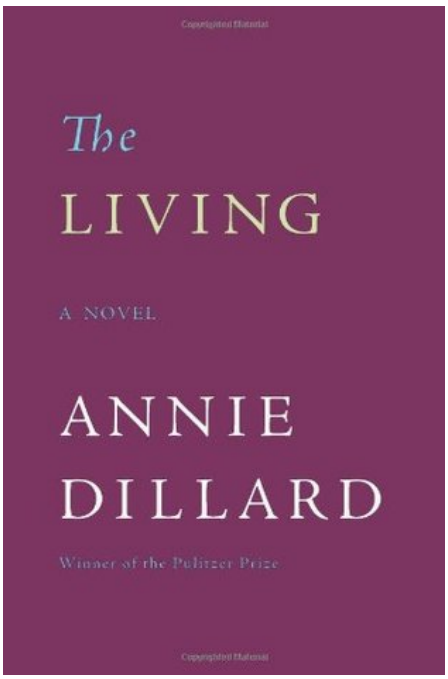

The Living

Annie Dillard

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Ninety miles north of Seattle on the Washington coast lies Bellingham Bay, where a rough settlement founded in the 1850s would become the town of Whatcom. Here, the Lummi and Nooksack Indian people fish and farm, hermits pay their debts in sockeye salmon, and miners track gold-bearing streams.

Here, too, is the intimate, murderous tale of three men. Clare Fishburn believes that greatness lies in store for him. John Ireland Sharp, an educated orphan, abandons hope when he sees socialists expel the Chinese workers from the region. Beal Obenchain, who lives in a cedar stump, threatens Clare Fishburn's life.

A killer lashes a Chinese worker to a wharf piling at low tide. Settlers pour in to catch the boom the railroads bring. People give birth, drown, burn, inherit rich legacies, and commit expensive larcenies. All this takes place a hundred years ago, when these vital, ruddy men and women were "the living."

The Living Details

Date	:	Published November 12th 2013 by Harper Perennial (first published May 1st 1992)
ISBN	:	9780060924119
Author	:	Annie Dillard
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Genre	:	Fiction, Historical, Historical Fiction, Literature

From Reader Review The Living for online ebook

Larry Bassett says

I am a fan of Annie Dillard. I first read A Pilgrim at Tinker Creek when I was a teenager and could still remember those earlier days when I spent time out in the wilds. Today it is the suburbs but back in the 1950s there were still fields and streams. But this book, The Living: A Novel, is a trip into the unknown for me. But, it turns out, a very enjoyable trip.

The name of the author and the cover with a rustic homestead first attracted me to this book and GR BookSwap made it available to me at very little cost. But it turns out that this book is about the Pacific Northwest. Now I know people who live there love that part of the country. But my experience is limited to deciding to get married while on a trip to Portland. That was twenty years ago and I have never gone back since then.

There are some emotional strings to that region for me. Thirty-some years ago in a bit of family intrigue my favorite cousin Bill ran away with the family babysitter to Oregon. There is Jean who moved to Bellingham with a small piece of my heart. A special stepson moved out of my life via the northwest. And I made that matrimonial decision in that neck of the woods. So I associate family and romance with the area.

This is what I know about the book as I start out, courtesy of amazon.com :

> This *New York Times* bestselling novel by Pulitzer Prize-winning author Annie Dillard is a mesmerizing evocation of life in the Pacific Northwest during the last decades of the 19th century.

Not much to go on, the name Annie Dillard and a rustic homestead on the front cover.

One of the first things I noticed about this book was that its chapters are in Roman Numerals. The last one is “Chapter LXXV.” If you don’t remember, L stands for 50. So *The Living* has seventy-five modestly sized chapters. More or less, V pages average per chapter. That’s a right good size for readers that like to rest regularly. But this book became less and less easy to put down as I got into it; I almost always wanted to keep reading at the end of each chapter in the last half of the book.

The book jumps right into reminding us that it is the tough pioneer days: in the opening pages a baby falls out of a covered wagon and is crushed by the wagon wheel. Thomas Hobbes reminds us that life is nasty, brutish and short, something you didn’t need to remind the early settlers of the Bellingham Bay. Many of those settlers were distressed to find they were too far north to grow corn. But death was easy to find and part of the scenery. We also see examples of frontier justice, the continuity of human spirit as well as resilience and determination in the face of tragedy and deprivation.

Published in 1992, the book has managed the years well. It doesn’t suffer from being twenty years old. Of course, it is historical fiction and the 19th Century is still the 19th Century whether you are reading it in 1992 or 2012.

The Living has the hallmarks of legend: some exaggeration, some sly humor, some heroics.

> They walked in the swift river itself for the first mile or so upstream. The Skagits dreaded the snarled forest, and found the going easier in the rivers, and even up in the mountains' snows. The horses had entered the waters readily, which pleased Grogan; he would have preferred mules if they could have afforded mules, he said, but mules would have dished this stage of the journey, as they purely misliked wetting their feet. He had seen a man shoot a pack mule dead, at the edge of a ford, simply to win the argument for the side of reason. The man had to carry his own gear, his *itkus*, in the mountains for a week, but never repented.
> John Ireland agreed with the mule. That time of year, in August, the river was chalky with glacial melt, and as cold as water could run. John Ireland splashed ahead of his grandfather, numb as iron from the waterline down.

