

# **Teaching a Stone to Talk Study Guide**

## **Teaching a Stone to Talk by Annie Dillard**

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## Plot Summary

In *Teaching a Stone to Talk: Expeditions and Encounters*, Annie Dillard shares fourteen separate personal essays with the reader. Each essay is a distinct and independent recounting of an event or place that Annie has encountered in her life. The settings include the jungle in Ecuador, the Galapagos Islands, a church service, and a cottage in the Appalachian Mountains among others. Weaving through her narrative of the events and places are common themes of spirituality, exploration, and discovery.

Annie ponders spiritual and religious questions and meaning in a number of the essays. In "An Expedition to the Pole", she weaves in her experiences at Mass with the history of polar explorers, realizing that everyone is searching for the sublime with their actions and balancing it with their humanity. In "The Deer at Providencia", Annie questions suffering on earth and why it happens. She also argues in the essays that what people do on earth does not change God, but it changes the people themselves. "Teaching a Stone to Talk", "A Field of Silence", and "God in the Doorway" also address religious and spiritual questions and themes.

Annie also uses several essays to highlight the idea of exploration. She discusses some of the places that she has visited, including The Galapagos Islands and the Napo River in Ecuador. In addition, she brings in historical information about polar explorers and Darwin's travels to the Galapagos in "An Expedition to the Pole" and "Life on the Rocks: The Galapagos", respectively. Annie argues in several of the essays that people have been placed on earth to watch and observe. Exploration of one's surroundings and the world become a part of this watching, as one only has a lifetime to see what the earth holds and learn from it.

Finally, a number of the essays discuss the idea of discovery. Heavily tied to the previous two themes, the discussion of discovery is about how people examine and see the world. Discovery is all around if people only open their eyes to it. "Living Like Weasels", "On a Hill Far Away", "Lenses", "Total Eclipse", and "Mirages" all discuss finding something extraordinary in the events, people, and places around where people live. Annie finds discovery on walks from her home and through a microscope.



# Characters

## Annie

The narrator through all of the essays in this work appears to be the author, Annie Dillard. Although the reader is never explicitly told this and no other characters refer to her by name, the narrator remains consistent throughout all of the essays which appear to be personal in nature. The narrator, Annie, is the only common figure between the essays. The only other figures to appear in more than one of the essays are Annie's three North American male companions during her trip to Ecuador, who appear in "In the Jungle" and "The Deer at Providencia".

Although the essays are personal, the reader learns only brief bits about Annie's life. In "Total Eclipse", one learns that she is married to a man named Gary. One also learns that she grew up in Pittsburgh and lived on an island in Puget Sound for a time. She attends a Catholic church, although she has attended other churches in the past. It is also clear that Annie has traveled quite a bit in her life. Many of the essays focus on the places that she has been including the Arctic, the Galapagos Islands, Ecuador, the Appalachian Mountains, and the Yakima valley of Washington, among other places.

What does come through in the narrative are Annie's thoughts and questions about life. She appears as a curious individual who wants to explore life. She's a spiritual person who considers her faith and how it fits into the world around her. In many cases, Annie comes closest to the sublime through nature. She also encounters pain and suffering in nature as well, making her question why these aspects exist in the world. Through her words and thoughts in the essays, Annie appears as a thoughtful individual who observes her world carefully. She compares herself to the palo santo trees in the Galapagos, both of them watchers of the world.

## Gary

Gary is Annie's husband. He appears in the essay "Total Eclipse". Although Gary represents an important relationship in Annie's life, she tells the reader very little about him. Yet, from what Annie writes and chooses not to write about Gary in the story, the reader can infer some aspects of their life together.

In the story, Gary and Annie travel to the Yakima valley in Washington to view the eclipse. They spend the night in a hotel and rise in the morning to find a place to watch the eclipse happen. During the eclipse, Annie finds that Gary takes on a platinum look. He smiles at her, but he seems miles away from her. After the eclipse is done, Gary and Annie stop at a restaurant for something to eat, where they talk with others who saw the eclipse.

That Annie and Gary choose to take this trip together and the easy companionship that they seem to share, the reader can infer that the couple likes each other and enjoys the



company of the other. The two have chosen to witness the eclipse together and appear to both be interested in the event. The reader sees no tension or anger between the two, only companionship and friendship. Annie alludes to crinkles around Gary's eyes as well, which would indicate that he is at least approaching middle age if he is not older at the time that the story takes place.

