



10 Ways to Write about Social Justice and Science in a Memoir

By Catherine Stover

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For those who ask, “*How do I write about social justice or science from a personal perspective – without sounding dry and academic? and Can I show how my life experiences influence me when I write about serious topics?*” here is a list of memoirs with interesting solutions. These 10 pieces are from [A Fine Line](#), my blog about books. Each 100-word post includes links to additional information.

Contents:

1. In a list of suggestions, the author of this memoir creates a map of her feminist thinking: *Dear Ijeawelle, Or A Feminist Manifesto in Fifteen Suggestions* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie.
2. In a series of letters to his adolescent son, the author explores his place in the world as a Black man: *Between the World and Me* by Ta-Nehisi Coates.
3. In a collection of candid personal essays, the author describes their experiences as an advocate for LGBTQ+ rights and social justice: *Love that Story: Observations from a Gorgeously Queer Life* by Jonathan Van Ness
4. In this story, which is in the style of a novel, the author shows us the traumatic conditions in which he grew up and became an adult: *Black Boy* by Richard Wright.
5. In her stories about pretense and dysfunctional dynamics, the author compares living in Japan to living in the Midwest of the USA: *Polite Lies: On Being a Woman Caught Between Cultures* by Kyoko Mori.
6. In a collection of magazine-style articles, the author questions when, where and how to disclose a psychological disability: *Life of the Mind Interrupted: Essays on Mental Health and Disability in Higher Education* by Katie Rose Guest Pryal.
7. In a nervous report about the demands for complete loyalty, the author takes the risk of telling the readers the truth: *Without You, There Is No Us: My Time With the Sons of North Korea's Elite* by Suki Kim.
8. In a personal story written by a science reporter for *The Wall Street Journal*, the author explains the biology of anxiety: *On Edge: A Journey through Anxiety* by Andrea Petersen.
9. In a book that won the Pulitzer Prize, the author writes about the natural world – at times a scientist, and at times as a poet: *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* by Annie Dillard.
10. In a how-to guide, the author of this memoir shares his personal history and offers lessons for those interested in antiracism: *How to Be an Antiracist* by Ibram X. Kendi.

1. “Beware the danger of what I call Feminism Lite.”

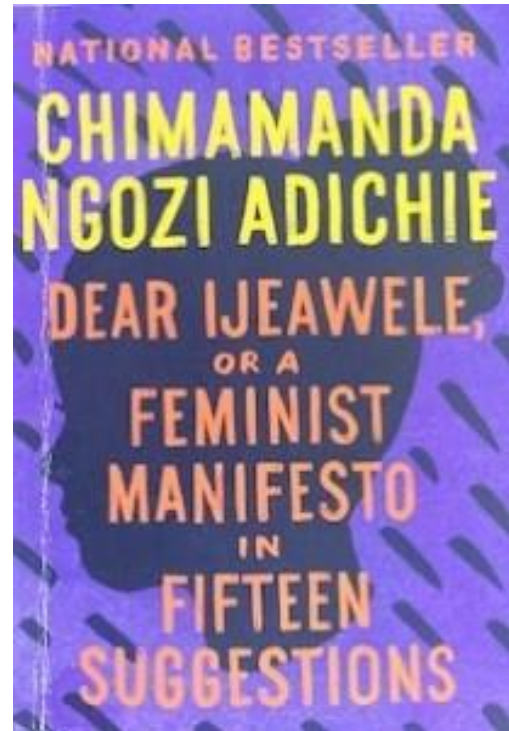
Posted on July 29, 2020

“Feminism Lite” is the idea of [conditional female equality](#), where men believe they are superior but should be expected to “treat women well.” It can be disguised as real feminism when men behave in an equitable way – but believe it’s optional and provisional. You hear it in phrases like “he will do housework when his wife is out of town.” You also see it when powerful women are judged more harshly than powerful men. In this short book, which originated as a letter to a friend, there are [15 suggestions](#) that clarify what it means to believe in full equality.

Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. *Dear Ijeawele, or A Feminist Manifesto in Fifteen Suggestions*. Anchor Books, 2017, p. 20.

Link:

<https://www.catherinestover.com/beware-the-danger-of-what-i-call-feminism-lite/>



2. “The struggle is really all I have for you because it is the only portion of this world under your control.”

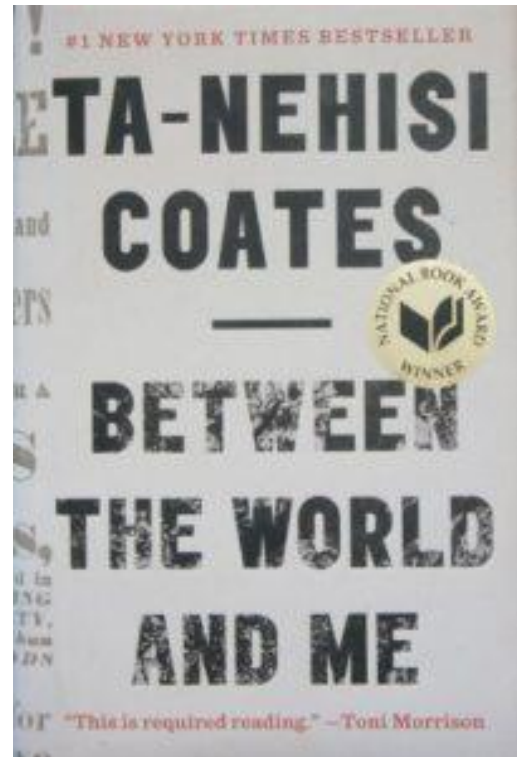
Posted on September 1, 2016

This 2015 winner of the National Book Award for Nonfiction – “a work of [rare beauty](#) and revelatory honesty” that is “[highly provocative](#), thoughtfully presented” — is a meditation on race as a social construct. Written as a set of letters to his young son, it raises many [important questions](#) but does not offer solutions. It reminds me of another set of letters – Rainer Maria Rilke’s *Letters to a Young Poet* – which recommends having “patience with everything unresolved in your heart” so that “someday far in the future, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answer.”

Coates, Ta-Nehisi. *Between the World and Me*. Spiegel & Grau, 2015, p. 107.

Link:

<https://www.catherinestover.com/the-struggle-is-really-all-i-have-for-you-because-it-is-the-only-portion-of-this-world-under-your-control/>



3. “I learned that writing a memoir is like figure skating: it looks effortless and beautiful from the outside. . .”

