Edna Annie Proulx (pseud) was born August 22, 1935, in Norwich, Connecticut, to George Proulx, vice president of a textile company and Lois Proulx, a painter who traced her family history in Connecticut back to the year 1635. Lois Proulx was an amateur naturalist who encouraged the young Annie to observe small details of everyday life and the natural world, a habit that would later develop into the detailed research that contributed depth and realism to Proulx’s fiction.

In the early 1950’s Proulx briefly attended Colby College in Waterville, Maine, but left without completing a degree. She returned to college in 1963 and in 1969 graduated cum laude from the University of Vermont with a bachelor of arts degree in history. During these years Proulx was married and divorced three times; a daughter from her first marriage lived with Proulx’s first former husband while Proulx raised three sons from her second and third marriages.

In 1973 Proulx graduated from Sir George Williams University (now Concordia University) in Montreal with a master of arts degree in history. She completed all the work for a doctoral degree in Renaissance European economics and passed the oral examinations in 1975 but decided not to complete her dissertation, as there were so few teaching jobs available in her field.

The eldest of five sisters, Proulx had been drawn from an early age to the outdoor life; after leaving school she moved to a small cabin in the Vermont woods and spent much of her time hunting, fishing, and canoeing. In the 1980’s she supported herself and her sons by working as a freelance journalist, publishing dozens of magazine articles on topics ranging from fishing and making cider to growing apples and lettuce. Eventually she accepted assignments to write do-it-yourself handbooks about gardening, cooking, and home-building projects. These books often provided historical illustrations and background in addition to instructional material, early evidence of Proulx’s devotion to research and historical detail. In 1986 she received a Garden Writers Association of America award for her how-to books and cookbooks. Although the subject matter reflected Proulx’s interest in the back-to-the-land movement and self-sufficiency, over time she found nonfiction manuals less interesting to write.

Proulx enjoyed writing fiction and had published several short stories in Seventeen magazine while she was in graduate school. Even while writing nonfiction on assignment, she managed to produce one or two short stories each year. Though she was able to sell most of her short stories, Proulx never thought she could make a living writing fiction. Two of these early stories were listed as “Distinguished Short Stories” in Best American Short Stories for 1983 and 1987.

In the early 1980’s Tom Jenks, an editor at Esquire magazine, accepted three of Proulx’s stories for publication, giving her exposure to a larger, national audience. When Jenks took a job at the publisher Charles Scribner’s Sons, he offered Proulx an opportunity to publish her first collection, Heart Songs, and Other Stories. Although Heart Songs was well-reviewed, Proulx, then in her early fifties, still did not think of herself...
as a writer.

Although Proulx had no desire to write longer fiction, Jenks had included a clause in her publishing contract committing her to write a novel. With financial support from arts foundations in Vermont and Wyoming and inspired by a collection of old postcards with mug shots of escaped convicts, Proulx began writing fiction full-time. Her first novel, *Postcards*, tells the story of a Vermont family struggling to keep their farm afloat after their son murders his girlfriend and leaves home. Proulx was surprised to find longer fiction less demanding to write than the short story; rather than paring down her prose, she could expand on what she wished to say. Critics hailed *Postcards* as an emotionally powerful and brilliantly written debut. When Proulx won the PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction for *Postcards*, she was the first woman to receive the award in its twelve-year history.

Her second novel, *The Shipping News*, tells the story of a man trying to repair his shattered life through a return to his family home in the harsh landscape of Newfoundland. Proulx had become interested in Newfoundland during a fishing trip there and spent months revisiting the country to absorb local atmosphere that could lend authenticity to her book. Her ability to evoke the loneliness and chill of the bleak landscape and to capture a people caught in the throes of economic and social upheaval earned her more critical praise. In 1994 *The Shipping News* received the *Chicago Tribune*’s Heartland Award for fiction, the National Book Award, the *Irish Times* International Fiction Prize, and the Pulitzer Prize in fiction. The novel was translated into eight languages, and a successful film version was released in 2001.

Proulx’s next novel, *Accordion Crimes*, follows an accordion built in Italy and passed among a succession of owners to tell an often violent story of the American immigrant experience. *Accordion Crimes* was inspired partly by Proulx’s family background; her father’s family had come to New England from Canada, sacrificing many of their cultural traditions in an effort to become truly American. Proulx originally planned to set the book in Texas but needed a fellowship in order to afford to do research there; when her funding fell through, she recast the book over a wider geographical range. After traveling extensively to promote *Accordion Crimes*, Proulx decided to stop making personal appearances, which she felt took too much time away from her writing. After her mother’s death in 1995, Proulx moved from a house in Vermont—which she had largely built herself—to Wyoming, where she had done most of her fiction writing even while she maintained her residence in Vermont.


Proulx is one of several late twentieth century American writers, such as Carolyn Chute and Cormac McCarthy, whose fiction deals with rural life in particular regions of the United States. Proulx’s fiction examines how individuals in poor communities survive social, economic, and geological upheaval—how such people react when traditional and long-standing ways of life are assaulted by modernization, urbanization, and social change. The French-inspired approach to the study of history Proulx learned in Montreal helped form her approach to fiction writing, which links the experience of the individual with the historical time and place in which it occurs. Proulx’s work is concerned with the impact of historical time, places, and events on her characters’ lives, rather than individual introspection, and often examines characters’ relationships to large social movements and to the land on which they live.
Proulx draws on her background as a historian to research her novels extensively, often traveling to the places about which she writes and working to master details of time period, language, and local custom. Much of her fiction reflects the harsh climate and hardscrabble quality of rural life, and most of her characters come to a bad end. Praised for her sweeping vision of the American experience, poetic mastery of language, and offbeat, often dark humor, Proulx’s work has been compared to that of the American novelists Herman Melville, William Faulkner, and Ernest Hemingway.

Biography (Literary Essentials: Short Fiction Masterpieces)
Edna Annie Proulx was born in Norwich, Connecticut, in 1935, the oldest of five daughters. Her father worked his way up in the textile mills to the position of vice president; her mother painted landscapes in watercolors. Because her father was frequently transferred, the family moved several times when she was young. She entered Colby College in the 1950’s but dropped out to, as she says, “experience two terrible marriages, New York City, the Far East, and single-mother-with-two-children poverty.” She returned to school in 1963, graduating Phi Beta Kappa. She entered the graduate program at Sir George Williams University (now Concordia University), in Montreal, specializing in Renaissance economic history, and finished all the work for the Ph.D. degree except the dissertation.

By this time Proulx had been married and divorced three times and was the mother of three sons. She worked as a freelance journalist from 1975 to 1988, writing books and articles on a wide range of subjects. In the mid-1990’s, Proulx moved from Vermont to Centennial, Wyoming (population 100), where she lives and writes in relative isolation. She travels part of the year to Australia and Ireland and across the United States.
Additional Biography

Biography (Survey of Novels and Novellas)

Edna Annie Proulx is the oldest of the five daughters of George Napoleon Proulx and Lois “Nelly” Gill Proulx. Her father’s ancestors immigrated to Quebec from France in 1637 and then, around the time of the American Civil War, to New England to work in the textile mills. Her mother’s family had immigrated to America from England in 1635. George Proulx began working in the textile industry as a bobbin boy but quickly advanced to the vice presidency of a textile mill and served as an internationally recognized consultant in textiles. His work involved assignments in various venues, and the family moved with him.

The family had lived in North Carolina, Vermont, Rhode Island, and Maine by the time Proulx finished secondary school at Deering High School in Portland, Maine, in 1953. Her mother was an amateur artist and devoted naturalist. She passed these interests along to her daughters, including Annie, much of whose freelance writing would later explore naturalist topics.

Proulx enrolled in Colby College in Waterville, Maine, with the class of 1957, but she dropped out of college in 1955 to marry the first of her three husbands, all of whom she eventually divorced. She had a daughter by her first husband, two sons by her second, and another son by her third. The daughter, from whom Proulx was estranged, lived with her father, who raised her. Eventually her relationship with Proulx, who was always close to her sons, improved. Proulx helped to raise her sons and partially supported them with the income from her freelance writing.

Proulx enrolled in the University of Vermont at Burlington in 1963 and in 1969 was awarded a bachelor’s degree cum laude in history. She was elected to Phi Beta Kappa. She then pursued graduate studies in history at Sir George Williams University, now Concordia University, in Montreal, earning a master’s degree in 1973. She continued her graduate studies, pursuing a doctorate in Renaissance history. In 1975 she passed her doctoral oral examinations, but she failed to complete the doctoral dissertation she had contemplated producing on Renaissance economic history.

As early as 1964, Proulx published articles in Seventeen, which continued to publish her work through the next fifteen years, as did Gray’s Sporting Journal. As early as 1979, Gourmet published a piece Proulx wrote. She has said in interviews that she made a decent living from freelance writing.

Proulx’s writing soon attracted favorable attention. Her short stories were well received, so when her publisher urged her to write a novel, she obliged, producing Postcards in 1992. In the 1980’s, looking for a good place to go canoeing, Proulx found a map of Newfoundland and was intrigued by such place-names in this stark land as Blow-Me-Down, Snake’s Bight, Come-by-Chance, and Run-by-Guess. Newfoundland became the setting for her next novel, The Shipping News. She eventually bought a house in Newfoundland and began to visit there regularly, although in 1995 she moved to Wyoming and has continued to live there for part of every year. She first went to Wyoming for a six-week residency at the Ucross Foundation and found it such a compatible writing environment that she settled there.

Biography

E. Annie Proulx was born on August 22, 1935, in Norwich, Connecticut, into a family of farmers, mill workers, inventors, and artists whose ancestors had lived there for three centuries. Proulx’s mother, a painter and amateur naturalist, instilled in Proulx an appreciation for nature and the details of life. Because of her father’s career in textiles, Proulx’s family constantly moved, so she lived in several states, including North Carolina, Vermont, Maine, and Rhode Island. She earned a bachelor’s degree in history from the University of Vermont in 1969 and then went on to graduate school at Sir George Williams University (now Concordia University) in Montreal. In 1973, she earned her master’s degree in history, and in 1975, she passed her
doctoral oral examinations. However, she did not finish her dissertation because there were few teaching jobs in history at the time. Instead, Proulx turned to freelance journalism. While living with a friend in a rural shack on the Canadian border in northern Vermont, Proulx wrote a variety of articles, book reviews, and on-assignment nonfiction books. She also founded and edited *Behind the Times*, a rural Vermont newspaper (1984–1986). Through all of this, she struggled to make enough money to support her three sons.

At the same time, she began to write fiction. She published several short stories in magazines, and in 1988, the stories were collected in *Heart Songs and Other Stories*. As they would continue to do, the critics praised Proulx’s narrative gifts, harsh landscapes, and tough but compelling stories. In 1989, Proulx began writing fiction fulltime. In 1992, she published her first novel, *Postcards*, which won the PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction in 1993. Proulx was the first woman to win this prestigious award. However, it was her next novel, 1993’s *The Shipping News*, which made Proulx a household name. The book was a popular success, it won the National Book Award for fiction (1993) and the Pulitzer Prize for fiction (1994), and it was adapted into a feature film (2001). In 1999, she published *Close Range: Wyoming Stories*, which includes “The Half-Skinned Steer.” This story was also included in *The Best American Short Stories 1998* and *The Best American Short Stories of the Century*. Proulx currently lives and works in Wyoming, a setting that allows her to pursue her many outside interests, which include hunting, fishing, canoeing, and bicycling. Her novel *That Old Ace in the Hole* was published in December 2002.

Biography

Annie Proulx was born in Norwich, Connecticut, in 1935 to George and Lois Proulx. Her ancestors had lived in the area of Connecticut for over 350 years as farmers, artists, and mill workers. During Annie's youth, her father worked in the textile industry, so the family moved all over the country as he advanced his career. Annie attended high school in North Carolina and Maine; the family also spent time in Vermont and Rhode Island.

After graduating high school, Proulx attended the University of Vermont, where she received her bachelor of arts in 1969. She then attended graduate school in Montreal at Sir George Williams University where she received her master of arts in 1973.

Proulx's mother, Lois, was an artist and had a strong family tradition of oral story-telling. Many of her inventive ancestors could tell a story using everyday objects. This tradition helped to spark Annie's interest in telling stories of her own. Proulx began writing initially to support her three children. She wrote mostly informational books that covered topics ranging from canoeing to African beadwork. During this period, she somehow found time to write fiction as well, which eventually was collected into *Heart Songs and Other Stories* in 1988.

After the success of this collection, her publisher persuaded her to write a novel. Her first, *Postcards* (1992), is about the decline of the American farm family. *Postcards* won the PEN/Faulkner Award as well as rave reviews from publications such as the *New York Times*.

Proulx had another novel published the following year, *The Shipping News*, which won her even more critical acclaim as well as a Pulitzer Prize. This novel captured her love for Newfoundland's history, geography, and people. It illustrated the struggle between the harsh geography and climate of the region and its inhabitants.

Her next novel, *Accordion Crimes*, published in 1996, gained decent reviews, although not as strong as those for *The Shipping News and Postcards*. *Accordion Crimes* did, however, earn Proulx the Dos Passos Prize for literature.

After this novel, Proulx decided to go back to her first love, short-story writing. She prefers writing short stories to novels since she enjoys the challenges involved with making every word count. Her collection of
short stories *Close Range: Wyoming Stories*, published in 1999, explores myths of the West, in which Proulx had been interested since she moved to Wyoming in 1995. The collection earned her overwhelmingly positive reviews. "Brokeback Mountain," the most critically acclaimed story in the collection, earned the *New Yorker* Award for fiction in 1998 and has been often anthologized, including in *The O. Henry Stories* published in 1998.
E. Annie Proulx Short Fiction Analysis (Literary Essentials: Short Fiction Masterpieces)

Although E. Annie Proulx’s first collection, *Heart Songs, and Other Stories*, was relatively conventional in structure and language, her interest in what one of her characters calls the “rural downtrodden” is much in evidence here. The stories, featuring such quaintly named characters as Albro, Eno, and Snipe, take place in rural Vermont and New Hampshire. Without condescension, Proulx describes trailer-dwelling men and women who drink, smoke, feud, and fornicate without much introspection or analysis.

Close Range: Wyoming Stories

In *Close Range: Wyoming Stories*, Proulx shifts her milieu to the rural west, where her characters are similarly ragged and rugged, but where, either because of her increased confidence as a writer or because she was inspired by the landscape and the fiercely independent populace, her characters are more compellingly caught in a world that is grittily real and magically mythical at once. Claiming that her stories gainsay the romantic myth of the West, Proulx admires the independence and self-reliance she has found there, noting that the people “fix things and get along without them if they can’t be fixed. They don’t whine.”

Place is as important as the people who populate it in *Close Range*, for the Wyoming landscape is harsh yet beautiful, real yet magical, deadly yet sustaining. In such a world, social props are worthless and folks are thrown back on their most basic instincts, whether they be sexual, survival, or sacred. In such a world, as one character says in “Brokeback Mountain,” “It’s easier than you think to yield up to the dark impulse.” E. Annie Proulx’s Wyoming is a heart of darkness both in place and personality.

“Brokeback Mountain”

The most remarkable thing about “Brokeback Mountain” is that although it is about a sexual relationship between two men, it cannot be categorized as a homosexual story; it is rather a tragic love story that simply happens to involve two males. The fact that the men are Wyoming cowboys rather than San Francisco urbanites makes Proulx’s success in creating such a convincing and emotionally affecting story all the more wonderful.

Jack Twist and Ennis del Mar are “high-school drop-out country boys with no prospects” who, while working alone at a sheep-herding operation on Brokeback Mountain, abruptly and silently engage in a sexual encounter, after which both immediately insist, “I’m not no queer.” Although the two get married to women and do not see each other for four years, when they meet again, they grab each other and hug in a gruff masculine way, and then, “as easily as the right key turns the lock tumblers, their mouths came together.”

Neither has sex with other men, and both know the danger of their relationship. Twenty years pass, and their infrequent encounters are a combination of sexual passion and personal concern. The story comes to a climax when Jack, who unsuccessfully tries to convince Ennis they can make a life together, is mysteriously killed on
the roadside. Although officially it was an accident, Ennis sorrowfully suspects that Jack has been murdered after approaching another man. Although “Brokeback Mountain” ends with Jack a victim of social homophobia, this is not a story about the social plight of the homosexual. The issues Proulx explores here are more basic and primal than that. Told in a straightforward, matter-of-fact style, the story elicits a genuine sympathy for a love that is utterly convincing.

“The Half-Skinned Steer”

Chosen by writer John Updike for The Best American Short Stories of the Century, this brief piece creates a hallucinatory world of shimmering significance out of common materials. The simple event on which the story is based is a cross-country drive made by Mero, a man in his eighties, to Wyoming for the funeral of his brother. The story alternates between the old man’s encounters on the road, including an accident, and his memories of his father and brother. The central metaphor of the piece is introduced in a story Mero recalls about a man who, while skinning a steer, stops for dinner, leaving the beast half skinned. When he returns, he sees the steer stumbling stiffly away, its head and shoulders raw meat, its staring eyes filled with hate. The man knows that he and his family are doomed.

The story ends with Mero getting stuck in a snow storm a few miles away from his destination and trying to walk back to the main highway. As he struggles through the wind and the drifts, he notices that one of the herd of cattle in the field next to the road has been keeping pace with him, and he realizes that the “half-skinned steer’s red eye had been watching for him all this time.” In its combination of stark realism and folktale myth, “The Half-Skinned Steer” is reminiscent of stories by Eudora Welty and Flannery O’Connor, for Mero’s journey is an archetypal one toward the inevitable destiny of death.

“The Mud Below”

E. Annie Proulx has said that this is her favorite story in Close Range, for “on-the-edge situations” and the rodeo interest her. The title refers to the mud of the rodeo arena, and the main character is twenty-three-year-old Diamond Felts, who, at five foot three has always been called “Shorty,” “Kid,” “Tiny,” and “Little Guy.” His father left when he was a child, telling him, “You ain’t no kid of mine.” His mother taunts him about his size more than anyone else, always calling him Shorty and telling him he is stupid for wanting to be a bull rider in the rodeo.

The force of the story comes from Diamond’s identification with the bulls. The first time he rides one he gets such a feeling of power that he feels as though he were the bull and not the rider; even the fright seems to fulfill a “greedy physical hunger” in him. When one man tells him that the bull is not supposed to be his role model, Diamond says the bull is his partner. The story comes to a climax when Diamond is thrown and suffers a dislocated shoulder. Tormented by the pain, he calls his mother and demands to know who his father is. Getting no answer, Diamond drives away thinking that all of life is a “hard, fast ride that ended in the mud,” but he also feels the euphoric heat of the bull ride, or at least the memory of it, and realizes that if that is all there is, it must be enough.

“The Bunchgrass Edge of the World”

Like most of the stories in Close Range, “The Bunchgrass Edge of the World” is about surviving. As Old Red, a ninety-six-year-old grandfather, says at the end, “The main thing in life was staying power. That was it: stand around long enough, you’d get to sit down.” Picked by Amy Tan to be included in The Best American Short Stories 1999, it is one of the most comic fictions in the collection. A story about a young woman named Ottaline, with a “physique approaching the size of a propane tank,” being wooed by a broken-down John Deere 4030 tractor could hardly be anything else.
Ottaline’s only chance for a husband seems to be the semiliterate hired man, Hal Bloom, with whom she has silent sex, that is, until she is first approached by the talking tractor, who calls her “sweetheart, lady-girl.” Tired of the loneliness of listening to cellular phone conversations on a scanner, Ottaline spends more and more time with the tractor, gaining confidence until, when made to take on the responsibility of cattle trading by her ill father, she meets Flyby Amendinger, whom she soon marries. The story ends with Ottaline’s father getting killed in a small plane he is flying. The ninety-six-year-old grandfather, who sees how things had to go, has the powerfully uncomplicated final word—that the main thing in life is staying power.
Proulx, Annie

Introduction

Annie Proulx 1935-

(Full name Edna Annie Proulx; formerly published as E. Annie Proulx) American novelist and short story writer.

The following entry presents an overview of Proulx's career through 2001. For further information on her life and works, see CLC, Volume 81.

With the publication of her Pulitzer Prize-winning second novel, The Shipping News (1993), Proulx attracted critical acclaim for the literary refinement of her richly descriptive, tragicomic fiction. Her work blends elements of regionalism, magical realism, and an ambitious prose style to create intricate narratives focusing on the changing North American landscape. A short story writer and novelist, Proulx is best known for her technical dexterity, her striking language and use of idioms, her close attention to the details of daily life, and her mordant humor. Whether meticulously describing the construction of an accordion in Accordion Crimes (1996) or the desolate Wyoming outback in Close Range (1999), Proulx mixes a powerful lyrical style with vast, exacting knowledge about her subjects—gained by careful research and keen observation—to create engaging stories about human lives as they are shaped by their historical, economic, and ecological circumstances.

Biographical Information

Proulx was born in Norwich, Connecticut, on August 22, 1935, the eldest of five daughters in a family of French-Canadian descent. Her family moved frequently—contributing to her fascination with geography—and Proulx's interest in nature and storytelling were fostered by her mother, an artist. Proulx published her first short story, “All the Pretty Little Horses,” in Seventeen magazine in 1964. As an undergraduate, Proulx attended Colby College and the University of Vermont, where she graduated cum laude in 1969. She began work on her doctorate in history at Sir George Williams University (now Concordia University) in Montreal, Canada, eventually passing her oral exams, but never completing the degree. Proulx's academic interest in history and custom, particularly the way in which changing circumstances influence everyday life, remained constant, reemerging throughout her fictional works. Married and divorced three times, Proulx became a single parent to three sons, whom she supported through freelance writing while living in New England. During this time, she founded a newspaper, Behind the Times; co-authored a book about making cider and another about cooking with dairy foods; wrote a number of “how-to” books; and contributed numerous articles on topics such as cooking, gardening, and fishing to a variety of publications. She also wrote short stories, which appeared in Gray's Sporting Journal and Esquire. In 1988 Proulx made her literary debut with the publication of Heart Songs and Other Stories, which was generally well received. Following the publication of this collection, Proulx was given an advance to write a novel, and, with additional assistance from foundation grants, she wrote Postcards (1992), which received the PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction in 1993, making Proulx the first woman ever to win this coveted award. Proulx went on to win the Pulitzer Prize in 1994 for The Shipping News, which also received the National Book Award and the Irish Times International Fiction Prize. The Shipping News was subsequently adapted into a screenplay for a film starring Kevin Spacey in 2001.

Major Works

Proulx's stories and novels are characterized, above all, by the author's concern for place. Proulx renders the details of stark, forbidding landscapes in a manner that makes them both palpable and metaphorically
powerful. Her characters, typically eccentric and emotionally scarred, are often directly shaped by their setting, and Proulx's unsparing observations record the intimate details of their daily existence. Through her finely wrought settings and interactions, Proulx addresses such grand themes as hope and futility, love and loss, and yearning and raw violence. Heart Songs and Other Stories consists of nine stories set in backwoods communities in northern New England. Combining irony with a poetic, precise style, these stories present scenes of bitter antagonism—involving cruelty, betrayal, and revenge—worked out in the context of the natural world and against a changing rural landscape. Postcards is a lyrical study of conflicting human emotions, such as guilt, and the devastation that accompanies changes to the social and physical terrain, particularly those set in motion following World War II. Spanning roughly thirty years, the novel follows the struggling, worn-down Blood family of Vermont. The protagonist, Loyal Blood, kills his girlfriend and flees from his home, heading west. His postcards sent to family in Vermont, along with the postcards of several others, mark each chapter opening and give the book its title. The Shipping News follows Quoyle, a newspaperman and father of two, as he reconnects with the land of his ancestors in Killick-Claw, Newfoundland. Along with his aunt and his children, Quoyle renews his old family home, abandoned for the past forty years, and comes face to face with the brutal geography of Newfoundland. As in her other stories, Proulx employs an omniscient third-person narrator, an approach that permits a high degree of authorial observation and detachment. Topics addressed in the novel include the maritime economy, boat-building, a local newspaper, and knots, which are used to symbolize physical, spiritual, and emotional quandaries. Both water and knots serve as allusive leitmotifs throughout the narrative. Knots and ropes are reflected in the character name “Quoyle,” reminiscent of the word coil, and each chapter is prefaced by different knot-tying instructions for mariners. Language is central again in Proulx's next novel, Accordion Crimes, a celebration of everyday rituals—playing music, preparing and eating food—set against the grim realities of immigrant life in the United States. Variously regarded as a series of vignettes, related novellas, and a picaresque narrative, Accordion Crimes follows the life of a green, handmade accordion from its beginnings in 1890 Sicily through a succession of owners of various ethnic backgrounds—German, Polish, Norwegian, French Canadian, Black Cajun, Basque, Mexican—over the period of a century. The eight stories that constitute the novel depict the dangers and conflicts of assimilation, the dissipation of cultural identity, and the inevitable horrors of life in a violent, prejudiced society—and are often punctuated by grave misfortune and gruesome disfigurement or death. Close Range, Proulx's second short story collection, consists of eleven narratives set in distant, rugged Wyoming, where again the landscape is rendered as a dominant force, and where those who inhabit this space experience loneliness, violence, and suffering. The characters in these stories are mainly feckless, downtrodden ranchers and cowboys whose lives, while seemingly plain, are shaped in surprising ways by the physical world. In “Brokeback Mountain,” one of the most notable stories in the collection, Proulx relates the painfully sublimated homosexual bond between two male ranchers.

