyzed.

Part One: Pages 15 through 38

Part One: Pages 15 through 38 Summary and Analysis

"The story," Dillard writes, without indicating what the story is, "starts back in 1950, when I was five" (15). These years were spent largely in silence; people were busy restarting their lives after the end of the war, and mothers and their children generally spent their days at home in silence. Anne's life, though young, was very reflective, and she characterizes this period as transition in and out of consciousness of the world around her. During this time, she began to climb out of many of her childhood fantasies. She used to imagine a monster was creeping into her room periodically throughout the night, but later discovered that it was just the headlights of a car coming through her bedroom window.

One facet of her growing desire to discover and analyze the world was touching the skin of adults—her mother and father, mainly—and noting how it was different from her own. Adult skin, she thought, was saggy and decrepit, while children's skin was taut and beautiful. Yet, despite her assessment of her parents as bags of skin filled with bones, they were really quite young, still in their twenties, and when they dressed up, even Anne had to admit that they looked beautiful. She was proud of her parents and wanted the world to see how beautiful and wonderful they were.

The neighbors across the street, the Sheehy's, were Irish Catholic and Anne was forbidden to associate with them after one of the boys told Anne to call her black maid a racial slur. Nonetheless, Anne—and indeed her parents, too—could not resist the spectacular sight of seeing Jo Ann Sheehy skate on the icy streets in winter. Graceful as she was, it was doubly impressive for Anne; the street in her mind was filled with danger and she half-expected Jo Ann to be run down by a car at any moment. The Sheehy's, like many of their neighbors, were Catholic. In Anne's mind, which was formed by vague Protestant rumors and prejudices about Catholicism, when the children went to school at St. Bede's, they were off to meet some awful fate where they would be terrorized by nuns and forced to worship the Pope. Anne's mother, recognizing her daughter's fears, decided one day to introduce her to a group of nuns walking by the house, and Anne felt as if she was being delivered to her executioners as the nuns politely said hello.

Anne adored her mother, especially how she would talk. She was filled with various quaint sayings, stories, lyrics from songs, and even the occasional Scottish phrase, inherited not from her ancestry, but from the heavily Scottish town of Somerset. She had descended from two prominent Somerset families: the Millers, renowned for their beautiful women, and the Lamberts, who were notorious both for their charm and heavy drinking. HeAnnie's grandfather died when Annie's mother was seven after winning a large sum of money from a contest and going on a drinking spree with a friend. As a result, Anne's mother grew up longing—in vain, of course—to have her father back.

Part One: Page 39 through 69

Part One: Page 39 through 69 Summary and Analysis

Dillard recalls the adventures she had as a child. Once, she found an old coin in an alleyway by her house and her father told her that the older a coin is, the more value it has. Inspired by this, she began digging around more and more everyday, thinking that the deeper she dug, the older and hence more valuable coin she would find. She never did find another coin, but cherished the excitement of the treasure hunt nonetheless.

As Anne grew older, she began traveling further and further from home. Her father had forbidden her from going to a place called Frick Park—bums lived there, he said—but her mother allowed her to go if she kept it a secret. Anne made the journey there several times to watch people play games. She would be approached by homeless people sometimes, but she was not afraid of them; she would even bring them food occasionally and eat with them.

Anne got in trouble during the winters for throwing snowballs—at cars, mainly. One time her friends pelted a car with snowballs and the driver, to their horror, got out of the car and started chasing them. He chased Anne and her friend for what seemed like miles, following their every turn through their suburban landscape. Finally, he caught them; Anne was not scared, however, but jubilant. He had put so much effort into tracking them down that it seemed more like he was playing a game with them than angry. He said a few words to scold them—because that is what a person should do in such a situation, Anne thought—and went on his way.

Jokes were very important in Anne's family, and from an early age her parents went to great lengths to explain any joke that came up to her and her sister. She recalls that her father favored verbose, long jokes while her mother's sense of humor was sharper and more to the point. Her mother also liked strange jokes. One joke in particular involved intentionally telling a joke she knew would bomb, only to revive it a day or two later as the punchline for another joke. She was a witty insulter, too, and so the kids loved setting her up to see with what kind of clever line she would come back.

Each summer Anne and her sister Amy would move in for a few months with their grandparents at their lake house. Anne recalls one time picking up a penny on the beach and her grandmother telling her to be sure to wash her hands after touching money, which Anne thought was funny because she was otherwise soiled with sand, mud, and whatever else was on the beach.

Oma, Anne's paternal grandmother, was in a sort of competition with their mother. Oma wanted the family to be incorporated into the upper-class German culture of the Doaks, but Anne's mother was content with her lifestyle as it was. Though the kids liked spending time with Oma—who was quite well off and free with her money—they sided

quite naturally with their mother and even looked down on Oma to an extent because of her overt racism.

The family moved—not far, to the other side of Frick Park—when Anne was about eight. Her parents, evidently now richer, spent a great deal of time and effort improving their house and even joined a country club, where the kids would often spend time. It was also during this time that her father planned, embarked on, and returned early from his ill-advised journey to New Orleans. Anne recalls reading Stevenson before he left and noting that, like her mother, some of the characters used Scottish phrases, and it was a recognition for her that she and her parents were not their own, atomistic universe, but part of a larger world.