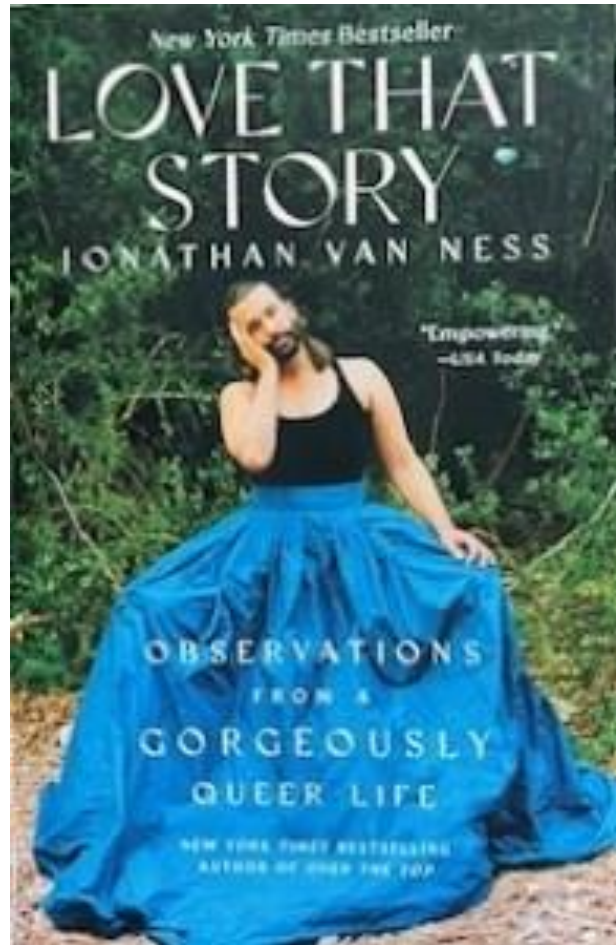
Posted on January 31, 2024

“... while in reality, you stretch thy groin so much that you nearly split yourself in half for the whole world to see.” The author, JVN, whose [trademarks](#) are joy and kindness, shares what happened after the first memoir was published. Some readers expected JVN to be their source of strength, while others hurled hate and threats of violence. So why write another memoir? JVN feels required “to constantly connect to empathy, patience, and ultimately a [human curiosity](#) that wants to help others find their joy and happiness.” Memoirists, take note. Can you articulate your reasons for taking the risks?

Van Ness, Jonathan. *Love That Story: Observations from a Gorgeously Queer Life*. Harper One: 2022, pp. 2, 231.

Link:

<https://www.catherinestover.com/i-learned-that-writing-a-memoir-is-like-figure-skating-it-looks-effortless-and-beautiful-from-the-outside/>



4. “There was the teasing and impossible desire to imitate the petty pride of sparrows wallowing and flouncing in the red dust of country roads.”

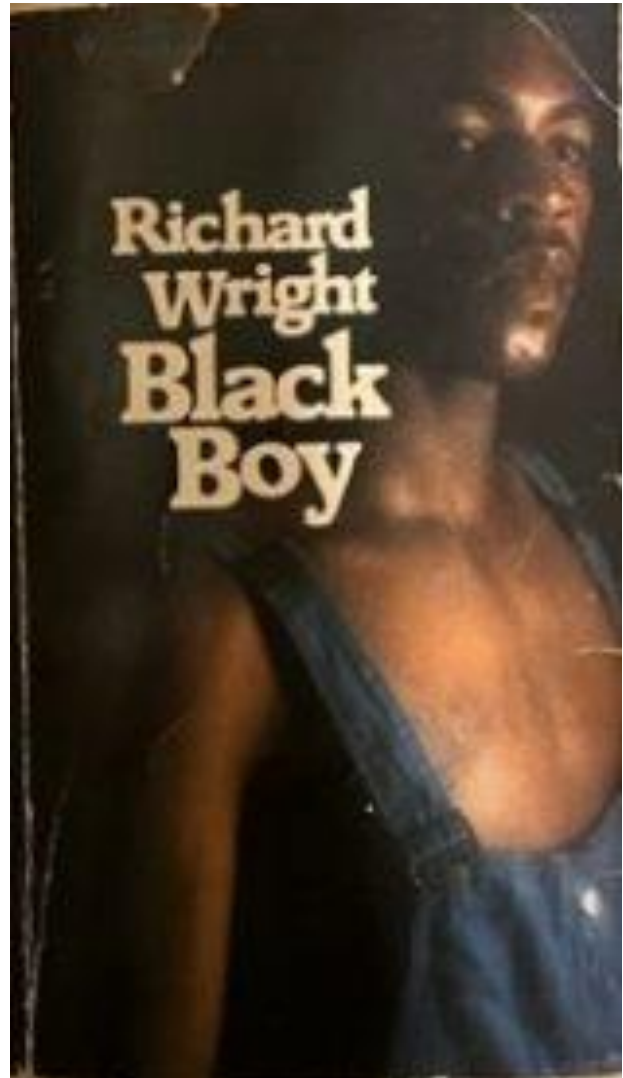
Posted on January 31, 2023

Richard [Wright](#), who was born in 1908, describes the “brace of mountainlike, spotted, black-and-white horses clopping down a dusty road through clouds of powdered clay” in his memoir [Black Boy](#). He finds beauty in the “green leaves rustling with a rainlike sound” and in identifying with “the sight of a solitary ant carrying a burden upon a mysterious journey.” These descriptions help us understand how he was able to survive near-fatal beatings, hunger, loneliness, and poverty as a child in the South. The way brutality and beauty share the page in this book is remarkable. For me, it’s unforgettable.