I have seen the movies where the lives of three or four individuals in different circumstances or locations intersect with each other. *The Living* has seven stories that overlap. The characters and the years intermingle. We see the lives of some characters from birth to death; sometimes that is not very many years since deaths, often by tragedy, are a regular part of the stories. We see some events from the point of view of more than one person. We see characters interact as marriages, fires, moves, tragedies, jobs, fates and fortune change lives over time or overnight.

Can you feel nostalgia for a place you've never been and a time you've never lived? Annie Dillard has taken me to a new place, the Pacific Northwest, and a new time, the last half of the 19th century. I want to thank her for that. I have read eighteen books on my historical fiction shelf. There are five more on that shelf at the moment to be read. I think I should raise those books up on my priority list.

What is a lesson of *The Living*? There are many but one is as simple as "the tides come in and the tides go out." It ends with another:

> The heavy rope pulled at him. He carried it to the platform edge. He hitched up on the knot and launched out. As he swung through the air, trembling, he saw the blackness give way below, like a parting of clouds, to a deep patch of stars on the ground. It was the pond, he hoped, the hole in the woods reflecting the sky. He judged the instant and let go; he flung himself loose into the stars.

The Living is easily a four star book for me. Maybe even four and one-half stars. Today I ordered several more used books by Annie Dillard online from Alibris. I'm hooked!

Arwen56 says

Questo romanzo l'ho letto nel 1994. Temporalmente si colloca nella seconda metà dell'Ottocento e narra delle vicende di alcuni pionieri che presero parte alla colonizzazione del nord-ovest dell'immenso territorio

americano. Lo sfondo storico, se veritiero (io non ho le conoscenze sufficienti per poterlo affermare), è interessante, ma lo stile dell’autrice è un filino troppo soporifero e distaccato.

Ad ogni modo, non mi è dispiaciuto.

Chris says

I think this book is sort of historically interesting, since it's set in the place where I live now, and gives a rough history of the settling of the area and etc. As a novel though, it is very slow and plodding. There are basically four or five interesting plot points spread out across four-hundred meanderingly descriptive pages. Sometimes Dillard's writing is pretty, but it doesn't really get at anything all that interesting to me.

Susie says

Interesting story, I like historical fiction. But the characters are none of them sympathetic - it's sort of a James Michener read all over again, looking at the people who've lived in a region over time and unpacking the history of that place. But I don't really love or care at all about any of the characters. I probably won't finish this one.

Michael says

As when I read it twenty years ago, I'm struck by the irony of the title. An awful lot of this book is about The Dying, which people did with far more regularity and gusto on the 19th century frontier than we see currently. But then, living and dying are two sides of the same coin, and it is true that the story continues to follow the adventures of the living characters rather than the dead ones, and this is a good thing; the dead have so few adventures, and that is one of the reasons we sorrow for them.

It's a book more of vignettes than of robust through-lines. One of the more interesting threads -- and this isn't something I could see 20 years ago, because I hadn't read *Crime and Punishment* -- is of a Raskalnikov figure, transplanted to the Puget Sound. Dillard's version of the character is more vivid and real, because we have a better understanding of how his pathology develops, and also because it's hinted that he has read *Crime and Punishment*. What role does it have in the book? Not much, really, but it does both generate incidents that are important to the "plot," such as it is, and illustrates that in the nineteenth century even the most remote frontiers were tied into the international cultural scene.

The Living is, I think -- and this is a rare instance when I can speak with professional authority -- one of the finest books of Pacific Northwest history. That's an unusual thing to say about a novel, but the imagined events of Dillard's story probably capture the reality of 19th century life among the big trees better than any of the non-fictional treatments.

Eibi82 says

“El río Nooksack, nacía en un manantial en el circo de un glaciar que se encontraba en lo alto de la cara oeste del monte Shuksan. El manantial se congelaba formando un carámbano, que goteaba en una pequeña laguna; un arroyuelo que salía de la laguna recorría un valle alto a la salida del circo, atravesando las montañas, filtrándose, derritiéndose y aumentando de caudal tan rápidamente que a poco más de un kilómetro de su origen una persona necesitaba botas altas de goma y un bastón para cruzarlo. Aquello era el río Nooksack.”

La épica norteamericana de frontera, los famosos pioneros, son para mí, un género en sí mismo. Son historias apasionantes, que nunca me canso de leer y descubrir.
Sin embargo, *Annie Dillard* va más allá.

Con ella, he ido recomponiendo pedazos de historia (y de corazón), cada vez que terminaba una parte del libro. He pasado meses al lado de los *Fishburn, Ireland, Honer, las tribus lummi, skagit y nooksack* ; los he visto crecer, los he visto caerse y volver a empezar de nuevo.
Por eso sé, que *Quienes viven* es algo más que una gran historia épica; son familias que en cada página, son ejemplo de perseverancia y tenacidad; la lucha por la supervivencia en una tierra salvaje y dura, pero también muy hermosa y llena de posibilidades. Una de esas lecturas de contrastes, que conmueve y emociona, a la vez que critica la hipocresía, el trato hacia las mujeres y las tribus indias.

“Al cabo del tiempo, llegó a creer y a esperar que una generación más educada y humana surgiría de cada aldea americana, y trabajaría generosamente para la nación, para acabar con el poder de los “intereses”, mejorar las condiciones de vida y de trabajo, acabar con la corrupción, terminar con la explotación y redistribuir la riqueza.”