Part Two: Pages 73 through 100

Part Two: Pages 73 through 100 Summary and Analysis

The history of Pittsburgh and America in general, were vague thoughts in Anne's mind. The thoughts were too unclear and uncritical to really be considered beliefs; at most, they were the seeds of future beliefs, which would come about as Anne grew more fully into consciousness. The various historical facts she knew—about the old businessmen who used to run Pittsburgh and the old cobblestone which would later be replaced by pavement, for example—formed a kind of pleasant scenery for her imagination to play in, but, as yet, she was unable to understand or comprehend the true significance of one's place in history.

Anne read her first non-fiction book when she borrowed a drawing book from her friend's father. She was fascinated by it and took up drawing almost every day. She was shocked—and pleased—to find that one could spend almost an unlimited amount of time drawing an object. There were always additional levels of detail and nuance that had to be left out if time were a consideration. This fact was a realization of the immensity and complexity of the world. Children believe the world is exactly how they think it is, not out of arrogance, but because they have not progressed to the point of consciousness where they fully understand that the world is something totally separate from them and their imaginations. Another such realization came when Anne began studying a book at a local library, a guide to streams and rivers. While the content of the book was interesting in its own way—if, perhaps, useless to a ten-year-old girl—she was shocked to see how many other people had checked out the book, too, and realized that there were, perhaps, other people like her, who were content to study knowledge which was both fascinating and totally impractical. By reflecting on what those people were like, she was also reflecting on what she was like.

As Anne began to become interested in boys, in the innocent way a little girl becomes interested in boys, she also learned lessons about the world and how she differed from others. Her mother had sent her and her sister to a private girls' school, which had a kind of parallel existence with a nearby private boys' school. The children would all meet at dancing school, where girls would be paired with boys to awkwardly learn ballroom dancing, a skill which proved to be quite useless for them. Though she was certainly fond of them, in a way Anne felt herself superior to the boys, who were—she thought—clumsy, drooling beasts. Looking back on this, Anne realizes how wrong she was for looking down on them, when in the long-run, these same boys would become the business leaders of Pittsburgh and the great men of their times, while the girls would become their patient, invisible domestic supporters. As Anne writes this, of course, it is important to realize that it is said ironically; Anne is critical of the fact that the boys, especially the boys from the wealthy community she lived in, were assumed to become the powerful leaders of the next generation, while the women were taught that they

would never really amount to much. At best, they would make good wives. Anne, for her part, had chosen a third path from a young age and avoided both. She had neither the ambition of the boys nor the docility of the girls. Instead, she lived in her own world, however impractical, of imagination, and wondered how anyone could want anything else.

Anne loved both of her sisters. Amy was a beautiful child, she thought, and Anne recalls with fondness how she would play with her dolls, quoting lines from comic books. Molly, because she was younger, inspired a different kind of affection in Anne. Anne marveled at how silly Molly was for seeming to think that if she covered her eyes, she became invisible to the world. Amy had initially inspired jealousy in Anne, but Molly inspired a more mature, conscious feeling of kinship.

When her father returned from his failed trip down the Mississippi he needed a new job, if for no other reason than to fill his days. He got a job as a business manager for a small radio advertising company and even filled in occasionally as an actor. Anne remembers how he would quote the lines from their radio spots—perhaps in some funny voice—to amuse the children. He even had a part in a horror movie named "Night of the Living Dead" at one point. Anne's mother was initially disappointed that her husband would take part in such a crude film, but after the movie enjoyed great success, she was only unhappy that he could not reap more of its profits.

Anne, inspired by the poor performance of the Pittsburgh Pirates, decided to start practicing baseball by throwing pitches at a target in her garage. Eventually this evolved into practicing pitching with a boy named Ricky, the brother of one of Amy's friends. Anne would occasionally ride her bike to watch Little League baseball games and constantly tried, with no success, to play, dreaming of playing a real game of baseball. Eventually, she had to settle for playing softball, a game which was in her mind a toned down, less exciting version of the real thing. Here again, through the eyes of her childhood, Anne spotlights the unequal treatment of boys and girls and her own instinctive resistance to gender roles.

Part Two: Pages 101 through 125

Part Two: Pages 101 through 125 Summary and Analysis

Anne recalls a tornado coming through her neighborhood. Her mother had tried to gather up the children and keep them away from windows for their safety, but Anne was too curious and wanted to watch the tornado. The storm did not damage her house directly, but a power line nearby was knocked down and she and her father went out afterward to watch the loose wire shoot out sparks and melt the pavement below it.

Streetcars, large rail-bound vehicles for public transportation, were a prominent feature of Pittsburgh urban life at the time. For Anne, their most obvious effect on her were their tracks, which made the already bumpy cobblestone sidewalk even more dangerous. Cars sometimes obstructed their way and the streetcar, unable to travel anywhere its rail did not run, could do nothing but sound its horn. One time, in a moment of innocent childhood curiosity which, if she were older, would be the worst kind of malice, Anne and her friend stuck a rock on the streetcar track to see if it would derail the streetcar. At first, the streetcar lurched over it, and looked like it might fall, but its weight was too much for the rock and it slammed down, smashing the stone into pieces. Anne was really relieved, in a way, because she was old enough to now know that there were consequences for actions and she thought that she would go to jail if it had derailed.