Wright, Richard. *Black Boy*. Perennial Classic, 1966, p. 14.

Link:

<https://www.catherinestover.com/there-was-the-teasing-and-impossible-desire-to-imitate-the-petty-pride-of-sparrows-wallowing-and-flouncing-in-the-red-dust-of-country-roads/>



5. “Not a week goes by without my telling a lie, but I suppose that is the same for most people.”

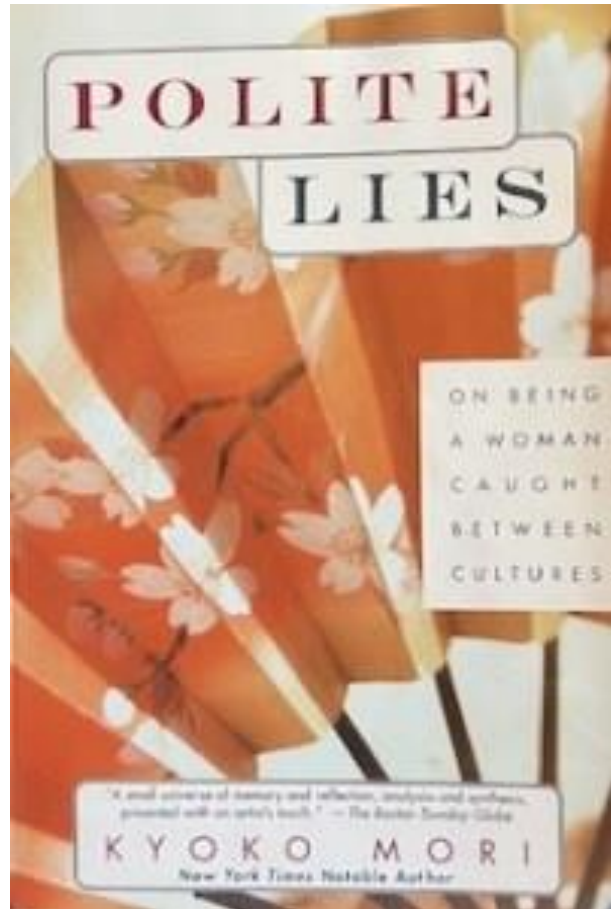
Posted on February 27, 2014

Under what circumstances do you lie? This [book](#) shows how our tendencies to lie can be influenced by the culture we live in. [Kyoko Mori](#) describes situations in her home country of Japan, where it's more important to be polite than honest, especially with people who have authority over you. After moving to the Midwest, she observes that we have a different way of lying. For example, we'll say, "He's a nice person, but..." and then describe how awful he is. Or, instead of declining an invitation, we'll say, "I'll think about it," or "I wish I could be there."

Mori, Kyoko. *Polite Lies: On Being a Woman Caught Between Cultures*. Fawcett Books, 1997, p. 211.

Link:

<https://www.catherinestover.com/not-a-week-goes-by-without-my-telling-a-lie-but-i-suppose-that-is-the-same-for-most-people/>



6. “This fear of fraud reveals a presumption about disabled people. . .that disabled people are fakers and malingerers, or milking the system for handouts.”