Critical Reception

While Proulx has sometimes been regarded as a relative newcomer to the literary scene, publishing her first book of fiction in her mid-fifties, critics have noted that she had been writing for more than two decades before her first collection was released, a fact that accounts for the technical prowess and precision of her work. Her fiction has been compared to that of Herman Melville, Cormac McCarthy, and the Southern gothic writings of William Faulkner and Flannery O'Connor. Heart Songs and Other Stories initially received scant critical attention, but when it was republished in 1994, it was met with widespread critical acclaim. Reviewers have praised Postcards for its technical skill, stunning language, and breadth of vision. The Shipping News, alternately regarded as a black comedy, a romantic comedy, and a pastoral, has been Proulx's most critically and commercially well received work to date. Despite the novel's enormous popularity, some critics have found Proulx's language distracting and overdone, while others have felt that the author's detached approach kept the characters, particularly Quoyle, at an excessive remove. Accordion Crimes has been generally recognized as an ambitious and playful rendering of idiomatic language and American immigrant life. However, some reviewers have expressed disdain for the novel's structural device of tracking the accordion's peregrinations. Moreover, some critics have raised questions about the ubiquity of sudden violence in this and
other of Proulx's works. A number of commentators have viewed it as a gratuitous plot device, while others suggest that the omnipresence of violence and perversity in Proulx's fiction reflects an underlying nihilism in the author. Close Range has been considered by several critics as Proulx's finest writing to date, though a few have noted that her overly descriptive passages occasionally hinder the pace of the stories. Yet, as with her previous fiction, reviewers have praised Proulx's salvific humor and moving depiction of the suffering and violence that define the grim lives of her characters. One of the stories from Close Range, “The Half-Skinned Deer,” was selected by John Updike to be included in the collection The Best American Short Stories of the Century.

Principal Works
Heart Songs and Other Stories (short stories) 1988

Postcards (novel) 1992

The Shipping News (novel) 1993

Accordion Crimes (novel) 1996

Brokeback Mountain (novella) 1998

Close Range: Wyoming Stories (short stories) 1999

Criticim
Loree Rackstraw (review date September 1989)

[In the following excerpt, Rackstraw offers a positive assessment of Heart Songs and Other Stories.]

According to master fictionist R. V. Cassill, the short story is “a refuge for those who want to explore the human condition as sentient men and women.” This traditional view is central to recent collections of short fiction by Richard Lyons and E. Annie Proulx. Lyons's volume of ten stories [A Wilderness of Faith and Love] takes the reader on a sometimes terrifying, sometimes hilarious probing of sexual longing which verges on the metaphysical in its intense intimacy. [In Heart Songs.] Proulx invents a more poetic distance in nine stories that trade intimacy for nearly pristine simile to reveal touching and bizarre struggles of country folk. Both make vivid the painful irresolution of human need, although Proulx softens that pain with irony. Lyons, on the other hand, fashions characters who are driven by an unrelenting need for union with a force that seems malevolent yet strangely sublime. As one of his characters puts it, it is a need “… to be carried beyond what I know.” …

E. Annie Proulx's stories resonate with Lyons's in their use of the powers of nature and in their occasional Laurentian undertones of the dark mysteries of sexual longings and conflicts. Most of her stories are set in the rural backwoods or mountains, and are populated by eccentric country folk whose sense of ethics and purpose is shaped by the land.

One splendid example is “Bedrock,” a tale whose intrigue is born of the conflict between Perley, an aging widower victimized by his new young wife, Maureen, and her incestuous brother, Bobhot. But it is also born of the struggle to eke a living out of Perley's potato farm which “was a thin mantle of soil that lay over granite bedrock scarred by glaciers and meteorites.” The bedrock is fundamental to the polarity that informs the bizarre marriage of Perley and Maureen: “Atoms of this granite whirled in his body. Its stony, obdurate qualities passed up through the soil and into plant roots. Whenever he took potatoes from the heat-cracked
bowl, his bones were hardened, his blood fortified.” Maureen, however, is of different stock: she “was shot through with some wild astral substance so hard and dense that granite powdered into dust beneath her blows.”

The conflict begins a few months after the death of his first wife, when Perley is strangely compromised: Bobhot brings his young sister unannounced to Perley's farm, and leaves her “… to clean up for you, do some home cookin’.” When she comes to Perley's bed that night, “The guilty scents of willow pollen and the river in spring flooded the room …” Although the nature of this guilt is not clear until the story's end, it is central to the couple's marriage a month later, and to the gradual reversal of traditional gender roles. Maureen transforms Perley's comfortable house with her own coarse decor and takes over the heavy jobs around the farm, leaving the domestic chores of cooking and cleaning to Perley.

In a startling fist fight and seduction scene over what kind of potatoes to plant, Perley is brutalized into a state of passive obedience by his young bride. From that point on, he helplessly watches his once prosperous farm slowly deteriorate like the eroding topsoil. Proulx is deft in her subtle revelation at the story's end of Perley's rape of Maureen years before, when she was but a child. It is then that the theme of female revenge becomes a stunning backwash to enrich the story with unexpected profundity.

Stories that end with subtle ironic twists are clearly a favorite strategy in this collection. Proulx is so skilled at simile and so sensitive to the curious eccentricities of her characters and their folk ethics that the occasional predictability of ironic endings is less obtrusive than one might expect.

The threat of insanity or violence lurks beneath the surface of many of Proulx's stories. For example, the musical Twilight family of the title story seems reminiscent of the barbaric hill people of James Dickey's Deliverance. Eno Twilight has invited Snipe, a city drop-out with questionable talent, to sit in on their Wednesday evening music fests. Snipe hikes through the snarled brush to Eno's mountaintop cabin and is ushered into a stifling kitchen:

The stamped tin ceiling was stained dark with smoke, a big table pushed against the wall to make more room. Above it hung a fly-specked calendar showing a moose fighting off wolves under a full moon. The Twilights sat silently on kitchen chairs arranged in a horseshoe row with old Eno at the center. Their instruments rested on their knees, their eyes gleamed with the last oily shafts of August sunlight. No one spoke. The old man pointed with his fiddle bow to an empty chair with chromium legs and a ripped plastic seat off to the side. Snipe sat in it and took his guitar out of its case.

Snipe becomes increasingly intrigued with the musical family and speculates how he might market their talent, despite the protests of his wife, who has given up her weaving craft to work at Poochie's Grill for groceries and rent money. He is especially intrigued with Fat Nell, the immense vocalist and actual master of the group, whom he takes for Eno's daughter. When he pays her a daytime visit he finds her alone in the kitchen making jelly, a scene foreshadowing brutality. The returning family interrupts Snipe's seduction of Nell, and he barely escapes with his life after learning she is actually Eno's wife. A disgustingly insipid Snipe then woos his wife back with chilled champagne and a Haydn symphony. As they lie in the pillows of the sofa, he dreams of driving a battered old truck through the desert, beating out “a Tex-Mex rhythm on the cracked steering wheel,” and figuring how to make a fortune collecting jimsonweed.

Proulx is intrigued with the subtle nuances of fraud, violence and the bizarre in her characters. But she is also keenly attuned to the destruction of backwoods New England culture by the incursion of new technologies and city folk. In a gem of understated complexity—“Electric Arrows”—she interweaves the narrator's recollection of a childhood play-acting game that celebrates the accidental death of an abusive family friend, with ongoing observations of a rich city couple who have bought up the Clew family property as a kind of
romanticized relic.

The story's title is a reference to the narrator's father, whose failure as an apple grower was redeemed by his job installing electricity for farmers with his friend Diamond Ward. It is Diamond who was accidentally electrocuted trying to remove a kite from the wires, a kite whose “wooden skeleton, a fragile cross” is still in the loft of the Clew barn. And it is Diamond with whom the narrator's father spends his lunch breaks in a shady meadow on the farm beside a spring. While Diamond naps, the father kills time by chiseling a bas-relief of himself in his lineman's gear on a flat slab of rock. As a child, the narrator and his little sister (carefully avoiding Diamond) bring lunch to their father and play hopscotch on his grand design. This is the design the city folk now take for a sacred carving of an Indian god, and a bittersweet irony echoes in the narrator's final observation: “I laugh, because isn't there something funny about this figure slowly cut into the fieldrock during the long summer noons half a century ago?”

E. Annie Proulx captures the complexities of New England rural character and culture, while Richard Lyons explores dark mysteries reflected in the wilderness of the Northwest. Both have used the form of the short story to take readers into a rich exploration of the human condition.

Frederick Busch (review date 12 January 1992)

[In the following excerpt, Busch praises Postcards as a “powerful novel” about “powerful matters.”]

You have to start somewhere. And though the term “first novel” is often used not only to indicate the beginning of a novelist's career but also to suggest a shapelessness (or a shape created by autobiography), a fumbling with language or a surrender to the overmuch poetry of a young soul, and an inability to manage more than two characters, we must remind ourselves that The Sun Also Rises was a first novel, as was Pickwick Papers and Wise Blood.

In the beginning—with the very good ones—there is story. E. Annie Proulx has studied her America and her own soul, and she has invented a story large enough to get lost in and to want to get lost in. She has achieved a prose with which to tell such a story. And the result is a novel that feels like a fifth or sixth, not a first. This richly talented writer announces with Postcards that we had better, from now on, be listening for her voice.

This powerful novel is about powerful matters. It is made with a language that demands to be lingered over—for the pungent bite of its effect and for the pleasure of learning how good, and even gorgeous, sentences are written.

Each chapter takes for epigraph a postcard—from a member of the Blood family, a county agricultural agent, a forlorn wife, a desperate mother. The cards flavor the broth unmistakably; but, witty and ironic as their devising is, what makes this rich, dark and brilliant feast of a book is its furious action, its searing contemplations, its language born of the fury and the searching and the author's powerful sense of the gothic soul of New England.

Here, at the start, is Vermont in the 1940s, and here are the Bloods, grimy with poverty and long laboring on their meager, unyielding farm. And here is Loyal Blood, who has just murdered his girlfriend—the act is a rising up of the Puritan soul of this countryside and country—as he tries to sit at supper:

The ham smelled like blood. Cold air crawled along the floor, the ferret scurried in the wall.
On a hill miles away, an attic window caught the last ray of light, burned for a few minutes, dimmed.
The heightened senses, the desperate and involuntary perceptiveness: they could belong to one of Dickens’ murderers (Bradley Headstone, say, or Bill Sikes) or to Faulkner's Joe Christmas. Loyal Blood flees westward, having buried his victim and his hopes; the postcards from him start reaching the Bloods, enmired on their farm.

The fate of that farmland, and of the countryside Blood travels over, recapitulates something of the history of America from the ’40s to the present. And Proulx offers a vivid, heartbreaking glimpse of the desperate side of America during World War II.

Her portrayal of Loyal's guilt is remarkable. A wandering, tormented, cursed soul, he realizes that he can have “no wife, no family, no children, no human comfort … for him, restless shifting from one town to another, the narrow fences of solitary thought …”

The novel takes us toward the ’70s, the subdivision of New England farms, the migration to the land of weekend- and summer-people, the scattering of the Bloods. It takes us through Loyal's life and the identities he wears, and the one he wears at the end. The gentle and rough ironies, the feel for landscape, the profound understanding of loneliness and machinery and how work is accomplished—these, and the love of names (the Nipples, the Bloods, Travis Butts, Orson and Pego, Ben Rainwater), the language that sizzles like meat in a pan: they point to a wonderful writer and an astonishingly accomplished novel. …

Inevitability—a test for the conclusion of a novel—is a powerful trait of E. Annie Proulx's Postcards. Among the hard-won first novels of 1992, it rings in the new year's fiction with a music lusty and strong.

William Green (review date 18 July 1993)

[In the following review, Green offers a generally positive assessment of The Shipping News, while noting flaws in the book's digressive subplots and superficial characterizations.]

E. Annie Proulx was already 57 when her first novel, Postcards, was published in 1992. Before that, she had churned out freelance articles about cider, lions, canoeing and mice; she had written short stories for Esquire; she had founded a monthly newspaper called Behind the Times; she had raised three sons and divorced three husbands. Postcards was an unexpected sensation. Critics called it “beautiful,” “mesmerizing” and “astonishingly accomplished.” Fellow authors honored her with the PEN/Faulkner Award, a 000 prize that had never been won by a woman. For good measure, Proulx also landed a Guggenheim Fellowship.

Proulx's second novel, The Shipping News, is a black comedy about Quoyle, an endearing loser whose father used to toss him into brooks and lakes. Proulx describes Quoyle's childhood superbly in the novel's opening pages, summing up years of misery in a few painfully vivid images: “… brother Dick, the father's favorite, pretended to throw up when Quoyle came into the room, hissed ‘Snotface, Ugly Pig, Warthog, Stupid, Stinkbomb, … Greasebag,’ pummeled and kicked until Quoyle curled, hands over head, sniveling, on the linoleum.”

Quoyle drops out of school, moves into a rented trailer, and distributes vending machine candy before stumbling into journalism. He writes so badly that his colleagues call him a “lobotomized moron.” Seduced by a nymphomaniac named Petal Bear, Quoyle gets married and experiences four weeks of bliss. Petal spends the next six years cuckolding him. She even stars in a pornographic movie, elegantly disguising herself with a mask made from a potato chip bag.
As if this were not enough, Quoyle loses his job and Petal abducts his children. After selling the kids to a pornographer for 00, Petal dies in a car crash. All of these events occur in the first 30 pages of the novel. The rest of the book traces Quoyle's attempt to seize control of his life. Now in his mid-30s, he must come to terms with the loss of his wife, find a girlfriend, learn to write properly and generally try to become less oafish.

Quoyle's first step is to emigrate from Upstate New York to Newfoundland, a rugged island off the coast of Canada. He finds a job there as a reporter at the Gammy Bird, a newspaper specializing in stories of sexual abuse. His editor, amused by typographical errors, sabotages everyone's articles. In one report, the phrase “Burmese sawmill owners” becomes “Burnoosed sawbill awnings.” Quoyle writes about ships and about gruesome car wrecks.

Proulx has visited Newfoundland frequently since she first traveled there in 1987 to fish for trout. What fascinates her about the islands is the way its traditional lifestyle has come under threat. Quoyle's editor, Jack Buggit, laments, “the fishing’s went down, down, down, 40 years sliding into nothing, the … goddamn Canada government giving fishing rights to every country on the face of the earth, but regulating us out of business.” Buggit also rails against “bloody Greenpeace” for destroying the livelihood of local seal-bashers. Proulx explored a similar historical process in Postcards, describing decline of an old farming family in New England.

Proulx captures the flavor of Newfoundland as convincingly as if she were born there. She writes about the perilous climate, the xenophobia, the skills of boat-builders, the art of skinning a seal, the dangers of the sea and the recipe for flipper pie. She depicts quirky islanders who embellish their life stories and daydream about moving to Florida. She also has an ear for evocative place names, some of which she has invented: she writes of Little Despond and Desperate Cove, the Tickle Motel and the Flying Squid Gift & Lunchstop.

In various interviews, Proulx has said that she feels liberated now that she can afford to write nothing but novels. “All these stories,” she has said, “were just bottled up inside me, waiting to get out. Now writing is sheer play.” Proulx—who has been known to write for 18 hours at a stretch—does seem to be inexhaustibly inventive. The Shipping News is brimming with eccentric characters and rich subplots: an Englishman named Nutbeem builds a boat, sails the Atlantic and is shipwrecked in Newfoundland; Quoyle's aunt names her dog after a woman with whom she has had a tragic love affair.

A number of characters and subplots appear in the novel for no particular reason. Some readers will find these digressions charming since they give the book a leisurely, meandering quality. Others, like me, will find parts of the novel aimless and slightly dull.

Another flaw of the book is that some of the main characters remain superficial. We never understand Quoyle's aunt, his new girlfriend or his children. In fact, Quoyle himself often seems a distant and confusing figure. However, Proulx's use of language is so fresh that you rarely notice such problems. After all, who else would describe a face looking “like cottage cheese clawed with a fork”?}

Sandra Scofield (review date 1 August 1993)

[In the following positive review, Scofield evaluates the strengths of The Shipping News, calling the novel “wildly comic.”]
suffering,” until Petal and a lover take a wrong turn, end up dead. All in 28 pages.

Unlikely material for a romantic comedy, but E. Annie Proulx's *The Shipping News* is, doubt not, a wildly comic, heart-thumping romance. Here is a writer who, in a room with Robertson Davies, John Barth, Dickens and Joyce, would say, “That's nothing, hear this,” and hold the room. Here is a novel that reinvents the tale and gives us a hero for our times. Do not think all that matters take place in the cities; Proulx proves, with her special brand of sympathy, that redemption lies in the outpost, and heroes are those who will open to joy.

As Quoyle reels in grief, his aunt, a yacht upholsterer, appears with a scheme. She and her toothless dog, Quoyle and the girls, will steer “away to Newfoundland, the rock that had generated his ancestors, a place he had never been nor thought to go.” After all, the old house still stands, more or less, accessible only by roads impassable for months, or across the bay. It's “half ruined … pumiced by stony lives of dead generations.” And what's a man to do in Killick-Claw, Newfoundland?

Survive. Invent. Start work on the *Gammy Bird*, a newspaper that specializes in sex abuse stories and runs a wreck front page, every week, no exception. Make mistakes (like buying a boat that nearly drowns him) and friends—especially Dennis and Beety, who become the family he's never had. Develop a taste for seal-flipper pie and squidburgers. Above all, look after the children. For pure fathering, Quoyle is already heroic. Sunshine and Bunny are wonderful characters, especially Bunny, 6, who scowls like Beethoven, dreams of a snarling white dog, and shows off, eating lobster, saying, “I love red spider meat.” Quoyle, who cherishes his offspring, gives them all the things he comes to realize Quoyles never gave or got before: real attention, gentle handling, respect, which is how we come to know, at first, how much he has to give.

Much of the novel winds out of the *Gammy Bird* offices, where, though his first efforts are “like reading cement,” he learns to put a spin on it. He is part of something. He sets out to learn all he can, not just about the shipping news—his beat consists of listing boats-in, boats-out—but Killick-Claw, the Quoyles, new friends, Newfoundland. And through a cast of improbably named characters (Nutbeem, Diddy Shovel, Tert Card, among many) Proulx regales us with a pandect of Newfoundland lore. Some of it is cruel and nasty, most of it is harrowing but all of it is lustily entertaining. She goes on a little too long about Gaze Island (from whence the Quoyles skidded, the ancestral home across the ice); she strays from her established points of view to throw in a seal hunt; there are moments of exaggerated portentousness, a forced invention and a surfeit of obscure vocabulary (jaggled hair frowsting down, a craquelured surface, etc.). But this is a novel bursting with story, a lot of dimes for your dollar.

Proulx, who won the PEN-Faulkner Award this year for her novel *Postcards*, uses language that is riotous yet clearly under her control. She compresses it oddly—“Quoyle chopped at his secret path to the shore. Read his books. Played with his daughters … Pain he thought blunted erupted hot”—as if there's so much story, no time for every sentence. She plays word games and lets Quoyle comically label his perceptions: “Dog Farts Fell Family of Four.” She is capable of precision, the perfect description, the keenest insight. She is grand with weather and landscape.

It is her characters, however, who bind the spell, and there are many. Every one has a story. The aunt has spent a lifetime running from childhood. Dennis wants his father's lobster license. Girlfriend Wavey's drowned husband is a demon ghost. Somehow, the stories matter and merge; the pieces fit; Quoyle belongs, at last.

Proulx quotes an old sailors' book. To untangle a snarl, we are told, “do not pull on the end; permit it to unfold itself.” A prescription for storytelling. For life, *The Shipping News* is proof.

John Whitworth (review date 4 December 1993)
Much American scorn has been poured on the European Art Film which improves and uplifts on government money, but conspicuously fails to entertain. It is curious, then, that America appears the natural home of the Art Novel, the self-referential productions of Barth, Donleavy, Vonnegut and Pynchon if you like them long, or Brautigan and Kesey, born out of Kerouac, if you like them short and equally pretentious.

What strikes one about much American writing from very early on (good writers too—Melville, Poe, James, Nabokov) is how intent its practitioners are on making it new, pushing back the boundaries of prose etc, and causing the reader to sweat a bit. Each one means to reinvent narrative, rather than refine on something already there. Each one contains his own history of the world, as it were. And how they all love the adjective, the prose-poetic rush of blood that draws admiring attention to itself. Horatian art that conceals itself is not their bag. I note in passing that poets writing prose do not generally do this. Perhaps they work it out of their systems.

E. Annie Proulx doesn’t waste time, but gets stuck into Art on page 1 [of The Shipping News]:

Hive-spangled, gut oaring with gas and cramp, he survived childhood; at the state university, hand clapped over his chin, he camouflaged torment with smiles and silence. Stumbled through his twenties and into his thirties …

Am I going to get 337 pages of this? Indeed I am. And can I stand it? ‘As I was lying on the green / A small volume it chanced I seen. Carlyle's Essay On Burns was the edition. / I left it lying in the same position.’ But we reviewers are made of sterner stuff.

Anyway, I want to know why they do it. E. Annie Proulx is obviously a good writer, in the sense that she can ‘make words do what she wants,’ to adapt Eliot's bon mot about Larkin. Why does she want them to do this? Because it is not enough for her novel to be a story; it has to be (I quote the blurb) ‘an irresistible, inspiriting comedy of human life and possibility.’ It has to be a tract, in other words.

Though the style is baroque, the plot and message are both almost simple-minded. Our hero, Quoyle, is a big, ugly, useless man (a journo, natch) living in upstate New York, whose marriage to sexy little Petal is a disaster (‘the part of Quoyle that was wonderful was, unfortunately, attached to the rest of him’). She mocks him, betrays him, deserts him, sells their children to a child-molester and is burned to death in a road accident, which serves her right. The children are not physically abused but naturally rather disturbed. They are called Bunny and Sunshine.

That's the downside. The rest of the book is the symbolic resurrection of Quoyle after he takes off in a camper for Newfoundland, which is like Daphne du Maurier's Cornwall but worse, with an eccentric and nameless aunt. The Country Mouse beats the Town Mouse into a cocked hat, little Bunny doesn't fall off the roof and down the cliff, the aunt, already into cracker-barrel philosophy, takes up yacht upholstery, Quoyle finds true love with someone called Wavey, and Uncle Jack, dead and drowned, is resurrected for real at his wake. Everything turned out just fine.

Was love then like a bag of assorted sweets passed round from which one might choose more than once? Some might sting the tongue, some invoke night perfume. Some had centres as bitter as gall, some blended honey and poison, some were quickly swallowed.
Yes, love was just like that. This, and lots more, is what dumb Quoyle thinks on page 315. You can see what
writing for a local newspaper (The Gammy Bird) has done for him.

As for the godforsaken hacks who stayed back in New York State, they get their comeuppance and no
mistake. ‘Some nut came in yesterday with a f—ing machine gun’ and killed most of them because they
didn't print his letter. This is Thoreau for the 1990s and it's back to the log cabin with the lot of us with plenty
of sermons in stones and good in everything except New York State of course.

I suppose it is also a transatlantic version of Tom Sharpe (the funny names, the rude words, the casual
violence) minus the engaging small-boy lavatorial humour and plenty of grown-up preachifying/speechifying.
As you can see, I don't rate it much, but it got the Irish Times International Fiction Prize, and hell, what do I
know? I wouldn't recognise charm if it hit me over the head.

Most chapters are headed by a drawing and text from The Ashley Book of Knots. When the knots run out we
get stuff from The Mariner's Dictionary. Do you suppose we should remember The Seaman's Manual in
Heart Of Darkness? Oh, I think so, don't you?

John DeMont (review date 25 April 1994)

[In the following review, DeMont offers a positive assessment of The Shipping News.]

When Vermont writer E. Annie Proulx first visited Newfoundland in the mid-1980s, she was searching for
new rivers and lakes in which to dip her canoe paddle. “The moment I arrived I experienced this visceral
feeling,” she told Maclean's, speaking by phone from her small, book-filled house situated on 17 acres of
Vermont hillside. “Newfoundland was meaningful to me in a very profound way which I can't really
explain.” Well, she certainly took a decent stab at it in The Shipping News, her moving, witty novel about an
American newspaperman who experiences a similar epiphany in Newfoundland. Earlier this year, it won an
American National Book Award and The Irish Times International Prize for fiction. And last week, it captured
another honor—the 1994 Pulitzer Prize for fiction.

Proulx's roots in Canada—and particularly the Maritime provinces—run deep. Her paternal great-grandfather
came from Quebec. While she was growing up, her family made repeated trips to Nova Scotia and New
Brunswick. In her 30s, she lived in St. Albans, Vt., just over an hour from Montreal, where she completed her
MA in history and worked towards a Ph.D. at Sir George Williams University (now Concordia). And during
19 years of freelance journalism, Proulx—a divorced mother of three sons—returned to Atlantic Canada
whenever she could find an assignment or an excuse.

The pull from Newfoundland was even stronger. The author, now 58, was captivated by the island's stark,
brooding landscape and the colorful language, which she calls “the most expressive in the world.” At the
same time, she found the province to be a place in constant change and turmoil. “The 21st century,” says
Proulx, “hangs over Newfoundland like a clenched fist.”