Anne recalls being full of energy, waking with joy each to day to face a new set of adventures and challenges. She marveled at the progress of knowledge and technology. Specifically, she admired effort: Whether someone was putting in great effort to cure a disease or just to move a stone in a circle, something about it inspired her. She heard the Biblical saying that if one has faith, they can move mountains, and so she believed, or half-believed, that if she really believed it and wanted it enough, she could fly. She ran down the sidewalk flapping her arms. As a ten-year-old, Anne realized that perhaps she was too old for this and felt some embarrassment when she passed by adults on the sidewalk. She forced herself to keep going, and this would turn out to be an important moment for her. While she did not fly, she did make herself do something which others would think silly or stupid, a kind of courage which Anne values even now. The first person she passes, a businessman—a perfect symbol of mundane practicality—looks at her shyly, almost embarrassed. She then passes a middle-aged woman whose eyes convey, not shame or puzzlement, but the same joy that fills Anne. Anne feels that, at heart, this woman holds onto the same imaginative spirit.

Her mother had this spirit, too. Anne recalls how she would latch onto phrases she thought sounded funny or interesting and repeat them for days. She loved humor and plays on words, but she especially loved when her own sharp wit met a true challenge. She even loved when people would point out and undermine her jokes; people who would tamely fall for them were dull. As the children aged, she started incorporating them into her jokes, handing them the phone when someone dialed the wrong number

and giving them a fake identity to act out. Her jokes could even be quite elaborate—and a bit cruel. One time, for example, she approached a couple at the zoo and acted like the man was her former lover and that Anne was their love-child. She left before he could respond, leaving him desperately trying to explain to this wife or girlfriend that he had never seen her before.

Anne's mother had an intelligence which, in Anne's estimation, was largely wasted in her domestic life. She had all kinds of ideas for inventions or new ways to do things, but these ideas could never be realized because, at the end of it all, she was a housewife. She was also not ashamed to believe things which were, in their social circle, quite unpopular, and became an advocate—at least within their home—for the rights of labor and the poor. Anne, looking back, credits her mother for making her into an independent woman.

Anne became fixated on the French-Indian War from the moment she heard about it. The romantic image of the Iroquois and the rugged image of the colonist captivated her imagination. She read about the war as much as she could, and constantly reenacted its battles and skirmishes in her mind. She decided that she wanted to learn the ways of the Indian and started training herself to travel through the woods without making a print or sound. Indian lore captured the imagination of the other kids in the neighborhood, too. They played "Indian ball," gave each other "Indian burns," and tried to find omens in the sky, like they imagined the Indians had.

Part 2: Pages 126 through 155

Part 2: Pages 126 through 155 Summary and Analysis

In her attic bedroom, where she spent time working on all her hobbies, Anne started doing detective work. She, and sometimes her friend Pin, would go out and take notes on any kind of suspicious activity. Lacking a photographic memory, she tried her best to remember the faces of "suspects" by memorizing various sentences describing their faces. Unfortunately, she found out that these sentences were not remotely capable of drawing before her mind an exact face. They allowed various ways of interpretation, perhaps implying the gap that is necessarily created between the author of a text and the reader of a text.

Anne and her sister went to a Presbyterian Bible camp every year for a few months. Between this and Sunday school, Anne absorbed many quotes from the Bible and became enthralled with their lyricism. She repeated them over and over in her head, mixing together passages which had no relation with one another, not really concerned with what they meant, but with how they sounded.

She inherited a rock collection from a paper boy. The paper boy himself had inherited it from some old man who died, and he told Anne that he did not have the time for a rock collection. Immediately, Anne fell in love with it. She found a guide to rocks and minerals at the local library and tried her best to identify the rocks she had. What fascinated her more than her own rocks were the rocks she did not have but imagined she did. She imagined the expeditions of rock-hunters, traveling around the world smashing open what seem like plain, ordinary rocks and finding a trove of crystals and amethysts inside. She fancied herself such an explorer—though she never did actually smash open a rock—and carefully labeled her rocks, strictly following the precise rules for displaying and labeling rocks set forth in her guide. What fascinated her most about the rocks and rock-collectors, however, was that there were people who truly valued the rocks as objects in themselves and not merely as objects for sale. Almost everyone she had grown up with had an obsession with wealth that stifled imagination and creativity. Therefore, her eyes were opened when her guide to rocks advised the rock-hunter not to refine his gold, because that would mean he would be legally required to sell it.

One Christmas, Anne received a microscope as a present. She had wanted one for a long time because it would be helpful both for her detective work and her fascination with ponds and streams. She used it to study everything she could find, but the microscope really paid off when she saw her first amoeba, a creature she had only read about. Excited, she rushed to tell her parents, but neither showed interest. It was at this moment that she realized that these kinds of joys would always belong to her private life. While this realization was perhaps tinged with some sadness, it was more importantly a realization that a person plans their life based on what they want to do, and not based on the impression it makes, or does not make, on others.

While true living consists of staying conscious of the world around oneself, despite its myriad distractions, there is such a thing as too much consciousness. Anne learned this lesson going on trips with her friend, Judy Schoyer, to her parents' cabin in the woods. Every time she went there, she enjoyed herself so much that the weekend flew by. She was fascinated by the Schoyer family and they, somehow, evoked a kind of consciousness of the world and herself in Anne that she realized threatened her enjoyment of life. While being conscious of oneself and one's world is necessary to truly living, it is possible to be so bogged down in thought and analysis that the joys of the world itself are missed.

Part 2: Pages 156 through 177

Part 2: Pages 156 through 177 Summary and Analysis

What adults find interesting and beautiful and what children find interesting and beautiful are often quite different. Children, having been around for much less time, can be excited about something which is quite commonplace to adults. Likewise, something that is exceptional to adults is probably not so interesting to a child; everything, almost, is exceptional to them. Thus, when Anne, now thirteen, found herself coming more and more to like the things adults found interesting, she realized that she was maturing into an adult herself.

