

REVIEWS

Annie Dillard keeps asking 'why'

For the Time Being, by Annie Dillard, Knopf, 204 pp., \$22

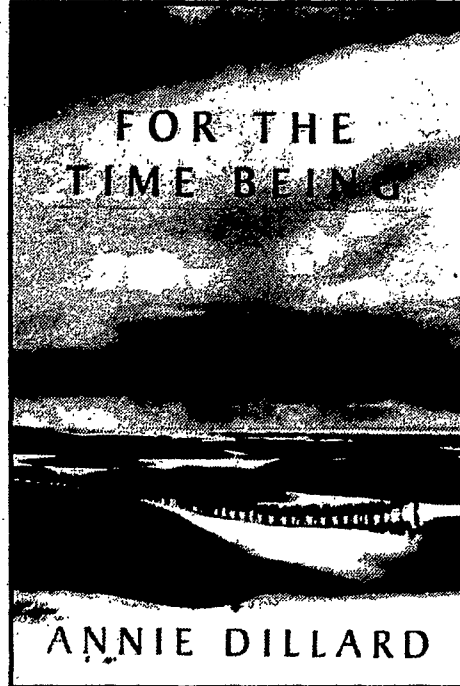
Reviewed by Peggy Rosenthal
Guest contributor

After Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* won the Pulitzer Prize in 1975, she was pegged as a nature writer. It's true that her close observations of nature form the primary material of that book, but she is always pushing beyond them to probe life's core mysteries, scary as they might be. Unnerving questions keep popping up in *Pilgrim*. Musing on the millions of rock barnacle larvae along a single sea shore, for instance, Dillard asks: "What if God has the same affectionate disregard for us that we have for barnacles?"

In her major new book, *For the Time Being*, Dillard is still probing life's toughest questions: of natural and human evil, of death and suffering, of how each one of us can matter so utterly when there are so mind-boggling many of us. But now, 25 years later, she makes these probings her book's primary focus.

Sharp observations of nature are still there, but they're explicitly at the service of these compelling questions. So she reports people's quirky descriptions of particular clouds in order to ask: "Why seek dated clouds? Why save a letter, take a snapshot, write a memoir, carve a tombstone?" The answer, she suggests, is that we need to hold on to these passing forms as a way of holding on to our own existence: Clouds are eerily like us humans, taking shape over the earth for an instant, then dissipating forever.

Similarly, the book has fascinating facts



on sand, what it is and how it moves over the earth, but the facts quickly move into reflections like "Earth sifts over things. If you stay still, earth buries you, ready or not... We live on dead people's heads."

Dillard isn't trying to be morbid in such comments. She's simply trying to see life clearly, and from a cosmic perspective. To this end, she refers often to two of her favorite visionaries: the Jesuit paleontologist Teilhard de Chardin, who discovered Peking Man, and the 18th-century Jewish mystic, the Baal Shem Tov. She loves how Teilhard, literally digging deep down to explore life's meaning, came to a vision close to the Baal Shem Tov's: that in every

bit of God's creation is hidden a "holy spark."

Clouds, sand, Teilhard, the Baal Shem Tov and more (including Dillard's own travel notes to China and Israel): Through all these bits and pieces, Dillard keeps pushing her basic questions of who we are, why we are here and how God figures in it all. In *For the Time Being*, she is as much the archeologist as Teilhard, uncovering fragments of meaning and putting them together to puzzle out what we humans are doing during our history on this earth.

To dramatize her role as sifter through fragments of meaning, Dillard has crafted the book as a collection of fragments sorted by recurring topics like Birth, Evil, Encounters, Numbers. At first, the segmented structure might seem disorienting to the reader; but soon the rhythm becomes familiar and recurring images tie disparate parts together. Dillard's gifts as a creative essayist are on a par with Emerson's. I predict that *For the Time Being* will become a classic of American literature, in the tradition of the transcendentalists.

