Annie Proulx's first novel, *Postcards* (1992), won the PEN/Faulkner Award; she was the first woman to receive it. Her second novel, *The Shipping News* (1993), received both the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award in fiction. In 1997 she received the John Dos Passos Prize, given to an author the prize committee deems the best underrecognized American writer in midcareer. Two stories from *Close Range: Wyoming Stories*, "Brokeback Mountain" and "The Mud Below," won the O'Henry Award; "Brokeback Mountain" also won the National Magazine Award. And yet, Proulx did not begin her full-fledged literary career until she was in her fifties. She has continued to publish short stories and novels to great acclaim and has seen *The Shipping News* and "Brokeback Mountain" produced as major Hollywood films.

Edna Annie Proulx (pronounced "Proo") was born on 22 August 1935, in Norwich, Connecticut. Her mother, a painter and amateur naturalist, encouraged in her the habit of close observation and, she reports, introduced her at age three to metaphor, asking her to describe the picture she saw in her mind when she heard a piece of music. This practice created a lifelong passion for metaphor that she describes as fueling all her writing. Proulx earned her bachelor's degree at the University of Vermont and her master's at Sir George Williams University, now Concordia University, both in history. She began work toward a doctorate but did not complete it. She became immersed in the French *Annales* school approach to history, which, in her words, "pioneered minute examinations of the lives of ordinary people through account books, wills, marriage and death records, farming and crafts techniques, the development of technologies" (*Missouri Review* interview; for an analysis of this influence on her work, see Stéphanie Durrans's essay in Alex Hunt). Her creative writing takes this same approach, as she does extensive and minute research into the places and people about which she has written (rural Vermont, Newfoundland, Wyoming, Texas), living in those places, examining old records, and getting to know the residents. She has been married and divorced three times and has a daughter and three sons, the latter whom she raised mainly as a single parent. After living in Vermont for most of thirty years, she moved to Wyoming in 1994. She now divides her time between Wyoming and Newfoundland.

Proulx spent many years as a freelance journalist for magazines, covering topics as diverse as canoeing, gardening, mountain lions, mice, African beadwork, and weather. She also produced how-to books on carpentering, gardening, and food. During these years she published short stories at the rate of one or two a year, most typically in *Gray's Sporting Journal*, known for the literary quality of the outdoor fiction it publishes. Her first collection was *Heartsongs and Other Stories* (1988). She initially published as E. Annie Proulx and sometimes E. A. Proulx but now prefers Annie Proulx.

Since *Close Range*, Proulx has published two more collections of stories set in Wyoming: *Bad Dirt: Wyoming Stories 2* (2004) and *Fine Just the Way It Is: Wyoming Stories 3* (2008). In the latter collection her interest in, and influence from, the work and methods of Mark Twain appears prominently, especially in "I've Always Loved This Place" and "Swamp Mischief," both featuring the devil as a major character. In addition to those mentioned above, her other novels are *Accordion Crimes* (1996) and *That Old Ace in the Hole* (2002). She almost always writes in a third-person, limited perspective (in *Close Range*, the only exception to this is the first-person narrative, "A Lonely Coast").

The lead story in *Close Range: Wyoming Stories*, titled "The Half-Skinned Steer," was selected by Garrison Keillor for inclusion in *The Best American Short Stories* 1998 (Proulx herself edited the 1997 edition of this series) and later by novelist John Updike for *The Best American Short Stories of the Century* (1999). Along with "The Blood Bay," it is a takeoff on the traditional "tall tale" that was once central to Western American literature. While the eleven stories that compose the collection uniformly feature her sharp, evocative, metaphor-driven prose, they form a spectrum in terms of their relationship to realism and tone. At one end would be "Job History," an example of minimalism with its bare-bones recounting of a family's series of failed economic efforts and brief references to news stories they hear—Vietnam and Selma, Alabama, "religious cult members [who] have swallowed Kool-Aid and cyanide"—reflecting the degree to which these historical events remain on the periphery of their lives. In the traditionally realist camp are "A Lonely Coast," "The Mud Below," and "People in Hell Just Want a Drink of Water." At the other end are examples of magical realism, with the talking tractor in "The Bunchgrass Edge of the World" and the seductive spurs in "A Pair of Spurs." Yet, all the stories in the collection are in some way resonant with its epigraph, attributed to a retired Wyoming rancher: "Reality's never been of much use out here."
"Brokeback Mountain" has received the most attention of the stories in Close Range, in part because of the motion picture based on it; in part because its reputation as a "gay cowboy love story" sets it apart from most fiction of the West; but also simply for the quality of the story. Beginning in 1963, it is the story of two uneducated young men: Jack Twist aspires to become a rodeo star; Ennis Del Mar wants to be a rancher. They spend a summer isolated together on Brokeback Mountain, herding sheep, and fall in love. The story then records the next twenty years in their lives, as they take fishing and hunting vacations together a few times a year until Jack is killed, most likely in a hate crime based on homophobia. "Brokeback Mountain" exemplifies the hallmarks of Proulx's fiction: rural characters with little to no economic opportunities; detailed attention to the landscape, weather, and social history of the setting; and social commentary. It was first published in The New Yorker in October 1997, and has been frequently anthologized.

Further Information


Primary Works


Discusses her approach to fiction in great depth.


Focuses on "Brokeback Mountain" and Proulx's thoughts on the reception of the story and the resulting film. Proulx also discusses her interest in Wyoming.

Criticism


Interesting look at the unusual names of people and places found in these two works.


Thought-provoking reading of the story through the conventions of the pastoral as created by Theocritus, arguing in part that Jack takes on many of the experiences of one of Theocritus's greatest heroes, Herakles (Hercules).

Argues that Proulx highlights the masculinity of Jack and Ennis in order to make the sex scenes between two men more palatable to mainstream audiences. More attention is given to the film than to the story.


Highly useful study of Proulx and her work through *Close Range*. After a chapter of biography, one chapter is devoted to each of Proulx's books. The chapter on *Close Range* includes commentaries on all of the stories.


Brief but helpful in its focus on the causes of emotional repression in Jack and Ennis. The essay must be read with care, as the authors do not always make it clear when they are discussing the film and when the short story.


Examines several of Proulx's works as fulfilling a contemporary desire for realism despite the prevalence of Postmodernism; for advanced students.


Uneven collection with more emphasis on the film than the short story.


Traces the bifurcated landscape of the story—plains and mountains—to the divided lives Jack and Ennis lead. Tuss discusses both the story and the film.

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