At the same time, she began to discover the complexity of the world. Her childlike belief in the simplicity of the world was being undermined as she discovered that almost anything—the dullest objects—was or could be the subject of serious study. This discovery was spurred on by moths. Her teacher had put a moth larva into a jar so that the students could watch it turn into a full moth. Anne recalls watching the moth break out of its cocoon and try to spread it wings, unsuccessfully, in the tiny jar. As it turned out, if a moth cannot spread its wings immediately after breaking out of the cocoon, it will be permanently deformed, and the students watched with some sadness after the moth crawled, not flew, away when the teacher released it. Fascinated, Anne took to studying moths and eventually other insects. She became a kind of amateur insect collector and went through the woods and streams sticking bugs into jars, following—as closely as she could—the instructions for bug catching provided in her books. She enjoyed insects particularly because people generally ignored them. No one cared about insects, and neither had she. Yet, when she turned her attention to them, she discovered an entire universe of knowledge and, if such a universe existed for insects, she knew there must be many other universes she had not yet noticed.

Later, Anne developed an interest in reading about Louis Pasteur and Jonas Salk, two scientists famous for stopping smallpox and polio, respectively. She admired their worth ethic and, more importantly, how all their work had culminated in the creation of something good. Salk's life was especially poignant for Anne because she grew up when polio was afflicting many children—even children she knew—and Salk tested his serums on Pittsburgh children, Anne among them. Reading biographies of hard-working, influential people like Pasteur also taught her another lesson: All biographies end with death. She had never experienced death, and she really had hardly even experienced any kind of loss. Bit by bit, she realized that these were parts of life, however painful they might be—and she knew her mother had been in pain her whole life after losing her father when she was seven.

That spring, Anne and her family moved into the old house of her father's parents. His father had died and his mother moved into an apartment with a friend. Anne recalls his last moments: His brain tumor had so debilitated his brain that he could only utter the word "balls." Their new neighborhood was much more quiet and there were not so many

people around. If she walked a bit from the house, though, she could see down the street to where they had once lived. The whole family would go to the same street the next Memorial Day and find, after the parade, all of the characters from Anne's past lined up on the opposite side of the street, marking perhaps the first moment Anne engaged with her own memories.

Part Two: Pages 178 through 204

Part Two: Pages 178 through 204 Summary and Analysis

After the family moved, Anne started reading about World War II. It had a different significance to her than her reading about the French-Indian War. Now more mature, so, too, was her perspective on history. The French-Indian War was an exciting, romantic, but ultimately, to her mind, fictional event. The signs of World War II, though, were all around her and in the Cold War era she had to go through the same air raid drills that children during World War II had. Everyone was scared of the atomic bomb, Anne included, and she started imagining living in the basement of the family's new house for years as the radiation dissipated; unfortunately, her mother told her, there was enough food to last only a few weeks. She, and all the others she assumed existed who had immersed themselves into books as she had, could not imagine ever growing up and becoming part of mundane, boring adult society like everyone else.

As Anne grew up, so, too, did the boys. The former intersection between the boys and the girls—dancing school—was replaced by formal dances held by various country clubs. Anne's heart throbbed after she attended her first and was amazed to see all the strong, powerful boys who fought valiantly against the demands of their parents, a kind of courage Anne could admire but not hope to imitate. She returned home very late and one of the boys, an older boy with blond hair, was stuck on her mind, though she would probably never see him again.

The next day was Sunday and so Anne went off to church. She hated it and tried her best to focus instead on remembering every detail of the wonderful night before. Some of the boys from the dance were there, too, with a sullen look on their faces, and she assumed that they hated being there as much as she did; the difference was that they probably had fought with their parents, an act she never could do. Anne had once discovered religion at a Bible camp when she was younger, but the environment at the Presbyterian church she was forced to attend caused her to lose her faith. Hypocrisy was everywhere, not least of all with her parents who, though they themselves did not go, forced her to go to church. At least, she thought, she had an ally with the boys. However, this comfort, too, was taken away from her when it was time for Communion and she watched the boys, and everyone else, engaged in sincere prayer to God. Anne was now confused and wondered what she was missing.

Several years before this, Anne went on a trip on the river with her father. The river was a place of many curiosities for her and her father did his best to explain what he could. In particular, the locks confused Anne. Her father explained the principle behind it: Water always seeks its own level. Therefore, if the water is put higher up, it will flow down. The same principle explained how water was pumped into their upstairs bathrooms: The water tower is higher. Later he used the same principle to explain American economics. If enough money is put into high enough places, it would flow

down to lower places. Her mother became infuriated, to the point of tears: She reminded them of the shacks they had seen in Georgia, people who had obviously not benefited at all from money in high places. This was a turning point for Anne: She no longer believed everything her father said.

Part Three

Part Three Summary and Analysis

Though many other men and women had helped build up the city of Pittsburgh, Andrew Carnegie, millionaire businessmen, stood out in front of all others in the minds of the citizens. As the legends went, even at a young age, he was a forward thinking man who defended the rights both of slaves and workers. After successfully building up a business worth almost half a billion dollars, he sold it and spent the rest of his life creating libraries and museums for the city. Anne attended weekly art lessons at one such museum. After the classes were over, she wandered through the halls. One exhibit in particular struck her: "Man Walking." "Man Walking" was, as the name suggests, a statue of a man walking and Anne saw in it a model of a man who went through the world fully conscious of himself, his life, and his universe; in other words, he was a man with the same kind of interior life that Anne had.