The artist in her seems drawn to communities facing extinction. Proulx's 1988 collection, Heart Songs and
Other Stories, was set amid the dispossessed New England working class. And her first novel, Postcards,
which won the 1993 PEN/Faulkner Award for fiction, was about a family of New England farmers struggling
against the forces of the 20th century.

In that regard, Newfoundland was nothing new. Proulx made the protagonist in her latest book a reporter
named Quoyle—“head shaped like a crenshaw, no neck, reddish hair ruched back”—for the simple reason that
she could think of no other way for a person to make a living in the province's blighted economy.
Accompanied by his aunt and daughters, he moves to the outport Killick-Claw, a pastiche of places on the island's northern peninsula that Proulx has visited over the years. Does she fear for the future of the outports that inspired her? “The historian in me is saddened that a way of life is disappearing forever,” she says. “But life is about change; you can't hide from it.” Through *The Shipping News*, though, Proulx has managed to bring the beauty and heartbreak of Newfoundland to the world.

Verlyn Klinkenborg (review date 30 May 1994)

[In the following review of *The Shipping News*, Klinkenborg commends Proulx's descriptive talent, but concludes that the novel lacks emotional depth and resonance.]

There is always, of course, a distinction to be made between a successful writer and the gravy that is ladled over that writer by the literary press. Recently, E. Annie Proulx (pronounced “proo”) has been served up hot. Her first novel, *Postcards*, won the PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction in 1993—the first time a woman has won that prize. Her second novel, *The Shipping News*, won the 1993 National Book Award, and it has just been awarded the Pulitzer Prize for fiction. Proulx herself is a copywriter's dream: a survivor, a jack-of-all-trades, an independent cuss, a backwoods literatus, a fisherperson, a hunter, a woman who writes with the wolves, longhand. When quoted by reporters she sounds a little ursine, and it can be hard to tell—given the gravy—how much of that is the bluntness of a writer caught unaware in the midst of her private life and how much is good staging.

As the press ladles praise upon her, it praises itself, as it always does, for knowing a good thing when it sees one. The articles that have been written about Proulx, who is nearly 60, tend to celebrate the blush of fame, the transforming power of the media gaze, as if Proulx's main achievement were to have lived long enough to warrant attention at last. “These days,” one reporter writes in *The Washington Post*, “the roughest thing in Proulx's life involves learning the myriad duties of a budding literary celebrity.” Welcome to Valhalla.

You hear a lot of talk about the marketing value of the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize (and the Booker Prize, too, which Proulx was deterred from winning by not being British). That kind of talk makes you wonder whether marketing value hasn't become an asset in its own right to the entities behind those prizes, worth protecting for the value it confers on the prizes themselves. The more often the National Book Award spawns a best-seller, the more valuable that sales record makes the National Book Award, and the more important it thus becomes to bestow it upon books that will live up to everyone's expectations so the value of the prize isn't diminished.

“There is no doubt that people like to see their names in print with a little pat of butter attached,” wrote Bernard Darwin, Charles's grandson and a Dickens scholar, and these bookish prizes are as close as the literary establishment comes to the Academy Awards—the night of the living pats of butter. It isn't too cynical, nor is it necessarily a discredit to the talent involved, to believe that the deliberations of literary prize-givers are no more governed by purely artistic considerations than are the profound and inevitable ruminations of voting members of the Motion Picture Academy of Arts and Sciences. I mention this because *The Shipping News* is an out-and-out crowd-pleaser, a book that will certainly not diminish the commercial value of the National Book Award even as that award (and the Pulitzer Prize) increases this book's sales.

*The Shipping News* is the story of Quoyle, a lumbering, prognathous ne'er-do-well who finally does do well when he leaves behind his dreary, incommodious life in Mockingburg, New York, and returns to his ancestral country, the coast of Newfoundland, in the company of his young daughters, Bunny and Sunshine, and his quietly efficient, quietly lesbian aunt, Agnis Hamm, a yacht upholsterer. Quoyle is freed from Mockingburg by the death of Petal Bear, his sexually incandescent wife, whose light shone equally upon all men, and by the double suicide of his parents, who left their suicide note—cut off by the beep—on Quoyle's answering machine.
In a town called Killick-Claw, Quoyle finds competence and the respect of his neighbors and a good wife. The book's final sentence is this: “And it may be that love sometimes occurs without pain or misery.” If this were the first sentence of the novel, the reader would know from the start what at first he only suspects: that The Shipping News is a fairy tale, a book that doesn't just happen to turn out happily but that plainly intends to turn out happily all the way, a book that is unstinting, almost, at times, forced, in its good cheer.

In Killick-Claw, Quoyle goes to work for a newspaper called The Gammy Bird, a “forty-four-page tab printed on a thin paper.” Its pages are filled with fake ads, a homemaker's column written by an old fisherman named Billy Pretty, reports of the shipping news and local car wrecks—Quoyle's beat—a scabrous gossip column called “Scruncheons” and a weekly series of articles on local sex abuse cases reported by a marooned Brit named B. Beaufield Nutbeem. “That's what sells this paper,” says the managing editor, a scrofulous man named Tertius Card, not columns and home hints. Nutbeem's sex stories with names and dates whenever possible. That was Jack's genius, to know people wanted this stuff. Of course every Newf paper does it now, but Gammy Bird was first to give names and grisly details.

“Jack” is Jack Buggit, the paper's owner, a lobster fisherman whose favorite oath is “cockadoodle”—as in “Jesus Cockadoodle Christ”—and to whom Proulx is so obliged that at the end of the novel, when Jack, having drowned, is lying in his coffin, she cannot bear to kill him off:

A roar and screaming. Some stumbled back, some surged forward. Quoyle pushed from the kitchen, saw a knot of arms reaching to help gray Jack back to the present, water dribbling from his mouth with each wrack of his chest. And across the room heard Bunny shout “He woke up!”

A novelist may do with her characters what she will, but in the resurrection of Buggit I found the clearest cause of a reluctance I had been feeling all the way through The Shipping News, the reluctance you feel when someone you scarcely know puts his arm around your shoulder and pushes you toward the door. The Shipping News is the very skillful work of a writer who has given her novel the shape of comedy, given it comic characters with comic names and comical utterances, and who places her characters in comic situations, but who is still uncertain whether the reader will detect that this is comedy. This has less to do with the dark substratum of much that is funny here—sex abuse and the general wrack of lives and the peculiarly personal violence of small-town existence—than it does with the narrator, whose voice is elliptical, often poetic and oddly detached. At times reading The Shipping News is a little like watching a silent film comedy accompanied by the wrong musical score: The Gold Rush with music by Stravinsky. Every now and then incongruous harmonies do occur, but the overall effect is puzzling.

In The Shipping News, as in Postcards, Proulx is a powerfully descriptive writer. She is drawn by landscape and by work, rather than by character, and in this trait she resembles no one so much as Wallace Stegner. Set against the passion with which Proulx sees the natural world, and against the intricacy with which she explains the labors men and women impose upon themselves, her characters seem relatively unadorned, plain people marked by reluctance, although their plainness is exaggerated by the poetic extravagance of the narrator's voice. If you hearken mainly to the narrator's accent and rhythms in Postcards, for instance, you will scarcely feel the tragedy that overwhelms Loyal Blood, the farmboy who accidentally kills his girlfriend and is dislodged by that act into a lifetime of drifting. There is an optimistic amplitude to the narration in Postcards that has been replaced in The Shipping News with an impatient but often beautiful terseness. Here is a moment early in the book, just before Quoyle's parents commit suicide:

It was spring. Sodden ground, smell of earth. The wind beat through twigs, gave off a greenish odor like struck flints. Colts-foot in the ditches; furious dabs of tulips stuttering in
gardens. Slanting rain. Clock hands leapt to pellucid evenings. The sky riffled like cards in a chalk-white hand.

Proulx writes with unending fascination about the sea off Newfoundland. “The ocean twitched like a vast cloth spread over snakes.” “The long horizon, the lunging, clotted sea like a swinging door opening, closing, opening.”

Against that staccato poetry, which never quite fills out syntactically or rhythmically, there come the voices of Newfoundland, like Buggit's, talking about a fishing season full of quotas and allocations. “Einstein couldn't understand it. They've made a fucking cockadoodle mess out of it, those twits in Ottawa who don't know a lumpfish from their own arse.” Or Pretty's, talking about a rock off Quoyle's Point called The Comb. “Twelve points onto that rock. Or used to be. Was named after the old style of brimstone matches. They used to come in combs, all one piece along the bottom, twelve to a comb. You'd break one off. Sulfur stink. They called them stinkers—a comb of stinkers.” Or the harbormaster's, whose name is Diddy Shovel, talking about a storm at sea:

You never hear the wind after that without you remember that banshee moan, remember the watery mountains, crests torn into foam, the poor ship groaning. Bad enough at any time, but this was the deep of winter and the cold was terrible, the ice formed on rail and rigging until vessels was carrying thousands of pounds of ice. The snow drove so hard it was just a roar of white outside these windows. Couldn't see the street below. The sides of the houses to the northwest was plastered a foot thick with snow as hard as steel.

As for Quoyle, he tends to think in headlines: MAN WALKS ACROSS PARKING LOT AT MODERATE PACE, MAN WITH HANGOVER LISTENS TO BOAT-BUILDER PROJECT VARIABLES, REPORTER LICKS EDITOR'S BOOT.

Innumerable are the novels that make the human heart an abstract place, without work, without topography, with only the gravity provided by the emotions and the mind brooding upon them. That is not Proulx's way. She is obsessed by what people know about the worlds they inhabit. In Postcards you learn from Loyal Blood more than you could imagine wanting to know about how to remove human scent from coyote traps or how to find dinosaur tracks. In The Shipping News the subjects are fishing, maritime economy, boat-building, the running of a local newspaper, Canadian politics, yacht upholstery, harbor management and the curious tongue spoken by Newfoundlanders, not to mention knots.

There is a specificity to this world that allays the vague rumblings of Quoyle's heart, still stricken by the worthless Petal Bear, whose last act, before she died, was to sell her daughters to a man in Connecticut. As the novel slides forward, Quoyle is drawn closer and closer to a woman named Wavey Prowse, whom Proulx describes, not unkindly, as “an erasing of the human, female form,” and in the end he marries her. Yet that isn't where the main current of the novel lies. There are other currents—the story of Quoyle's aunt, Hamm, the stories of Bunny and Sunshine, the sagas of the Buggit and Quoyle families, the roiling life of The Gammy Bird. But The Shipping News is really a novel about a man growing into his work, growing into a place he cannot have without the work he does there.

It is Hamm who brings Quoyle back to Killick-Claw:

Fifteen she was when they had moved from Quoyle's Point, 17 when the family left for the States, a drop in the tides of Newfoundlanders away from the outports, islands and hidden coves, rushing like water away from isolation, illiteracy, trousers made of worn upholstery fabric, no teeth, away from contorted thoughts and rough hands, from desperation.
She, too, has been freed to return by death, by the death of her lover, a woman named Warren, after whom she has named her dog. The Aunt's return to Killick-Claw and to Quoyle's Point is a form of defiance. When she was young, she was raped by her brother, Quoyle's father. Her first act upon returning to the house where she was raised is to dump his ashes down the privy. “The thought that she, that his own son and grandchildren, would daily void their bodily wastes on his remains a thing that only she would know.” The sole remaining ancestor on the Point is a crazy old cousin who hexes the house with charms made from knots, knots left lying across thresholds. The cousin tells Quoyle the secret Hamm has carried with her since her childhood. The undoing of that memory—the acknowledging of it—is just one of the redemptive surges that sweep across this novel as it hastens to its end, when all must be redeemed.

The past in this place was hard, hard times, as Pretty says, and the present is the time that will seem hard before long. Every comedy is underpinned with tragedy, and in this comedy the tragedy is everywhere, in the news, down the privy, on the seafloor, in the graveyards. And yet curiously I felt, when I finished The Shipping News, as though the resonance of both the comedy and the tragedy had leaked away. For all the precision of Proulx's writing, for all her “sky the straw-colored ichor that seeps from a wound,” there is, in her ellipses, in her terseness, room for a vacuum to arise.

Reading this novel, I began to think of the ways in which a reader is led, or misled, by a narrator's affections, which are often impossible to conceal. I realized that I could not detect this narrator's affections, besides her love for the play of water and light against the land. In The Shipping News the characters seem limited, not enlarged, by what goes unspoken. Even Quoyle. Despite the evident pleasures of this book, I found myself listening hard for an accumulating echo, looking, in emotional and dramatic terms, for what Proulx calls “the reeling gyroscopic effect of the earth's spin that creates wind and flow of weather, the countering backwashes and eddies of storms.” But I did not hear it or find it or feel it.

Ronald Rompkey (review date September 1994)

[In the following positive review, Rompkey praises The Shipping News for its “poetic power.”]

E. Annie Proulx's The Shipping News is a rich novel set in Newfoundland and strikingly free of the conventions that often define it in fiction. Here we find none of the vaunted inner strength, none of the preoccupation with the elements, none of the sentimental self-justification for living there in the first place, none of the maudlin religiosity, no celebration of those fine rugged shores, no self-conscious literary language. Instead, there is a powerful sense of a place caught in the dilemma posed by modernity. The novel is a poetic triumph, and its triumph lies in the reworking of the pastoral.

The pastoral is as old as Virgil's Georgics. It concentrates on the slow exploration and cataloging of rural pursuits from the point of view of a visitor or outsider who is somehow troubled, dissatisfied or weary of his own lot. Such a man is Quoyle (we never learn his first name), born in Brooklyn of Newfoundland ancestry, the holder of countless dead-end jobs, and one of life's failures. As his nautical and suggestively allegorical name implies, his role in life is to be walked on. Quoyle is a misfit, a “damp loaf” of a body who, as a boy, cherishes the idea that he has been deposited into the wrong family and that somewhere out there his “real people” long for him. He drifts into newspapering, writes petty local news, ignores the world at large and waits for life to begin. Along the way, he marries a vendor of burglar alarms who, after a month of desire, begins to offer her considerable sexual abilities elsewhere. Two daughters are born.

To this point, the novel seems destined for melodrama. But when Quoyle's Newfoundland-born father adds to his son's misery by committing suicide, he first leaves a suicide message on Quoyle's answering machine, only to be interrupted in mid-farewell when the tape runs out. At once, a note of humorous detachment is introduced, and the novel takes off into some sphere of its own. Quoyle's wife departs with a child.
pornographer and perishes on the highway, leaving him a cuckold, a widower and a single parent all at the same time. And now, with the two children and his aunt, a woman haunted by her own demons, he takes his first risk: he goes to Newfoundland to start again in a “fresh” place he has glimpsed only in the family album.

Through Quoyle, we are introduced slowly to late twentieth-century life straining to stay in touch with itself. He first seeks out the family house abandoned for forty years, “half ruined, isolated, the walls and doors of it pumiced by stony lives and dead generations.” He dances on the edge of a society where his experience as a former distributor of vending machine candy or as an all-night clerk in a convenience store are useless, for this society seems to work according to some unseen rhythm. Thus, he struggles to restore the house, but lacks the builder's skill. He buys a boat that looks fine, but fails to measure up to local standards. His point of entry comes when he is given a job at the cranky local newspaper. The paper features a women's page produced by a bachelor, sexual assault stories written by one of the victims and accounts of car wrecks to be contributed by Quoyle, whose late wife was beheaded in one. It gives him an uneasy feeling, “the feeling of standing on a playground watching others play games whose rules he didn't know.”

Slowly, he discovers the history of the Quoyles, a family of “wrackers,” and comes to grips with the place. The pastoral world takes hold. We encounter people who view their lives through a veil of what William Empson has called an “ironical humour” giving expression to a sense of social injustice, waste and human limitation. We are introduced to the skills of house building and boatmaking, weather and sea patterns, sewing and stitching, foodways and social rituals, the waning life of the fisherman, and a rough, uncompromising language. All of this is played out through the cycle of the four seasons.

The preoccupation with lore wisdom and knowing suggests the loss of something. The novel becomes a portrait of a place where, as Goldsmith wrote under not dissimilar circumstances, “wealth accumulates, and men decay.” One character sums it up this way:

It's chasing the money and buying plastic speedboats and snowmobiles and funny dogs from the mainland. It's hanging around the bars, it's murders and stealing. It's tearing off your clothes and pretending you're loony. It used to be a happy life here. See, it was joyful. It was a joyful life.

Annie Proulx's achievement is to capture a moment when joy is suddenly glimpsed from afar. The novel balances on the brink of an uncertain future: accumulation of knowledge, custom and human intercourse seem suddenly at odds with what is to come.

Through Quoyle comes the awareness of a powerful sense of change, much of it brought about by the unseen hand of government and the enticements of big oil, and the newspaper that Quoyle has been given to manage by the end of the novel mirrors that chance. “Now we got to deal with Crock-Pots and consumer ratings, asphalt driveways, lotteries, fried chicken franchises, Mint Royale coffee and gourmet shops, all that stuff,” mutters one of his colleagues. And Quoyle, having escaped the encroachments of modernity in the United States, finds himself staring them in the face again. His contemplation of these circumstances gives the novel a poetic power, worked out in an elliptical style that has all the compression of a long exchange on electronic mail. Where do we go to seek balm? Back to the land? If so, back to whose land?

Jane Gardam (review date 25 March 1995)

[In the following review of Heart Songs and Other Stories, Gardam compliments Proulx's literary skill, but finds her stories “unconsciously derivative” of earlier American writers.]
I don't know what to make of E. Annie Proulx. This, her first book, is rumoured to have been found on the slush pile of her American publisher in 1988. Her first novel, *Postcards*, in 1991 caused a lot of excitement and won the PEN/Faulkner prize, the first time for a woman. In 1993 came *The Shipping News*, hailed as the great American contemporary novel of Atlantic coast life. It won every international award you can think of and then a Pulitzer prize.

And here she is now on the dust-jacket of *Heart Songs*, short stories published here for the first time. She looks delightfully whacky and unliterary and leans upon a stave, a jolly cross between Richmal Crompton's William and Friar Tuck. In a minute she'll be stomping up the mountain again to her guns and rods.

The curious thing is that while she writes about an astonishing, secret New England, land of the remote farm settlements, deepest carmine in tooth and hoof and claw and not to be found in the guide-books, there is a great sense of having been here before. There are Faulknerian obsessions. The blood of game birds stains the snow. Killing deer rifles flash and snap. Great Hemingwayian animals hang from trees their ‘body cavity black in the moonlight.’ The fox slinks endlessly and instinctively towards its prey as the old stagers stalk theirs ‘out on the Antler,’ brood on the feuds of ancient familial enemies a bit more like *Lorna Doone* (dare one say *Cold Comfort Farm*) than one would expect of 20th-century Vermont. And urban incomers well known to Mary McCarthy, Alison Lurie, John Updike are buying up all the old homesteads, patronising the natives, considering they own the graveyard, discovering carvings on the rock which they identify as Indian when it was only grandad. They ask kindly how the hay is shaping up of people who don't grow hay. A ghastly drunken fishing expedition into ‘the sink holes of the Yellow Bogs’ is less searing, rather dottier but very like Raymond Carver.

E. Annie Proulx can write of course. Very well indeed. She has a passionate feeling for country matters, for weather, especially if it's hard, for hard living, hard folk and she cares about the sinful and the seedy and the poor and the disappointed. She describes the minute, unspoken ritual events in these lives—the pot of fat pork slung on the stove at dawn, the ice forming on the blue barrel of the gun. She is very funny, as funny as she is in *The Shipping News*. A posh academic comes to call on Aunt who sits eating pie in Atlantic Ocean Farm. The academic, Mrs Moon-Azure, has legs that come out of the car as ‘straight as celery stalks.’ A New York wife—a very good portrait: ‘her animal brown hair long and tangled,’ poor soul—comes to the country to help her sanity, goes plumb off her rocker, puts the telephone in the sink and pours boiling water on it, sits down to eat a mouse.

In the facts of these tales I totally believe. I believe in the mouse, in the sex-starved truck-driver obsessed by vanilla because it smells of the criminal lush who is to destroy him. I believe in the sad old farmer trapped into marriage by an evil young wife he once abused as a child and who now co-habits with her brother. I even believe in the murderous vendetta between families and the shoot-out in Stone City, a nasty ruined farmstead in the brambles where murder was done and continues to be done to the third generation (‘That was Floyd. The one who got the electric chair’).

But for all this and in spite of her good dialogue and distilled construction—they are like little novels some of these—and the dazzle of her landscape I find these stories quite unconsciously derivative, and even in the welter of horrors and hatreds rather ordinary.

B. A. St. Andrews (review date spring 1995)

*[In the following positive review, St. Andrews evaluates the strengths of The Shipping News.]*
Lovers of language have awaited *The Shipping News* with an excitement comparable to that greeting each serialized installment of a Dickens novel making slow passage across the Atlantic. That is because of Annie Proulx's writing: uncompromising, uncommon, unrelenting, unassailably precise. The expectations established by Proulx's first novel, *Postcards*, and her short-story collection *Heart Songs and Other Stories* have been satisfied amply by this triumphant second novel.

It is language, after all, which triumphs in Proulx's book. First, its postmodern episodic hero Quoyle is himself a writer; we follow this peculiar pilgrim's progress with growing interest and increasing affection. Second, the book's language is alive. Its syllables urge and slice and spin the reader like a dervish wind. Salty, luscious, mind-grabbing, chewable words and phrases like drenty, Nutbeem, and the terrible Nightmare Isles energize the people and events.

No avid reader can help but be drawn around and down into language's whirlpool. In like manner, Killick-Claw's peculiar newspaper *The Gammy Bird* breathes life into the daily catalogues of sex crimes, port reports, car wrecks, and local secrets. As befits a novel set in the Maritime Provinces, the sea serves as the ruling deity, and the idea of drowning works on both physical and metaphysical levels.

PEN/Faulkner Award winner Proulx's second novel builds on the close observation and the cold, calculated lyricism made manifest in her earlier works. *The Shipping News* reaffirms the power of unique idiomatic speech, of characterization, of love, of land- and seascape, and of communion among us, yet the novel's form is fractured. The knots which provide each chapter's decoration serve, perhaps, as a key metaphor. This sometimes icy, often grotesque, always quirky work ties us tightly inside a love knot: “Water may be older than light … the wind be imprisoned in a bit of knotted string. And it may be that love sometimes occurs without pain or misery.”

It may be. Nothing remains unqualified in Proulx country. And after our meeting Aunt Agnis Hamm and Quoyle's daughters Bunny and Sunshine, after witnessing the waterlogged reprise of Jack Buggit, after watching Wavey Prowse enfold Quoyle, we may find Proulxian love to be a fixed adjective among literary critics. This love is more domestic than exotic; it seems born of hardship, born from hearts battered by wave upon wave of despair. Such love finds, despite all former experience and against all odds, safe harbor.

If that vaguely reminds us of Flannery O'Connor's idea of grace, it should. As in O'Connor's work, Proulx reveals how redemptive love or grace hovers over us like the angels, unaware. Comparable in these writers too are the exactness of idiomatic phrasing, their use of dark, rolling humor, and their deft, uncompromising characterizations.

All this to suggest that, within the unsettling elements of Proulx's masterwork, some readers may sense the lurking, smiling shadow of Flannery O'Connor. Given that lofty standard, it is little wonder that *The Shipping News* has a wondrous string of lights—the Pulitzer Prize, the National Book Award, the *Irish Times* International Fiction Prize—flashing around its name.

Ellen Akins (review date 30 April 1995)

*In the following review, Akins offers a generally positive assessment of Heart Songs and Other Stories, noting that Proulx's prose is “often inspired.”*

If you want to meet someone named John or Mary or David, who has good teeth (or at least most of them), a decent haircut and low body fat, who'd rather sit on a toilet than piss off the porch, who might walk in the woods without taking a gun, who uses deodorant and has a fair grasp of standard English, then don't come in.
If, on the other hand, you're looking for Netta or Albina or Albro, Eno or Snipe or Leverd, and you like 'em battered and broke and unbathed, this is the book for you. It's not pretty: “Some kind of subject,” as the rare outsider says in one of these stories, “the rural downtrodden.” There are, that is, a few people here from “away,” and a mighty suspicious lot they are gentrifying some run-down piece of property, buying up the locals' old junk and hanging it on the walls, outfitting themselves a la L. L. Bean and calling themselves hunters, or trying to lose themselves (or find themselves—who knows?) in the gritty misery of the place—in short, slumming.

This collection of stories [Heart Songs] by E. Annie Proulx is not a new book, but it may well be new to you. It is Proulx's first book, augmented with two previously unpublished stories, and its reappearance offers a second chance to those of us who missed it the first time around—the many readers Proulx has acquired since publication of her prize-winning novels Postcards and The Shipping News. What's worth noting, though, is that this isn't the Annie Proulx of The Shipping News. That spirited wit reporting from the fringe, making the most of the worst with her wildly exuberant language, is not much in evidence here. Nor is this, really, the Proulx of Postcards, manic documenter of the dour and the bleak. In both novels, the dark and the darker, there's adventure—in the jampacked if meandering plots, and in the prose—whereas these stories, for the most part, stay put. They stay close to convention in language and form, and they never stray far from one perspective on one poor sort of life.

