

Book review: *The Living*, by Annie Dillard (Harper Collins)
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by Sarah Pollock

The transformation of the Pacific Northwest from wilderness to semi-civilized frontier occurred with astonishing speed in the last four decades of the nineteenth century. In just one generation, the thickly forested, island-strewn wilderness that emigrants found at the end of an arduous wagon trek was partially cleared and settled with gridded towns, street cars and telephones.

The peaceful Indians who welcomed settlers with open arms had been decimated by disease and banished to reservations, and the whites who had needed their help to gain a foothold in the rough terrain were busy farming, mining, fishing and gambling on the potential real estate value of the land they claimed as their own.

Such a compressed version of American history -- saturated with violence, betrayal, abrupt change, loss, hardship and triumph -- makes a terrific backdrop for Annie Dillard's life-affirming first novel, *The Living*. In a deftly woven narrative that is more the story of a town than any individual character, Dillard threads the lives of several ordinary families into their historical context.

The town of Whatcom, Washington (which later became Bellingham) flourishes when boosters predict the Northern Pacific tracks will terminate in town. It soon collapses when Tacoma wins the terminus instead, booms again in 1892 when railroad magnate Jim Hill plans his Great Northern terminus there, and collapses again in the nationwide panic of 1893. Meanwhile, the new settlers' children grow up, marry one another, have their own children, get rich in the boom years, lose their shirts in the panics, and begin again.

Dillard, whose non-fiction books include the Pulitzer-Prize winning *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, casts these lives against scrupulously researched historical events, such as the shameful expulsion of the Chinese from several northwest cities in 1885. Such historical context generally adds richness and depth, but there are moments where Dillard's detailed research threatens to overburden the story. At times it is difficult to discern which events are pivotal and which are merely included because she found them too interesting to omit.

The novel's prevailing question, asked variously by different characters throughout the book, is posed most succinctly by Vinnie Fishburn after her family's financial setbacks ruin her dream of college. "How was it possible to endure the losses one accumulated just by living?" she asks herself. The characters answer the question diversely, but the underlying affirmation of this rich, evocative book is that we are here to sing praise for what is given.

If anyone is the central character, it is Vinnie's uncle, Clare Fishburn. A lanky, happy-go-lucky fellow whose own mother finds him disappointingly ordinary, Clare

doesn't begin to experience life as more than a passing parade until he receives a death threat from the town's pathological bully, Beal Obenchain, who has already committed one murder. Obenchain, a true sadist, doesn't intend to kill Clare Fishburn but merely to terrorize him and expose him as a coward.

How Clare faces the threat and the richness he derives from confronting his own mortality become the novel's driving metaphor. For the first time, his eyes are opened to the significance and beauty of his own life. Everyday details become luminous.

"It was always and everywhere exactly as real and vivid as this," Clare thinks as he watches some men on the beach and his eye drifts out to the misty far islands suspended aloft in the water. "Always the planet where you belonged, the generation you hated to leave, and nowhere more telling, more saturated in meaning than this place at this moment ... This is all there had ever been and would ever be, these men throwing stones, this amateur harbor, the sea, the west sky above it."

Obenchain, whose sadistic pleasure is ruined by Clare Fishburn's extended epiphany, later reflects with contempt upon how "the colorful men and women of the world distracted themselves in all the old familiar ways, and babbled in families over the daffodils... He had vowed long ago, and renewed his vow frequently, that if holding hands in a circle and singing hymns, as it were, was what it took to make life endurable, he would rather die."

The almost religious quality of Dillard's vivid, detailed descriptions of the natural world sustain her transcendent theme. The book is laced with finely etched descriptions of a landscape filled with snow-capped mountains, dark forests thick with pine and fir, plains of goldenrod and blue asters, and an inland sea embracing mist-enshrouded islands and inhabited by gulls, brants, guillemots, and otters. For Dillard's sense of place alone this book is a pleasure to read.

The novel is weakest in its narrative drive, particularly in the early chapters, which are emotionally flat. The action is largely propelled by the forces of history, and contains so many evenly emphasized characters that the reader never feels intimately bound to any of them. Dillard tears through three decades and numerous births and deaths in the first seventy pages, distancing the reader by telling many key events from a retrospective point of view. It is not until at least a third of the way through the book that the characters' interrelationships begin to emerge.

Nonetheless, readers will be richly rewarded for patience with a slow start, for by the end of this deeply felt novel it is hard to let the frontier town of Whatcom and its people go.

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