As Anne aged, she became increasingly swept up in the world around her. School became faster paced and all her peers put great emphasis on looking good, fitting in, and dressing fashionably; she followed them. The beautiful world she had once known and loved as a child began to fade before her eyes. In its place was a world which was fixated on having a nice tan and making a lot of money. Her visits to her grandmother would soon come to an end, but on her last visit, when she was fifteen, she recalls riding with her grandmother and her grandmother's friend in a Cadillac. Out of nowhere, Oma broke down and started crying: Though he had died two years ago, grief over her dead husband was still with her. She recalled the only time he was ever mad at her—when she screamed because she thought he was going to drive the car over the side of a cliff.

When Anne turned sixteen, the world, which had begun slipping away from her already, fell completely into the abyss. She was constantly filled with anger—at what, perhaps she did not know—and often took it out, quite naturally, on her family. Sometimes the anger would be so intense that she would whip her bed in her room. All of her positive emotions were focused on her boyfriend, who she does not name, but whom she insists she loved tenderly. She likens her existence then to the wire she saw after the tornado years before: She was shooting out sparks and melting her way into a pit. As she realized the darkness she was sliding into, she began to fear that perhaps this was the natural course of things and that her excitement with the world was merely childhood foolishness which she could never recover.

During these angst-filled years, Anne decided to quit the church. This action may not have upset her parents so much—after all they did not attend church themselves—if she had not sent an angry letter explaining her quitting to the reverend of the church. Her parents were upset because it would cause scandal and gossip for them. Anne met with the minister to discuss her decision, but his words did not move her. She borrowed some books and tapes from him about the theological "problem of pain"—why God, if

he is all-powerful, allows people to suffer and die. Anne could not find an answer anywhere to this question. Ostensibly, this was research for a paper, but the reader might reasonably think that Anne herself was trying to find meaning in her own pain.

Anne had started to become what people considered a "troubled child." She had been suspended for school for smoking and subsequently grounded at home. She was injured in a drag racing accident, lured by the thrill of fast driving. She recalls standing in court before the judge, relying on crutches because neither of her knees worked. During this time, Anne developed an interest in poetry. She was entertained by its lyricism, but she especially found comfort—or at least a kind of companionship—in the French symbolist poets. Their poems were often dark and expressed many of the same dark, lost feelings she was experiencing.

The only way Anne found she could concentrate in class is if she were drawing; it would relieve some of her tension and anxiety. She would draw all over her books, in any whitespace she could find and, in a way, it annoyed her that she did it so compulsively. The teachers even tolerated it this; one let her paint in the back of the room. As school ended, she began to realize that there is another world outside of her classroom, a world she glimpsed in the poetry she began reading. She would leave for college soon, and imagined herself like the moth her teacher had released into the world, crawling, and not flying, out of the school.

Epilogue

Epilogue Summary and Analysis

The most important thing in life is to enjoy the present world for what it is. It can be amusing and quite natural to contemplate the past and consider how one evolved from childhood to adulthood, but really, that path is irrelevant. What truly is important is to remain conscious and enjoy experiences as they come and go. Anne looks back and sees her father's ill-advised journey to New Orleans as symbolic of a natural yearning for the kind of happiness which comes from rejoicing in the world.

Characters

Anne Doaks Dillard

Anne Dillard—Anne Doaks throughout the book—is the author of this book which recalls her childhood from the time she was five until she finished high school and became an adult. Anne was a curious young girl, interested in nearly everything. She checked out library books on almost any subject and was able to get excited by what others might consider mundane and boring. For example, one of her favorite books was a field guide to ponds and streams; she checked out the book again and again and read it over as if it were a favorite novel. Other interests she entertained, at least temporarily, were rock collecting, forensics, drawing, and studying insects. As she grew older, her intellectual interests became more serious. Anne depicts this by contrasting her interest in the French-Indian War as a young girl and her interest in World War II as an adult. The first was exciting and dramatic, but it seemed to her more like a literary event than an actual event; its reality made no impact upon her. However, as she learned about World War II, she could see the signs of it around her: people who had fought in it surrounded her, as did people who lost loved ones in it.

As Anne grows, she matures into an independent woman like her mother. She, for the most part, resists the temptation to live like other people would want her to live; instead, she lives for herself. This independence is illustrated most clearly when she tries to fly. Though ten-years-old and supposedly too old for such make-believe, she runs down the street flapping her arms, thinking that if she really believes that she can fly, she will. On some level, she knows that she will not be able to, but the importance of this occasion is that she kept trying, even though she knew she looked foolish to others. She was, in other words, able to keep hold of that same spirit of imagination and creativity which young children possess but which is supposed to—or so the world says—fade away with adulthood.

Anne's Mother

Anne's mother—Pam Doaks—is, in many ways, a model of the kind of woman Anne wants to be. She admires how her mother was willing to do and believe things which would be unpopular in the upper-class circles in which they traveled. For example, when her husband mentions, approvingly, the Republican theory of "trickle-down" economics, whereby the poor are supposedly made better by the rich becoming richer, she reacts strongly against it, almost coming to tears. She was an advocate for the poor and working class while her friends and relatives thought that those type of people, perhaps, were something less than human.

