

Disasters and deformities

reviewed by [Jill Peláez Baumgaertner](#) in the [May 19, 1999](#) issue

For the Time Being.

By Annie Dillard. Knopf, 204 pp.

Several years have passed since I last encountered a book by Annie Dillard, but her images remain as strong in the memory as Proust's madeleine. Her gaze concentrates on the ordinary until it is transformed into the transcendent: a tree so intensely colored that it gives off light; a sky's invisible clouds revealed only in reflected images on the surface of a glassy lake; a bowl of pond water where one-celled creatures are visible to the naked eye.

Her intense watchfulness, her ability to concentrate so fiercely that the impenetrable becomes apparent, dazzle readers so much that they allow her to move beyond description into exhortation. We live our lives in a daze, she says to us, and it is time to wake our sleeping senses so that we can see what has been there all along. As for the spiritual realm, she asks why we sit complacently in our church pews when it would make more sense to don crash helmets, so soul-shaking the word of God should be to us.

It is, therefore, not unreasonable to come to this book expecting surprise and revelation, expecting to be shattered out of our self-absorption. When even before the first chapter Dillard announces her intention and provides a map, cautioning us not to be impatient but to let her random images work upon us gradually, we are willing to play along because the rewards have been so great in her previous work. Her subject here, however, is most daunting. It has been the theme of the greatest writers, from Dostoevsky to Elie Wiesel to Blake, who asked the tiger, the symbol of evil, "Did He who made the Lamb make thee?" Dillard tackles, in short, the biggest question of them all: Is God responsible for disasters, deformities and all of the peculiar horrors of life on earth?

Dillard begins by describing birth defects, in particular those of a brother and sister who are six and three but are the size of an 11-month and a four-month-old infant, mentally retarded, with displaced hips, pleasant dispositions and no powers of

concentration. "If your child were a bird-headed dwarf," she writes, "mentally deficient, you could carry him everywhere. The bird-headed dwarfs and all the babies in Smith's manual [of birth defects] have souls, and they all can—and do—receive love and give love. If you gave birth to two bird-headed dwarfs, as these children's mother did—a boy and a girl—you could carry them both everywhere, all their lives, in your arms or in a basket, and they would never leave you, not even to go to college."

The tone is disorienting, and so Dillard continues, circling the question, dipping in close to it, withdrawing from it, approaching it from a new angle, using the headings of Birth, Sand, China, Clouds, Numbers, Israel, Encounters, Thinker, Evil and Now to organize, or perhaps disseminate, her thoughts in each of seven chapters. Seven times she returns to each subject, quoting other writers, telling stories from Hasidic life, recording observations, filling the pages with statistics, describing encounters on her travels, ruminating on the question of evil. The subjects eventually begin to implode. The boundaries give way—Sand becomes China, Numbers becomes Births, Now becomes Israel.

The typical Dillard moments are here, although sometimes with a new, skin-crawling twist. She is able to direct our gaze to the miracle of the specific. At the mouth of the Jordan River, for example, she finds a most unlikely blue crab. On the obstetrical ward she hears a nurse whisper of the birth of a baby with gills and a tail curled so tight it had to be moved forcibly in order to reveal the child's gender. And along the way she visits the emperor's tomb outside of Xi'an, China, where well diggers in the early 1970s unearthed the first of 7,000 life-size statues of soldiers, each as individual as the 7,000 live models that must have been used by the artists who shaped them.

Reading this book is dizzying, which is what Dillard intends. We need to be pushed off-balance, she seems to be telling us, because questions about God, evil, what it means to be human and the meaning of any individual life are not easy for those of us (that is, all of us) unable to imagine our own death though we know that everyone who lives must also die.

When Dillard is most specific, she is most effective. But sometimes the connections are forced, the tone precious, the effect even at times pretentious. In such a randomly organized book, the moments of linear narrative are oases, such as the descriptions of Jesuit paleontologist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin's digs in the deserts

of China or the Hasid girl lost in the woods of upper New York. There will be readers who will insist that what appears to be random is actually poetic, and one must admit that there are poetic interludes, but the book as a whole is not a piece of poetry. It feels more like an indulgent experiment.

Dillard's point is probably that she has no answers, only more unanswerable questions, and she is correct in assuming that the biggest questions of human life probably cannot be asked, or satisfactorily answered, in completely propositional language. But the result of trying to avoid traditional strategies of organization in this case is that the questions themselves begin to blur until, finally, they fade away entirely, and one is left wondering if the author has any clear ideas at all to offer.