Los hechos históricos, se entremezclan con la vida de estas familias que dejaron todo por un sueño: empezar de cero para mejorar y crecer. Un camino que, a pesar de los baches, teje una comunidad, nos muestra el lado más bondadoso de las personas, dejando a un lado las diferencias y los prejuicios, uniéndose para superar adversidades.

Todo ello con esa pluma tan maravillosa de Annie Dillard, evocadora, salvaje, poética, directa y bella, como la tierra del Whatcom o la bahía de Bellingham. Me resulta muy difícil despedirme de una historia tan humana (quizá por eso la he leído tan despacito) y de la que he aprendido tantísimo, aunque estoy convencida que volveré a ella más de una vez.

“Oh voluntad de vivir que todo lo soporta
Cuando todo lo visible parece desplomarse,
Álzate en la roca espiritual,
Fluye a través de nuestros actos, purificalos…
Con fe que surge de la sangre fría."
-Alfred Tennyson-.

Yorgos says

On its surface, The Living is the story of the settling of the American Northwest, told through the eyes of early settlers in Bellingham bay in Washington. It is an epic, intergenerational account of hardship, boom and bust, the destruction of Native American populations, the felling of the old growth forest, the building of the railroads and successive gold rushes. It's more than that, and deeper. Like her nonfiction, it's a meditation on what makes life worth living, on the unpredictability and ineffability of death and suffering and on the meaning of our fleeting lives in between. The story follows multiple families, the Fishburns, the Sharps, the Randalls, and the Obenchains, but it turns on the life of Clare Fishburn, whom we meet as the son of early settlers and who later is confronted with the knowledge of his own inevitable and proximal death. How he responds and lives his life, knowing he will die, adds meaning and color to every other story and character in the book.

No one I've read one can write like Annie Dillard. Every sentence is perfect and utile: where she wants to be beautiful and devastating, she is; where she wants to introduce us to a person, in a sentence they are whole; and where she moves the action along she does so deftly and deliberately. She wields symbols like Melville: Beal Obenchain is simultaneously a tragic, piteable person, death incarnate, and pure, raging and impotent willpower; a tree is a tree and a crab is a crab, except when they are something more; Hugh Honer is a boy and a man, and all of us, and also the holy watcher, witness to death. She manages to be profound without succumbing to sentimentality, and to entertain with asides and with stories beside the story. I have not read all of Annie Dillards work, and had previously associated her with non-fiction only; I see her in a new light now, and this is my favorite book of hers.

Jenwah says

The only novel by Annie Dillard, and it's really amazing. A historic fiction of the settlement of Bellingham Bay. She writes the way it must have felt. Lonely, factual... a hollow accounting of the death of loved ones. Then it slowly comes alive, emotional.... one of the only "epics" that I've truly enjoyed.
Caveat: some long-winded rambling poetic passages that I need to read a few more times before I "get it". .... and some parts that are really violent.

Brian says

I was hugely surprised at the struggle it was to finish this. Upon first reaing, "The Living" is a testament to Dillard's considerable abilities to write in an eipc style; that sense of the epic persists throughtout, leaving the reader at times quite outside the narrative. Characterization saves this one, though-- the individuals depicted become so real throughout their stories that they are hard to let go...

Nicole says

I picked up this book after seeing that Dillard had written a review of the book I had just finished reading--John Mathiessen's Shadow County, a book that is an intense, complex, and thoroughly satisfying read. I was about a third of the way through The Living and realized something was bothering me. It wasn't the quality of the writing. Dillard writes beautifully and eloquently and the story she tells is compelling, but there is a detachment from the characters that prevents the reader from becoming thoroughly engaged in the narrative. The bottom line is that I just didn't care about any of the characters; I didn't feel invested in them in any way. It's good storytelling but storytelling that does not get under your skin. I heard Joyce Carol Oates speak a few years ago about how she has tried to include more dialogue (and less description) in her novels. This book has very little dialogue which I think contributes to how distanced one feels as a reader. It's the antithesis of someone like Cormac McCarthy whose dialogue reels you in and twists your heart or Harriet Simpson Arnow (The Dollmaker) whose pitch-perfect characters haunt you days after finishing one of her novels. I was hoping for a heart-wrenching, gut-churning novel but after a few chapters was left feeling a bit empty. Maybe I will pick the book up again sometime in the future and give it a second chance. Maybe.

Donna Davis says

When I got home from my annual pilgrimage to Powell's City of Books, I looked over my treasures. Those that had been on my wish list got read first. Now I am down to the books I bought because a Powell's employee liked them, or from impulse (rare). I also sometimes buy a book if it has won awards and is in a subject area of interest to me.

This book made me wince when I saw I had paid 75% of the original price. It did not look promising.Stained, or fly-specked around the edges; pages yellowing and about to fall out. What had I done?

On the surface, it is historical fiction about the development of Bellingham, WA. A snore (unless you live there MAYBE), right? But then, why was it a New York Times best seller, if it was a waste?
Flip to the author page...Guggenheim Foundation grant, National Endowment for the Arts, Washington Governor's Award...okay, okay, I would read it!