Anne's mother is also a picture of one who is happy in any situation. Unique-sounding phrases captivated her and she would repeat them with glee for days. She told jokes and took great pains to ensure that her daughters understood how to properly deliver

them. She was also an incredibly intelligent woman and often thought up creative ways to improve this or that household item or had some keen insight into a political or economic issue. By circumstance, however, her ideas never could really see the light of day: She was a woman living in the 1950s and the way was not yet clear for her to travel outside of the household.

This restriction, which Anne notes with sadness, was perhaps a motivation for Anne to help overcome gender inequality. Even as a young girl, she did not understand why boys could play baseball but girls could only play softball, a sport, in her mind, which was simply a dumbed-down and less exciting form of baseball. She feared she one would day "mature" and grow up to be like every other girl and have no ambition beyond marrying a successful man and keeping a tidy household. However, though she could not escape her fate to be a housewife, Anne's mother at least provided an example of a woman who never gave up that child-like spirit of curiosity which made the world such a bright place to Anne.

Anne's Father

Anne's most prominent memory of her father is his ill-advised decision to travel down the Mississippi river to New Orleans. After several lonely weeks, he scraps the plan, sells the boat, and flies home. To Anne, this trip is symbolic of a desire to find true happiness, and she realizes, looking back on her childhood, that one does not need to go to New Orleans to be happy; rather, happiness can be found anywhere through consciousness of the beautiful world in which one lives.

Amy

Amy is Anne's younger sister. Anne is jealous of Amy, probably simply because she is her younger sister and thus sees her as competition for their parents' attention.

Molly

Molly is Anne's younger sister and is about eight years younger than Anne. Unlike Amy, Anne had no jealousy towards Molly, perhaps because Anne was more mature when Molly was born.

Jo Ann Sheehy

Jo Ann Sheehy is an Irish girl who lived across the street from the Doaks household. Whenever the street iced over, Jo Ann would ice skate around and the entire family was captivated by her grace and beauty.

Oma

Oma is Anne's grandmother on her father's side. Anne and Amy visited their grandparents almost every year to stay in their lake house. Anne learned a lesson about the pain of loss when she saw Oma break down in tears two years after her husband died.

Margaret

Margaret was a black maid who lived in the Doaks house. When Anne was a very young child, a young boy across the street told her to call Margaret a racial slur. She did—not knowing what the word meant—and got in trouble by her mother, illustrating her mother's sensitivity.

Louis Pasteur

Louis Pasteur was a biologist who discovered the vaccine for small pox. Anne admired his life which was dedicated to doing good for the world through hard work, and she hoped to one day imitate him.

Andrew Carnegie

Andrew Carnegie is one of the central figures in Pittsburgh history. He was a businessman who created a multi-million dollar steel company. When he was older, he sold the company and dedicated his life to philanthropy. Anne took art classes at one of the museums he built for the city.

Objects/Places

Pittsburgh

Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania is the city where Anne grew up.

Paw Paw

Paw Paw is a camp ground where Anne frequently went with her friend Judy. Eventually, she stopped going because it made her too sad to leave.

New Orleans

New Orleans is the home of jazz and a kind of promised land in the mind of Anne's father. He takes a boat journey down the Mississippi river, but never reaches New Orleans. It is symbolic of a happy internal life, which Anne discovers one can have without ever leaving home.

Edgerton Avenue

Edgerton Avenue was the street of the first house in which Anne lived. Down the street was the Catholic church, St. Bede's, which frightened her.

Richard Lane

Richard Lane was the street where Anne's second house was located. She spent most of her childhood here and the attic room became a kind of headquarters for her many studies and hobbies.

French-Indian War

The French-Indian war was a war fought between the French and English before the American Revolution. The images of Indians sneaking through forests and rugged soldiers fighting one another captivated young Anne's imagination.

World War II

World War II represents the maturation of Anne's intellectual interests. Unlike the French-Indian War, World War II's reality was obvious to her and thus when she studied it, she truly felt like she was learning about the world in which she lived.

"Man Walking"

"Man Walking" was a statue in an art museum that Anne saw as a symbol of a happy, conscious life.

Hollins College

Hollins College was the college Anne went to after graduating high school. Her teacher suggested that she go there so that her "rough edges" could be smoothed off.

Shadyside Presbyterian Church

Shadyside Presbyterian Church is the church Anne must attend every Sunday in connection with her Presbyterian schooling. Anne never enjoys going and feels left out when she notices everyone else seems to be able to sincerely pray to God and she cannot.

Themes

A Curious Life Is A Happy Life

The main theme throughout the book is that in order to be happy, one must fight to be conscious of oneself and the world in which one lives. Anne recalls when she was five and sees that at that age, she was just starting to become conscious. She recalls living her quiet domestic life where the days were spent alternating between her various activities and reflecting on those various activities. This same pattern followed Anne throughout her life, and it seems that it is necessary, in her mind, that these periods of awareness be broken up by periods of simply living. She learned this lesson at Paw Paw, where she found herself living every moment totally aware, and thereby missing the world, the object which was supposed to be the focal point of her consciousness.

A subtext of the book is that most people lose this consciousness as they grow into adulthood and perhaps some never have it all. A happy, conscious life is placed in opposition to the life which is concerned only with material comforts and social status. As Anne went through high school and started to be swept up in the fads and fashions popular among her friends, she began to fear she would fall in line like everyone else. This fear was only compounded by growing feelings of angst and dissatisfaction, feelings which are natural enough, perhaps, for an adolescent to experience. Anne's mother, however, was a living example of a woman who was able to remain happy and rejoice in the world no matter what her circumstances were. As a woman, Anne's mother could never have any of her various creative ideas realized or appreciated by the world at large, but that did not stop her from living an interior life, which was full of joy.