## Miss White

Miss White was a neighbor of Annie's while she was growing up in Pittsburgh. Miss White was old and lived alone across the street from Annie. She was kind and often tried to teach Annie new things, such as finger painting. One Christmas, Miss White dressed up like Santa Claus, which scared Annie, who thought that Santa Claus was God. Annie was also scared when Miss White accidentally burned her while showing her a magnifying glass. Miss White appears in "God in the Doorway".

## The Child

The child is a nine-year-old girl who accompanies Annie to the cottage in the Appalachian Mountains in the essay "Aces and Eights". It is not clear what the child's name is or what relationship the girl is to Annie, just that she has sometimes lived with Annie and sometimes not. Annie thinks that the child tends toward the nostalgic and she also discovers that the child loves a boy named Francis Burn, who the child thinks is cute. At the cottage, the child is playful, riding a bike and wanting to play cards with Annie. When the time comes to leave, the child wants to stay at the cottage.

## The Little Boy

Annie encounters this boy on a walk in "On a Hill Far Away". He seems lonely and almost too old for his age to Annie. His family belongs to a Christian church that believes in witnessing to others and both he and his mother ask Annie if she knows God, although both seem nervous about doing so. Although the boy is cold, he tries to keep Annie there with him so he has someone to interact with. Annie says that seeing him made her glad that she had a sister and friends.

## Larry

Larry appears in "Teaching a Stone to Talk". He is trying to teach a stone to talk, keeping the stone on a shelf, covered with piece of leather. Annie does not know him well and most of her information about him comes through other people.



## Polar Explorers

In "An Expedition to the Pole", Annie discusses the polar explorers from the past who sought to find the North and South Poles. Many of these explorers died on their journey, often from hypothermia, starvation, and other illnesses brought on by the extreme conditions. Annie notes that they explorers died with dignity, often choosing to sacrifice themselves for the sake of their fellow explorers.

## The Franklin Expedition

Annie discusses this famous polar expedition in "An Expedition to the Pole". Sir John Franklin and over 130 men set out from England in 1845 to find a northwest passage from the Canadian Arctic to the Pacific Ocean. The expedition took three ships for what they expected to be a two or three year journey. Many of the items, such as glass wine goblets, sterling silverware, and china place settings that the expedition took along were unpractical for the environment and conditions they would face. The men also did not have any special clothing or gear for the Arctic weather.

The expedition left England to great excitement and fanfare. For the next twenty years, other expeditions would find signs and remnants of the ill-fated expedition in the Arctic. The Inuit found a tent with thirty bodies inside at Terror Bay. At Starvation Cove, a boat with thirty-five bodies was found. Expeditions would also find silver flatware, backgammon boards, and other items from the expedition.

Annie argues that this expedition was the turning point for polar expeditions. First, it led to more exploration as the mystery of what happened to the group grew. A number of other expeditions set out specifically to find what happened. Through this future exploring, the Arctic would be mapped. The expedition also led to technology developed for use in the Arctic, including clothing better suited for the cold, brutal conditions.

## Ecuadorian Travelers

Annie travels with three North American men in "In the Jungle" and "The Deer at Providencia". The three men are never named, although Annie says that one of the men lives in Manhattan and that they are all older than her. The four travelers grow close to one another on their journey together. The men and Annie visit various villages within the jungle near the Napo River. At Providencia, they see a deer that has been caught and is struggling to free itself. The men later tell Annie that they were surprised at her reaction to the deer, expecting her to be more moved at its suffering and demand its freedom.



## Eclipse Watchers

Annie and her husband gather with others on the top of a hill in Washington to watch a full eclipse in "Total Eclipse". The watchers come from all over the region to see the eclipse from the hills of the Yakima valley. As it is cold, all of them are bundled up in coats and other cold weather gear. Annie notes that the group lets out a collective scream as the darkness races towards them. When the darkness has passed, everyone streams down to their cars and joins the traffic on the road below, even though the eclipse technically is still occurring.

Annie and Gary encounter many other eclipse watchers when they stop at a restaurant near where they watched. Everyone is excited about what they have seen, and they talk to each other as they eat breakfast. A college student tells Annie that the eclipse looked like a Life Saver.

## The People

Annie refers to the congregation in "An Expedition to the Pole" as the people. These people include the Wildflowers performers, the priest, and the baby, Oswald, who is baptized. The congregation gathers each week, and their actions often strike Annie as humorous. During the service, they sing a number of songs and participate in the baby's baptism. Annie imagines that many of them are on the ice floe with her at the end of the story.