The story was praised by others as "epic", and it is true. The characterization and plot are first-rate. There are many families whose lives are followed, and yet, even with sleeping pills under my belt (metaphor; I don't sleep wearing a belt), I kept track of them all and even more, felt as if I knew them. The writer was true to her characters, and there was nothing formulaic or tossed in as filler to meet a deadline. It was s story about PEOPLE who were shaped by their environment. Some of it filled me with joy, and other parts broke my heart. I was sorry to reach the last page, even though this was a long, leisurely read.

The page numbers are deceptive. It clocks in under 400 pages, but in trade paperback size, it packs a whole lot of words onto each page. (Think small type, slim margins).

This is not a book to be rushed through. Once you are hooked--and if you enjoy historical fiction, or even strong, well built, dynamic characters (and multiple characters are dynamic here!), this is good read by a cozy fire. Buy it for yourself this winter, or get it for a friend.

As for me: I learned that this was only her FIRST novel, and she won the Pulitzer for a nonfiction book (The Pilgrim at Tinker Creek) that is going on my wish list. Gee, I hope Santa is good to me this year. There are so many amazing books out there, and I can't wait to read more by Dillard!

Jesse says

There are many fine sentences in this book. The plot is perfectly laid. The characters are well-drawn and the themes are profound. Nevertheless, there is something wrong with this book. It is possible that the author does not love her characters. Or maybe it is that she doesn't love the place, the northwest. It doesn't surprise me that she left the northwest after 5 years and moved back east. I think she doesn't understand what we, and those who lived here before us, really love here on Puget Sound. At any rate, the book is almost boring in its splendor. Its metaphors are as thick and lightless as a dark stand of 200' Doug firs in the Cascade foothills.

On the other hand, "To feel time beating you senseless - that was the great thing, to feel time beating you off the beaten track and down to the beaches, where the tide sucked at the bluffs and the guillemots dived in the surges - that was the great thing."

Like I said, there are many fine sentences in this book.

Diane says

Whew... this was much more about the dying than about the living. I picked this up because it was about the settling of the Puget Sound area and I'll be vacationing there soon. I thought I might get some insight into the history of the Northwest. It IS informative in a Michener sort of way. There is a lot of effective descriptive writing about the moody beauty of this coast My friends tease me about liking stark, spare, dark novels but this was VERY stark. You just get interested in a character and he dies. You start to get attached to a locale and the setting shifts. Still, it was a terrifically written novel. But I'm exhausted from it.

Steve says

This is a fascinating epic novel, a big book that paints in broad strokes. The author gallops along in her descriptions of events and people; she skips entire years; she describes people as one would describe dolls (the shapes of their heads and facial features). She describes many deaths, but the peculiarities and complications of life most fascinate her. Can one woman survive when just about everyone in her family dies in domestic tragedy? Can one man -- however twisted -- own another person's life without actually committing murder? This is an unusual and magnificent novel. The author describes the delicate balance of the white folks clinging to the edge of a heavily-wooded continent, hoping for solvent banks and railroad terminus. She describes the tragedy of the Chinese, brought in to do some heavy work and then deported as quickly as possible. And she describes the inter-tribal skirmishes between the American Indian tribes, and how it affects or doesn't affect their interactions with the white settlers. She provides descriptions of the tenacious dealings between the East Coast and West, and how the economic woes of the East (which seem eerily similar to our present day troubles) impact those in the West. Those of us who live up here in the Pacific Northwest glean some images of early Seattle and Bellingham. I've applied all of these words and I still cannot adequately describe this book.

Adam says

I've been reading for a long time and I've read a lot of books, and I'd like to think that insofar as there are skills involved in the basic act of reading, I've mastered most of them. And yet somehow, in the 800+ book I've logged on Goodreads, I contrived to read this one backwards. The audiobook is broken into 8 parts; I read the last one first, etc, and didn't realize until I got to the third track. It seems a bit unfair to judge a book on an experience so different from its intended form. For instance, the plot is remarkably anti-climactic and "Shandyfied"--as in, it's the sort of "shaggy dog" like story that is constantly interrupting its narrative to explore the life story of new characters and their family members. Those aren't illusions produced by the order of chapters I experienced; that I could go so long without realizing what was happening just speaks to the nature of the book. The biggest differences are that it ramps up establishing place and character at the end instead of the beginning, and it goes in reverse chronological order. It's like reading a blog or a journal from most recent to oldest. Which is to say, it's not actually that weird.

Okay so structural confusion aside: The Living was good but a bit disappointing relative to my hopes. It's the most sprawling and inclusive in its approach to history of any of the historical fiction I've read lately, but suffers from what I imagine must be the main deterrent for writing that sort of novel. That is, the story is diffuse and meandering enough that it leaves open the question: what is the point of all this? The characters are characterized with moments of real eloquence and insight but without larger arcs (though this is a likely casualty of my reading order). The community itself tracks from an addendum to a Native settlement to a growing settler town but this never feels very central to the story. I was especially hoping for Dillard to focus on environmental history, and while there are some aspects of that, the focus on nature is minimal and not satisfying. The closest thing there is to a main story is this vague Crime and Punishment deal, but even that feels ancillary. Ultimately it's a loosely structured slice-of-life portrait of a community in flux, and it just isn't quite good enough to make that sufficiently interesting.