Gender Inequality

As a woman writing in the Eighties about growing up in the Fifties, Anne frequently visits the topic of discrimination against woman. In the Fifties, when Anne was growing up, women, almost without exception, were housewives. This expectation was present even in their education, as Anne notes that the boys were being raised to be the next great men who would lead the world, while the girls were just learning how to best please men. Anne sees all her own studies and interests as subversive to this order. In 1950s America, there was no room for a female biologist, entomologist, or detective, but Anne happily studied these things nonetheless. Indeed, the world at large seemed to be cut off from women, who were really only supposed to know the home; thus, Anne takes a kind of rebellious joy in reading French poetry which revealed that world to her.

The tragedy of gender discrimination is embodied in the life of Anne's mother. Anne's mother is brilliant, witty, and passionate. She has all kinds of ideas for how to improve the world, why the leading economic theories of the day are flawed, how this or that household item could be made better. However, Anne realized with sadness, these ideas could never really see the light of day. Simply put, no one would take them

seriously if they came from a woman. Nonetheless, Anne admires her mother for remaining happy and not bowing down to the demands of the world, which would have her give up her own inner fire and submit to solely carrying out the tasks of a homemaker.

The World A Threat to the Conscious Life

A child is naturally curious and excited by the world. Though the young Anne is certainly exceptional in some ways—her interests are probably somewhat uncommon among children—she is a typical child in her ability to be fascinated by even the simplest objects. To a child, the entire world is full of marvels and she never knows what what she will find next. Gradually, though, this curiosity fades. The child becomes an adult and can no longer run around the garden looking for salamanders but rather must spend time poring over bills or mopping the kitchen. An adult, simply, has no time for those "unimportant" childish things. At least, this is the conventional wisdom of the world in which Anne grew up, and it is against this conventional wisdom that Anne writes as an adult.

As Anne ages, she is faced with temptations to leave behind her child-like ways and become an adult. In high school, she starts to become obsessed with what all teenage girls were then obsessed with: attracting boys. She tanned, bought fashionable clothes, and wore fashionable jewelry. It is no coincidence that these years are the only years of the book which are dark and miserable. Anne was angry at the world and nearly resigns herself to the belief that her childhood awe was simply part of her childhood, a joy she could never regain as an adult. As the epilogue makes clear, however, this loss does not come as a natural result of maturation. There is no reason one must give up that childlike joy; the only reason people do so is because the world, obsessed with money, progress, and comfort does not care about childlike joy. It is only natural, then, that society would lure people away from that impractical spirit which inspired Anne to run down the sidewalk and try to fly. To live a happy life, then, one must live in spite of society. This lesson is symbolized when Anne discovers an amoeba with her microscope. She runs to tell her family, assuming they will share her joy, but no one cares. A happy person, then, must learn to take joy in their interior life without the company of others.

Style

Perspective

Anne writes from the perspective of a woman in the Eighties reflecting on her childhood in the Fifties. Now a professional writer, she looks into her past, not as an attempt to understand how she got to where she is (because, she says, that does not matter) but because she believes children are the best living examples of how to live happily. Children are naturally in love with the world and fascinated by the simplest things. This curiosity is usually stamped out by the demands of society, which is concerned only with money and social status. However, she feels one can hang onto this childlike spirit, and Anne implicitly credits her mother for her ability to do so. By all appearances, Anne's mother lived a life which should have been mundane and boring. She was a homemaker, tucked away in a Pittsburgh suburb, and her daily tasks rarely deviated from cleaning and cooking. Yet, despite this, she could find joy and excitement in the smallest things: clever turns of phrase, witty jokes, and unique-sounding phrases.

In Anne's mother's life, however, there is a note of tragedy, drawn out by Anne's contempt for discrimination against women. Anne's mother was a brilliant woman, but by social convention her brilliant ideas could never be realized. No one took a woman seriously then. Anne's mother could no more be an inventor than Anne could play baseball with the boys. While the book is dedicated almost exclusively to considering the past, it would probably be wrong to think that Anne is condemning only the gender discrimination in the 1950s. Rather, she is clearly against any social conventions, past or present, which limit the ability of a person to live out her dreams.

Tone

Though the subject of the book is the simplicity of childhood, Dillard's writing style is complex, vivid, and sophisticated. While certainly an indication of her skill, the contrast between form and content is striking. One plausible explanation is that by putting the thoughts of a five- or eight- or ten-year-old into the language of a polished, skilled writer, Anne is granting a certain amount of credibility and sophistication to those thoughts. This strategy is certainly in keeping with the overall meaning of the book. It is children, Anne believes, and not adults, who truly know the way to be happy, and adults would do well to imitate their simple, curious, joyful lives.

Though Anne is trying to make several points in the course of the book, until the epilogue, the book tries to teach only through example. It is true that she documents many of her own thoughts and reflections as she grew up, but the major lessons are taught by episodes in the young Anne's life. For example, one point made by the book is that living a happy life will often mean living it without the approval of others. This point is made concrete when Anne discovers an amoeba with her microscope. She runs to

tell her parents, but they do not really care. The joy is hers alone, and she realizes that she must accept that.

The book, however, is not a one-dimensional lesson about how to live one's life. Dillard obviously takes joy in presenting entertaining episodes from her childhood and wants to connect with readers who likely have many similar memories of their own. The readers, then, would be wrong to attempt to read symbolism into every passage; some of the funny stories related are meant to be simply that, funny stories.