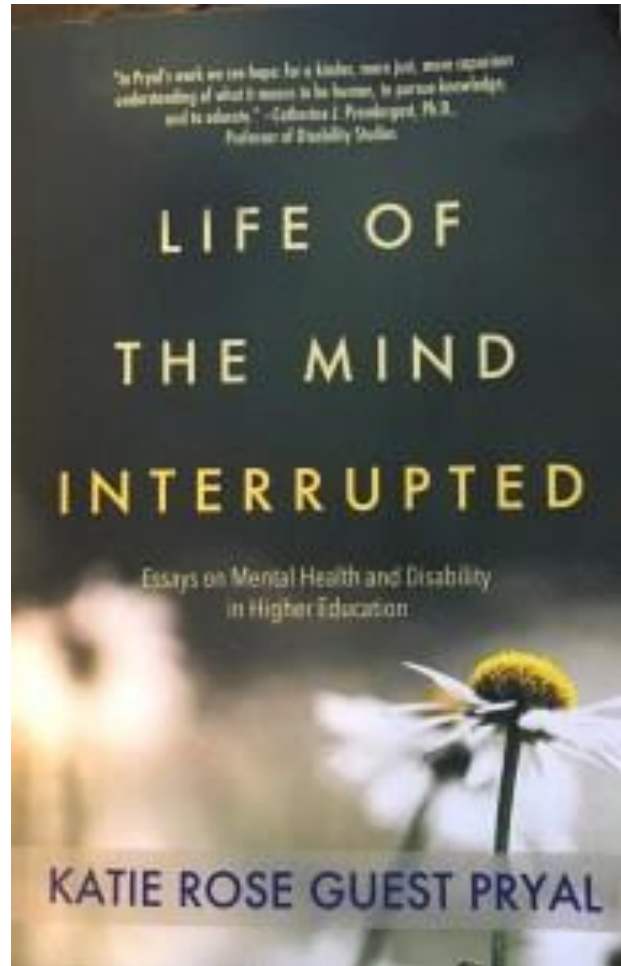
Posted on September 26, 2019

Katie Rose Guest Pryal taught at the university level for twelve years without ever considering seeking disability accommodations. As a law professor, she knew her disability would have been legally recognized. And yet, she did not “out” herself as a person with a [psychological disability](#) until she left academia and published an essay in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. This book’s collection of essays encourages readers to recognize the problems caused by stigma, hostility, ignorance, and suspicion. Pryal argues for making “the radical decision that suspicion is not going to be your way of thinking any more” (112).

Pryal, Katie Rose Guest. *Life of the Mind Interrupted: Essays on Mental Health and Disability in Higher Education*. Snowraven Books, 2017, p. 54.

Link:

<https://www.catherinestover.com/this-fear-of-fraud-reveals-a-presumption-about-disabled-people-that-disabled-people-are-fakers-and-malingerers-or-milking-the-system-for-handouts/>



7. “They had built the entire foundation of their country on isolationism and wanting to kill Americans and South Koreans, yet they needed to learn English and feed their children with foreign money.”