Matt Dean says

This book is beautifully written. The prose is as fine and as lovely as anything I've ever read. The book is majestic and magisterial, as formidable as the densely forested lands that the characters strive to master and tame.

And yet, well, put it this way: one character is said to have written a three-hundred page epic poem in which men battle polar bears and pack ice; although the poet is a rank amateur, I wish I could have read his no-doubt-inept poem rather than this finely wrought novel.

I was profoundly unmoved. I barely cared whether the characters lived or died. I had a glimmer of interest in a sort of antisocial, woodsy Nietzschean named Beal Obenchain, but for him as well as for the rest, I felt very little *emotion*.

After a couple of hundred pages, I began to understand why this is so: the characters are almost always alone and lost in thought. Even when two characters are together, they are mostly caught up in their own separate thoughts. Much of the talk is summarized, rather than quoted. The quoted talk is generally trivial; the summarized talk is generally momentous. Time and again, we sit in a room with an introspective character as he or she thinks back on some horrific or exciting event, and prefer that we could witness the *event*, rather than read a summation of the character's *reflection* upon the event.

If Dillard had set out to blunt the emotional impact of her own novel, she couldn't have chosen better ways of doing so.

Of course, I don't mean to suggest that it's *all* introspection. A scene that takes place on a logjam that's just about to break up, for example, is powerfully dramatic—but there, too, we are told before the scene even begins that a major character will die in it.

Another scene, depicting the ugly behavior of a xenophobic mob, is unequivocally compelling in the way it depicts the inhuman way people treat one another. The chapters surrounding that scene could make a whole book, if they were fleshed out and expanded. Instead, that passage feels oddly extraneous, as if Dillard had been loath to waste any research material.

I feel as if I'm taking more care in avoiding spoilers than Dillard herself. An example: when I say that Beal Obenchain kills a man in Whatcom just to watch him die, it sounds as if it should probably be a spoiler—but it's not. We're told he's going to do it, and then we watch him do it. By the time this happens, so *much* has happened, so little of it apparently of any import, that I couldn't tell whether or not this murder was even significant.

Now, having finished the book, I'd say, eh, probably not. It's just something that happened, followed (a couple of hundred pages later) by something else that happened as a consequence. I'm still trying to avoid spoilers, here, though there's hardly any need. There are no surprises or twists in this subplot.

A minor technical point. DIllard's handling of point of view is, at times, jarring. It's a little unusual, these days, to read fiction in which the POV changes from character to character within a scene. Writers of old used to do that sort of thing all the time—it's a matter of fashion, rather than of statute—but when I come across it writers' groups and workshops, I usually regard it as a mistake. It usually *is* a mistake. *The Living* is an epic set in the late 1800s, so it seemed somewhat fitting.

But then there's something like this:

> The skin on her face looked soft as a blossom, spotted, and her black eyes squinting out seemed glossy and hard. She was watching her granddaughter Vinnie souse the plates with curly-haired Hugh Honer in the sea. The boy had hardened up *considerable* since the bad summer when everybody died on him and he seemed ready to *curl up his own self*.... [T:]hough she herself favored responsible young fellows with a *mite more foolery in them*, that kind seemed hard to find.

It's a minor thing, as I said, but it bugs me: We are given details of the character's appearance—of her *face*, which she cannot *see*— and then within the same paragraph we are privy to her thoughts, in her vernacular (the italicized portions). I'm not especially fond of the god's-eye-view sort of third-person narration Dillard employs throughout the book, but I'm particularly annoyed by this mixture of close and distant third-person.

This is the first substantial piece of Dillard's writing that I've ever read. She's been on my list for a very long time, though. In college, a friend of mine love-love-*loved Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. I have fond memories of reading and rereading an essay in an old *Writer's Market*, in which Dillard recommended fearlessness in writing and revising. If a story is like a house, let's say, sometimes you need to reconfigure the floor plan. Sometimes a wall needs to come down. You go at it with a sledgehammer and hope it's not a bearing wall.

Sometimes it *is* a bearing wall, but it needs to come down anyway. Duck.

I am sorry to say, *The Living* either has altogether too many bearing walls, or none. I dearly wanted to love this novel, but I didn't. Not at all.

JoAnn W. says

This was a book about the early settlers in the Puget Sound region of Washington and the hardships they endured, along with the Native-Americans. Ms. Dillard repeatedly made the point that many people died young, sometimes violently, sometimes very suddenly She wrote so that the reader had no warning of the sudden death of a character. She made me appreciate the transitory nature of life and the gift of life.

Harold Titus says

“The Living” by Annie Dillard portrays the numerous hardships and the strengths and weaknesses of character of the original white settlers and their immediate descendents in the northwest corner of Washington State during the last half of the Nineteenth Century. Her novel begins in the fall of 1855 with the arrival of a fictitious pioneer family, the Fishburns, and ends in July 1897 with a celebratory gathering of second and third generation friends that include a Fishburn son and granddaughter. It is a historical novel that informs us, that engages us with its interesting characters, and that tests our patience.