Structure

The book is divided into three major parts, preceded by a prologue and concluded with an epilogue. It is worth noting that the book begins and ends with the same story: Anne's father's failed attempt to go to New Orleans. While the significance of this trip is not obvious at first, as the book progresses, it turns into a powerful symbol. What Anne's father was attempting to do was utterly impractical. He quit his well-paying, prestigious job as an executive for the family company to sail to New Orleans, a kind of jazz mecca. As it turned out, he never made it; the trip was too long and too difficult. Anne came to realize, though, that there was no need to leave to find happiness. Happiness was available, at a moment's notice, in a rich interior life. The whole world was full of wonder, not just New Orleans; one just had to be willing to see it.

Part One begins with Anne's earliest memories, when she is about five-years-old. It is during these chapters that the main characters of the book—specifically Anne's parents—are developed and those characters remain, more or less, unchanged throughout the thirteen or fourteen years the book covers. Anne, naturally, evolves dramatically, but in these early years she is characterized by the same curiosity and intensity which drives her through the rest of her life.

Part Two, by far the largest section of the book, depicts Anne from about ten years of age to fifteen. These periods mark the height of Anne's childhood. She is old enough now to understand, basically, how the world works, but she is not so old that she is lured away by the temptations of the world. These years are bustling with activity as Anne moves from one interest to the next. She reads excitedly about the French-Indian war; she studies forensics and styles herself an amateur detective; she reads about moths and other insects and, though she hates them, she takes pleasure in catching them because she had never thought about them before. She is in love with how rich the world is and how much there is to learn.

In Part Three, Anne is an adolescent. This short section is the only dark period of the entire book. Anne is evidently starting to undergo the process of becoming an adult, and it seems to her that part of that is giving up her childlike joy. The world, then, becomes a dark place, and Anne is filled with a causeless anger, so intense that she even whips her bed with a belt when no one is around. She starts to get in trouble both in and out of school, and her parents become anxious, wondering what will become of her. The section ends with her decision to go to college.

The darkness of Part Three is peeled back by the brief epilogue. Anne, now talking from the present, denies what she feared as a teenager: That adulthood must necessarily be boring and practical. The spirit of childhood can be recovered and held onto: The reader need look no further than the author herself to find an example.

Quotes

"He [Anne's father] was a lapsed Presbyterian and a believing Republican." (8)

"Every woman stayed alone in her house in those days, like a coin in a safe." (16)

"In the leafy distance up Edgerton I could see a black phalanx. It blocked the sidewalk; it rolled footlessly forward like a tank. The nuns were coming. They had no bodies, and imitation faces. I quitted the swing and banged through back door and rain to Mother in the kitchen." (34)

"I was ten years old now, up into the double numbers, where I would likely remain till I died. I am awake now forever, I thought suddenly; I have converged with myself in the present." (69)

"A child is asleep. Her private life unwinds inside her skin and skull; only as she sheds childhood, first one decade and then another, can she locate the actual, historical stream, see the setting of her dreaming private life—the nation, the city, the neighborhood, the house where the family lives—as an actual project under way, a project living people willed, and made well or failed, and are still making, herself among them." (74)

"Children who drew, I learned, became architects; I had thought they became painters." (80)

"They [the boys] had been learning self-control. We [the girls] had failed to develop any selves worth controlling." (91)

"There was joy in effort, and the world resisted effort to just the right degree, and yielded to it at last. People cut Mount Rushmore into faces; they chipped here and there for years. People slowed the spread of yellow fever; they sprayed the Isthmus of Panama puddle by puddle. Effort alone I loved. Some days I would have been happy push a pole around a threshing floor like an ox, for the pleasure of moving the heavy stone and matching my knees rise in turn." (107)

"Mother's energy and intelligence suited her for a great role in a larger arena—mayor of New York, say—then the one she had. She followed American politics closely; she had been known to vote for Democrats. She saw how things should be run, but she had nothing to run but our household. Even there, small minds bugged her; she was smarter than the people designed the things she had to use all day for the length of her life." (115)

"These, then, were books which advised, in detail, how to avoid making money, right here in America. Right here in Pittsburgh were people who dug up the nation's mineral wealth, played with it, stored it behind glass, looked at it, fled in a flat-out spring from anyone who threatened to buy it for dollars, and ultimately gave it to the paper boy." (141)

"Personality, like beauty, was a mystery; like beauty, it was useless. These useless things were not, however, flourishes and embellishment to our life here, but that life's center; they were its truest note, the heart of its form, which drew back our thoughts repeatedly." (157)

"Pittsburgh wasn't really Andrew Carnegie's town. We just thought it was. Steel wasn't the only major industry in Pittsburgh. We just had to think to recall the others." (207)

"In New Orleans—if you could get to New Orleans—would the music be loud enough?" (255)

Topics for Discussion

What does Dillard mean when she talks about consciousness?

Why does the book begin with the story about Anne's father traveling to New Orleans, when this incident does not happen some years into the story?

Why does the book end with the New Orleans story?

Explain the last line of the book: "In New Orleans—if you could get to New Orleans—would the music be loud enough?"

Dillard writes in the epilogue that, while it can be interesting to trace one's history throughout life, it does not really matter. Why would she write this in an epilogue to a book which is dedicated entirely to recalling her own past?

Why does Anne hate Amy but love Molly?

When recalling her adolescence, Anne mentions how deeply she was in love with her boyfriend, yet never provides any details about him—not even his name. Why?