All of these stories take place, as far as I can tell, in rural Vermont and New Hampshire. Proulx has a remarkable eye for everything grotesque about abject poverty and ignorance, but she's by no means out to make fun of these people she describes as “all suet and mouth” or “a hump of steel-colored hair, a congealed expression, oily hands picking over a strew of metal parts” or “powder blue stretch pants and golden eyes in a sharp little fox face” or “fat, richly, rolling fat” or “one of those hard grey men who ate deer meat in every season and could fix whatever was broken again and again until nothing was left of the original machine but its function.” They're animated by grudges and feuds, they sleep with their sisters or fathers, they're prone to freak accidents and spontaneous couplings, they live in trailers, drink too much, smoke too much, look twice their age. Proulx's sympathies seem to be with them, and now and then I wonder why, if she is sympathetic to these characters, there isn't more to their lives—anything beyond a grudge or a feud or a momentary lust that might compel a person to go on. It's a painfully constricted vein of realism she's working here.

That said, there are very good stories in the collection: one about an old man losing his farm to his conniving young wife and her brother; one about a local trying to teach a tourist to hunt; and another, new and maybe a bit self-reflective, about a photographer angling for arty pictures of a pitiful local woman. The writing, though it's not the weird joy ride of The Shipping News, is often inspired; you can't finish this book without breathing the air in these places, seeing the faces, smelling the kitchen or the barn or the dirt, feeling the dark of the woods. So finally, whatever you may think of Proulx's rural downtrodden—if, like me, you look for a little leavening—there's always the sense of this gifted writer at work, going places, to make the visit worthwhile.

Sybil Steinberg (essay date 3 June 1996)

[In the following essay, Steinberg provides an overview of Proulx's life, career, and body of work upon the publication of Accordion Crimes.]

Mention E. Annie Proulx's name and readers flash an instant visual map of where she can be found.

Those who shivered through Newfoundland's stark climate in The Shipping News are certain that she lives there. Yet the landscape of failing farms and dilapidated trailers in Heart Songs and Postcards prove that rural New England is essential to her frame of reference. (Indeed, she lived in Vermont for over a decade.)
Postcards, however, also plunged across the map of America, as does her eagerly awaited new novel, Accordion Crimes, just out from Scribner. In this latest work, the whole country serves as her canvas, a chiaroscuro mural of ethnic enclaves that includes urban ghettos, prairie homesteads, sharecropper's shacks and depressed factory towns.

The characters in Accordion Crimes are immigrants or descendants of immigrants from Sicily, Germany, Mexico, France by way of Canada, Africa by way of slavery, Poland, Norway. Their stories are connected by a battered green accordion brought to North America by a Sicilian musician who meets a violent end. Thereafter, it is passed from stranger to stranger on an odyssey that encompasses a century of social history.

It turns out that Proulx is as essentially roofless as her many characters in Accordion Crimes, as peripatetic as her protagonist, Loyal Blood, in Postcards. She knows the country well, having traversed it repeatedly to research her books, and the allure of the unknown continues to pull at her. She has finally settled, however, in a snug pine-log cabin in a tiny (pop. 100) town in Wyoming.

What is Annie Proulx doing in Wyoming?

This historic old mining town on the edge of the old frontier is exactly right for her, Proulx says. In fact, all her books, with the exception of Heart Songs, were written in Wyoming. A grant from the Ucross Foundation, to write Postcards, first brought her here, and she realized “what an enormous help the sight lines were, and the room to walk. There's something about being able to shoot your eyes very far ahead. In northern New England, the trees got in the way,” she says. “For me, this land is full of ghosts and spirits. It speaks to me more than any other place I've ever been.” She could not make a permanent move while her mother was in ill health in New Hampshire. After her death a year ago, Proulx packed up and headed for the wide open spaces.

Elements that might daunt others—the rugged weather, for example—make Proulx exult. On the last day of April, snow still glistens on the mountain peaks that embrace the spectacularly scenic valley, and wind-driven snow squalls animate the air. An outdoorswoman to her solid bones, Proulx counts cross-country skiing among her necessary delights. The details of hunting, fishing and trapping in her books come squarely from her own capabilities and enjoyment. She is a tall, energetic woman who wears her curly hair short and her black-rimmed glasses with sturdy efficiency. She walks in long strides; talks in a torrent that swings between vehemence and exuberance; laughs in great gusts of mirth, mainly at life's ironies; dresses in generic workclothes. Fashion is probably the only word in the dictionary that does not resonate for her. Writing makes her happy.

The opportunity to settle down has been a belated blessing. The oldest of five sisters, Edna Annie Proulx was born in Connecticut in 1935, but her family moved often, as her father, of French-Canadian extraction, pursued his career as a textile executive. Her mother, whose New England family roots go back to the early 1600s, was an artist who trained Proulx to cultivate an observant eye.

During years of boring jobs (most of which she won't talk about) and three marriages (ditto), Proulx wrote magazine articles and how-to books to support herself, producing “an occasional short story” when she had the time. She finally saw those tales collected in Heart Songs (Scribner's, 1988). With her two novels, Postcards (1992) and The Shipping News (1993), Proulx won, in dazzling succession, enough prizes to give her financial stability. But not intellectual complacency.

Proulx's view of life is unsparing, and social questions intrigue her. She knew for some time that she wanted to write a book about immigrants, “about the cost of coming from one culture to another. I wanted to get a sense of that looming over culture that demands of newcomers that they give up their language, their music, their food, their names. I began to wonder: where did our taste for changing our identity come from? Was it the immigrant experience where the rite of passage was to redefine yourself as an American?”
Yet she knew from the beginning that she didn’t want to write an historical novel “plodding onwards from 1890 to the present.” Her solution was to compose the narrative of four interlinking parts. “There is the one overarching story that covers 100 years” (the accordion’s meanderings). “Within that are nine shorter stories,” each with a different immigrant group as focus. “Within that, there is an increasing multiplicity of shorter stories of intersecting lives” (members of each protagonist's family, through several generations); and “within that, tiny flash-forwards, fiction bites.” The latter are parenthetical asides, both tragic and funny, thumbnail sketches that sum up a marginal character's entire life in just a few words, introduce an element of surprise to the narrative and contribute to the “truncated, staccato effect” that Proulx desired.

“Instead of the river of time, you get a lawn sprinkler effect, a kind of jittery, jammed, off-balance feeling.” The characters in these brief sketches succumb to bizarre accidents and grotesque twists of fate. A man is killed by a boar running down a highway; a little girl playing in her yard has her arms sheared off by jagged metal roofing blown from a passing truck. “I wanted this mosaic of apparently random violence to exist within the sense of continuity,” she says.

The setting she created for her ethnic cameos—the wretchedly poor milltown of Random, Maine, the swampy marshland of Bayou Feroce, La.—were the catalysts to her imagination. The sense of place is paramount in her conception of story, “Everything that happens to characters comes welling out of the place. Even their definition of themselves, and a lot of this book is about the definition of self.”

The fine accretion of concrete details make these fictional places as real as any location on a map. Proulx digs into the research part of her work with the zeal of a hunting dog. “I was an historian before I became a novelist,” she says. Though she dropped out of Maine’s Colby College in the 1950s, over a decade later she earned her B.A. from the University of Vermont and, in 1973, an M.A. in history from Sir George Williams University in Montreal (now Concordia University); she lacked only the dissertation for her Ph.D. when she quit to become a journalist.

To research Postcards, her first novel, she went back and forth across America, stopping in all the states where her homeless protagonist worked and lived. “That was my road book,” she says. Newfoundland, which she visited on a fishing trip, became the setting of The Shipping News after it struck her like a coup de foudre. There, too, long sight lines pulled her in, though she found the sea “a distraction.” She explored the island and pored over maps, mirroring the eccentric place names with her own inventions. She absorbed the Newfoundland dialect by going to bed every night with a vernacular dictionary.

When she decided to use the accordion as the instrument of fate in Accordion Crimes, Proulx was astonished to discover that there were practically no books on its history in the U.S. What she did find was “a huge stack of court cases” involving accordions, the kind of petty suits that had to do with class and economics, the bickering that often obsesses outsiders in society. Immigrants, whose “continuity is reduced to genes, whose past is rejected, thrown away and despised” were also the people most likely to play the accordion. “It's the immigrant instrument, because it's light, it's small, it's portable and it doesn't get out of tune,” Proulx says.

Her research is effortlessly integrated into the story, and only the long acknowledgements section, listing more than 20 accordion scholars and musicians, suggests how widely she pursued information. Among others, she thanks the man who told her how one would hide money in an accordion. The thread that ties the narrative together is the reader's knowledge that the green-button accordion holds 000 secreted in its bellows. The final irony of its totally wasted beneficence is a typical Proulx touch.

Among those who contributed information were her eldest son, Jonathan Lang, a sound engineer; her daughter-in-law, Gail, a blues singer; and her son Morgan Lang, a student of ethnomusicology. Another son, Gillis Lang, is a college student. And for the first time in any of her books, Proulx's dedication includes her daughter Muffy Clarkson, never mentioned before even in her official bio. Proulx responds coolly to
questions about this belated introduction. “We've lived apart for many years, not through any enmity but through a family situation. I recently rediscovered her. I love her dearly. It seems a good time to include her with her brothers,” she says, then segues to another topic. One does not probe further.

Raising her three sons as a single mother was the factor that limited Proulx's ability to produce fiction. Over several years, Tom Jenks at *Esquire* published a number of her stories. After Jenks went to Scribner's, he suggested collecting them into the book that became *Heart Songs*. Proulx was “between agents at the time”—she had a lot of them, she says, until she “got lucky,” and connected with her current agent, Liz Darhansoff. When Jenks suggested adding a novel to the contract, “I could have cared less, so I said sure, go ahead.”

Jenks left Scribner's before the stories were edited, and John Glusman, “one of the best editors I've ever had,” handled publication of *Heart Songs*. When Glusman, too, exited Scribner's, Barbara Grossman saw *Postcards* through, and published *The Shipping News* (Proulx has called her “the editor of my dreams”) before she left for Viking. Now Proulx is in editor Nan Graham's hands, and she calls herself fortunate again, though she finds the situation somewhat amusing. “All those marvelous editors shifted away and all that remained in place was Scribner's—and even that went through a corporate takeover and the loss of the apostrophe s,” she comments wryly.

In the flux of editor's departures, Proulx's work has remained constant. *The Shipping News*, the story of Quoyle, a newspaperman of mediocre record who has failed at marriage, livelihood and life until he experiences the thawing of his heart in the unlikely terrain of frost-bound Newfoundland, was greeted by ecstatic reviews. The prizes—among them an NBA and a Pulitzer—began rolling in, and the book sold more than one million copies in hardcover and paper. Proulx now needs a secretary to handle her mail, and she is besieged by requests for speaking engagements.

Meanwhile, *Accordion Crimes* is a BOMC selection, and a tour beckons in June and July—after which, she claims, she is “never going to do it again. The long sustained silences and empty spaces that are necessary to writing are harder and harder to get,” she says with a weary shrug.

It is likely that her future books will each consider a new aspect of the world. She has several in her mind at the moment; research materials are already arranged on “project shelves” in her bookcases. Proulx reserves her most scornful opinions for “this very unpleasant trend that one should only write about one's personal experience. That's the worst piece of advice ever given to students. If only people would write about what intrigues them, what they don't know, would do a little research, would become questioning as well as observant. That's the pleasure in writing” she says.

For Annie Proulx's readers, the pleasure is reciprocal.

Bharati Mukherjee (review date 9 June 1996)

*[In the following review, Mukherjee praises Accordion Crimes, calling the work Proulx's “most audacious to date.”]*

I fell under E. Annie Proulx's storytelling spell some six or seven years ago when I chanced on *Heart Songs* and read all 11 stories in the collection at one sitting. Proulx's language sparkled, her vision stung. Although I shared nothing in terms of ethnicity and upbringing with the New England characters, I found myself in profound empathy with their harsh hungers and demonic hopes. I still wonder why that brilliant first book didn't win Proulx literary prizes.
Since then she has, of course, written two acclaimed novels, *Postcards* and *The Shipping News*, and won all the major honors, including the PEN/Faulkner Award, the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award.

Her new novel, *Accordion Crimes*, is her most audacious to date. It opens in a Sicilian village in the last decade of the last century. Except for one amber-eyed romantic who makes accordions for a living, all the villagers are schemers, gossips, cynics and malcontents. The accordion-maker dreams of running away to “La Merica,” a fecund New World country where everybody, even a poor Sicilian like him, is said to have a fair shot at wealth and happiness. His idea of happiness is to own a music store in America. The only way he can earn enough to own the store is to get to America, work odd jobs and play accordion music for a fee. To this end, he sets about crafting a special instrument. In a hut that once sheltered dying goats, he whittles Circassian walnut wood for the accordion's case, saws brass for its grille, polishes bone for its two rows of buttons. He cuts the throat of a kid and tans its hide with ash lime and tallow so he can have leather supple enough for the accordion’s 18-fold bellows. He works patiently, obsessively, creating a green, gleaming instrument of eerie beauty and mournful voice:

Rivulets of light washed mother-of-pearl, the nineteen polished bone buttons, winked a pair of small oval mirrors rimmed in black paint, eyes seeking eyes, seeking the poisonous stare of anyone who possessed malocchio, eager to reflect the bitter glance back at the glancer.

Does this accordion possess such fairy-tale properties of menace and magic that it can drive one of its owners to murder and another to suicide? Or is Proulx delivering a brand of “moral” fiction in which philandering, self-absorbed wife-deserters meet with bloody comeuppances? Or is the accordion just a writerly gimmick for smoothing over clumsy transition tracks?

All of the above, and so what?

The emigrant-hero of *Accordion Crimes* is the accordion, not the accordion-maker. To make an inanimate object the protagonist is to take a huge risk, but Proulx pulls it off. The accordion makes its trans-Atlantic journey as the accordion-maker's luggage. In America the accordion is lost, stolen, pawned, tossed out with the garbage. It covers many states, and it intrudes on many still-unmelted ethnic ghettos, always adapting its voice to the new owner's accent and interest. Finally, after 100 restless years, it suffers fatal damage at the hands (or rather the soiled feet) of toddler vandals.

With Proulx as biographer, the accordion's life story becomes more than an occasion for dazzling displays of writing. True, the reader is hustled past vignette after brutal vignette of desperate immigrant life: Sicilians, Cajuns and Basques in Louisiana, Germans in North Dakota, Poles in Illinois, Mexicans in Texas, Quebecers in Maine. Not all the vignettes are equally moving. But Proulx proves her thesis with bleak persistence: America hates its non-Anglo immigrants.

Her imagery is so ornate and yet so precise that it renders some of the vignettes unnecessary. For instance, any emigrant who visualizes New Orleans as a “scimitar-shaped city fitted in the curve of the great river where moss hung from trees like masculine beards, and tea-colored water of the bayous harbored alligators and ebon people nonchalantly strolled streets, where the dead lay aboveground in marble beds and men walked holding pistols” is surely setting himself up to be conned or disenchanted.

All the same, when disillusionment with La Merica hits the Sicilian accordion-maker, it hits with a lynch mob's violence and velocity. Having been rounded up and taken to a prison along with other Sicilians and Italians following the shooting of New Orleans' chief of police, he now sees the approaching mob “with searing clarity, a loose thread on a coat, mud-spattered trouser legs, a logging chain in a big hand, the red shine of the engorged faces. …” Next comes the “barrage of bullets.” It fells him in the women's restroom of the prison, where he had sought to hide.
In Proulx's world, assimilation is mimicry of Anglo xenophobia. This is the fate that befalls Silvano, the accordion-maker's 11-year-old son. Anglos beat him, cuff him, box him, press lighted cigars to his lips. And when they let him go, he burns with such hatred for his Sicilian father who couldn't learn "American ways" that he reinvents himself as "Bob Joe" and signs on as deckhand on a boat named Texas Star.

The character I found most affecting is Dolor Gagnon, born in Maine to a French father and Franco-Canadian mother, abandoned at age 2, renamed "Frank" by an orphanage director and brutally weaned from his ethnic heritage. Dolor/Frank is, ironically, the novel's iconic American. He is fully assimilated, which means he has had "his name taken from him, the language lost, his religion changed, the past unknown, the person he had been for the first two years of life erased."

In Proulx's blighted America, immigrants can invent new selves, but they cannot revert to their original selves. Frank can change his name back to Dolor, but he can't reclaim his genetic birthright: Quebec music, superstitions, vices and myths. He makes his pilgrimage to Quebec, searches out and finds accordion music at its purest and unearthliest:

He wanted to play that music, music that belonged to him by blood inheritance, but could not learn it because he didn't speak French, because he lived in a place where the music was no longer admired or played. …

He is the proverbial stranger in his hometown. His search for his roots leaves him feeling alone, inadequate, suicidal. The end Proulx provides Dolor is horrific.

Like all fairy tales, this one charms with its marvels and scares with its excesses: Walk-on characters may be impaled in freak accidents; just as easily, they may happen on 00 bills on sidewalks. Even the imagery can be ornately grotesque. "The Malefoot family … was a tangled clan of nodes and connecting rhizomes that spread over the continent like the fila of a great fungus."

Accordion Crimes is a thrilling read. I wish Proulx had kept the green instrument intact for 200 years instead of just 100.

Ellen Akins (review date 23 June 1996)

[In the following review, Akins commends Proulx's "overwhelming verisimilitude" in Accordion Crimes.]

E. Annie Proulx does not repeat herself, which could be a curse, since every book she writes will not be The Shipping News—a novel so widely read and well-loved that it would be tough to follow. But tough is Proulx's strong suit and, as it turns out, the curse of repetition is for other writers—those with but one or two puny stories to tell in the same old long-suffering style. What might fill another writer's novel is dispatched in a page or two by Proulx in her new book, Accordion Crimes, and nothing is slighted in the process.

The plot, such as it is, follows the fortunes of an accordion through the lives of those into whose hands it passes—and a remarkable and varied lot of lives that is. Sounds like a gimmick? Yes, but the theme is handled so well and ultimately becomes so irrelevant, let's just call it a device and be done with it. What Proulx is really after here—by way of the little green, two-row button accordion's passage from person to person and place to place—is an anecdotal history of immigration and prejudice in 20th century America. Despite the bright light of the author's wit and her transcendent rendering of music in prose, it's a long, dark story.
Accordion Crimes begins with the instrument's maker in Sicily around the turn of the century and moves with him and his young son to “La Merica,” the land of opportunity, where he dreams of one day opening a music store. Chance and a deceptive fellow traveller divert him from his intended destination, New York, to New Orleans, where he finds foul accommodations and backbreaking work. Just as he's finally managed to wangle his first commission for making an accordion, the immigrant falls victim to mob violence fueled by anti-Italian hatred.

Goodbye Louisiana and hello Iowa! After a string of events, the green accordion turns up again, this time in the company of three German homesteaders. They're a bit luckier than the accordion maker, but not for long. In the land of opportunity, everyone's got someone to hate, and the Kaiser's war-mongering leading up to World War I ensures that it will be the Germans this time.

The accordion next turns up with Mexicans in Texas, French Canadians in Maine, Cajuns on the Gulf of Mexico and descendants of African slaves from Vanilla, Miss., to Chicago. Then it turns up with a Pole, a Basque and a Norwegian. And every hard-luck story is drawn with such a profligacy of detail as to make Dickens look restrained.

Proulx isn't content to tell us, for instance, about a peripheral character's extracurricular success, a photograph featured on the cover of Life magazine. She also tells us that the student at the bottom of the human crush in the famous photo of a phone booth is a pole-vaulter. It's not enough that we know every piece of furniture collected for resale by another character; we learn that among the desks are many drawers that have been clawed by the nails of executives listening to bad news on the telephone. People come and go, but never without a quick, parenthetical account of what's in store for them. And then there are the lists—of diseases, small towns, colors of horses, symptoms, purchases, furnishings.

None of this is necessary, but it adds up to an overwhelming verisimilitude, the sense of a crowded and particular reality that these characters inhabit. As stringently unsentimental as Proulx is, she nonetheless evokes an odd pathos—an elegiac feeling for an expansive idea of America frittered away in a million petty ways.

What's beautiful, though—and what lifts this book above a grim documentary of sad lives, quashed dreams and lost identities—is the music in it. Here, Octave the Cajun plays zydeco for a dancing crowd: “His fingers raced and hit, trills and violent tremolo, the notes vibrating with the force of his upward lunges, a left-hand trill going on and on and the heel of his right hand knocking hard and quick against a mass of buttons, a jam of close notes, discord that pulled yells from the dancers and then a sudden stop leaving everybody panting and laughing, and then—it's a trick, folks—right back into it again.”

A fiddler in Montmagny, Canada, draws from his instrument a “sound like a flock of birds, a flight of arrows striking all around him, from a growling, clenched-teeth mutter on the G and D strings to harmonic shrieks and stair-tumbling runs.” Beyond these moments, there is the music Proulx makes of her many voices, from the Sicilian to the Southerner, the logger to the rancher, the Mexican patriarch to the Polish grandmother, all sounded with perfect pitch.

“They say music cures crime,” one character observes along the way. Of course, it doesn't. But it does suggest a larger, more generous soul—one unsullied by the long history of criminal acts and American life so painstakingly described in Accordion Crimes.

Celia McGee (review date 24 June 1996)
Ours is a billboard culture. Giant signs may no longer line every highway, but we still like our labels writ large, especially when it comes to people. American advertisements for the self identify as well as pigeonhole in the ostensibly democratic, egalitarian society dreamt up by a bunch of Europeans fleeing tyranny, hierarchies and silly dress codes. Well, dream on. Take the accordion. Put that in American hands and they might as well be waving a sign that the snobbish will read as “Low Rent,” “Low Life,” “Lower Middle Class.”

Proulx being Proulx—the good-naturedly knotty The Shipping News was her last book—she's done her homework, and therein lies not exclusively the book's charm. Like an overeager academic, Proulx prefaces her narrative with lengthy acknowledgements citing every person and institution she consulted in the course of admittedly prodigious and far-flung research (with puppy-doggish personal notes thrown in). It's a gesture appropriate for nonfiction—and distinctly unsuitable for storytelling, meta- or not. Although not as bad as the kind of “thank you”s increasingly employed by striving fiction writers, announcing their influential friendships and grant-getting abilities, it would seem to signal an earnest, plodding book, and Accordion Crimes is far from that. So skim this intrusion, and marvel instead at how Proulx's powers of imagination and writing transcend the exposed mechanics of information gathering, sentence by weirdly gorgeous sentence: “All along the wet sand lay the wooden shoes of drowned Dutchmen and from the woods a bear emerged, head up into the wind, lured by the smell of burning sugar.”

With Accordion Crimes Proulx manages the saga of an object, a road novel with a musical instrument as protagonist instead of Neal Cassady or Huck Finn. The accordion journeys through time, place and human event: the bicycle-borne settlement of a German-speaking Iowa town, migratory “Frenchies” roving from bayou Louisiana to Canada's indistinct border with Maine, black and bluesy Chicago entering the Depression, Poles rolling pirogi and cigars, Basques sheepherding in Montana, downtrodden Mexicans living in a Southwest wrested from their ancestors. The travelogue offers a wonderful sort of “Proulx's Believe It or Not.” Myth is spun out of the mundane—thumbnail histories of linoleum and of Jules Verne's Polish origins, a disquisition on the Acadian name Courtemanche, riffs on long-defunct record companies, evocations of posthumous photography sessions, a critique of nouveau riche ranch decor, or the appearance of a black-painted funeral accordion.

Drenched in music and its lore, the novel draws similarities between making music and writing fiction, with Proulx's tale accruing rhythms and refrains of its own. Often that means skipping into the future, where incidents resemble The Shipping News's zany crudeness more than the sobering poetry of the rest of Accordion Crimes. It also sways from Old World to New, with the baggage of superstition, custom, folk magic and the ancient rituals of prejudice transported to an unknown and frightening land. There hope turns to disillusion, dreams to nightmares, authenticity to artifice (“aprons trimmed with bands of … Mamie Eisenhower pink,” “terrible cookbooks … by made-up women with American names, Betty Crocker, Mary
Lee Taylor”) in Proulx's unflinching rendition of the dark side of the immigrant experience, her rewriting of American literature's upbeat Westward-ho classics.

Not that her lovable, unsavory characters don't achieve happiness, don't through music reach “the single burning night that comes at the top of a life.” It's just that “it's all downhill from there,” and the trick to avoiding the inevitable replacement of joy with sadness is to take a suicidal way out. For Proulx herself, perhaps the deepest sorrow stems from one of music's great ironies: that an instrument and its sounds can be shared by practically all cultures yet keep them apart. It's like religion: Faith is universal, but its institutional manifestations have forever caused killing, strife and discrimination. One man's music is another's “coon,” “Polack” or “potato-eater” junk. Billie Holiday sang of “strange fruit”; in Accordion Crimes, it's also “dago” Italians who get lynched. Before long, anti-German sentiment in World War I taints Schubert and angers German-Americans into “Deutschland, Deutschland über Alles.” Stupid ethnic quarrels prefigure today's Balkans, an accordion antagonizes a murderous junta in Argentina, and Freemen-clone surface in Montana. The power of music indeed.