## Objects/Places

### Hollins Pond

Annie sees a weasel at this pond. It is located near a highway and just a few minutes away from rows of houses.

### Wildflowers

This group, led by a tall teenager, performs in Annie's Catholic church. An old woman, a Chinese man, and a fourteen-year-old boy are also in the group.

### The Pole of Relative Inaccessibility

On the Arctic Ocean, this is the farthest point from land in any direction.

### Napo River

The Napo River is in the Ecuadorian jungle. Annie visits villages and the jungle along the river with three other North Americans.

### Providencia

This is the village where Annie and her travel companions see the trapped deer. The village is located along the Napo River in Ecuador.

### Galapagos Islands

These famous islands lie off the coast of Ecuador. Darwin came to his theory on evolution from the species located on the islands. Annie also visits here in several of the short stories within the book.

### Palo Santo Trees

These trees exist on the Galapagos Islands. They are pale and wispy, facing the sea. Annie thinks that if she were to be reincarnated, she'd want to come back as a palo santo tree.





## **Tinker Creek**

This creek is near Annie's home. She meets the young boy near the creek and talks to him about fishing and his animals.

## **Yikima Valley, Washington**

Annie and her husband travel here to see the eclipse of the sun.

## **Pittsburgh**

Annie spent her childhood in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

## **Daleville Pond**

Annie sees the pair of whistling swans at this pond. Daleville Pond is located in the Roanoke valley of Virginia.

## **Darwin's Finches**

The finches on the Galapagos Islands helped lead Darwin to the theory of evolution. The finches have different beaks from species to species. Annie calls them to her when she visits the islands.

## **The Farm**

Annie lived here at one time. It is on an island in Puget Sound, Washington. She believes that she saw angels in the field there.

## **The Cottage**

The cottage is in the Appalachian Mountains. Annie visits here with the child and her dog.



# Themes

## Discovery

From the first essay "Living Like Weasels", Annie Dillard sets up the theme of discovery. She invites the reader to observe and discover the world with her. Each essay, in many ways, brings a new discovery for Annie, often of a spiritual nature or something about herself. As she discovers the world, she also discovers something about herself.

Annie also brings in a discussion of historical discovery into her own personal discoveries. She talks about Darwin's discovery of the theory of evolution and the polar explorers' discovery of the poles. These discoveries compare with her own observations and discoveries of places and people. Like a scientist, she looks through a microscope at a drop of pond water and through binoculars at a pair of whistling swans. She spends time quietly observing the world, finding scenes and insights that she could have never imagined.

For Annie, discovery is heavily tied to the idea of watching. In "Teaching a Stone to Talk", Annie argues that people are here to witness. Humans cannot change or use the essential essence of the earth or animals. Annie says that one can only witness them. The witnessing doesn't change the earth or change God, but it changes humans. By watching, humans discover new things about their world and about God, which ultimately brings humans closer to God and brings humans better knowledge of themselves.

## Exploration

Although Annie believes that watching brings discovery, she also spends a great deal of time in the book discussing exploration. The two ideas are not necessarily opposite as Annie finds through exploration new sites and environments to observe. In fact, the reader can find Annie exploring new environments and events in many of the essays within the book. She makes the comment at one point that humans only live once and that while they walk the earth they should get a feel for the place, particularly those out-of-the-way places. As Annie finds, these out-of-the-way places often open up new insights and thoughts about God, life, and our place in the world.

In "An Expedition to the Pole", Annie compares humans today to the polar explorers of the past. She argues that both groups are searching for the sublime or God. In the beginning of the essay, she starts each narrative, alternating between them until the two finally combine and Annie becomes one of the polar explorers in her mind. By combining the two, Annie suggests that humans spend their lives seeking God and the sublime, always prodding on, looking for the spot where God can be found. Most people, like the early explorers, fall by the wayside, tripped up by trying to carry impractical objects through life. Some explorers, however, find glimpses of the divine,



which spurs them on to look for more. For Annie, this is also the reason that she goes back to church each week: for those glimpses of the divine.

Whether humans actively explore or stand watching, they seek the sublime, the divine, God. The glimpses of these things are unpredictable, like the mirages that Annie sees. Annie models both seeking out and watching for the sublime in her explorations.

## Spirituality

In all of the essays in the book, Annie confronts some aspect of spirituality and faith. The experiences that she has and the things that she sees bring her into contact with God and with her own beliefs, doubts, and ideas. Through the essays, the reader can see Annie's thoughts and feelings about God and her own faith.