The novel’s authenticity is one of its strengths. It is evident throughout that Annie Dillard knows her subject matter. One example is how early settlers felled huge Douglas fir. The fastest way was to use fire. They would augur one foot long holes downward into the massive tree trunks. They would then bore holes laterally to connect with the downward-angled holes. Next, they would insert burning sticks into the downward holes, the lateral holes to serve as a draft for smoke to escape. The next day “deep inside, the fired trees were burning. Weak yellow flames curled low from their trunks.” The following day “the trees started to fall, one after the other, and shook the earth so the house jumped. … The house rose, and everything in it rose, too … Shreds of cast green lichens, like bits of beard, blew into the house, with twigs, bark, sawdust, and plain dust. … The charred stumps kept burning. … The fir roots were so pitchy that a man could burn them right in the ground.” Not once did I doubt the novel’s setting or historical accuracy.

We who have lived life into our senior years know well what human existence is about. We are brought into this world without our consent, as children we are taught (or not taught) how to survive, if fortunate we live to adulthood, we procreate, and we survive until we don’t. The quality of our existence is more often determined by factors beyond our control -- governmental decisions, economic forces, groups of people, individuals, chance -- than by our force of will. We, nobody else, determine our lives’ value. This appears to be the central theme of the novel. I appreciated how Dillard’s characters grappled with difficult burdens, endured unexpected tragedy, and strived to ascribe meaning to their lives. “The Living” is a dark story that offers little optimism that man will ever ascend beyond his baser elements. Strive as we may to make better the lives of our family members, friends, and neighbors, stronger forces ultimately restrict if not defeat our brave efforts and force us eventually to live safe lives of avoidance of that which may be harmful. I prized this aspect of the novel.

The main characters were well developed and, at times, intriguing.

Ada Fishburn loses her three-year-old son Charley on the wagon trail west. Standing by the front passenger barrier of his parents' wagon, he topples over. "… their own wheels ran him over, one big wheel after the other, and he burst inwardly and died." She and her husband Rooney carve out a plot of land amidst the enormous, ever-present firs. Six years after their arrival from Illinois, their four-year-old daughter Lettie dies of an ear infection. Eleven years later Rooney, digging a well, releases a stream of poisonous gas and instantly succumbs. Ada's second husband dies accidentally three years later. She reaches old age, a good woman in every respect. "The more time God granted her on this earth," she reflects near the end of her life, "the more she saw it rain, but He mustn't think she wasn't grateful, because she was grateful – only if He was giving out time, why not pass some to people who needed it?"

Ada's son Clare learns the ways of existence in and outside the local towns of Whatcom and Goshen, survives childhood, and becomes a somewhat shallow-minded but helpful, generous adult. An event occurs after he has married and fathered a daughter that causes him to anticipate sudden death. Previously caught up in a land development boom, having accepted the prevailing attitude that life's prime purpose is to acquire wealth, Clare is forced to contemplate what is most important about life.

In 1879, thirteen-year-old John Ireland Sharp participates in an expedition led by his grandfather up the Skagit River into the mountains to seek a pass through which a transcontinental railroad might be built to reach the Pacific shores. The party comes upon a dying Indian youth impaled on a pointed stake embedded in the ground. John Ireland is shaken by the experience. Two years later, hard times having come to the Whatcom area, the boy's father moves his large family to Madrone Island, of the San Juan Islands in Rosario Strait. Soon after their arrival John Ireland is severely beaten by Beal Obenchain, a large-sized local boy. Two of John's ribs are broken. He recovers. The bully's lies about the cause of the beating are believed; he is not punished. The family ekes out a primitive existence. One day John Ireland remains on shore while his parents and brothers and sisters board their skiff to go to Orcas Island to see a man who sells tulip bulbs. The sky has the look of rain. Hours later Beal Obenchain's father spies the skiff adrift, empty. All of John Ireland's family is lost. He carries with him over the succeeding years this thought: "the people you knew were above water one minute, and under it the next, as if they had burst through ice. They went down stiff and upright in their filled gum boots and soaked skirts; they stood dead on the bottom and swayed with the currents like fixed kelp, his mother and father and sisters and brothers standing in a row on the ocean floor." John is adopted by the Obenchains, kind people, notwithstanding Beal. Eventually, John leaves the island, grows into manhood, and embraces socialist principles.

Beal Obenchain is psychotic. He is driven by an overpowering sense of unworthiness. To stave off episodes of psychological impotence he commits violent acts, receiving from them sufficient energy temporarily to face everyday that which diminishes him. At various places throughout the book we witness his cruel acts; and we yearn to see his come-uppance.

1874, Baltimore, Maryland. Minta Randall, daughter of U.S. Senator Green Randall, marries Eustace Honer, a young man of nearly equal social standing but afflicted by impractical dreams of engaging in adventurous enterprises. Minta, who is physically unattractive, forces her reluctant parents to consent to this marriage, Eustace deemed by them and the parents of other eligible debutantes to be an undesirable match. Scorning the stilted life of wealth and privilege, their imagination fired by brochures extolling the virtues of Puget Sound, Minta and Eustace move to Goshen and buy property (320 acres) next to Ada Fishburn and her adult son Clare. Minta and Eustace adapt well to their demanding environment. Despite their wealth, they are accepted by the local inhabitants. They produce children.

Eleven years after their marriage, in 1885, the local community decides to clear a huge log jam on the Nooksack River. "The jam was three quarters of a mile long – a city of trees and logs … It had been there as

long as anyone … could remember. A forest straddled the river on top of the jam. Fifteen or twenty feet above the waterline, Douglas firs and silver firs with trunks four feet thick were growing a hundred feet high from soil trapped in the smashed mess of logs. Birds nested in the trees." It takes three months to clear the jam. Near the end of the work Eustace slips on a log and falls into the water. Its current takes him under a layer of logs. He drowns. His nine-year-old son Hugh witnesses it.