Adding macho insult to ethnic injury, most of Proulx's squeeze-box players are men, who jealously guard the accordion as a “man's instrument,” cruelly, sometimes violently, inciting daughters and wives to permanent flight. The men are in love with an instrument whose sexual connotations Proulx robustly explores, but that finally leaves them lonely and dissatisfied. Celebrity is ruined by hubris, illusions of grandeur are dashed the next step up the social ladder, heritage is rejected by succeeding generations. Meanwhile, the green accordion's secret gift, squirreled away early in the book, will go to a woman who knows what to do with human kindness. In Proulx's hands, such knowledge becomes a worthy substitute for the artisthood bestowed on accordion players of old, then battered beyond repair by the modern world. Proulx the artist always conveys the wonder left in even these diminished times. She hasn't given up on life, or art.

Phoebe-Lou Adams (review date July 1996)

[In the following positive review, Adams evaluates the strengths of Accordion Crimes.]

“The accordion was so natural, a little friend. Easy and small to carry, easy to play, and loud, and can play bass rhythm and melody. Just the accordion and nothing else and you've got a dance.” This is the opinion of a Mexican-American character, but it could just as well have come from any of the immigrant musicians who populate Ms. Proulx's splendid novel [Accordion Crimes]. The accordion of the title is an old-style, tenderly handmade instrument brought over from Sicily around 1890. Through murder, theft, carelessness, and even honest purchase, it crisscrosses the country, passed from one ethnic group to another. It enlivens a makeshift beer garden in South Dakota, where the German colony has a hard time during the First World War. It gets to Maine and Texas and Chicago, where old Mrs. Przybysz, a magnificent cook in the classic Polish style, has a daughter-in-law who makes “a fish shape from cottage cheese, canned tuna and Jell-O, with a black olive eye.” Time passes, instruments grow more complicated, and the little old squeeze-box deteriorates from abuse and neglect, but it can still interest a Basque shepherder. The immigrant groups through whose hands it passes also suffer abuse, neglect, and hard luck. They die of poor doctoring and alcohol and unpredictable accidents; their children scatter; their heritage is eroded. Ms. Proulx describes these people and their problems and their stubborn hopes for the future or regrets for the past with extraordinary conviction and a skill peculiarly her own. There appears to be no narrator between the reader and the characters. Here they are—this is what happens to them. Of course there is a narrator, invisible and omniscient, who slides into big scenes without warning, introduces important information as mere background detail, and arouses sympathy while seeming to cast a cold eye on all the action. Ms. Proulx is a magician.

J. Z. Grover (review date September 1996)
In the following review of Accordion Crimes, Grover praises Proulx's authorial voice and prose skill, but notes that her characters, as emblematic figures, are to some extent trivialized.

Annie Proulx's latest excursion is one step forward and one step back. The novel's form is closer to that of her first, Postcards (1992), and its nightmare tour of American society, than it is to her second, The Shipping News (1993), in which Proulx's eye for all things scabrous and American was tempered somewhat by her subjects—stoic Newfoundlanders and an almost zomboid main character, Quoyle. (I do not say “protagonist” in mentioning Quoyle: Proulx could not be said to have protagonists, for the world happens to her characters rather than through them. Rights of creation she reserves to herself.)

Accordion Crimes, like Postcards, is a picaresque, a series of vignettes linked by the characters' possession of a green button accordion, made at the turn of the century by an unlucky Sicilian craftsman and finally squashed by a semi in Louisiana in the 1990s. The picaresque, popular in both eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British and American fiction, is a form that allows writers to scrutinize the class enmities, loyalties, ethics, habits and locutions, superstitions and faiths of a broad cross-section of humanity under the guise of tracing a pocket handkerchief's, a guinea's, a dog's, a lorgnette's, a cane's various owners. It is not a form that invites identification with its fictional characters so much as with its narrator—a construct that suits Ms. Proulx just fine.

In the case of the green accordion, possession changes with misfortune—impoverishment, sickness, disability, bad luck, or death—so it quickly becomes apparent that each of the book's eight sections will be bracketed by disasters befalling the accordion's current owner. Proulx's instrument and its possessors endure a century of American indignity and injustice: a New Orleans vigilante action against Italian immigrants kills off the accordion-maker after a jury acquittal; a German American retreats into bitterness and paranoia during World War One, when anti-German sentiment sweeps the Iowa town he helped found; a Tejano accordionist lives out his days as a restaurant bus boy and his nights as a conjunto star. Other tales of Quebecoises, Black Cajuns, Chicago Poles, two generations of white Montanans, and the son of Norwegians from Old Glory, Minnesota punctuate the story of the green squeezebox.

With each passing, the accordion, like the traditions it once animated, becomes less the medium of a specific folk music and more a mere commodity, its songs first reduced to hybrid pop hits (“Yes, Sir, That's My Baby” in the 1920s; “The Mexican Hat Dance” in the 1950s; “The Ballad of the Green Berets,” “Winchester Cathedral” and the “Me and Bobby McGee Polka” in the 1970s), and then to silence.

Along the way, Proulx recreates a remarkable range of locutions:

Friends, this here's Dr. Squam, talking plain talk to you again. … Now, men, when a man reaches a certain age, and you know what I mean, you men who are suffering, he begins to lose interest, his spirit droops, certain glands begin to wither and all the spring goes out of his step. If this sounds like someone you know, pay close attention …

(pp. 87–88)

Or “There's very few eats rice puddin for breakfast”; “You know, I don't want to say anything about the French people, but those coonasses, they're you know, impulsive, not too smart?”; “She's worth something, oh yeah, me, I don't say she's not a handmade, a special one, but needs work, and if you was smart you could jew him down, non?”; “Mr. Malefoot, I seen you bring it in a case many a time, you see what I'm sayin? I under the impression a case go with this 'cordion.”
Proulx's are odd if brilliant surfaces, replete with bright particularities (“she could see forlorn strings hanging from the underside of the sagging sofa”), charged metaphors (“He blew smoke from both nostrils like a bull on a cold plateau”) and broad humor (child sisters of the 1940s are named Lorraine, Lassie and Lana). But if all these add up to anything beyond the marvels of names, bodily descriptions, perfect-pitch dialogue, catalogues of homely domestic cast-offs, beautifully embodied folk musics—Tejano, Polish American, German American, Quebecois, Cajun, Italian—and retellings of historical events, it is this: America squeezes the life out of her immigrants, substituting over generations the pale, watery images of television and radio for the chewy, vivid cultures people brought with them. To adapt is to assimilate: the melting pot, that ferocious metaphor, boils off all that is sustaining in folk cultures. The precipitate that remains is a bleak residue of TV dinners, popsicles, Mountain Dew, nicotine gum. (Food is as much a controlling metaphor in Accordion Crimes as is accordion music.)

Like Hawthorne's chilly characters, these considerably funnier and riper creations function chiefly as placeholders—in Proulx's case for their maker's lament over the fall of our folk cultures, over the racism and mendaciousness that exist everywhere. If a character flutters close enough to the light, toward credibility as a creation verging on independent existence, WHAM!—Proulx annihilates the upstart. Her inventions sizzle against the heat of the bulb and then they are gone. Next victim, please …

(And there's the matter of minor characters dying in parenthesis. Their absurd deaths—stumbling into a hot spring at Yellowstone; grabbing a Japanese bomb as it drifts down over an Iowa cornfield; a bloody attack in a bathtub; an Amazon Indian's arrow caught in the throat as a character squats to take a jungle dump … that sorta thing—almost guarantee the triviality of their lives. No one simply dies in her sleep or sitting up reading.)

In short, as a reader I feel set up: on the one hand, Proulx invests her characters with a juicy, Rabelaisian credibility, and on the other, puppets them into doomed, unrounded fates. The good are, for the most part, sacrificed (dead of a spider bite, suicide, gangrene); the most vicious are as likely to thrive as to die inventively. Ultimately, only two constants hold Accordion Crimes together: that America is made up of multiple racist, sexist cultures, in which no one is ever too oppressed to snigger at and deride members of even more powerless groups; that its cultures are blind to their own folk strengths, eager to sacrifice them to the latest synthetic promises.

Do I remember any of the characters vividly? One and only one: the narrator's autodidactic, smart-ass, sardonic voice, the synaptic jump of her candescent prose embodying music and food, tracing their devolution into Lawrence Welk and frozen pizza. The rest are bass chords without the treble melody.

John Sutherland (review date 7 October 1996)

[In the following review, Sutherland evaluates the strengths of Accordion Crimes, noting that the collection “uses all the range and the resources of Proulx's mature prose.”]

The praise for E. Annie Proulx's The Shipping News was unanimous and superlative. It won a string of important prizes. But literary history is littered with examples of authors stifled by their own success. When you suddenly find yourself at the top, where do you go?

One's curiosity about what Proulx would do next flows from the nature of her work. The Shipping News is a fine novel, and it will still look good seventy years from now—unlike, say, Edna Ferber's So Big, which also won a Pulitzer Prize. But it is, in the context of late twentieth-century American fiction, a strangely idiosyncratic performance. All writers, even the most original, have literary debts, but Proulx's are not easily identified. The Shipping News is created around a Quasimodo pour nos jours, the hack journalist Quoyle, who finds meaning to his little life at the outermost rim of the continent, on the stormy Newfoundland coast. In
literary historical terms, it was not easy to see where this exuberant diary of an American nobody was coming from. There are some Beckettian inflections, but the nearest contemporary analogy seemed to be John Kennedy Toole's *A Confederacy of Dunces*, another work which won great admiration but only after the author killed himself, despairing of finding a publisher who liked his novel enough to print it. Like John Kennedy Toole, Proulx defies easy classification.

After the success of *The Shipping News*, the temptation must have been great to play it again. The pleasing news is that Proulx has not done so. Rather than repeat herself, she has enlarged her theme vastly to take on the biggest subject of all. In her new novel, she sings of America. Of the three terms in the Great American Novel, the trickiest is undoubtedly the middle one. America is not a subject which is easily contained within the dimensions of a single work of fiction.

In *Accordion Crimes*, Proulx has selected an ostentatiously traditional technique for the organization of her narrative. She has gone back to a best-seller of 1765 called *The Adventures of a Guinea*, by Charles Johnstone. Johnstone's novel patented what was to be the most imitated gimmick in late eighteenth-century fiction, and one which is still regularly revived in popular narrative. It follows the course of a gold coin, as it goes randomly from hand to hand, telling the story of each of its successive owners. In Proulx's novel, the traveling object is not a piece of money, but a portable musical instrument.

This formula allows Proulx to work within the structure that she likes best—the collection of short stories, accidentally connected but thematically unified. For all her virtues, she is a short distance writer. One of the few shortcomings of *The Shipping News* was that it lacked an overall architecture, but was instead a series of little riffs and episodes set against a static narrative situation. The device that she adopts in her new novel—the vignette—allows her to play to her strength while composing what is ultimately a panoramic national mosaic. (By my rough count, *Accordion Crimes* has some forty to fifty narratives and central characters.)

The connecting strands in Proulx's long story are the adventures of a small green accordion made by a craftsman in Sicily at the close of the nineteenth century. Proulx relishes the intricacy of those technical jargons that extend language to the limits of its precision. In *The Shipping News* she took as epigraphs to her chapters extracts from *The Ashley Book of Knots*; and, if nothing else, readers will take away from that novel a new awareness of the difference between a “bight,” a “snarl,” a “mesh” and a “nip.” *Accordion Crimes* opens with a lovingly close description of the accordion-maker at work:

> He has cut the grille with a jeweler's saws from a sheet of brass, worked a design of peacocks and olive leaves. The hasps and escutcheons that fastened the bellows frames to the case ends, the brass screws, the zinc reed plate, the delicate axle, the reeds themselves, of steel, and the aged Circassian walnut for the case, he had purchased all of these. But he had constructed and fashioned the rest: the V-shaped wired springs with their curled eyes that lay under the keys and returned them to position in the wake of stamping fingers, the buttons, the palette rods. The trenched bellows, the leather valves and gaskets, the skived kidskin gussets, the palette covers, all of these were from a kid whose throat he had cut, whose hide he had tanned with ash lime, brains, and tallow.

It is hard to write as accurately as this. But Proulx goes beyond the functional accuracy of the trade manual and creates poetry. It is not easy to see how it is done, but the nearest analogies that come to mind are those vivid inventorial chapters in *Moby Dick* or, to pluck from the contemporary, the corresponding chapters in William Least Heat-Moon's *PrairyErth*, where for three pages he does nothing but list names of grasses. Proulx, one feels, could find poetry on a ketchup bottle.

The accordion-maker (who is never named, but is clearly—as the sacrifice of the lamb implies—identified with the biblical Abraham) leaves Sicily in 1890 for “La Merica.” He takes with him his son Silvano and his
instrument. By a series of fatal accidents, the accordion-maker ends up in New Orleans, where, with ten of his Italian compatriots, he is promptly lynched in a riot orchestrated by local community leaders. Welcome to La Merica. The little green accordion passes into the hands of a German immigrant farmer, Hans Beutle, who settles in Iowa. The instrument no longer plays plangent Sicilian melodies, but lusty Teutonic marches and ballads. This is the longest tenure any owner has of the accordion, from 1891 to the late 1920s; it is also the foundation-building phase of American civilization.

Beutle is possessed of titanic physical energy and libidinal drive. (It is worth adding that Proulx can be a very sexy writer when she wants.) Over the decades, the German farmer builds up a prosperous business defying deep-rooted Iowan antagonism against “sourkrauts.” It seems like a textbook American success story until Beutle dies ignominiously and agonizingly from post-operative infection following a goat-gland transplant into his sadly enfeebled testicles. In the same week—it is 1929—his fortune is wiped out by the Wall Street crash. American quacks and hucksters have done him in. Forty years of diligence and skilled tilling of the Iowa soil leaves Beutle's family nothing.

“The old green accordion,” as it now is, falls into the dexterous hands of a Hispanic virtuoso musician, Abelardo Salazar. We follow its tuneful career through the 1930s and 1940s, as Tejano music builds its huge constituency among the migrant underclass. Abelardo is popular but never rich. He is bitten by a venomous spider and neglected to death by the American health system. When she tells the clinic orderly that her husband is very sick, Abelardo's wife, Adina, is brushed off: “The doctor is at the hospital at a meeting. If you people would make appointments instead of just crowding in like this, instead of just coming in without an appointment.” Abelardo is taken home to die in front of a “droning television.”

It is now the 1950s and the tempo accelerates. The accordion spends some time with Franco-Canadian owners before going south to Louisiana, where zydeco is born from its now wheezy bellows. In the 1960s, it is briefly in the possession of African Americans in the civil rights struggle. Polka-playing Poles and melancholy Minnesotan Norwegians have their turn before the old, exhausted accordion finally attains its quietus in the 1990s. Its successive ownerships transport us inside a dizzying series of ethnic groups—all musical in their different ways, all ethnically distinct but nonetheless all quintessentially “American.” Foreignness does not melt in Proulx's America, it gradually erodes into the recognizable here and now. She is very good at registering the gains and losses of what the INS calls “naturalization”—becoming natural. The magic of the accordion is that, like America, it can absorb all styles, all cultural idioms. And, like America, the accordion is profoundly delusive. Most of its various owners have been dirt poor, blissfully unaware that in its passage through America the instrument has acquired a hidden store of thousands of dollar bills in the recesses of its pleats. Proulx loves irony.

I seem to recall that somewhere in America there was something like an “accordion awareness week.” Largely owing to its indelibly proletarian character, it is a much-maligned instrument. As the Victrola brought common people the privilege of hearing orchestral music in their homes, so the accordion brought them the power of cheaply making it. But, unlike the saxophone (which was also once a proletarian instrument), the accordion has never been admitted into the classical instrumental ensemble. It is even despised by jazz musicians. Ask even musically cultivated people to name a famous accordionist and you will draw a blank. (If they think hard, they may come up with Edith Piaf.) It is still stigmatized and déclassé, an instrument of the folk incapable of anything higher than the vulgarist folk music.

It is significant that Proulx did not call her novel Adventures of an Accordion, but Accordion Crimes. “Behind every great fortune there lies a crime,” wrote Balzac; and his epigram has been taken as the epigraph to two great studies of America, C. Wright Mills's The Power Elite and Mario Puzo's The Godfather. The theme of Proulx's novel is that behind every great country, specifically behind the great United States, there lies ubiquitous crime. The roots of that crime she locates in xenophobia, racism and the economic exploitation that keeps the accordion-playing classes in servitude.
The little histories that make up Proulx's national chronicle are a catalog of broken families, of disillusionment, of premature death, of industrial accident, of death in meaningless foreign wars. Put that way, it may sound as if *Accordion Crimes* is an angry novel or a political one. It is not. The strongest impression one takes from the lives that Proulx chronicles is vitality—life itself. Her work demonstrates the paradox—found at its most extreme in tragedy—that the unbearably sad can be aesthetically pleasing and morally uplifting. But the fact remains; no American life ends happily in *Accordion Crimes*.

There was little doubt after *The Shipping News* that Proulx was a good novelist. The earlier novel's scale was miniature, but she had come to terms with that most difficult of American bequests—the Melvillean rhetoric. Looking back, it seems clear that in *The Shipping News* Proulx was shaping the instrument for *Accordion Crimes*; it is not accidental that this image dominates the opening of this last novel. It is easy for critics to make fools of themselves with grandiose claims; but in scale, in vision and in imaginative daring, *Accordion Crimes* uses all the range and the resources of Proulx's mature prose. It is now safe to assert that she is a great novelist. It is a pity that she won all those prizes with the last novel: she deserves to win them again.

Caroline Moore (review date 12 October 1996)

[In the following review, Moore offers a positive assessment of *Accordion Crimes.*]

Many of those who admired E. Annie Proulx's magnificent second novel, *The Shipping News*, must have rushed off to buy her first, *Postcards*. They will have found there the same rich ingredients: Proulx's winning eye for the peculiar, her ear for the rhythms of speech, and the blazing vigour of her descriptive prose. At times, however, *Postcards* tilted towards a sort of American *Cold Comfort Farm*:

> Mink clenched the carving knife, sawed at the ham. The ham smelled like blood. Cold air crawled along the floor, the ferret scurried in the wall … ‘Pass the plates.’ Mink's voice, gone thin since his tractor accident a few years ago, seemed caught in some glottal anatomic trap.

In *Postcards*, men rarely escape mutilation by machinery, a fiancée dies during passionate intercourse, a grandmother falls through rotten floorboards upon the baby trapped beneath, and cows go down with the Mad Itch.

The deaths come even more thick and fast in *Accordion Crimes*. E. Annie Proulx's latest novel is the story of a green accordion, travelling for 100 years from hand to hand and from ethnic group to ethnic group across America, until it finally meets its own unloved end. This idea for a novel is not immediately appealing: I remember feeling similarly uninspired at school by the essay title 'A Day in the Life of a Penny,' though doubtless the young Proulx would have risen to the challenge. It was, after all, our human sympathy for huge misshapen Quoyle with his hellion daughters that made *The Shipping News* so beguiling. *The Shipping News*, indeed, was even a sort of love-story—a fable about homecoming, about finding one's roots. *Accordion Crimes* is about rootlessness, and the terrible human and cultural costs of the melting pot.

Without a human focus—though it's surprising how much Proulx can make one root even for an accordion that seems to bring a jinx upon its owners—*Accordion Crimes* reads like a series of short stories loosely strung upon a fine thread of history. Death strikes swiftly, even jauntily. Characters die of rattlesnake and spider bites, assassination by stiletto, a goat-gland implant that turns gangrenous, suicide induced by religious mania, electrocution with a worm-probe, impalement in a truck-crash; through being sewn up in a shrinking cow-hide in a desert, beheaded with an axe as an act of euthanasia, or simply as a card-sharper 'in a punitive barbed-wire corset.'
If Death has many doors, they open with the farcical speed of a Ben Travers comedy. Even a roll of Kodak may prove one's undoing:

… when Rawley and his wife, Evelyn, celebrated their 25th wedding anniversary with an autumn trip to Yellowstone Park where Rawley, in the West Thumb Geyser Basin, dropped a roll of film, trod on it, lost his balance and fell headlong into a seething hot spring, and despite eyes parboiled blind and the knowledge of impending death, clambered out—leaving the skin of his hands like red gloves on the stony edge—only to fall into another, hotter pool.

Macabre and quirky humour runs through this book. Readers who appreciated the stomach-churning cuisine of The Flying Squid Lunchstop in The Shipping News will enjoy old Mrs Przybysz's scorn of her daughter-in-law,

who thought she was a notable cook because she had taken part in something called the Grand American National Bakeoff, had won a set of aluminum pots with her imitation of a T-bone steak made out of hamburgers and Wheaties, a carved carrot for the bone … (She made also … a fish shape from cottage cheese, canned tuna and Jell-O, with a black olive eye.)

Dorothy Przybysz's refusal to learn her mother-in-law's traditional Polish recipes is only one symptom of the cultural costs of assimilation. Almost all the widely varied cast in this book are immigrants ( accordions, like bagpipes, seem to attract minorities)—Sicilian, German, Cajun, Tex-Mex, French Canadian, Polish and Basque; and they are faced with an impossible dilemma. Either they cling to their old ways, their language, their music, their roots, and are persecuted and despised by their neighbours in a world in which Italians hate Sicilians almost as much as whites hate blacks; or they try to assimilate, to shed their racial and national identities. Either way, they are scorned by their own children, the slick and impatient second-generation Americans.

This bleak picture of irredeemable prejudice and violence is hardly softened: the few of Proulx's characters who do make good have always tended to do so in particularly despicable ways (such as real estate, which is presented as more or less synonymous with villainy).

Yet even readers with minimal interest in accordions or mutilation will find themselves bowled along by the sheer virtuoso energy of Proulx's depiction of her violently seething, idiosyncratic Great American Nightmare. Her range and scope are tremendous, shuttling through the warp of multiple cultures and spanning, by the end, 100 years. And it is the range of detail that grips, richly concrete. In a sentence, she can summon up the physical presence of a character—or even a cat: ‘immense, squarish and orange, resembling a suitcase, his tail a broken strap.’ (Cat-lovers should not inquire about his fate.) She is fascinated by the litter and junk of life, and by the peculiarities of idiom left in remote or specialised pockets—whether from the isolated lives of trappers, or the tawdry rhinestone world of accordion competitions. I can only blindly assume that her passionate evocation of the technicalities of accordion music is as accurate as her account of how to trap coyotes: her prose breeds conviction.

Helen Carr (review date 18 October 1996)

[In the following review, Carr commends the detail and humor in Proulx's stories in Accordion Crimes.]

As a novelist, E. Annie Proulx has had a remarkable, if so far brief career. When in 1991, at the age of 56, she published her first novel, Postcards, she became the first woman to win the PEN/Faulkner Prize. Her second, best-selling novel, The Shipping News, won the Pulitzer Prize, and now here is her third [Accordion Crimes], an extraordinary achievement that covers the length and breadth of the United States and its alternative history
in the last 100 years. It is written from the point of view of “hyphenated” Americans—immigrants, blacks, Hispanics—for whom the American dream brought so often only wretchedness and pain.

Much of the finest recent US fiction has sprung from the country's ethnic diversity and ethnic oppression. Proulx's novel is a new, rather different step in the exploration of what WEB DuBois so famously called double consciousness. Its sweep is epic, shaped not around an individual, nor a family, nor a place, but a green two-row button accordion, lovingly made by a Sicilian peasant and brought to New Orleans in the 1890s.

He is warned that Americans curse both Sicilians and Italians as “sacks of evil,” but the long, back-breaking hours at the docks, abuse and squalid tenements all seem worthwhile when he gets his first commission to build an accordion. Then, with some Italians, he is brutally lynched.

The accordion travels on, first north to the Midwest plains, to “a Württemberger, a Saxon and Königsberger who became Germans in America,” then to a Hispanic musician in Texas, back north to a French Canadian orphan in Maine, on to a young black musician working on the Louisiana oil rigs, back to a Chicago Pole, on to a Montana Irishman, a Basque shepherd, and to its final destruction after it has passed through a Norwegian second-hand business in Minnesota.

The qualities that distinguished The Shipping News are all here—the wonderful blend of poignancy and wry humour, vitality, the rich detail, the compelling evocation of a way of life. What is so impressive in this novel is Proulx's skill in constructing so many riveting stories, so many engaging voices. Each group's history is present, yet Proulx tells her stories largely through her character's eyes, in the words they would have used. Most are “poverty hardened,” warped both by the prejudices they face and the prejudices they bring with them, but also full of longing and dreams. Like Proulx's restless Polish cigar-maker they search “back and forth and up and down, looking for the golden America they had imagined.”

Proulx mingles historical and fictional events, radio spiels, advertisements, song titles. Eleven Italians were lynched in New Orleans in 1891, though the accordion-maker is fictional; her fictional Germans suffer the kind of abuse real German-Americans experienced during the first world war. The novel is full of fascinating detail about accordion music, for the instrument is far more than a linking device. Few play it well, but through its music they find their way back to their origins and hold on to memories in the face of a culture demanding conformity.

Music is resistance, music is home, but for these people between languages, between cultures, the accordion's “wonderful voice, sonorous, plangent, shouting in grief” also speaks their loneliness and sorrow, hope and desire, when they have no words themselves. Just as one hears the blues in Toni Morrison's writing, the “sonorous plangent” music of the accordion seems transmuted into Proulx's haunting language and her powerful, compassionate tale.

Mark Shechner (review date winter 1997)

[In the following excerpt, Shechner discusses recent trends in contemporary women's fiction and offers a mixed assessment of Accordion Crimes.]
pretensions through her modesty and good taste.