Annie presents spirituality and faith as a work in progress. She compares humans' search for the sublime with the polar explorers' search, each moving forward step by step. Like the weasel and the eagle, she wants to seize hold of that one necessity and not let go, wherever it takes her. She argues that the way to know God is to change one's life, to throw one's lot with God and turn toward him. The changes do not alter God, but they do alter a person's life to bring that person closer to God and deepen their spiritual life.

Yet, Annie is also honest about her own spiritual struggles. She doesn't present herself as having the ultimate spiritual knowledge, or of trying to guide the readers along on the right path. Instead, she offers her struggles as common ground, as places to start conversations and reflections on faith and God. In "The Deer at Providencia", Annie confronts the pain and suffering in the world, admitting that she doesn't understand it. Spirituality, as a journey or sojourn, involves growth and questions.

# Style

## Perspective

Annie Dillard is a writer who has written several other works in addition to "Teaching a Stone to Talk: Expeditions and Encounters". The reader is given little other information about her background or her education. She has traveled to many different spots and this could be due to a love of travel or as a writer on assignment.

Although the essays in the book are personal ones discussing her thoughts and feelings, Annie clearly intends the essays to be read by others. At several points in the book, she addresses the reader to clarify a point. Thus, she is not writing a personal journal or diary that she intends to keep private from the world. Although she intends the works to be seen by others, they are personal in nature and she may be writing some of them, in part, as a way of reflecting herself on what she sees and experiences.

The readers is drawn into the experiences that Annie has. She allows the reader into her private thoughts and questions, showing how they come to be and how Annie reasons her way through them. The intention seems to be to have the reader experience these struggles and questions with Annie, to understand why Annie feels as she does, and to take this information into the reader's own life to reflect on and think about.

## Tone

Teaching a Stone to Talk is a subjective work. Annie Dillard writes a first person narrative, allowing the reader to see her experiences through her eyes. The reader gets to see inside Annie's head to know what she is thinking and feeling about the situations and places that she includes in the book. Even in presenting historical facts or scientific evidence, Annie always includes her own thoughts about them as well, placing the facts within a context and her overall discussion.

The overall tone of the work is one of thoughtfulness. The essays are meant to be thought about and pondered for their meaning, both for Annie and for the reader's own life. The essays are meant to evoke spiritual questioning on the part of the reader as Annie has in her own life. Through her discussion of the spiritual matters and questions, Annie brings the reader to a starting point from which the reader can confront similar questions.

Annie mentions in several of the essays that lifeless objects and people watch life and the world. Her work also serves as an introduction or call to observe the places and situations around the reader. Annie finds inspiration in these things as she watches and observes. She seeks to discover more about the world and her faith through nature.

## Structure

"Teaching a Stone to Talk: Expeditions and Encounters" is divided into fourteen essays. Each essay focuses on a different topic or theme. Most have no connection to each other except for the common narrator. "In the Jungle" and "The Deer at Providencia" both take place on the same trip to Ecuador, and "Teaching a Stone to Talk" and "Life on the Rocks: The Galapagos" both discuss the Galapagos Islands. The themes of spirituality, discovery, and exploration weave their way through the fourteen essays with different intensities.

The advantages of using this format is that the reader can easily make it through the book an essay at a time. Rather than having to digest an entire book, the essays can each stand alone. The reader is given short descriptions of what Annie is thinking or feeling, yet each is complete by itself, offering interest and insight. The combination of the essays allows the themes to shine forth more clearly, while bringing insights from a variety of experiences, places, and people.

One of the disadvantages to the essay format is that the reader never learns a great deal about any one place or person. While the narrator appears in all of the essays, the reader never gets a great deal of information about her. In addition, the essays leave many questions about the various places that Annie visits. For example, the reader doesn't get to fully experience the Galapagos Islands with Annie, knowing all of the things that she did or saw there.



