Bloom's Literature

Proulx E Annie

Prize-winning novelist and short story writer Annie Proulx is renowned for her spare yet finely crafted prose, her memorable, quirky characters, and her strikingly beautiful but isolated settings in New England, Canada, and Wyoming. About her writing career, Proulx has said, "I came to writing late, and I'm racing against the clock to get everything down. My head is jammed with stories; they are pushing to get out."

Born Edna Annie Proulx on August 22, 1935, in Norwich, Connecticut, the best-selling author goes by Annie Proulx, although for many years, until 1997 when her story "Brokeback Mountain" was published in the New Yorker, she used the initial of her first name, calling herself E. Annie Proulx. Her father, an up-and-coming textile entrepreneur with French-Canadian roots, moved his family frequently, always searching for better opportunities. Annie, the eldest of five sisters, was smitten with wanderlust at an early age. Her mother, whose English ancestors had lived in Connecticut for 350 years, was a gifted amateur painter and naturalist. "From my mother I learned to see and appreciate the natural world, to develop an eye for details, and to tell a story," recalled Proulx. "And from my maternal grandmother (who washed and ironed all her paper money) I picked up some facility in shaping a story, and the exercise of the imagination."

After graduating from Dearing High School in Portland, Maine, Proulx attended Colby College but soon dropped out to marry H. Ridgely Bullock in 1955. The couple had a daughter, Sylvia, who was raised by Bullock once he and Proulx were divorced. (After Bullock's death in 1993, Proulx and her daughter became reacquainted.) Two more marriages resulted in divorce and produced three sons. "It gradually dawned on me that I am not well-suited for marriage," Proulx wrote on her Web site. She then completed her undergraduate education at the University of Vermont, where she studied history and graduated cum laude and Phi Beta Kappa in 1969.

In 1973 Proulx earned a master's degree in history from Sir George Williams (now Concordia) University in Montreal and two years later passed her doctoral oral exams. Opting for a more secure career in freelance journalism instead of academia, she never completed her Ph.D. dissertation. In order to support herself and her three sons, she wrote several how-to books, such as Plan and Make Your Own Fences and Gates, Walkways, Walls and Drives (1983). From 1975 to 1988 she wrote nonfiction articles for popular magazines, assignments she described as "tedious non-fiction," on disparate subjects: weather, apples, mice, African beadwork, cider, and mountain lions. Nonetheless, she managed to focus on her creative writing and published two short stories a year in Gray's Sporting Journal. She also spent two years writing for and editing a newspaper in rural Vermont, Behind the Times, that she had helped found, all the while continuing to write short stories on the side. Her short fiction began to appear regularly in Esquire, and one of the magazine's editors suggested that Proulx compile her stories. Her first collection, Heart Songs and Other Stories, set in backwoods towns in Vermont and featuring small-town characters described by critic Kenneth Rosen of the New York Times Book Review as "shy, battered, depleted," came out in 1988. (It was reissued, with two additional stories, in 1995.)

Well into her 50s, and with the assistance of a Vermont Council on the Arts fellowship (1989), a National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) grant (1991), and a Guggenheim fellowship (1992), E. Annie Proulx published her debut novel, Postcards (1992), a multigenerational, poignant story about the Blood family and their New England farm. The book garnered critical acclaim, especially for Proulx's skills as a first-rate storyteller depicting the collapse of the small farm in post–World War II America, and received a PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction.

