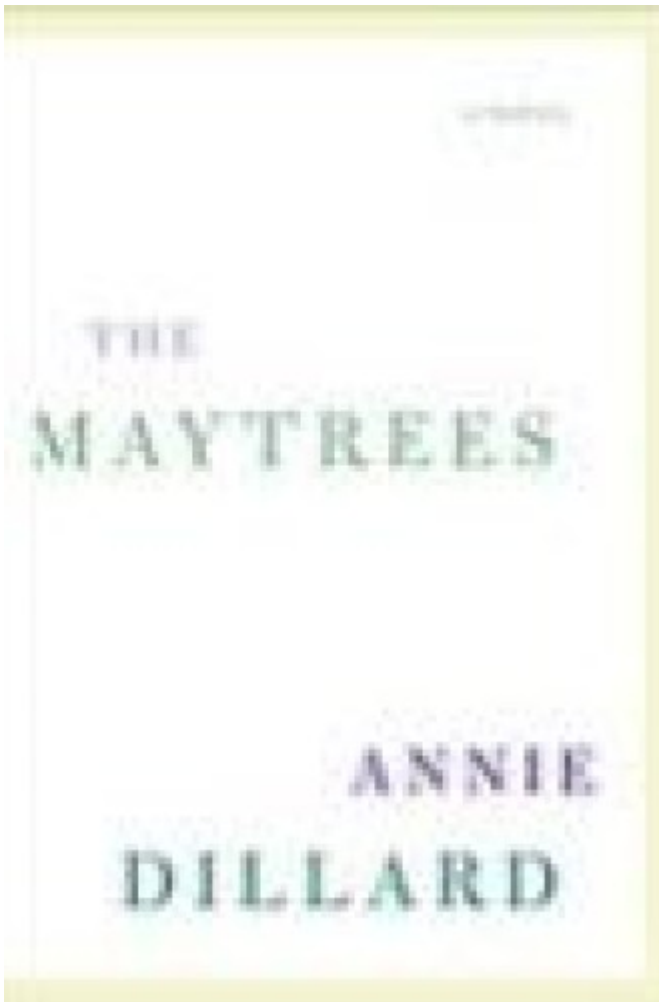


The Maytrees: A Novel

reviewed by [Amy Frykholm](#) in the [October 16, 2007](#) issue

In Review



The Maytrees

by Annie Dillard
HarperCollins

In the final installment (*For the Time Being*, 1999) of her wide-ranging trilogy that started in 1974 with *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, Annie Dillard asked the reader to

consider grains of sand, numbers of stars, and the scope of both universal and human time. She suggested that the generalizations and assumptions that we easily make in everyday life are challenged by this vastness and that the true immensity of time and space escapes us.

In her new novel, *The Maytrees*, these same themes are at work, yet the scope of the subject is dramatically smaller. It traces the lives of one couple, Toby and Lou Maytree, who live on Cape Cod. Poised “at the world’s wreck where all shattered,” the characters live lives that are “played out before the backdrop of fixed stars. . . . The slow heavens marked hours. They lived often outside. They drew breath from a wad of air just then crossing from saltwater to saltwater. Their sandpit was a naked strand between two immensities, both given to special effects.”

If you can get to a beach to read *The Maytrees*, and perhaps even bring a flashlight and read at night under the stars, you will understand this book more readily than you will if you read it in your study. Not that *The Maytrees* is a “beach read.” The book is dense; the prose is often difficult and occasionally even muddy. But the “fixed stars” and the sea are characters as well as setting, and like *For the Time Being*, this book reminds the reader of the relative insignificance, fragility and beauty of our lives. Dillard announces in the novel’s early pages that the Maytrees “acted in only two small events—three, if love counts.” This book is a study in character. At its heart is a question about human love.

The central portrait is that of Lou Maytree; we understand her mind and motivation best. She seeks solitude and simplicity and has spent the years “listing, like Diogenes, all she did not need.” She ponders “immensities” from this position of simplicity, becoming monklike as the years pass. “Her sense of the vastness of each aspect multiplied, and the more it expanded, the denser with questions it grew.” Toby Maytree is the one who spends his life and work absorbed with Plato and Aristotle, but Lou’s mind is expansive, flexible and curious enough for her to live as a philosopher.

Dillard’s portrait of Toby makes him appear to lack Lou’s depth, and I understand him less easily. Why, I wondered as I read, does Lou love him? Dillard offers one line in particular to detail, if not explain, Lou’s love. The line is wonderful, and I have repeated it to myself frequently, but it does not quite tell me what I want to know: “She loved Maytree, his restlessness, his asceticism, his, especially, abdomen.” And it isn’t only Lou’s love that mystifies me; I also struggle to understand Toby’s

motivation for the acts that drive the book's spare plot. It may be that my confusion on these points is precisely the author's intent. Love remains mysterious, even to lovers, and if love persists over years, over failings, over the erosion of time, then it is even more mysterious.

This novel is as much about mortality as it is about love—or perhaps about the link between love and mortality. We get several portraits of death, especially of old people dying while tended by people who exist with them in complicated relation. As Lou, Toby and their son care for one dying woman, Toby ponders the role that love plays in his and others' willingness to do this work. "Wishing and doing," he reflects, "within the realm of the possible, was willing; love was an act of will. Not forced obeisance, but—what? The obvious course of decency? Innate knowledge of goodness? Was it reasonable to love the good and good to love the reasonable? What a crashing bore." Dillard does not answer these questions for Toby, but goodness tracks him too in ways that no one can explain.

The Maytrees is a book worth pondering. Its seeming simplicity is seductive enough to draw the reader into the questions that Dillard poses and then to strike with unexpected emotional power. Once again, Dillard takes on the big questions of life, love and meaning in a fresh and intriguing way.