I must warn readers that the book contains images that are not for the faint of heart. On my first reading, I had to skip over the opening description, from a human birth defects manual, of a pair of bird-headed dwarfs. Dillard's hallmark has always been finding just the right image to shock us into truly visualizing her theme, in this case the very definition of being human. Remember *Pilgrim*'s scene of the giant water bug sucking out a frog's innards, placed near the book's start to keep us from feeling too sentimental about nature.

I don't know of a writer who is more unflinchingly honest than Annie Dillard. Or who can better find images to stimulate our reflection on life's basic questions. In a hundred eye-opening ways, *For the Time Being* asks (and answers): How are we to live? How do we help release the sparks of the holy in our brief time here?

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Peggy Rosenthal, a parishioner at Rochester's Blessed Sacrament Church, is the author of the new book *The Poets' Jesus* and co-editor of the anthology *Divine Inspiration: The Life of Jesus in World Poetry* (both Oxford University Press).

Drama on video

NEW YORK (CNS) — The following are home videocassette reviews from the U.S. Catholic Conference Office for Film and Broadcasting.

'Anywhere but Here'

Heartfelt drama (1999) in which a level-headed daughter (Natalie Portman) struggles through her teens with a mom (Susan Sarandon) who has impulsively moved them from their Wisconsin roots to Beverly Hills. The finely acted film sensitively explores the daughter's love-hate relationship up to its deservedly sentimental resolution. An implied affair, sexual references, occasional profanity. The USCC classification is A-III—adults. The Motion Picture Association of America rating is PG-13—parents are strongly cautioned.

'The Fox and the Hound'

A fox and hound raised as friends have to confront the consequences of the roles assigned them by nature and humans in this 1981 Disney animated feature. Based on the book by Daniel P. Mannix, the result provides some pleasant entertainment for the young, though its sentimentality and cloying cuteness will put off older viewers. The USCC classification is A-I—general patronage. The MPA rating is G—general audiences (Disney).

'Definitive' Catechism published in English

By Jerry Filteau
Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON — The second English edition of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, released several weeks ago, is being distributed by the U.S. Catholic Conference and Our Sunday Visitor.

The book carries a list price of \$14.95 for softcover and \$24.95 for hardcover.

Since the catechism first came out in English in 1994, more than 2.3 million copies have been sold.

The new edition is more than 100 pages larger than the original. It has an expanded index and is the first version of the catechism to include a glossary.

Originally issued in French in 1992 by Pope John Paul II, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* is the first official compendium of Catholic doctrine published by the Holy See since 1566.

The second English edition incorporates text changes made in 1997 with the publication of the definitive Latin edition.

The Latin text made about 100 modifications of the original French, including



stronger language against the death penalty, a more positive treatment of organ transplants and clearer presentations of the liturgical and sacramental practices of Eastern Catholic churches.

When the French version was issued,

the pope said it would be the definitive text only until publication of the Latin, which would then become the *editio typica* — the definitive or normative edition.

"The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* is already acknowledged as one of the great achievements of the pontificate of our Holy Father, Pope John Paul II," said Msgr. Dennis M. Schnurr, general secretary of the USCC and National Conference of Catholic Bishops.

"This second edition, which conforms to the *editio typica*, is another important step in bringing this summary of our faith to our Catholic people and to all who wish to understand Catholicism," he said.

Gregory Erlandson, Our Sunday Visitor editor in chief, said, "In just a few years the catechism has become an essential tool in catechesis and evangelization. OSV has supported the efforts of the conference's Office for the Catechism, and we are happy to participate in putting the catechism into the hands of as many people as possible."

In 1997 Our Sunday Visitor gave the bishops' Office for the Catechism a five-year grant of \$500,000 to support its work.

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EDITORS' NOTE: The second edition *Catechism of the Catholic Church* — \$14.95 softcover, \$24.95 hardcover, plus postage and handling — can be ordered directly by telephone from the U.S. Catholic Conference, (800) 235-8722, or *Our Sunday Visitor*, (800) 348-2440.

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