

# **BOOK CLUB To Go!**

## **The Maytrees**

### **By Annie Dillard**

#### **Introduction**

Toby Maytree first sees Lou Bigelow on her bicycle in postwar Provincetown, Massachusetts. Her laughter and loveliness catch his breath. Maytree is a Provincetown native, an educated poet of thirty. As he courts Lou, just out of college, her stillness draws him. Hands-off, he hides his serious wooing, and idly shows her his poems.

In spare, elegant prose, Dillard traces the Maytrees' decades of loving and longing. They live cheaply among the nonconformist artists and writers that the bare tip of Cape Cod attracts. Lou takes up painting. When their son Petie appears, their innocent Bohemian friend Deary helps care for him. But years later it is Deary who causes the town to talk.

In this moving novel, Dillard intimately depicts nature's vastness and nearness. She presents willed bonds of loyalty, friendship, and abiding love. Warm and hopeful, *The Maytrees* is the surprising capstone of Annie Dillard's original body of work.

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#### **About the Author**

Annie Dillard has written eleven books, including the memoir of her parents, *An American Childhood*; the Northwest pioneer epic *The Living*; and the nonfiction narrative *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. A gregarious recluse, she is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

She was born in April 1945 in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Best known for her narrative nonfiction, she has also published poetry, essays, literary criticism, autobiography and fiction. She is married to the historical biography Robert D Richardson Jr (award-winning and bestselling author of biographies on luminaries such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau and William James).

Dillard's childhood is described in detail in her 1987 memoir, *An American Childhood*. She is the oldest of three daughters of affluent and nonconformist parents who

encouraged humor, exploration and creativity. She studied literature and creative writing at Hollins College in Virginia, and married her writing teacher, the poet R.H. Dillard, who "taught her everything she knows" about writing.

She graduated with a Masters in English in 1968. After a near-fatal bout of pneumonia in 1971 she spent four seasons living near Tinker Creek in the Blue Ridge Mountains near Roanoke, Virginia, where she wrote *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (perhaps inspired by Thoreau's *Walden*, which was her thesis topic).

*Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* won the Pulitzer Prize in 1975. After which she wrote a number of narrative essays in a similar style before writing her first novel, *The Living* (1992), which grew out of a story she wrote fifteen years before. Published fifteen years after *The Living*, *The Maytrees* is her second novel.

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## Reviews

"Dillard wryly questions notions of love, exalts in life's metamorphoses, and celebrates goodness. As she casts a spell sensuous and metaphysical, Dillard covertly bids us to emulate may trees...the tree of joy, of spring, of the heart." –*Booklist*

"Dillard has always been fascinated by time -- by the fact that existence is charged with it, saturated with it, borne along by it into a future that makes the span of any life less than negligible. And time in its mystery and grandeur bestrides this novel. Its sea is wild and generative, its sky orders the constellations, and both are primordial, archaic, full of the fact of time past and persisting, unchanging, changing everything. If there were such a thing as cosmic realism, *The Maytrees* would be a classic of the genre." –*Washington Post*

## Further Reading

*New England White* by Stephen L. Carter

*Open Me* by Sunshine O'Donnell

*Divisadero* by Michael Ondaatje

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#### **Possible Discussion Questions**

1. When Maytree asks, "Say, Lou—here's a question. Keats put, 'Who shall say between Man and Woman which is the more delighted?' What do you think?" Lou answers "The woman." Why does Lou add later that night as Maytree is falling asleep, "If the man is John Keats" (page 38)?
2. What does Maytree feel towards Lou when Pete gets hit by the car? Why does her forgiveness of the driver so upset him, and how does her ability to forgive ultimately bring him back to her?
3. How does Toby and Lou's love for each other mimic the ebb and flow of the seaside?
4. Lou's father left her when she was young. How does this influence how she handles Toby leaving her?
5. Most of the Maytrees friends, including Deary, fall in and out of relationships. Despite the still conservative post World War II era, none of these relationships feel salacious. How and why does it take on a different feeling when it happens to the Maytrees?
6. What does the book's sparse landscape and living on the edge of a forceful sea say about our time here on Earth?
7. How does the book's title reflect its overall theme of acceptance?
8. *The Maytrees* has been hailed as a "meditation of love." How did this story make you feel about love?
9. Deary transforms herself from a Spartan bohemian to a materialistic New England matron. What do you feel triggers this abrupt change in her?
10. Does Toby misunderstand or take Lou's quietness for granted early in their relationship?

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