One indisputable fact of American fiction writing over the past ten years is the number of women who have established themselves in the first rank or something fairly close to it. Just think of Jane Smiley, Louise Erdrich, Amy Tan, Carol Shields, Toni Morrison, Maxine Hong Kingston, Barbara Kingsolver, E. Annie Proulx, and Dorothy Allison, to pick just a few of the many names that come to mind. In numbers alone this emergence of women has no precedent in the history of American literature, and in many quarters it is taken for granted that these women have come forward with fresh agendas, bracing messages, and authentic visions of American life that can't be gotten elsewhere. It is also assumed that their claim to widespread attention and regard, beyond enclaves that might be specially invested in their messages, is that they show the contours of the familiar world to be vastly different than literature had previously imagined it. In certain nominal instances, in which women's experiences are so patently different from men's, this hardly needs explaining. I'm not aware that American men have written any substantial literature of mothers and motherhood, of raising children or caring for aged parents, or of rape, wife-beating, child-molesting, or Lesbian love. In some of these areas, we can cite exceptions: Hawthorne and Faulkner on motherhood, Philip Roth on caring for a dying father, Hemingway on pregnancy, a handful of men on sexual violence, though finally there is no denying the obvious: that experiences more common to women than to men are going to find their way into women's fiction, especially in a time when much of that writing takes its cues from a powerful women's movement that is increasingly devoted to the discovery and promotion of differences.

However, to raise the flag of difference, or “différence,” to use the locution that has crept into our vocabulary from French critical theory, is to confront matters that the gender theorists tell us are not products of experience in the usual empirical sense—i.e. that women will write about motherhood because they have been mothers—but the result of different sensibilities, instincts, nerves, and mystiques. There is already a vast and influential literature of this that goes back at least to Simone de Beauvoir and even beyond her to an early pioneer of psychoanalysis, Hélène Deutsch, and comes up to the present through popular sociology and psychology books—Nancy Chodorow's *The Reproduction of Mothering* or Carol Gilligan's *The Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* or almost anything by French theorists Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray. The volume of this literature is staggering. An electronic check for “subject = feminism and literature” in the integrated University of California library catalog, MELVYL, turns up 955 records, and the periodical literature will multiply that ten-fold with ease. It is not farfetched to think that gender “différence” has assumed the place of the single most popular, and worrisome, issue in all the Modern Language Association.

The general summary of our gendered differences is hardly uniform, but neither is it random, and what emerges from the popular studies are variations of some fairly rudimentary themes, which tend, as we might expect, to be flatteringly to women and uncomplimentary to men. Men, we learn, are bozos at intimacy while women are athletes at it. Chodorow: “Men grow up rejecting their own needs for love, and therefore find it difficult and threatening to meet women's emotional needs. As a result, they collude in maintaining distance from women.” And not only are women better connected, they tend to have sturdier egos and healthier nurturing powers. “Mother-daughter relationships in which the mother is supported by a network of women kin and friends, and has meaningful work and self-esteem, produce daughters with capacities for nurturance and a strong sense of self.” The inventory of these off-the-shelf behavioral differences is long and morally of a piece. Women are vigorous, well-integrated beings, men are emotionally undernourished.

The themes of the defensive and threatened male, the morally, sensually, and relationally incapacitated male, the neurotic and self-isolated masculine “I,” as opposed to the robust, nurturant, intimacy-cherishing female, who, in addition to her personal strengths, is “supported by a network of women kin and friends” and thinks more inclusively in terms of “we,” is so commonplace in critical studies now as to be virtually the folklore of
gender wisdom, and one can open any of a dozen influential books on these subjects and find some predictable variations on these themes. [Indeed, now that the girlfriend network has graduated from folklore to box office, with Waiting to Exhale and The First Wives Club, one wonders if it has any mileage left except as fodder for male-bashing comedy.]

Leaving aside the question of how such temperamental disparities came to be—and popular sentiment these days is lined up on the side of a “socially constructed” gender identity—the wary reader may well ask how we know any of this to be true, since, despite the common assumption that this lore is grounded in “studies”—sociological, anthropological, psychological, etc—most of these studies are remarkably vague about data bases, samplings and statistics, methodologies, falsifiability, and the normal controls we expect from science, while the bibliographies that accompany them, in which each author gives evidence of having carefully read the others, cause one to wonder just how much of these elaborate taxonomies come out of reproducible methods of investigation and how much are just the reigning folk wisdom recycled in new lingos. For if we know anything at all about our conceptions of men and women in our time or any other it is that they arise out of the most myth-infested corners of our minds, stoutly-defended, spidery alcoves where reason and evidence have difficulty infiltrating because we are so deeply protective of our cherished mythologies.

In the atmosphere of our time, bristling with sure-fire answers about the gender gap, gung-ho for “empowerment,” cavalier about questions of how any of its generalizations can be tested, so uninterested in differences between, say, Irish, Italians, Blacks, and Jews, and unconcerned about the part played by freedom, will, playfulness, and craftsmanship, we may find ourselves turning to the only data available outside our own immediate experiences to test these notions, the data of literature, either to illuminate the conditions of mind that create it or to embody the prevailing myths that surround us all, writers included.

It is with a test of this sort in mind that I took up recent novels by three women: Louise Erdrich, E. Annie Proulx, and Joanna Scott, in an effort to see if they could be read as the products of a unified female sensibility that might distinguish them from stories or novels by representative male writers, say, Richard Ford, Tobias Wolff, Robert Stone, and the late Raymond Carver, whom we can think of as writers of both male experience and masculine sensibility. Does the comparison work? Does it endorse the folklore? Can the books be read together as typical women’s fiction, or does the very idea of such a thing fall apart in our hands the moment we clutch it tightly? …

I never gave more than two cheers to E. Annie Proulx's previous novel, The Shipping News, which won the National Book Award in 1993 and the Pulitzer the year later and had the reviewers frothing at the blurb. It was a virtuoso performance, though I thought the prose sometimes overpowered the book’s simple characters, and I could never warm to the hero, Quoyle, who seemed unpalatably stiff, vacant of thought, and unknown to himself. As for the locale, a blustery coastal village in Newfoundland, it seemed, despite its off-camera mayhem—assault, rape, child abuse—too much the safe haven for Quoyle's need: too communal and therapeutic. The book's virtuosity felt frigid: I found The Shipping News a cold book about a cold man along a cold shore.

Put down your Shipping News; the real E. Annie Proulx has checked in with Accordion Crimes, in which she kicks out the jambs and writes herself silly. Accordion Crimes is a sprawling, rambunctious, bloody, and farcical roundup of stories, held together by one perambulating accordion and a vision of immigrant America as a place of animal vigor, zero-sum competition, musical invention, verbal magic, and casual violence. Indeed, even to speak of these free-standing episodes as stories is to assume plots, which they scarcely have. Think of them as hallucinations or crackpot rambles through The Valley of The Shadow of Death that Proulx calls America, bound together by threads of death, dismemberment, racism, and folk music. Accordion Crimes is a kind of language aerobics, in which Proulx turns pungent, vernacular English—marbled with phrases from a half-dozen other languages—into a Shakespearean-Joycean instrument for dazzling play, and if,
by the by, she tosses in a social message about America as possessed by race and hostile to difference, how many writers can resist the temptation of a bracing moral now and then, what with admonition being the national pastime?

Accordion Crimes follows the improbable odyssey of a green, handmade accordion from a Sicilian workshop in the 1890s to New Orleans, where the accordion maker goes looking for a new life and winds up murdered in an anti-Sicilian riot. Later it falls into the hands of German immigrants in rural Iowa, Mexican immigrants along the Tex-Mex border, a French-Canadian who grew up in an orphanage in Maine, the Malefoot family in Cajun country, one Hieronym Przybysz a.k.a Harry Newcomer in Chicago, ranch hand Kay McGettigan in Montana, and a descendent of Norwegian immigrants in Old Glory, Minnesota. Even a Basque shepherd serenades his flock with it. This is all so democratically even-handed—though Jews and Yankees never get to touch the instrument—that it sounds like a throwback to those Depression-era Popular Front novels with their ethnically balanced bread lines and picket lines. Accordion Crimes throws equal-opportunity death into the melting pot.

Consider the death of the nameless Sicilian accordion maker himself, shot by vigilantes while cowering in a prison yard; of one Charlie Sharp, who falls into a geyser in Yellowstone, climbs out parboiled, and falls into yet a hotter one; of Abelardo Relampago Salazar, who dies of a spider bite; of Dolor Gagnon, who marches into a chain saw he has propped into a tree; of Hieronym Przybysz, electrocuted by a malfunctioning worm probe (whatever that is); of Elise Gassman, who gets hers with an axe; of a shepherd who gets his from a rattlesnake. The point of this body count is more than just a little obscure, since only a portion of it is tied to ethnic violence, and it seems peripheral to the celebration of American vitality. One guesses that the mayhem is the flip side of the spiritual kilowatts and that violent death is as American as zydeco. In Accordion Crimes, words spill out like blood, but meanings don't always follow.

It appears that Proulx set out initially to write a fictionalized textbook about America as the land of the fleece and the home of the slave and changed her mind as she saw what she had. The book is flavored by the bitter New Historicism that has taken hold in both the academy and in fiction: a sensationalizing of the worst that can be known about how we have treated each other. Cormac McCarthy's novels about death and dismemberment along the old Santa Fe Trail are its outstanding examples, though Madison Smartt Bell's grisly novel of the Haitian Revolution, All Souls Rising, keeps stride with McCarthy for politics and splatter. Proulx is of that camp, though with differences. In her case the sour Historicism of the early chapters collapses into the exhilaration of the nightclub and the dance hall and all the wild crops she raises in the garden of language. Proulx's people die, but not before they dance the good dance. Dispensing with plots, she produces sentences that roll like arpeggios from the green accordion. Accordion Crimes is Proulx's own improvisation, her cantata, her bid for top prize in the literary dance contest. She does advanced fingerings and double stops, flying key changes and chord progressions; she does cajun, polka, zydeco, conjuntos, old-time french “gigues,” and “la musique traditionelle.” She does plains-hardened cowboys, drunk and fixin' to die, evangelicals selling success, salvation, and snake oil; she mimics hucksters, mystics, longshoremen, orphans, saints, and priapists. She does a cat being torn to shreds by dogs. Much of the book is performative exuberance darkened by bloody intuitions, and along the way she tells us everything we never wanted to know about accordions, harmoniums, bandoneons, and homely squeezeboxes. Why?

There is a program here apart from the instructional text on how poorly America has treated its immigrants. It is an essay on American elan vital and its sources, in which the accordion, seen as an archetypal folk instrument, is a talisman of immigrant dynamism and desire, a condensation of all the spiritual, physical, and creative powers that post-Plymouth arrivals have set loose on our shores. It is a bridge to American minority history, the echt folk instrument, which never mainstreamed in jazz, rock, blues, or symphonic/chamber music. Proulx is clearly entranced by the music itself, or writes as though she were, and any one of dozens of rhapsodic homages to its abundance in her own abundant language makes it plain. Here is Dolor (what's in a name?) Gagnon at a concert, finding himself entranced by an accordion player:

---

46
When the man played he seemed in a trance, his face fixed and expressionless, his eyes glaring into a distance beyond the room, his legs springing up and down like a piece of machinery, a fine accord de pieds. His music was muscular, with a full, ringing tone, very rapid and technically flawless. On and on he played, the music surging, circling, twining in and out of itself like a nest of snakes. It created a blue ozone mist around the player. No one was better than he, and when he stopped, the throats of the people in the room roared. Dolor clapped until he thought his fingernails would fly off.

Over the top? You bet, but then the entire book is a dictionary of the breathless, the bloody, the overripe—the American Gothic, and of the turbulent communities for which the Gothic is simply the homespun.

As Proulx construes it, the hallmarks of those communities, besides music, are sex and fecundity. Accordion Crimes is not notably an erotic book, any more than was The Shipping News: the erotic portion of love and sex seems not to be part of Proulx's vocabulary. But sex as energy and force surely is, and the accordion is their symbol. In an early scene, as the green accordion is being played, one of her characters cries out: “He's the man, the singing is the man, and he's doing it to a woman and the accordion is the woman.” And in the story titled “Goat Gland Operation,” we find Hans Beutle, German immigrant to Prank, Iowa, who is sexually insatiable and, in the words of Gerti, his glowing wife, “has to have it three times a day or die.” The song he adopts from Irving Berlin's The Girl and the Wizard is “Oh, How that German Can Love.”

With that sexuality comes fecundity, as Hans and Gerti have nine living children—others in Prank have more—and in other chapters wealth is measured in kinship. In “Hitchhiking in a Wheelchair,” Dolor Gagnon, an orphan, yearns for a woman most deeply “because of her dozens of relatives … the complex interconnections of blood extending up and over the border and to the St. Lawrence south shore and down through New England and into the south, Louisiana, uncles, cousins, second cousins, aunts, sisters-in-law, brothers and sisters and their husbands and wives and children. The wealth of blood.”

Accordion Crimes appears to be at bottom a celebration of American Catholic life, with the vast majority of its characters being Catholic: French-Canadian, Sicilian, Cajun, Polish, Irish, and their wealth consisting of blood ties rather than property, of which they have little. The sole exceptions are the Protestant Germans of Iowa. Inescapably the book comes into view as a collective moral history of American Catholic culture, though these are Catholics sans Catholicism, their spiritual life having been transubstantiated from the Church to the cabaret, where the entertainer is high priest and the dance the Mass.

Thus Proulx gives us a landscape ample with blood but light on lamentation, as though death were no more than a ripple on the stream of life. The tonic key of Accordion Crimes is one of perverse hallelujah laced with black comedy, especially in later chapters when Proulx, sensing the end of a long journey, slips the traces of social “meaning” and just lets fly with the wild voices of evangelism or snake oil or lonesome cowboy 3 a.m. blues. We get to listen in on a rural dentist boasting that “ain't a fuckin son of a bitsie left knows the difference between a goddam tuttle tooth and a sterling tooth,” an oil rig roustabout describing how he “had seen drill pipes blown out of the hold, shooters disintegrate into bloody pieces the size of dimes in the old liquid nitro days,” and on one Reverend Ike, who hectores his listeners by radio that “I am the greatest, I am stupendous, I am beyond all little kinds of measuring sticks and ordinary classifications. I am somebody, I am something coming to you like a BULLDOZER and I am looking good and smelling twice as good and I am telling you, get out of the ghet-to and get into the get-mo.” And in a tour-de-force of drunken blarney and high-plains ramble, ranch hand Fay McGettigan explains why he won't wear a watch, because his father once dropped one in a toilet, and the same watch later blinded his brother.

He reaches down in the pissy toilet to get the watch but it's no good, it's ruin. They didn't have no pissproof watches then. He keeps that goddamn thing in a cigar box for a couple of years until Donnell, my kid brother that was, takes it apart and a spring in it uncoils like a
rattlesnake and gets him in the right eye and he's blind in one eye the rest of his days, which wasn't very long. So I never wanted to watch seeing how much trouble they caused.

Accordion Crimes is certainly too much: a brawling, cacophonous, inharmonious, dense, tangy, overpopulated, overwritten book that makes few concessions to the reader, but rather, in its compositional vivacity, just hurls things at him/her. It is like one of those overstuffed Renaissance treatises, or like Shakespeare, of whom Ben Jonson said “sufflaminandus erat,” he ought to have been stopped. It does for accordions what Moby Dick did for whaling, and does it in the spirit of the famed maxim of Cajun music itself: “Laissez les bon temps roulez.” …

Erdrich's book [Tales of Burning Love] seems to conform to standard expectations more closely than those of Proulx or Scott [The Manikin]. Indeed, Proulx, who writes easily from within the personae of men and can dream up an historical montage as gruesome as anything by Cormac McCarthy, seems a counter-type, and whether that is by conscious intent or instinct or some socially-imposed pattern of desires that has commandeered her talent, the message to us is the same. Proulx will not be recruited or pigeon-holed, not even as, heaven help us, “transgressive.” (And how graceless a term that is for downloading authentic personal visions into routinized gestures of defiance.) And Scott as a domestic writer? Perhaps, but what dark domesticity, in which the kitchen is less inviting than the laboratory! Is Scott then our modern Mary Shelley?

Agendas, mind sets, and sensibilities, it would appear, exist for these writers as options rather than compulsions. We can find no demiurge, biological or socially constructed, pressing these imaginations into preformed channels, as though they were water that obeyed only land forms and gravity. Erdrich doesn't have to write as a Chippewa; Proulx and Scott don't have to write as members of the sisterhood. If there is such a thing as a woman's mind that is as uniform and predictable as a bucket of KFC chicken, we won't find it confirmed by these novels, which are as different from each other as any of them is from a novel by Ford or Stone or Wolff or Richard Bausch, four of our prominent guy writers and leading producers of neo-existentialist “man-alone” fiction. If these three novels are to be our case histories of how a woman's mind is put together, our Doras and Anna O's, then the socially constructed woman of Chodorow and Gilligan et al has to be regarded as no more real than Bigfoot or Simone de Beauvoir's circumspect writer whose chief care is to please and who takes refuge in convention and good taste so as not to arouse the suspicion or competitive juices of men. Indeed, pronouncements like de Beauvoir's should serve us as cautionary reminders of how perishable the ruling self-assurances of the age can be and how flimsy are our reasons for being sure of them. What these novels would appear to share in common is what Erdrich's Eleanor calls the “uncontrolled dance,” and what they ask is “no more than a momentary chance to get the steps right, to be in harmony until the music stops.” How deep that goes into women's writing we have yet to learn.

I would propose that these writers are indicators that a post-feminist moment is at hand. I emphatically do not mean that the issues raised by the woman's movement are now behind us, but rather that in certain areas of our culture, like writing and publishing, the movement has done its work, not only on the society in creating an audience for women and an environment in which they can work productively, but on women themselves, liberating them from the fear of failing to please others: other women as well as men. Writers are under no obligation to gratify a meddlesome sisterhood any more than to mollify a scandalized patriarchy, but only, as artists, to express and please themselves: to follow the spirit that moves them: the Dionysian or the Apollonian or all other spirits in between. And that is the true difference that these books embody: the absolute difference of writers who prefer the pleasures of freedom and the joys of pursuing their craft for its own sake—or the dance or the exhibition or the spectacle—to being spokeswomen for, or symptoms of, the perishable fashions of their generation.

Vicky Greenbaum (essay date December 1997)
[In the following essay, Greenbaum discusses the role of teachers in establishing and perpetuating the literary canon and offers strategies for teaching The Shipping News, a novel that Greenbaum proposes as a notable contribution to recent fiction.]

My path as literary explorer reaches back to my first day on the job. On my first teaching assignment, twelve years ago, my friendly and sympathetic department chair spent a late August day touring me around the school site from my classroom to the cafeteria to the (then vital!) ditto machine. Our final stop, the bookroom, sat behind an unmarked door. This bookroom seemed bathroom-sized, with a similar musty-damp smell. Rickety shelves loomed, crowded with hardback stacks from every discipline. My department chair, Lori Osantowski, watched sympathetically as I brushed past the boxes of anthologies designated for ninth-grade courses like the ones I’d be teaching. When my eyes reached toward the shelves, I failed to find any novels, but some novels lay boxed in a corner, resting in odd sets, mostly less than 30, and therefore unteachable.

Drawn to that corner, I sorted through dusty piles: The Last of the Mohicans, two hard copies stamped 1962; A Tale of Two Cities, eleven paperbacks, stamped 1970-something; The Mill on the Floss, eight copies, unstimed; My Antonia, twenty copies, stamped 1980; Fahrenheit 451, eight paperbacks and three permabound; Hiroshima, 35 copies in two different editions, stamped 1982. I shrugged off my disappointment and began to plan which recent short stories gleaned from magazines I’d bring in to feed the ditto machine.

Nowadays, many of us face well-stocked shelves, yet we go beyond the bookroom for different reasons. We may see ourselves as teachers in dialogue with the canon, no longer bound exclusively to teaching approved classics, valuable as those may be. We may teach Shakespeare in juxtaposition with August Wilson or Tom Stoppard, seeking to show students not just our roots as literate people, but also where we’re headed. As Henry Louis Gates points out, “we no longer see literary canons as objets trouves washed up on the beach of history” (1992, Loose Canons: Notes on the Culture Wars, New York: Oxford University Press, 34). Teachers and students have the power to shape modern literacy. Similarly Harold Bloom—a thinker who defends the presence of “canonical” writers—asserts that “poems, stories, novels, plays come into being as a response to prior poems, stories, novels, and plays, and that response depends upon acts of reading and interpretation” (1994, The Western Canon: Books and School of the Ages, 9).

Therefore, as a teacher I like to involve my students in the evolving canon. Most valuable, I think, are juxtapositions which students can make between classic and modern works featured in my classroom. For me, all decisions about literary worth are based on this premise: the vitality of literacy depends on that vitality of language, metaphor, and resonance of images which allows readers to connect texts with their inner and outer experiences. A student who has never ventured outside her Bay Area neighborhood in California may still inhabit the experience of characters of a different color, gender, or place through resonating metaphors which touch a chord inside.

THE CANON

We English teachers should never forget that the literary canon is developed, in part, by those who read and teach. As literary explorers, my adventurous colleagues and I remain in continual dialogue with the canon. This august body undergoes, metaphorically, a life-span: the new body springs full-grown from the conversation of thinkers, teachers, prize committees, reviewers, and readers; then, the body ages, casting off a few cells, replacing them with similar yet newer skin, clearly a part of the same organism. Finally, the body might coast to a slow death, embalmed between the pages of anthologies and Cliffs Notes. The American canon sheds writing faster than trees lose leaves in autumn; A Separate Peace follows The Last of the Mohicans toward extinction. Yet some voices, like Shakespeare, persist, empowered by their vitality to endure in dialogue with far newer works.
Now my astonished eyes behold Cliffs Notes for *The Color Purple*, and I wistfully remember the adventures attached to teaching that novel for the first time. Realizing that the frontier lies beyond us, I read voraciously, seeking fresh sustenance. While Shakespeare and *The Color Purple* hold their place in my curriculum, I spend summers adventuring, searching out fresh titles and voices, attempting to bring my students a literacy not merely modern, but resonant, reaching to varying shores of experience.

We, as English teachers, must ask with our students, “What gets to count as our culture? What makes knowledge worth knowing?” (Gates 1992, 175). Those teachers who, like me, spend free time reading with an eye to teaching, tend to share two gut reactions when encountering a brilliant new work:

I love this, so I want to teach it!

But is it literature?

I can teach a novel if my students can understand the novel's world and voice. About literature, I find myself asking with Harold Bloom:

What makes the author and the works canonical? The answer, more often than not, has turned out to be strangeness, a mode of originality that either cannot be assimilated or that so assimilates us that we cease to see it as strange. … When you read a canonical work for the first time you encounter a stranger, an uncanny startlement rather than a fulfillment of expectations.

(Bloom 1994, 3)

I will call a book “literature” if the story brings a fresh dimension to students' experience, and—the deciding factor—if the book contains sustained metaphors and resonating images, subtly unifying narrative, character(s), themes, and the language of the text.

The texts I've discovered, passionately admired, and successfully taught over the past decade include Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, discovered before I began teaching; August Wilson's play *Fences*, which I teach to juniors; *Animal Dreams* by Barbara Kingsolver, which works well for freshmen or sophomores; *Arcadia* by Tom Stoppard, discovered over holiday break in 1995; most recently, I'm thinking of teaching *The English Patient* by Michael Ondaatje. To illustrate my journey with recent novels, from discovery to teaching, I shall tell my story about *The Shipping News* by E. Annie Proulx (1993, New York: Scribner).

**INTRODUCING THE SHIPPING NEWS**

Reading *The Shipping News* during the summer of 1995, I was enthralled by Proulx' tale of Quoyle, a sad, displaced wanderer who arrives in Newfoundland in search of his peculiar roots. Metaphors such as the sea, the light arcing between poles, the green house chained to rocky landscape, resonate from page to page in language fresh, lovely, and stark. My decision to teach the book came not only from its metaphorical richness, but from the way that the characters develop. The book bloomed with connections. That year, I introduced the text to my sophomores, and I've been teaching *The Shipping News* for three years now.

As the students and I read chapter 1 together in class, their reactions challenge me: “Newfoundland? Where's that?” “Why should I care about this loser?” “These sentences suck. Didn't she ever learn the rules of grammar?” I refuse to be daunted. Similar reactions greet me whenever students encounter a challenging book, and students reading *The Shipping News* for the first time echo, almost verbatim (except for the Newfoundland part) the reactions of my students who first read *The Color Purple*. I won't take refuge in: “This is a classic. You have to read this in order to be a literate American,” though I believe that statement
true. Instead, I hand out maps of North America, and of Newfoundland, so we can discuss the strange territory and its implications. Students who’ve moved over vast distances with their families may share their thoughts; others consider what terrible impetus might launch someone away from their familiar comfortable—or uncomfortable—surrounding into an unknown place.

