

**BIOGRAPHICAL DETAIL AND EXTRA-TEXTUAL CONTEXT FOR:  
*For the Time Being* – ANNIE DILLARD (KNOPF, 1999)**

***from the book jacket:***

Following a novel, a memoir, and a book of poems, Annie Dillard returns to a form of nonfiction she has made her own – now, on the twenty-fifth anniversary of publication of the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*.

This personal narrative surveys the panorama of our world, past and present. Here is a natural history of sand, a catalogue of clouds, a batch of newborns on an obstetrical ward, a family of Mongol horsemen. Here is the story of Jesuit paleontologist Teilhard de Chardin digging in the deserts of China. Here is the story of Hasidic thought rising in Eastern Europe. Here are defect and beauty together, miracle and tragedy, time and eternity. Dillard poses questions about God, natural evil, and individual existence. Personal experience, science, and religion bear on a welter of fact. How can an individual matter? How might one live?

Compassionate, informative, enthralling, always surprising, *For the Time Being* shows one of our most original writers – her breadth of knowledge matched by keen powers of observation, all of it informing her relentless curiosity – in the fullness of her powers.

Annie Dillard is the author of ten other books, including *The Living*, a novel; *An American Childhood*, a memoir; and *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, a collection of essays the *Boston Globe* judged one of the best books of the 1980s.

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***epigraphs from the overleaf:***

The legend of the Traveler appears in every civilization, perpetually assuming new forms, afflictions, powers, and symbols. Through every age he walks in utter solitude toward penance and redemption.

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Should I mark more than shining hours?

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I have agreed to paint a narrative on the city walls.  
I have now been at work many years,  
there is so much to be told.

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***Author's Note from the preface:***

This is nonfiction first-person narrative, but it is not intimate, and its narratives keep breaking. Its form is unusual, its scenes are remote, its focus wide, and its tone austere. Its pleasures are almost purely mental.

Several subjects recur and resume in each of seven chapters. They are: scenes from a paleontologist's explorations in the deserts of China, the thinking of the Hasidic Jews of Eastern Europe, a natural history of sand, individual clouds and their moments in time, human birth defects, information about our generation, narrative bits from modern Israel and China, and quizzical encounters with strangers.

A trip to Israel and visits to an obstetrical ward comprise its chief first-person accounts. Another sustained narrative is the paleontologist's story, and another recurrent setting is China. Teilhard de Chardin and the Baal Shem Tov dominate the thinking about an individual's place in the buried generations of humans, and in eternity.

By the third or fourth chapter the disparate scenes, true stories, facts, and ideas will be growing familiar. Together they make a complex picture of our world. Does God cause natural calamity? What might be the relationship of the Absolute to a lost schoolgirl in a plaid skirt? Given things as they are, how shall one individual live?