## Quotes

"I think it would be well, and proper, and obedient, and pure, to grasp your one necessity and not let it go, to dangle from it limp wherever it takes you. Then even in death, where you're going no matter how you live, cannot you part. Seize it and let it seize you up aloft even, till your eyes burn out and drop; let your musky flesh fall off in shreds, and let your very bones unhinge and scatter, loosened over fields, over fields and woods, lightly, thoughtless, from any height at all, from as high as eagles." *Living Like Weasels*, p. 16

"God does not demand that we give up our personal dignity, that we throw in our lot with random people, that we lose ourselves and turn from all that is not him. God needs nothing, asks nothing, and demands nothing, like the stars. It is a life with God which demands these things." *An Expedition to the Pole*, p. 31

"The point of going somewhere like the Napo River in Ecuador is not to see the most spectacular anything. It is simply to see what is there. We are here on the planet only once, and might as well get a feel for the place. We might as well get a feel for the fringes and hollows in which life is lived, for the Amazon basin, which covers half a continent, and for the life that—there, like anywhere else—is always and necessarily lived in detail: on the tributaries, in the riverside villages, sucking this particular white-fleshed guava in this particular pattern of shade." *In the Jungle*, p. 55

"At a certain point you say to the woods, to the sea, to the mountains, the world, Now I am ready. Now I will stop and be wholly attentive. You empty yourself and wait, listening. After a time you hear it: there is nothing there. There is nothing but those things only, those created objects, discrete, growing or holding, or swaying, being rained on or raining, held, flooding or ebbing, standing, or spread. You feel the world's word as a tension, a hum, a single chorused note everywhere the same. This is it: this hum is the silence." *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, pp. 71-72

"We are here to witness. There is nothing else to do with those mute materials we do not need. Until Larry teaches his stone to talk, until God changes his mind, or until the pagan gods slip back to their hilltop groves, all we can do with the whole inhuman array is watch it." *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, p. 72

"We are strangers and sojourners, soft dots on the rocks. You have walked along the strand and see where birds have landed, walked, and flown; their tracks begin in sand, and go, and suddenly end. Our tracks do that: but we go down. And stay down." *Life on the Rocks: The Galapagos*, p. 115

"From that time I began to think of angels. I considered that sights such as I had seen of the silence must have been shared by the people who said they saw angels. I began to review the thing I had seen that morning. My impression now of those fields is of thousands of spirits—spirits trapped, perhaps, by my refusal to call them more fully, or



by the paralysis of my own spirit at that time—thousands of spirits, angels in fact, almost discernible to the eye, and whirling." *A Field of Silence*, p. 137

"Like everyone is his right mind, I feared Santa Claus, thinking he was God. I was still thoughtless and brute, reactive. I knew right from wrong, but had barely tested the possibility of shaping my own behavior, and then only from fear, and not yet from love. Santa Claus was an old man whom you never saw, but who nevertheless saw you; he knew when you'd been bad or good. He knew when you'd been bad or good! And I had been bad." *God in the Doorway*, p. 140

"So the rocks shape life, and then life shapes life, and the rocks are moving. The completed picture needs one more element: life shapes the rocks." *Life on the Rocks: The Galapagos*, p. 129

"I am still running, running from that knowledge, that eye, that love from which there is no refuge. For you only meant love, and love, and I only felt fear, and pain. So once in Israel love came to us incarnate, stood in the doorway between two worlds, and we were all afraid." *God in the Doorway*, p. 141

"I alternate between thinking of the planet as home—dear and familiar stone hearth and garden—and as a hard land of exile in which we are all sojourners." *Sojourner*, p. 150

"We are down here in time, where beauty grows. Even if things are as bad as they could possibly be, and as meaningless, then matters of truth are themselves indifferently; we may as well please our sensibilities and, with as much spirit as we can muster, go out with a buck and wing." *Sojourner*, p. 152

"Actually, I know why the child loves Francis Burn. It is because he is the one to whom she has given her love. But why were we given this fierce love? It beats me. I, too, love one." *Aces and Eights*, p. 172



## Topics for Discussion

Discuss the interweaving narratives in "An Expedition to the Pole". What do you think Dillard is trying to accomplish by alternating the narratives? What does the ending represent?

Dillard admires Larry for trying to teach a stone to talk. Why do you think she believes that this is worthy of admiration when so many would find it crazy or impossible?

Dillard discusses the idea of a sojourner several times in the book, including in the essay by that name. What does she have to say about sojourners? Why is this concept an important one for her?

Dillard has encounters with animals several times in the book. What are some of the things that she observes and learns from the animals she encounters?

Dillard states that she would want to be reincarnated as a palo santo tree. Why? What does she see in the palo santo tree that attracts her?

What does the deer at Providencia represent for Dillard? Why are the others surprised by her reaction to it?

Why do you think someone would try to teach a stone to talk? Why does Dillard think Larry is trying to teach it?

Describe the eclipse that Dillard and her husband witness. What happens? What surprises Dillard about it? Why do you think she went to see the eclipse?