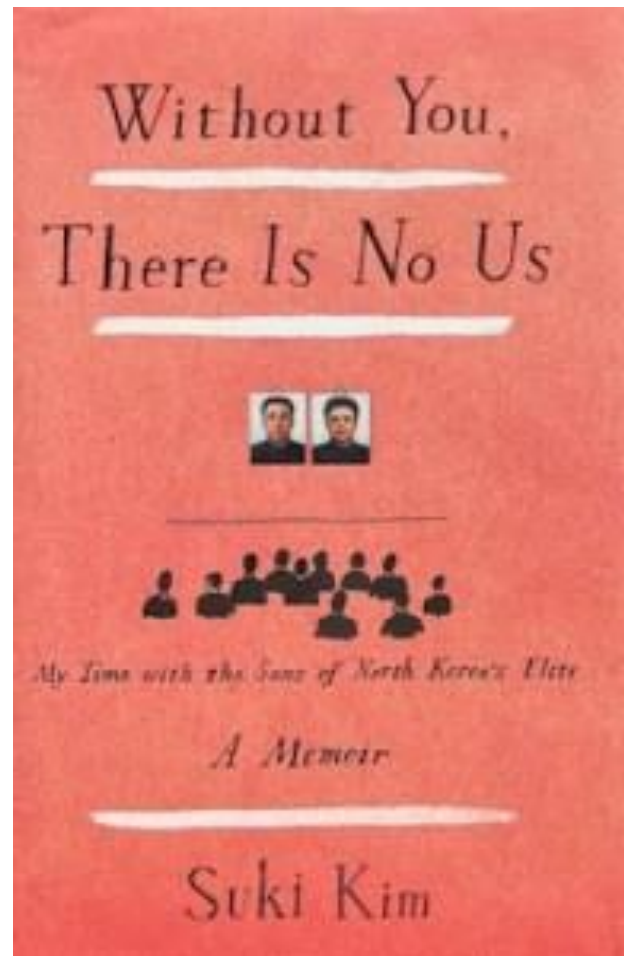
Posted on February 26, 2015

When Suki Kim's wrote about the six months she was as a teacher in North Korea, she was haunted by the idea that her book might lead to the punishment or even the death of her former students, who could be punished for knowing too much about the world. For example, they weren't supposed to know about the internet, because if they accessed it, they would discover contradictions to the facts they were told to believe. This could put them in real danger. Her [chilling](#) book describes “the Great Leader's [maniacal and barbaric control](#)” of the people in his country.

Kim, Suki. *Without You, There Is No Us: My Time with the Sons of North Korea's Elite*. Crown Publishers, 2014, p. 199.

Link:

<https://www.catherinestover.com/they-had-built-the-entire-foundation-of-their-country-on-isolationism-and-wanting-to-kill-americans-and-south-koreans-yet-they-needed-to-learn-english-and-feed-their-children-with-foreign-money/>



8. “When I was younger, anxiety sometimes flat-out crippled my ability to work.”

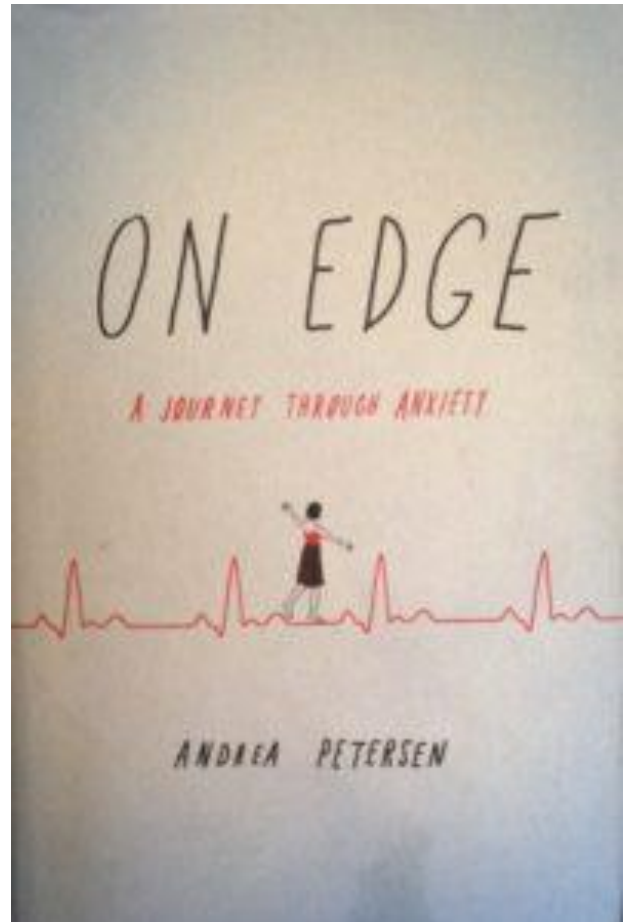
Posted on June 2, 2017

In every class I teach, there is at least one student who will talk with me at some point about how high levels of anxiety are preventing him or her from completing assignments. This memoir by Andrea Petersen provides a vivid account of what living with anxiety entails. She writes, “Anxiety is an isolation chamber where worry and fear elbow out human connection” (188). In addition, Petersen, a contributing writer at the *Wall Street Journal*, adeptly summarizes dozens of studies and scores of interviews with experts. This book should be required reading for those who work with young adults.

Petersen, Andrea. *On Edge: A Journey through Anxiety*. Crown, 2017, p. 160.