**SENTENCE STRUCTURE AND VOICE**

Next we analyze Proulx' sentence structure and imitate her peculiar voice with its rhythms. As in *The Color Purple*, the sentence structure in *The Shipping News* is far from standard. First, I put a sentence on the board: “A great damp loaf of a body” (Proulx, 2), and we chart parts of speech: where is the subject? the verb? We look at the paragraph (below) in order to figure out what the author tries to convey. Students discover that Proulx' paragraphs function as units, with implicit connections allowing for grammatical short cuts and for meanings hinted in the vacant spaces where subject or verb belong. We examine her description of the main character, Quoyle, who doesn't even have a first name:

> A great damp loaf of a body. At six he weighted eighty pounds. At sixteen he was buried under a casement of flesh. He shaped like a crenshaw, no neck, reddish hair ruched back. Features as bunched as kissed fingertips. Eyes the color of plastic. The monstrous chin, a freakish shelf jetting from the lower face.

(Proulx, 2)

I invite students to define odd words—*casement, ruched*—to imagine the body, the face, what Proulx is saying about the person inside, what she creates for a reader to feel. We read between the lines. As we explore links between the first chapter's language and Quoyle's world, students begin to make meaning with the text.

After analyzing structure and parts of speech, students craft “imitations,” using Proulx' structure to create their own sentences; the best come complete with hidden connections, and I read a sampling aloud. As we venture through the novel, I encourage students to note changes in style, urging them to consider how Proulx uses syntax to mirror certain aspects of character, psyche, and landscape, evoking meanings. As we near the novel's end and students begin to select paper topics, some of them will choose to examine the role of language and syntax in *The Shipping News*: how the rhythms and omissions reflect the landscape of Newfoundland, of Quoyle's life, of his transformation.

**CHARACTER ANALYSIS**

During our first week with the novel, we also complete a character analysis on the blackboard. I draw a circle with YOU printed at the center. Shooting out from the circle, arms branch, bearing names: *loves, hates, place, runs from, runs to, avoids, important, body, soul, face, name, past, who made you what you are, what you wish you were, future, landscape, close to, far from*—many options are suggested by the class. They are invited to complete confidential circles identifying themselves, assured that they may share or not, as they wish. I complete one for myself, sharing some areas; they reciprocate. An in-class writing follows on the next day, and students write a description focusing on whatever, from their brainstorming, compels them to write. I give only two requirements: include lots of details, and finish with a metaphor which fits you, or your experience. A day or so later, when we've read more of *The Shipping News*, students will complete a circle about Quoyle.

**METAPHOR**

A similar activity centers around metaphor and resonance; by the time we read *The Shipping News*, my students are familiar with this work. I call for metaphors they've noticed during the first few chapters of *The Shipping News*. Each metaphor volunteered goes in its own circle on the board. Some question invariably
ensues about whether certain things are metaphorical, and, after discussion, only class-approved metaphors remain. Then I ask for resonances, my shorthand for recurring images connected to a metaphor, and these are attached to their metaphors on the board.

For example, someone volunteers *rope* as a metaphor early in *The Shipping News*, and people attach resonances like *knots*, *coils*, and *Quoyle*. Each of the images carries a meaning or implication related to rope, which itself may serve in *The Shipping News* as a metaphor for connections, restrictive bindings, people or events twisted together like a mass of strands, and so forth. One of the reasons I find *The Shipping News* easy to teach is that metaphors resonate on virtually every page; after a little practice, students find the linkages easy to master. I attach grade points to the elements of the presentation. By the second time through the activity, some students need no prompting at all, while others need just a little.

**WRITING ASSIGNMENTS**

Writing assignments connected to these activities begin with in-class paragraphs about various topics, like the implications of the coil, or the epigraphs at each chapter-title, or a theme we've discovered. Eventually, there will be a book test requiring students to prepare brainstorming, connect imagery to Quoyle's transformation, explore connections between characters, and otherwise chart the shores of meaning in the novel. I always ask for comparisons between imagery in books we've read, so eventually students will consider and compare the use of metaphor in Quoyle's life with other literature we encounter during the year. In reflective writing, students will have further chances to explore metaphor, subtext, and other literary matter in real—including their own—existence. My motive is to help them make explicit the connections between themselves and the various worlds of their reading.

**OTHER TEACHERS' EXPERIENCE**

Not every foray into teaching a recent book is successful, but with *The Shipping News*, the success has been so pleasing that I've decided to continue teaching it for awhile. Some colleagues at my school introduced *The Shipping News* into their sophomore classes this year, and we've excitedly compared notes, responses, techniques. Kevin Karolak successfully focuses on the connections between *The Shipping News* and modern culture, while Cindy Lapolla introduced journal writing, called “Shipping Logs,” to facilitate student response and connections with their lives. My colleagues find this novel a most ambitious, yet workable, text for exposing students to metaphor and a fresh use of language. We'll continue to share and borrow ideas for as long as we wish to teach the book.

**CONCLUSION**

Modern readers continually touch the frontier of recent writing. Interpretation and connection remains at the heart of literacy; we, as teachers, seek to build these habits in our student readers. New writers add their voices to that dialogue with the canon in our classrooms, so that our students may see how literate voices, including their own, make meaning out of experience.

At this particular point in literary life, we are caught between Bloom's vision of the “books and school of the ages” as reflected in some bookrooms we might visit, and Gates' imperative to free ourselves from “The Master's Pieces” where “my people were the subjugated, the voiceless, the invisible, the unrepresented, and the unrepresentable” (1992, 35). Perhaps these two thinkers are closer than it seems: as we interact with the canon in classrooms, we may discover new connections between modern and classic, new resonances between where we are and where we've been.

Louise Flavin (essay date spring 1999)
Anne Proulx's first two novels have garnered an impressive number of awards. For Postcards, she received the PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction, the first time a woman had won the prize; and for The Shipping News, Proulx was awarded the National Book Award, the Irish Times International Fiction Award, and the 1994 Pulitzer Prize. Although the list of awards is distinguished, some reviewers have been less than favorable, most often when commenting on her writing style. One reviewer writes: the “sinuosity of E. Annie Proulx's prose seems to correspond physically with the textures of the weather and sea. Her inventive language is finely, if exhaustively, accomplished” (Norman). That reviewer complains that the “poetic compression” is at times too cryptic. Another reviewer faults “her truncated style” as a “deliberate messing around,” designed to obscure a failure of characterization (Walter). Verlyn Klinkenborg writes of an uncertainty in the handling of tone, of a narrative voice “elliptical, often poetic and oddly detached.” Klinkenborg also describes her “staccato poetry, which never quite fills out syntactically or rhythmically” (36). Proulx herself says of her prose style:

> It was purposeful for this book […] I was trying to give the feeling of the older style newspapers that had those little subheads, condensed thoughts, little crammed up precedes to events. And also that's the way people talk in Newfoundland. People talk in chunks and pieces and odd words here and there and a lot of things left unsaid so I just moved that kind of verbal handling of the language into the narrative itself to see what would happen and I liked the way it worked. Also I like to pare down a lot.

(qtd. in Baum)

Finally, a San Francisco Chronicle reviewer writes: “Even the language is knotted. Proulx throws words hand over hand and fractures sentences, so that the prose is full of strains and pulls. At best, the effect is ornate, lacy” (Spafford).

But Proulx's fractured, elliptical style, riddled with fragments, mostly participial, may serve a larger purpose in the narrative. Her fragmented sentences mirror the condition of the central character's life, for Quoyle is a kind of fragment, lacking a subjective sense of identity and selfhood. Even his name is appropriate: A “quoyle,” we learn from the first epigraph, is “a coil of rope,” “a spiral coil of one layer only. It is made on deck, so that it may be walked on if necessary” (1). Like his namesake, a piece of rope without a knot, Quoyle is without connection, a fragment, a man large in mass but molded by others to be easily walked on. Quoyle is inertial. His body, once in motion, tends to stay in motion on the course prescribed by wife or family; once at rest, he stays at rest, a lethargic lump of a man tortured by a desire to be loved and needed and to have a home.

The Shipping News is Quoyle's tortured quest to find that home. His is a spiritual journey to find the feminine complement that would give completeness to his own fragmented masculine self. The women of his life—Petal Bear, Wavey Prowse, his aunt, and his daughters—are the missing segments in the circle of Quoyle's existence: the demon lover, the tall and quiet woman, the stouthearted woman, and the maids in the meadow (171). Quoyle's quest is complete when he makes a home in the rugged Newfoundland fishing village of Killick-Claw. In the process he is transformed from a fragmented man, a man lacking in subject, a man with only a fragment of a name, into a whole and complete one with identity and selfhood. Quoyle reconstructs himself in Newfoundland, as he newly finds himself, becoming stronger, more assertive, more honest, and
more capable. He finds the happiness that had evaded him earlier in life.

The Quoyle we meet early in the novel is a failure in many ways. Grossly overweight, without love or career, he lives a life of meaningless meandering:

Nothing was clear to lonesome Quoyle. His thoughts churned like the amorphous thing that ancient sailors, drifting into arctic half-light, called the Sea Lung; a heaving sludge of ice under fog where air blurred into water, where liquid was solid, where solids dissolved, where the sky froze and light and dark muddled.

Lacking clear definition or dimension, Quoyle, with “hand over his chin” in defensive gesture, is the archetypal quest hero, ready to answer the call, to embark on a journey for life's transformation.

The call comes from an acquaintance named Partridge, who is in every way Quoyle's opposite. Partridge is a man “sure of his own good fortune,” a prophetic man who “got quick shots of coming events as though loose brain wires briefly connected” (4). What Partridge sees in Quoyle is a failure of energy, an inertia that needs to be energized. He thinks of Quoyle as “butter of fair spreading consistency” (5), a reference surely to Quoyle's massive size but also to his slack character, his lack of identity, and his failure to determine his own destiny. He is a man easily used and abused. Partridge tells Quoyle to “get your mojo working” (8), meaning that he must make his own luck. Noting in Quoyle “something like a reflection of light […] the chance of some brilliance” (31), he introduces him to his first newspaper job, pushes him out of the “submission he smelled in Quoyle” (5), and prompts him to marry by advising him that “Everything that counts is for love. […] It's the engine of life” (10). The “quoyle” has been walked upon by too many people.

Although Partridge sounds the call for Quoyle to end his stasis and prompts him into job and marriage, Quoyle is only beginning the quest for completeness. His marriage to Petal Bear is a heart-rending failure. She recognizes in Quoyle a “cringing hesitancy” (14) and boldly cuckolds him on the pullout couch in their living room while he listens from the master bedroom. At the same time, Quoyle becomes orphaned when his parents commit suicide to avoid the certain suffering of terminal illness. After their cremation, Quoyle is suddenly left alone without parents, estranged from his hateful brother, and then abandoned by Petal, who attempts to sell off their children so that she can escape with a lover. Quoyle is in an even more hopeless state of loss and separation, even more fragmented than before Partridge's call to seek control of his own destiny.

Quoyle's sense of alienation is furthered by learning his family history from his aunt Agnis, his father Guy's sister, who comes to stay with him after his parents' death. Gradually he discovers the full history of the despicable Quoyles of Newfoundland, but initially he learns that his grandfather Sian Quoyle fathered Guy Quoyle through a sexual liaison with his sister Addy. Later he learns that Guy raped and impregnated his half-sister Agnis. Quoyle's family history is one of incest, rape, and suicide; and the present-day Quoyle's promiscuous wife Petal sells their children to a child pornographer to fund her elopement from Quoyle. To end the cycles of incest and decadence set in motion by the earlier Quoyles, modern-day Quoyle must revisit the scenes of the earlier crimes and exorcise the ghosts and demons of his family's past. We learn later in the novel that ‘knots' can be ties for good or evil, but these knots of incest and rape are the evil ones that have haunted generations of Quoyles. Quoyle must tie “good knots” against the past to end the evil legacy of those prior generations.

Stylistically, the fragmented sentences that so mark Proulx's style appear to cluster at moments of his greatest fragmentation, mirroring the breakdowns in relationship that characterize Quoyle's life. Because they are often participial fragments, phrases that lack subjects of actions, we sense a lack of subjective character in Quoyle. That stylistic feature reinforces our perception of Quoyle as a person motivated by others, but without his own
“subject,” without his own drive or engine propelling his actions. For instance, after getting his first job as a newspaper reporter, we read: “Thrilled at the sight of his byline. […] Saw the commonplace of life as newspaper headlines” (8). Later about the progress of his parents’ illnesses and death, we read: “First the father, diagnosed with liver cancer, a blush of wild cells diffusing” (18). After reading of the suicides, we see, “Named incineration and strewing as choice of disposal” (19); “Sodden ground, smell of earth” (19). The fragmented sentences heighten our sense of the degree of Quoyle's separation from family and friends.

Quoyle's first perceptions of Petal Bear are related in fragments, but they are generally object description, not the usual verbal lacking subject: “Then, at a meeting, Petal Bear. Thin, moist, hot. Winked at him […] Grey eyes close together, curly hair the color of oak” (12). Petal has a subject, is strongly self-motivated, not fragmented, and thus appears to Quoyle as object. Quoyle, however, thinks of his world in terms of newspaper headlines, a way of reducing life from its full rich experience, its newsworthy story to a caption, a headline, a fragment of the experience, as when he thinks “Stupid Man Does Wrong Thing Once More” (89).

Having reached his lowest point of fragmentation, the orphaned, cuckolded Quoyle, father of two bratty daughters, is induced by his aunt to travel to Newfoundland, the ancestral home of the Quoyles. For Quoyle to survive in the rugged landscape of Newfoundland will be a difficult physical journey, but also an arduous spiritual journey to replete the self, to provide it wholeness, to provide subject. Newfoundland is described as a place where it takes “desperate work to stay alive” (33), and the “home” the aunt will take him back to has been “pumiced by stony lives of dead generations” (47). Located on the stony promontory overlooking the sea, cabled against the cold winds of the ocean, the house appears dislocated, out of place in its present location. Ever prophetic, Partridge has seen that Quoyle “needed something to brace against” (31), and Newfoundland will provide that something.

The aunt's plans to restore her childhood home begin her own quest, as she too has demons of the past to exorcise. Having suffered the loss of her companion-lover, a woman named Warren, she seeks to rebuild “family” with the nephew and his young daughters. She is in sharp contrast to the static, ineffectual Quoyle. She immediately organizes their lives, setting into motion the wheels of home restoration and family building. The “stouthearted” aunt begins her reconciliation with the past by dumping the ashes of her brother Guy into the outhouse and urinating on them.

In his quest for selfhood and community, Quoyle will be aided by a series of mentor-guides in addition to the aunt. His co-workers at the newspaper—especially his editor Jack Buggit; Bill Pretty; Beety and Dennis Buggit, who provide a model of domesticity and companionship; and Alvin Yark, the shipbuilder-uncle of Wavey Prowse—guide Quoyle on his quest to live and love in the foreboding, seemingly infertile landscape of Newfoundland. Quoyle becomes a managing editor of the newspaper, forms a community of friends in the small fishing town, learns of his past and how to reconcile with it, and finds “that love sometimes occurs without pain or misery” (337). Quoyle becomes the subject of his own actions and finds completeness and the full richness of life.

The transition from fragmentation to completeness is made textually through the use of dramatic irony. As readers, our awareness of characters and events both present and past is more complete than that of sluggish Quoyle. Dramatic irony suggests incomplete knowledge on the part of a character, and Quoyle is often victimized by his failure to know the full story. An example of that occurs when the stouthearted aunt tells Quoyle to put Petal behind him and begin his life anew in Killick-Claw. She tells him:

Of course you can do the job. We face up to awful things because we can't go around them, or forget them. The sooner you get it over with, the sooner you say “Yes, it happened, and there's nothing I can do about it,” the sooner you can get on with your own life. […] What we have to get over, somehow we do. Even the worst things.

(72)
Quoyle's thought is to dismiss the aunt: “Sure, get over it, thought Quoyle. Tencent philosophy. She didn't know what he had been through. Was going through” (72). The irony is that we know what the aunt has suffered, not just the loss of her beloved Warren, but more importantly the rape and repeated sexual molestation by her brother. Such an experience might have destroyed her, but she has put it behind her, gotten over it, and gotten on with her life. Quoyle's knowledge is incomplete. He is unaware of events in the aunt's life, past and present; but the readers know how much he has yet to learn. Quoyle's fragmented sentences continue to mirror his insufficient knowledge of things around him and reflect his lack of understanding of human life.

A similar example appears later in the novel when Quoyle, bothered by Bunny's failure to get along with friends, confides his concerns to the aunt, who again has the best advice:

Why don't you just wait, Nephew. See how it goes. She starts school in September. Three months is a long time for a child. I agree with you that she's different, you might say she is a bit strange sometimes, but you know, we're all different though we may pretend otherwise. We're all strange inside. We learn how to disguise our differentness as we grow up. Bunny doesn't do that yet.

(134)

Quoyle senses that “they weren't talking about Bunny at all” (134), and we know that the aunt is also talking about her own “difference,” her sexual orientation, which she has disguised, or at least not disclosed, over the years. Quoyle is the ironic victim as he is unaware of the aunt's secret. She consoles Quoyle by concluding, “And don't worry about Bunny. She's still a little girl” (135). That time the aunt lacked conviction, as she remembers her own childhood: “But that had not stopped Guy. She had been Bunny's age the first time” (135). Quoyle remains the victim of the irony as he dismisses the aunt's advice with this thought: “She meant well. But knew nothing about children and the anguish they suffered” (135). Probably no one had suffered greater anguish than she at the rape and impregnation by her brother, Quoyle's father, but Quoyle's sentence fragment underscores his limited awareness of the aunt's experience.

From Billy Pretty, another mentor-guide, Quoyle learns the family legacy. Billy takes Quoyle on a perilous journey in fog across Omaloor Bay, named for the Quoyles, according to Billy (162), to visit the grave of Billy's father. That journey reminds Quoyle of his own father and at least one happy memory from childhood, but it also enlightens him about the sordid history of his family. Billy tells Quoyle about the “old style of Quoyle”: Loonies. They was wild and inbred, half-wits and murderers. Half of them was low-minded” (162). Billy also tells Quoyle the family were “wrackers,” a legacy Quoyle fulfills by recovering a suitcase he sees floating in the bay. What begins as Quoyle's journey of discovery to learn his family's history ends in the horrific disclosure that what he thought was treasure in the suitcase is actually the dismembered head of Bayonet Melville, the captain of the Tough Baby. On a symbolic level, Quoyle has traveled into the realm of knowledge, for Melville was beheaded and dismembered, fragmented, as a result of an unhappy marriage to a promiscuous woman. His story mirrors Quoyle's marriage to Petal. Quoyle is confronted with the case of a man who, like himself, loved innocently and totally and was destroyed for remaining naive.

It would seem that Quoyle would be overwhelmed by the knowledge of his past as well as by the harshness of the present. And to add to his problems, his old cousin Nolan, the last surviving Newfoundland Quoyle, is tying knots against him. The epigraph that begins chapter 23 tells us, “The mysterious power that is supposed to reside in knots […] can be injurious as well as beneficial” (185). That proves true. Nolan ties knots to put a hex on the old Quoyle house to scare off the aunt and nephew, and apparently the knots may have had a positive effect. The knots, by contributing to the destruction of the house in the storm, resolve Quoyle's problem of living across the bay and commuting to work, as well as busing his children to school. The destruction of the house probably brings Wavey and Quoyle closer to marriage because it was essentially the
aunt's home, not their own. Wavey and Quoyle each have a “knotted” past, tied to the memory of first loves who betrayed and abused their trust. Both must break those injurious knots before new bonds of love can be formed. Gradually, and perhaps with the help of Nolan's knots, the relationship blossoms into love and marriage.

Symbolically, Quoyle must drown his old fragmented self to put an end to the influence of the low-minded Quoyles from whom he descends. He nearly accomplishes that in fact when he sets out across the bay in a storm that batters his poorly constructed boat. In a consistent symbology, he is confronted with the dismembered, decapitated corpse of Bayonet Melville, emblematic of the man Quoyle will remain if he continues to cling to the memory of his “demon lover” wife, refusing to acknowledge her betrayal. Through a kind of ritual baptism at sea, Quoyle reaches an epiphany in recognizing that old knots must be untied before new ones can be tied:

The boat wallowed about and a short length of line slid out from under the seat. It was knotted at one end, kinked and crimped at the other as if old knots had finally been untied. For the first time Quoyle got it—there was meaning in the knotted strings.

Proulx opens her book with an epigraph from The Ashley Book of Knots, which describes a basic knot of eight crossings that can have over 256 different arrangements: “Make only one change in this ‘over and under’ sequence and either an entirely different knot is made or no knot at all may result.” Quoyle must untie the old knots of love and family to form new knots of friendship and community. Recognizing the meaning and importance of bonds, he is now ready to face his struggle to emerge a new and restored human being.

Just as knots can work against one, they can also symbolize the positive bonding of friends, family, and community. Mrs. Jack Baggit's homemaking, a family and community bond, is symbolized in the lace doilies and worked rugs that adorn her home. Earlier, Mrs. Bangs told of the superstition of the young women who work woolen rugs that foretells who will be the next to marry. A cat was put inside the newly made mat; when it was let out, the person to whom the cat went would be the next to marry (181). Mrs. Bangs says the young girls do not make mats now and have lost the tradition, but Wavey and her Auntie Evvie are hooking a mat as Quoyle assists Uncle Alvin Yark to build a seaworthy boat for Quoyle. As Alvin worked, he “embroidered stories” (324), a metaphor of knotting that binds him to Quoyle as a friend as well as a future in-law. Yark's stories knot Quoyle to the past and the history of the area, linking him more tightly to the community and eventually in marriage and link themselves to the larger family or community of the area.

Others are knotting themselves to the life and people of the small village in Newfoundland. Little Sunshine is learning to knit, another kind of knotting, that binds her to Beety Baggit. She also helps Wavey hook the rug. Not only is Bunny closely tied in friendship to Marty Baggit, but she stands up to the bullies who make fun of Wavey's retarded son Herry. Bunny has learned to do knot tricks, suggestive of her clairvoyance and awareness of the power of knots. Bunny, who in keeping a vigil beside the body of Jack Baggit, another clairvoyant, “awakens” him from his near-drowning sleep. His awakening restores broken family ties, as his son Dennis finds livelihood and a future in lobster fishing. The book began with the deaths of Quoyle's wife and parents, but its ending is characterized by literal and figurative resurrections (Spafford). The bonds of friends, family, and community radiate out from Quoyle like a spider's web, extending even to his generous act of reconcilement with his cousin Nolan.

The aunt, too, completes her quest for the values of home, finding new life with Mrs. Bangs in St. John where they set up a yacht upholstery shop together. She unties the old knots to her ancestral home and to the memory of her beloved Warren; her acknowledgment of incestual rape is “one of the redemptive surges that sweep across the novel as it hastens to its end” (Klinkenborg 37).
Quoyle's quest for wholeness is accomplished when his fragmented verbal sentences are complete with subjects, when he becomes the doer of his actions: “Quoyle experienced moments in all colors, uttered brilliancies, paid attention to the rich sound of waves counting stones, he laughed and wept, noticed sunsets, heard music in rain, said I do” (336). Not only is this not a fragment; it is actually a run-together sentence with two subjects, indicative of a man who has reached a completeness beyond his greatest expectations. Quoyle reaches that “satisfying life” that Bill Pretty described to him on Gaze Island: “There was a joinery of lives all worked together, smooth in places, or lumpy, but joined. The work and the living you did was the same things, not separated out like today” (169).

The old Quoyle, to whom “nothing was clear” (3), completes his quest with a vision of integration, a portent of things to come:

Quoyle lay in the heather and stared after her. [...] The aunt, the children, Wavey. He pressed his groin against the barrens as if he were in union with the earth. His aroused senses imbued the far scene with enormous importance. The small figures against the vast rock with the sea beyond. All the complex wires of life were stripped out and he could see the structure of life. Nothing but rock and sea, the tiny figures of humans and animals against them for a brief time.

(196)

Quoyle's vision is one of union with the earth, of integration of the figures with the landscape, a knotting of person to place. His visionary moment expands to encompass a unity of time—past, present, and future:

The sharpness of his gaze pierced the past. He saw generations like migrating birds, the bay flecked with ghost sails, the deserted settlements vigorous again, and in the abyss nets spangled with scales. Saw the Quoyles rinsed of evil by the passage of time. He imagined the aunt buried and gone, himself old, Wavey stooped with age, his daughters in faraway lives, Herry still delighted by wooden dogs and colored threads. [...] 

A sense of purity renewed, a sense of events in trembling balance flooded him. 

Everything, everything seemed encrusted with portent.

(196)

That momentary visionary glimpse into a life “in trembling balance” reveals the unity and harmony of integrating a figure in time and space. The vision becomes reality when once-hapless, fragmented, and muddled Quoyle completes his quest, reconciling past, present, and future, uniting with the three feminine complements that transform his life into wholeness.

Quoyle's transformation has given him a new wife and home, a purposeful profession, a place in the community both present and past, an identity stronger and more assertive, more honest and capable, a life integrating work, love, family, and community in one harmonious whole. Having answered Partridge's call to get his mojo working, Quoyle has learned that love is the engine of life, has become the subject of his own actions, and has knotted himself to wife, family, community, and land.

Works Cited

Novelist and storyteller Annie Proulx has made a specialty of what might be called fancy writing about plain folks. The characters we meet in her new story collection, *Close Range*, are the flinty cowboys and ranchers of Wyoming.

“Wyos,” she tells us, in a story called “A Lonely Coast,” “are touchers, hot-blooded and quick, and physically yearning. Maybe it’s because they spend so much time handling livestock, but people here are always handshaking, patting, smoothing, caressing, enfolding. This instinct extends to anger, the lightning backhand slap, the hip-shot to throw you off balance, … and then the serious stuff that’s meant to kill and sometimes does.”