Minta is devastated. Her parents travel to the Northwest to console her. On the evening of their arrival by steamboat, Minta prepares to meet them at the Goshen dock. Hugh builds a fire in the fireplace to warm the house. She and Hugh travel by coach to the dock. Minta's two younger children are left at home to sleep. The fire that Hugh has built consumes the house, and his siblings within. Minta is reduced almost to a catatonic state. Ada Fishburn tells her, finally: "Hugh has not been going to school, and when he's here you don't see him, bless his heart, and with the help of God you must stir yourself. For you have a child still living." Minta must contend both with her loss and, again, with her parents' objectionable wishes. Move back to Baltimore, they say. There is a suitable man you once expressed love for. He has not married.

Three years later Hugh discovers Ada's second husband dead of a broken neck, the result of a riding accident suffered while traveling during a rainstorm. It seems to Hugh that he is predestined to continue to witness death. Watching a community celebration of the launching of a locally built racing yacht when he is seventeen, recognizing that he is damaged, he reflects: "People seemed so joyous tonight, yet it was the same world it ever was, and they all had forgotten. When a baby is born its fuse lights. The ticking begins, and the fire starts fizzing down its length." He has fallen in love with Ada Fishburn's granddaughter Vinnie. Greatly influenced by what has happened to him, he must make a decision.

These characters kindled my emotions. Their fates mattered to me. Yet it took me two months to read this book, mostly because of what I will call thick narration. Part of the narration's "thickness" is due to the author's considerable use of description, most of which, unlike the passage below, is not sharply visual.

He saw that darkness was spreading from the land. In the dark, five or six bonfires were going. People sat lighted by flames, and from a distance the live sparks that rose over the fire seemed to emanate from the people; the yellow sparks turned red and, as they met the darkness, went out.

Part of the "thickness" is due also to the author's too frequent explication of abstract thoughts.

Marriage began to strike him as a theater, where actors gratefully dissimulate, in ordinary affection and trust, their bottom feeling, which is a mystery too powerful to be endured. They know and feel more than life in time can match; they must anchor themselves against eternity, as they play on a painted set, lest they swing out into the twining realms.

Also bothersome to me was that the main characters' story-lines moved slowly. For example, it took seemingly forever for Beal Obenchain's fate to be revealed. Deleting much of the information provided about unimportant characters would have quickened the novel's pace.

But then I would come upon an excellently narrated scene like this:

In every corner of their big house she stumbled into Eustace's precisely shaped absence, and in the yard, the woods, the fields, garden, and barn. She carried herself carefully, like a scalding bowl – plain Minta, whose neck sloped straight from her linen collar, whose clear forehead and high brows stayed fixed. By herself and for herself, she tried to be splendid. Only secretly, as she tended the quarreling younger children and worked the ranch, did she whisper to herself deep in her mind, "I am dished." For where, exactly, had he gone, and

the intensity of his ways?

“The Living” is a substantial undertaking that, somewhat flawed, captured my interest and gained my respect.

Heather says

This book got into my skin like the good pioneer dirt and the deathsong of burning redwoods. I think Annie Dillard is my new favorite. I loved the epic sweep of this novel; every character became as irritating and loveable as my own household mates, every animal and being took my breath away with his or her particular awareness and being. I am inpsired to research, to write, to learn, to think, to breathe, to climb, to swim, to drown in the waters of life and literature.

Krista says

In The Writing Life, Annie Dillard describes her time living roughly on Lummi Island as she wrote a "difficult book". I'm assuming that was this book, and as difficult as it may have been to write, it is also difficult to read. Not in the sense that it's too deep or incomprehensible, but in the sense that it's unlike other books, as though Dillard was inventing the form as she went along.

I listened to the audiobook of The Living and may have therefore lost many opportunities to stop and reread passages, but there was one benefit: the narrator spoke in a flat tone, matter-of-factly describing scenes of violence and hardship and senseless deaths, and while this may sound like a drawback, I don't think it was accidental. The characters in this book are accustomed to loss and hardship and take it all in stride:

How was it possible to endure the losses one accumulated just by living? Sentiment based on fact was the most grievous sort, she thought, for the only escape from it was to shrug off the fact -- that babies died, say, or that people lost lands they loved, that youth aged, love faded, everybody ended in graves, and nothing would ever again be the same. She pounded herself to tears with these melancholy truths, as if to ensure that she would not betray herself by forgetting them -- which, however, she knew full well that she would, as all other grown persons have done, to their manifestly improved mental balance.

It was curious to me that Dillard spent more time in describing the hats worn by every last character than in describing the thoughts contained in those hat-wearing heads. When Rooney collapses in the bottom of the well, Ada doesn't start screaming for help or collapse with grief. Her immediate and sole reaction:*Without knowing she did it, Ada pressed both hands to her jaws.* When her neighbour George joins Rooney, in the well and in death, she and Priscilla both stand mute. And at the funeral for their men: *The Lummis wailed, but this was not the way of the settlers, who tried for impassivity.* This impassivity is a hallmark of *The Living* and I think it contributed to my disconnection with the characters. Had Ada started keening and wailing at the sight of her dead husband, I was prepared to join in. Because her reaction was foreign to me, the situation remained foreign.

