

When do you feel most **alive?**

KEY IDEA We all have something that makes us appreciate the wonder and excitement of life. It might be a tense basketball game, a rocky roller-coaster ride, or the **thrill** of an unexpected snowstorm. The author Annie Dillard has said that nothing makes her feel alive like facing a tough challenge. This selection is about one of the most exciting challenges she ever faced.

QUICKWRITE When do you feel most alive? Reflect on this question in a journal entry. Other questions you might ask yourself are these: When do I feel the happiest? What makes me feel great about my life? When am I glad to be me? Explain your answers.



literary analysis: setting in nonfiction

In the memoir you're about to read, Annie Dillard tells a true story from her childhood. The **setting**, the time and place in which events occur, is the 1950s in suburban Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, where Dillard grew up.

As you read, look for details that help you understand and picture where the selection takes place.

We were standing up to our boot tops in snow on a front yard on trafficked Reynolds Street . . .

Then look for ways the setting affects events.

reading skill: recognize cause and effect

Events are often related as **cause and effect**: one event brings about the other. The event that happens first is the cause; the one that follows is the effect. Often an effect becomes the cause of another effect, forming a chain of causes and effects.

As you read "An American Childhood," record causes and effects in a chain like the one shown.

Cause:

Cause /Effect:

Effect:

Review: Make Inferences

vocabulary in context

The following words help Annie Dillard tell about her exciting experience. How many of the words do you know? Create a chart like the one shown, and place each word in the appropriate column. As you read the selection, look for definitions of words that you've listed in the third column.

Word list

improvise/ revert/ spherical/ perfunctorily/ translucent/ righteous/ redundant/ simultaneously

Know Well

Think I Know

Don't Know at All



Annie Dillard
born 1945

Childhood Memories

Pulitzer Prize–winner Annie Dillard frequently writes about events in her life when she was growing up. Her parents shared with her and her sisters their favorite books and music and told stories and jokes. The young Dillard, full of curiosity, spent hours studying small pond creatures with her microscope. But despite a childhood filled with happy memories, as Dillard reached her late teens, she began to rebel and yearned to get away.

A Fulfilling Life Dillard got her wish for a new adventure when she went away to college and began to focus on writing. Since then, she has written essays, a memoir, poetry, and a Western novel. Dillard spends a great deal of time alone in the wilderness, and she frequently writes about nature. One might think a nature writer would tend to be serious, but Dillard loves to laugh. She keeps an “index of jokes” and says that “. . . irony has the highest place . . .” in literature.