Proulx's second and best-known novel, The Shipping News (1993), won both the Pulitzer Prize for fiction (on April 13, 1994) and the National Book Award for fiction (on November 23, 1993). Set in a desolate seaside town in Newfoundland, it was especially notable for its haunting sense of place and its authentic, stylized language. The disturbing novel revolves around Quoyle, a love-starved, second-rate journalist and widowed father who moves with his two daughters and aunt to a remote harbor town in an attempt to reclaim the family's land and re-create a home. Proulx visited Newfoundland's Great Northern Peninsula 10 times to do research for the book. During her first visit, a fishing trip with a friend, she reacted "viscerally" to the area. "I have a habit of falling immediately and deeply in love with places," she has said, adding that the harsh climate, grim history, hard lives, and generous, warm characters of the outport fishermen and their families deeply interested her. The Shipping News, which the Chicago Tribune Book World called "that rare creation, a lyric page turner," became a best seller and in 2001 was adapted as a Hollywood
Accordion Crimes (1996), her next novel, comprises a series of interconnected stories about the American immigrant experience and music in North America, when an accordion ends up with different owners from varied ethnic backgrounds over the duration of a century. It also required extensive research and traveling, which Proulx described as "a slow drift through the territory under examination taking notes … hiking the terrain, studying maps and weather."

After editing Best American Short Stories of 1997, Proulx published Close Range: Wyoming Stories (1999), about the history, violence, and challenging hardships of life in Wyoming. Proulx had moved permanent to Wyoming in 1994, noting in an interview that there was "much about the place that moved her deeply." Five years later she produced a second volume of Wyoming stories, Bad Dirt, and it too was populated by resilient, idiosyncratic characters. In one of the stories, "Pairs of Spurs," Proulx comments that Wyoming's unwritten motto is "take care of your own damn self." Her most celebrated story, "Brokeback Mountain," appeared in Close Range, having originally been published in the New Yorker on October 13, 1997. When it came out in the prestigious literary magazine, "it was so startling and powerful that for many people, the experience of reading it remains a vivid, almost physical memory," wrote Karen Durbin in the New York Times.

"Brokeback Mountain" won a 1998 O. Henry Short Story Award and was adapted into a controversial, landmark movie directed by Ang Lee. It became a major, multi-award–winning film, including several Academy Awards in 2006. "When I first read the story, it gripped me," said Lee in a New York Times article in 2005. "It's a great American love story, told in a way that felt as if it had never been done before." According to Proulx, "Brokeback Mountain" is the tragic story of two poor, inarticulate teenagers who have left home and both found summer work herding sheep, and then find themselves, much to their surprise, fiercely attracted to each other. They go on to share a 20-year, clandestine, unresolved but profound homosexual relationship. "The work of imagining, thinking, picturing, describing how things would have been for two 19-year-old rough, uneducated young men in 1963 Wyoming was slow, difficult and arduous. … Years of accumulated observation went into the story," commented Proulx. It took the author roughly twice as long to write the evocative short story as it normally takes her to complete a novel.

In 2007 she published a collection of Wyoming stories, Fine Just the Way It Is. That same year "Brokeback Mountain" was adapted as an opera with a libretto by Proulx. It premiered in 2014 at the Teatro Real in Madrid, Spain, to mixed reviews. Her next book, Bird Cloud: A Memoir (2011), tells the story of designing and building a house in the wetlands and prairie of Wyoming. It also looks at Proulx's family history and the natural history of the region, long inhabited by Native Americans. Proulx, who now resides in Seattle, Washington, told Time magazine that "if you get the landscape right...the characters will step out of it, and they'll be in the right place. The story will come from the landscape."

Proulx has received numerous honors for her storytelling artistry, including, for The Shipping News, the Irish Times International Fiction Prize and the Chicago Tribune Heartland Award; the National Magazine Award for excellence in fiction for "Brokeback Mountain"; inclusion of "The Half-Skinned Steer" in Best American Short Stories of the Century, edited by John Updike; and the New Yorker Book Award for Best Fiction in 1999. In addition to writing and traveling, Proulx's interests include hunting, fishing, canoeing, wood-lore, homemade bread, knots, and adult literacy. She also says that she likes cold, sharp seasonal changes and weather extremes. One thing she does not like is teaching creative writing courses: "The best way to learn to write is to read—widely, deeply, omnivorously," she asserts.

Further Information