Although there were instances when characters did react strongly to their situation, I can't recall a single time

when the narrative was being told from that person's point of view. When the surveying crew find the Skagit impaled on the stake, it is the immature perspective of the young John Ireland that is related, not that of the grief-stricken Yekton. Later, when John Ireland is watching the expulsion of the Chinese immigrants, he seems to lament more the death of his fondly held socialism than truly empathising with his fellow men. When Minta loses first her husband Eustace and then her two youngest children, her immediate reaction isn't shared at all. Hugh, about whom it has already been revealed is a person of particularly strong and private emotions, never shares his feelings about the accident that he caused. Throughout *The Living*, emotions are flat or never revealed. If this was meant to illustrate the acceptance and stoicism necessary to survive pioneer life, it contrasts with Susanna Moodie's true life experiences in Roughing It In The Bush-- of course life was hard, the work was hard, it was a struggle just to eat at times, but losing people wasn't borne in silence.

The exception to this emotionless life occurred repeatedly when young people met and fell in love:

When, over the following months, Minta Randall found that Eustace apparently reciprocated her profoundest and most secret feelings, she thought she had never lived before, or knew what life could hold, or what absolute power one heart could exert upon another. She perceived no trace, fossil, or echo of this wild sensation anywhere around her, and concluded that she and Eustace had invented it together, which would be, she thought, just like them.

All the more reason, I would think, that Minta would have been given a scene of public grieving at his death. On this subject of love, I was amused by how many hard-fought courtships ended with regretted marriages. Glee worked very hard to win Pearl, only to "despise" her in the end. Anyone would think that John Ireland had a happy homelife with June, yet all the while he wished he could be a hermit off on some island.

The historical aspects of *The Living* were fascinating: the transformation of Whatcom from a clearing in an immense forest to a proper town; the daily routines; the booms and busts; the opening of the West through railroads; and the slow evolution of the locals from people who would let newcomers sleep in their own homes until they were on their feet to business-minded folks who were looking to make a buck off every claim-jumper who passed through. This latter is done without resorting to idealising the times past-- the rise of individualism and capitalism is accompanied by advances in education and medicine and governance. By the end of the story, Whatcom has produced in Hugh and Vinnie the ideal of young man and woman. He has gone to study medicine at university and can roll up his sleeves to pitch in at the farm when at home. She has spent her life excelling at school, helping in the family store, watching over a constant stream of siblings, and with her stunning good looks and charm, has developed a graceful manner for declining marriage proposals. That they have found each other bodes well for the town as the story ends:

Hugh held the lantern aloft and saw it illumine the stiff boughs of trees; he set the lantern down. He stripped to his union suit, and somebody handed him the heavy, knotted rope. He could feel Vinnie low beside him, shivering and excited in the dark. Her wide skirts and many petticoats nudged his bare ankle once, then twice, and a pang ran through him. Before his eyes in every direction he saw nothing: no pond, no ocean, no forest, sky, nor any horizon only unmixed blackness.

"Swing out," the voices said in the darkness.

"Push from the platform, and when you’re all the way out, let go."

When? he thought. Where?

The heavy rope pulled at him. He carried it to the platform edge. He hitched up on the knot and launched out. As he swung through the air, trembling, he saw the blackness give way below, like a parting of clouds, to a deep patch of stars on the ground. It was the pond, he hoped, the hole in the woods reflecting the sky. He judged the instant and let go; he flung himself loose into the stars.

And so, ultimately, we the living all pitch ourselves into the void, hoping for, but never guaranteed, the safe landing. I wanted to love *The Living*, but it just didn't work for me. I thought that the business with Clare and Beal was going to redeem the whole thing for me, but I couldn't understand the motivations or reactions of either of them. In the end, this may well be a masterpiece, but I was never moved.

A few nice lines to end with, because the words and sentences themselves are fully glorious throughout:

--The shore looked to Ada as if the corner of the continent had got torn off right here, sometime near yesterday, and the dark trees kept on growing like nothing happened. The ocean just filled in the tear and settled down.

--How loose he seemed to himself, under the stars! The spaces between the stars were pores, out of which human meaning evaporated.

--From deep in the bay he could see Mount Baker in the east, holding the sunset aloft like a cone of coals after the stars came out.

--Mabel and her cousin Nesta, and flat-nosed Cyrus Sharp, and his youngest brother, Horace, were tying each other to a tree. They had found a length of line and were tying each other to the cottonwood tree. Clare watched from the kitchen. He had forgotten this piece of information: children tie one another to trees. Children find wild eggs, treasure, and corpses; they make trails, huts, and fires; they hit one another, hold hands, and tie one another to trees. They tied Horace Sharp to the tree; he cried. They tied Mabel to the tree; her flat beret fell off, and she could not break away.

Clare had looked out past the pie safe. Here is a solid planet, he thought, stocked with mountains and cliffs,where stone banks jut and deeply rooted trees hang on. Among these fixed and enduring features wander the flimsy people. The earth rolls down and the people die; their survivors derive solace from clinging, not to the rocks, not to the cliffs, not to the trees, but to each other. It was singular. Loose people clung in families, holding on for dear life. Grasping at straws! One would think people would beg to be tied to trees.