Link:

<https://www.catherinestover.com/when-i-was-younger-anxiety-sometimes-flat-out-crippled-my-ability-to-work/>



9. "Terror and beauty are woven into the fringes of things both great and small."

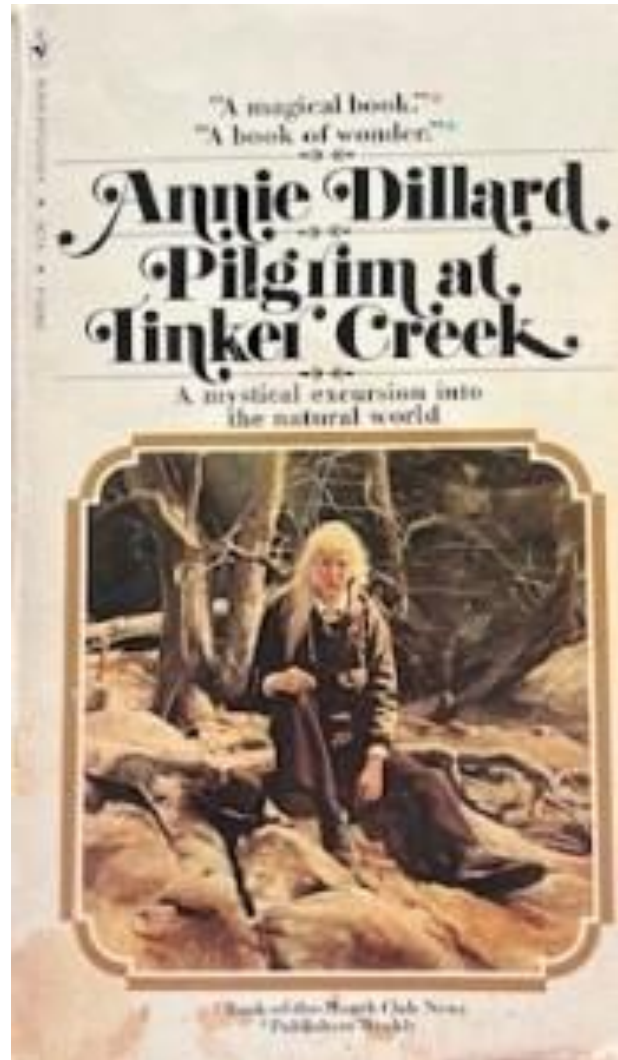
Posted on January 16, 2014

I have been drawn to this book by [Annie Dillard](#) many times, and I continue to appreciate the ideas and the poetic quality of the prose. My favorite chapter is "[Seeing](#)." For her, seeing leads to understanding, which then leads to transformation. Her closing lines describe being moved by the beautiful way a tree was reflecting light. She writes: "Gradually the lights went out in the cedar, the colors died, the cells unflamed and disappeared. I was still ringing. I had been my whole life a bell, and never knew it until at that moment I was lifted and struck."

Dillard, Annie. *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek: A Mystical Excursion into the Natural World*. Bantam Books, 1974, p. 26.

Link:

<https://www.catherinestover.com/terror-and-beauty-are-woven-into-the-fringes-of-things-both-great-and-small/>



10. “Antiracist ideas argue that racist policies are the cause of racial inequities.”

Posted on November 11, 2020

It is easier to blame people for making mistakes than it is to consider the role that policies play in determining outcomes. [Ibram X. Kendi](#) writes, “Americans have long been trained to see the deficiencies of people rather than [policy](#)” (28). For example, when my book club discussed [Evicted](#), we were more animated when pointing out Arleen’s mistakes than we were when noting that three out of four families in American who qualify for housing assistance receive nothing. This book argues for learning how to think critically about how the system works rather than blaming the victims.

Kendi, Ibram X. *How to Be an Antiracist*. One World, 2019, p. 20.

Link:

<https://www.catherinestover.com/antiracist-ideas-argue-that-racist-policies-are-the-cause-of-racial-inequities/>