There’s certainly violence in these stories, and plenty of raunchiness, loneliness, anger, and stoic humor. Life here is raw, lived close to the bone. The landscape is harshly beautiful, the climate unpredictable. Proulx excels at conveying the harshness and the beauty in passages like this one from “The Half-Skinned Steer”:

“Then the violent country showed itself, the cliffs rearing at the moon, the snow smoking off the prairie like steam, the white flank of the ranch slashed with fence cuts, the sagebrush glittering and along the creek black tangles of willow bunched like dead hair. … He walked against the wind, his shoes filled with snow, feeling as easy to tear as man cut from paper.”

This story, about an elderly man returning after many years to the ranch where he grew up, was included by John Updike in *The Best American Short Stories of the Century*. But it’s not my favorite of the 11 stories in this volume. It’s a bit portentous and heavy-handed in its symbolism, and parts drag, as Proulx piles on detail.

Proulx’s ear for dialogue, her ability to reveal both the humor and the sheer awfulness of what it’s like being caught between a rock and a hard place, are displayed in other stories, like “The Mud Below.” A young man becomes hooked on the dangerous thrills of life on the rodeo circuit, despite fierce opposition from his tough-minded mother. In a vain attempt to scare him straight, she takes him to meet a one-time rodeo star who “got his head stepped on” by a horse, and is now severely disabled.

Accidents, assault, rape, castration, and murder are just some of what these characters must contend with. Even when things are more peaceful, there’s always drought, cattle disease, or the bottom falling out of the market for beef.

And for those who don’t fit in, life can be tougher yet. In “Brokeback Mountain,” the powerful and poignant concluding story, two young cowboys, “raised on small, poor ranches in opposite corners of the state,” meet
one summer when they take jobs as sheep herders.

Much to their surprise, they fall violently in love, though at first they think that what happened between them was a minor aberration. Even after they go their separate ways, marry, and have kids, they find that neither can go on without the other: “We do that in the wrong place and we'll be dead,” remarks the one. “I been lookin at people on the street. This happen a other people?” Replies the other: “It don't happen in Wyoming and if it does I don't know what they do, maybe go to Denver.”

Proulx's evocative, sinewy, sometimes glittering prose, together with her tough-minded empathy, illuminates the hidden complexities of the seemingly “plain” folks who people these stories.

Dean Bakopoulos (review date September 1999)

[In the following review, Bakopoulos offers a positive assessment of Close Range, but comments that Proulx's stories are occasionally overburdened by excessive detail.]

The American West has been a favorite setting for many of the heavyweights of contemporary fiction: Cormac McCarthy, Rick Bass, Jim Harrison, Ivan Doig, and Richard Ford. Women who set their stories in Big Sky country (Wyoming, Montana, and Idaho) have not received the same critical acclaim and publishing hullabaloo as their male counterparts.

Enter Annie Proulx. She has only five books in print—including Heart Songs and Other Stories (1988), Postcards (1992), The Shipping News (1993), and Accordion Crimes (1996), all published by Scribner. Even so, Proulx has already won the PEN/Faulkner Award (for Postcards), as well as the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize (both for The Shipping News).

Her second collection of short stories, Close Range: Wyoming Stories, entertains the mythic legends of drunken cowboys, rodeo heroes, betrayed lovers, and aging ranchers, while exploring all the loneliness, blood, and dirt of the Western landscape.

The epigraph of Close Range is from a retired Wyoming rancher: “Reality's never been of much use out here.” Most characters in these narratives veer between what is actually possible and what is dreamed, as many take on the complex “story-within-a-story” mode.

“The Half-Skinned Steer,” which has been chosen for inclusion in John Updike's anthology The Best American Short Stories of the Century (Houghton Mifflin, 1999), is one of the highlights of this well-crafted collection. A retired rancher, Mero, in his eighties and with a mind full of flashbacks, makes his way across the country to the old family ranch for his brother Rollo's funeral. The ranch is now a tourist trap called “Down Under Wyoming,” and the journey turns hellish because of winter storms and the old man's difficulty with driving. Here, Proulx sets up all the themes that dominate this volume: The struggle of hope against nature, mortality, and despair.

Some of the newer and less-heralded stories in this collection are even more impressive. “Job History” chronicles the economic woes of the West through the life of Leeland Lee, who moves from job to job and plan to plan with an unyielding hope that prosperity awaits over the next ridge: “Leeland quits truck driving. Lori [his wife] has saved a little money. Once more they decide to go into business for themselves. They lease the old gas station where Leeland had his first job and where they tried the ranch supply store. Now it is a gas station again, but also a convenience store. They try sure-fire gimmicks: plastic come-on banners that pop and tear in the wind, free ice cream cones with every fill-up, prize drawings. Leeland has been thinking of the glory days when a hundred cars stopped. Now Highway 16 seems the emptiest road in the country.”
Through the sparse, understated chronology, Proulx depicts not only the difficult economic hurdles of the isolated region, but also the fierce emotional ones. This is powerful fiction, and somehow Proulx manages to give each story the plot, depth of character, sense of setting, and thematic weight of an entire novel.

But her talent is sometimes a flaw. On occasion, she packs in too much detail, particularly at the openings. She seems to be trying to show just how well she knows the geography, people, and history of Wyoming. While impressive, this background information often slows the stories down.

The final offering, “Brokeback Mountain,” features two ranchers—hard-drinking, cussing, rough-and-tumble men. But here's a new perspective on the macho cowboy: These two men have an intense, erotic, exhausting relationship during a summer up on Brokeback Mountain. Afterward, they move off to opposite ends of the country, marry women, and have families. Four years later, their relationship resumes. It is a tender and heartbreaking love story.

The crushing last line of “Brokeback Mountain” sums up all the loneliness and failed dreams that make Close Range such a moving and wise collection: “There was some open space between what he knew and what he tried to believe, but nothing could be done about it, and if you can’t fix it you've got to stand it.”

Rita D. Jacobs (review date spring 2000)

[In the following review, Jacobs offers a generally positive assessment of Close Range.]

Annie Proulx is perhaps best known for her Pulitzer Prize—winning novel The Shipping News and for her luscious prose, which is also in evidence in Close Range in evocative descriptions like the following: “It was her voice that drew you in, that low, twangy voice, wouldn't matter if she was saying the alphabet, what you heard was the rustle of hay. She could make you smell the smoke from an unlit fire.”

These eleven stories are populated by images of unrequited longing, wide-open spaces, hardscrabble lives, and characters with unlikely names: Ottaline Touhey, Sutton Muddyman, Car Scrope, Sweets Musgrove, to cite just a few. Two of the pieces, “The Blood Bay” and “55 Miles to the Gas Pump,” are so short that they function more as anecdotes than stories, and the slightly longer “Job History” is just what the title indicates. In contrast to the often masterful longer stories, these pieces feel like filler.

The stories are uneven, but when they work, they are wondrous, with characters so alive and touching that the reader feels the ache of loss as the final page is turned. Most successful is the very last story in the volume, “Brokeback Mountain,” the tale of two rough-and-tumble cowboys, Ennis del Mar and Jack Twist, who first meet and work together as shepherder and camp tender on Brokeback Mountain in 1963 when they are young. Over a long summer alone together, the two men gradually fall in love. Needless to say, love is not acknowledged as love, and the story follows these two men over the course of their years, as husbands and fathers who forge traditional lives. The story unfolds with a growing sense of Ennis's yearning for Twist, for the man whom he did love despite fate and ban and in a world where such a love cannot be recognized, often even by the people who are in love. In choosing such an unlikely setting for heartbreak and creating such strongly evocative settings and characters, Proulx proves her exquisite command of the story genre.

An almost equally notable work is “The Half-Skinned Steer,” chosen by John Updike for inclusion in Houghton Mifflin's Best American Stories of the Century. This story chronicles a trip back home, back west, and back in time by an octogenarian in his Cadillac. Proulx indulges herself at times with sentences like the following:
With the lapping subtlety of incoming tide the shape of the ranch began to gather in his mind; he could recall the intimate fences he'd made, taut wire and perfect corners, the draws and rock outcrops, the watercourse valley steepening, cliffs like bones with shreds of meat on them rising and rising, and the stream plunging suddenly underground, disappearing into subterranean darkness of blind fish, shooting out of the mountain ten miles west on a neighbor's place, but leaving their ranch some badland red country as dry as a cracker, steep canyons with high caves suited to lions.

Even for one who doesn't appreciate prose that calls attention to itself, these slightly purple flights suit Proulx's narrative.

Despite the unevenness of the stories, the volume makes a strong impression, seducing the reader into a modern romance, often verging on the Gothic, that is Proulx's vision of Wyoming.

Hilary Mantel (review date 11 May 2000)

[In the following review, Mantel commends Proulx's prose in Close Range, praising how Proulx “brings local and specific detail into focus for every reader.”]

When writers of fiction go out to peddle their wares to the public, one of the favorite audience questions is “How long did this book take to write?” It is a question which makes sense to readers, obviously, and to journalists, who like to sift authors into categories like “late starters” and “overnight successes.” But it seldom makes sense to practitioners. Maybe it's possible to pin down the moment when a particular plot line showed its colors against the undergrowth, or when a shift of the light threw up a detail once invisible against its background. You can say where an idea begins, but not where a sensibility has its root. Annie Proulx has emerged over ten years as a writer of classic stature, and profile writers are fond of remarking (quite incorrectly) that she didn't begin writing until she was in her fifties. They are confusing “writing” with “publishing,” which is an elementary and condescending error. Everything in her work attests to long practice of keen observation, a hoarding of images and facts, and the painstaking perfection of a craft which allows her to address the most pungent and raw subject matter in a style remarkable not just for vigor but for delicacy and finesse. If you were to ask of the stories in Close Range, “How long did these take?,” the answer would surely be “a lifetime.”

Proulx's first novel, Postcards, was published in 1991; it was the story of a fugitive murderer called Loyal Blood, fleeing from Vermont across the West, successively a prospector, trapper, and rancher; his only contact with his disaster-struck family back home is the series of postcards that begin the chapters. Her second novel, The Shipping News (1993), which won a series of major prizes, introduced its chapters with illustrations from The Ashley Book of Knots. Here she chose the harsh environment of Newfoundland in which to let her main character, a hapless journalist from upstate New York, find an accommodation with himself and his forefathers. Accordion Crimes (1996) explored the American immigrant experience in a densely written novel of epic range and authority. Proulx understands people through the history and topography that shape them. Her battered protagonists have the quality of the landscapes through which they move. Her work comes from the cliff edges and rugged defiles of literature; it is risk-taking, rigorous, and poised. She works language almost to exhaustion point, a ruthless poet hounding it for every nuance, each word whipped into line in paragraphs that build an astonishing stormy power. Like a poet, she sees ordinary things and defamiliarizes them, universalizes the parochial, brings local and specific detail into focus for every reader.

Close Range is her fifth book and her second collection of short fiction. In Heart Songs, published in 1988, her stories were set in rural New England, where she once lived. Here the location is her more recently adopted territory, of empty land, searing heat, bone-wrecking cold, air where one can see clearly and where it
is difficult to sustain illusions about either man or nature: a territory in which, in the title of one story, it's “55 Miles to the Gas Pump.” The stories vary in length between a few wry paragraphs and what used to be called a novella. The best of them have a novel's worth of content, without clutter or digression. They are capacious stories, like soft leather bags, and they carry within them the present and the past of America, enfolded like twins in the womb.

The story that introduces the collection is “The Half-Skinned Steer,” a classic ordeal story, mordant, complex, and gripping. It begins with a sentence that loops across the page and seems to snare a life in its tightening noose:

In the long unfurling of his life, from tight-wound kid hustler in a wool suit riding the train out of Cheyenne to geriatric limper in this spooled-out year, Mero had kicked down thoughts of the place where he began, a so-called ranch on strange ground at the south hinge of the Big Horns.

Mero left the so-called ranch in 1936, married and remarried, made money, never went home. Why go home to the prospect of bankruptcy and ruin?

… It was impossible to run cows in such tough country where they fell off cliffs, disappeared into sink-holes, gave up large numbers of calves to marauding lions, where hay couldn't grow but leafy spurge and Canada thistle throve, and the wind packed enough sand to scour windshields opaque.

Now he is going home for his brother's funeral. Rollo, who had been running the ranch with his son Tick and daughter-in-law Louise, has met one of the bizarre fates to which Proulx, without blinking, delivers her characters. The ranch's real owner is a wealthy Australian businessman, who has turned it into Down Under Wyoming. Among the theme-park animals are emus, flightless birds related to the ostrich; they stand six feet tall, run at thirty miles per hour, are omnivorous, and frequently aggressive:

Poor Rollo was helping Tick move the emus to another building when one of them turned on a dime and come right for him with its big razor claws. Emus is bad for claws. … It laid him open from belly to breakfast.

Mero doesn't like planes, intends to drive from Massachusetts. “Had a damn fine car, Cadillac, always drove Cadillacs, … never had an accident in his life, knock on wood.” He expects the journey to take four days. So what if he's eighty-three? “He flexed his muscular arms, bent his knees, thought he could dodge an emu.” As he begins his drive, Proulx weaves in a second strand of story. It is a tale told to Mero himself, before he left home, by his father's girlfriend. He has forgotten her name, but not her peculiar allure, her bitten nails, wiry veins, bulging eyes, and arched neck. She's not a sexy package, unless you like horses, and it is plunging, heated livestock that snorts and dives through Mero's dreams, forcing him at last away from his father's hearth, carrying with him the sinister tale of Tin Head, a farmer with the worst of luck, a “galvy plate eating at his brain,” holding his skull together after a fall down cement steps. Tin Head's land is a poisoned realm, like the territory blighted by a radiation leak or an Indian spell, with three-legged calves and piebald children running on the range; and a careless day of bungled slaughtering leaves him haunted by the phantom of a steer he has stunned but not killed, stunned and partly skinned, left stumbling over its own stripped hide, silent because tongueless, choking on blood.

Events of the journey puncture Mero's geriatric complacency. A drama of cascading ill luck brings him to a snowbound field, lost and freezing only a few miles from his old home, and we know this is where he will die, “in the pearly apricot light from the risen moon,” feeling the eyes of the half-skinned steer burning with hatred at his back. What is his crime? Perhaps his denial of his own nature, of his own responsibility, for he is
“a cattleman gone wrong,” unable to face a bloody steak on a plate; perhaps it is his lean self-righteousness,
his sanctimonious, self-serving refusal of family responsibilities, his arrogant conviction that the past can be
thrust away. The reckoning is comprehensive, and we follow him through the breathless expedients of his last
hours in the full knowledge of the curse that came down on Tin Head:

… He knows he is done for and all of his kids and their kids is done for, and that his wife is
done for and that every one of her blue dishes has got to break, and the dog that licked the
blood is done for, and the house where they lived has to blow away or burn up and every fly
or mouse in it.

It is a chilling, comprehensive vision of disaster, made bearable only by the exquisite tenderness of Proulx's
descriptive prose. What underpins it is fine judgment, for sometimes it seems that the urgent power of
the foreground story will pull away and snap the mooring to folklore; the structure hangs together on the finest,
strongest wire, almost invisible against the shivering landscape of human loss.

“The Blood Bay” also has its roots in a folk tale, about a horse that (apparently) eats a man. It takes us back
to the West of a hundred years ago; succinct, macabre, it produces a very different effect from the earlier
story, making the reader slyly complicit in its central event: the sawing off of the legs of a frozen cowboy by a
passer-by who covets his boots. Wyoming quickly reduces its people to objects, and the dead boy is “blue as
a whetstone” when Dirt Sheets spots him. As he hacks through flesh he admires the hearts and clubs in the
tooled leather, and when later that night the feet thaw out, he throws them in a corner of the house where he
and his workmates are sheltering.

Next morning Sheets is gone early, to “telegraph a filial sentiment” to his mother on the occasion of her
birthday.

The Blood bay stamped and kicked at something that looked like a man's foot. Old man Grice
took a closer look.

“That's a bad start to the day,” he said, “it is a man's foot and there's the other.” He counted
the sleeping guests. There were only two of them.

Pungent and droll, the story depends on the surreal understatement that is the hallmark of Proulx's largely
inarticulate characters, and on the balance she keeps between the quaint formality of the narrative tone and the
brutal aplomb of colloquial speech. In most, though not all, of the stories, the terrible and picturesque fates she
deals out to her characters have a blackly comic undertow. At its best her comedy is laconic and muffled, like
indecent mirth at a funeral. She doesn't play for laughs; a twisted smile merely arrives on the page. She is
seldom close to whimsy, except perhaps in “The Bunchgrass Edge of the World,” a darkly fantastical tale in
which an unloved fat girl forms a liaison with a talking tractor. “55 Miles to the Gas Pump” concerns
Rancher Croom, a Wyoming version of Bluebeard, who keeps the corpses of his paramours stacked in the
attic; it is a self-conscious shocker, and other authors could do it. Proulx is at her most impressive where she
has scope to unleash her big rolling images, and in those stories where a sentence or two, perfectly placed,
opens up the worldview of her characters.

They are people who are trying to make a living in a land that seems to want to kill them, and that is at best
indifferent to human efforts. Animals die, debts eat up ranches, dirt roads serve only to connect one
catastrophe with the next. Calving, branding, roundup punctuate the year, with its droughts and blizzards. The
human products of this terrain are inbred and hot-tempered, fatalistic, predictable to others and mysteries to
themselves; stubborn people, hard-drinking and violent, fitfully and inexpertly tender, battered by
circumstances and by each other. Their brains are scrambled, their judgments are warped; their ropey scars are
ornaments; they have hideous accidents, which they sometimes court as a way of establishing their self-worth.
“You rodeo, you're a rooster on Tuesday, feather duster on Wednesday” is the warning issued to Diamond Felts, high on the adrenaline of bull-riding and brisk sex with buckle bunnies. Diamond is not untypical: callous, mean, as unsocialized as a sasquatch. The women have a thin time and expect little from their relationships: “There's something wrong with everybody and it's up to you to know what you can handle.” They hide their toughness under “fuss-ruffle clothes with keyhole necklines.” Says Palma in “A Lonely Coast.” “Listen, if it's got four wheels or a dick you're goin to have trouble with it, guaranteed.” Sometimes they settle their troubles with guns. If these are the themes of rural soap opera, Proulx's treatment of them is neither folksy nor cozy. This is country music played by the devil's orchestra.

Could they escape, these characters? Their very names are letters, tying them to barely literate families, to dim garbled histories from other cultures. What would they do in the East, Dirt Sheets and Hondo Gunsch, Dunny Scotus and Jack Twist, Alladin and Diamond and Pearl? They could leave and be swallowed up in the vastness of the continent. Whether they are bigots or blunderers, whether they are damaged or the vehicles of damage, Proulx does not judge them. Nor are they interested in judging themselves, or protesting against what life has handed out. “If you can't fix it you've got to stand it.”

Willa Cather wrote that “in constructing a story as in building an airship the first problem is to get something that will lift its own weight.” It is a maxim that Annie Proulx might endorse. The first impression is one of simplicity, but on closer inspection hers is an intricate craft, of shaping, paring, and fitting together, nothing accidental, no effect without its exact calibration, no word without a job to do. Like Cather, she is attentive to the details of obscure lives, and in her short fiction she has the gift of suggesting a great deal more than she says, populating the background with shifting shadows, while the foreground detail is specific and precise. She seldom allows her characters to introspect, or intervenes as an author to nudge us toward an interpretation of their actions. Instead, she watches as they move through their landscape. It is as if the terrain turns the people inside out.

Her imagery comes from the land and its history, pulling the people closer to the territory. Complex images cast their net wide into the culture that wove them, and it is because of their precise derivation that their elaboration can be sustained:

Late August and hot as billy hell, getting on out of Miles City Pake's head of maps failed and they ended on rimrock south of the Wyo line, tremendous roll of rough country in front of them, a hundred-mile sightline with bands of antelope and cattle like tiny ink flecks that flew from hard-worked nib pens on old promissory notes.

Sometimes reviewers have complained that Proulx does not engage with her characters, but stays on the surface of her complex, fiery, twisting narratives. It is hard to make that charge stick when you read “Brokeback Mountain,” the account of a long love affair between two (sheep) herders, who do not describe themselves as homosexual and indeed do not describe themselves at all. Ennis and Jack are not yet twenty when they meet. After their dreamlike summer on the mountain, both marry, both struggle to conform, sustain their visceral need for each other by infrequent meetings. But from the moment we learn they have been observed in their camp through binoculars, our perception of the story is infused with a sense of dread: so much space, but no room for a secret. “It don't happen in Wyomin.” The precedents are grim; Ennis remembers from his childhood how a man called Earl who ranched with his friend was mutilated and murdered with a tire iron. “Dad made sure I seen it. … Hell, for all I know he done the job.” When Jack's wife gives him a flat, cold account, over the telephone, of the “accident” which kills Jack, Ennis is in no doubt that the tire iron has been employed again.

Proulx's subtle handling of their unlikely love story demonstrates how contained emotion banks up against the granite hardness of her narrative line. Her two herdsmen are as singular, and unfortunate, as those creatures in myth at whom the gods point a jealous finger; yet what destroys them is not some superhuman will but the
cramped bigotry bred in hard country, the limited awareness of those whose constrained lives are spent nose to the grindstone. Proulx’s concern with the economic conditions of these lives underpins her work. She is not a romantic, or given to the pathetic fallacy; these stories are never sentimental or elegiac. The characters are not doomed, they are harassed, disregarded, and gnawed by chronic anxiety about the basics of existence. If the natural order is indifferent to them, so is the free market. They live in that kind of economic insecurity, without reserves, where the least piece of ill luck can break them. They are the victims of modish urban fads and fears of contamination: “All over the country men who once ate blood-rare prime, women who once cooked pot-roast for Sunday dinner turned to soy curd and greens, warding off hardened arteries. E. coli-tainted hamburger, the cold shakes of undulant fever.” All the ranchers can come up with, to state their case, is a billboard which exhorts “EAT BEEF.” But as one of them says, “I suppose we should a put it on a blacktop highway where there's some traffic.”

In the future, survival in this territory may depend on fickle tourists and their appetite for a tamed wilderness and ersatz artifacts. Proulx views the prospect warily. You trash your own myths at your peril. Emus is bad for claws.

Erin McGraw (review date summer 2000)

[In the following excerpt, McGraw discusses the recurring theme of violence in American fiction and offers a positive assessment of Close Range.]

American fiction has a lot of hallmark themes: individualism and self-definition, a sense of sin and fear of redemption, a strong relationship with (or mourning for) nature. But probably more than any of these, and threaded through all of them, is a sense of violence as an ineradicable component of human nature. In novels and stories across the history of American literature, the possibility and range of human brutality has remained a bedrock subject, an issue writers can't seem to stay away from. What is the fascination for so many?

A list of contemporary names all but generates itself: Joyce Carol Oates, Norman Mailer, Robert Stone, Cormac McCarthy—and of their forbears, too, back through Steinbeck, Wright, Hemingway, Sinclair, Poe, and Hawthorne. Even the Reverend Jonathan Edwards, in his famous sermon “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” renders an image of the trembling, wrathful deity whose arrow is already fixed on us and whose arm has already drawn back the divine bow.

A concern with violence is one of our most potent literary birthrights, not least because we are still relatively close to the pioneers' violent work of carving a society out of wilderness. For four hundred years American writers have explored, celebrated, deplored, and one way or another brought to the page carnage, rape, mutilation, and murder—physical torment in all its manifestations. At this point, can't we call it quits? Haven't we learned everything we need to know about the rough imposition of one will over another?

Apparently not. The living writers I have named are artists of superior gifts, and their books are intelligent explorations of the extremes to which people can be driven. These writers have a large and enduring audience that finds sustenance in such explorations—sustenance, and perhaps a recognizable reflection of their own world. I am myself a member of this audience, finding in the work of Stone, McCarthy, and the others a powerful, persuasive vision—a view of human savagery that is both revelatory and unsettlingly familiar.

Why familiar? For all the regular, awful national news of random killings and gang warfare, the America that I experience day by day is not violent. I live in a suburb. Word of so much as a domestic disturbance in this neighborhood is big news. But like many of my countrymen—if I may infer from the literature I read—I carry an uneasy sense that the civility I expect in my daily life is a boat easily tipped. This sense may come from a present-day culture that celebrates violence, or our relatively short national history in which humans have
been more often imperiled than not. Or—a more troubling possibility—the feeling might simply be the result of a lifetime spent reading literature that consistently presents violence as the underpinning of much human action.

Any cursory reader of newspapers is well acquainted with the sort of story in which some mannerly person of quiet habits and unexceptional personality is driven to homicide by a trivial injury. Unreflective writers seize on these stories as evidence that socially acceptable, nonhomicidal behavior is itself the aberration; left to ourselves, they suggest, we would allow our brutish natures to romp unchecked. Such an explanation, a kind of debased Hobbesianism, is attractive in its simplicity, but in the end is overly narrow. The idea that polite human activity is necessarily a displacement for some kind of more genuine rage and hunger too glibly explains and too easily dismisses the full range of human action. If all fiction were hampered by such assumptions, it would be too thin to bother reading.

But cultures are not sustained, generation after generation, on psychologically inept tropes, and many of the most interesting and wrenching and memorable uses of violence in American literature have neither simple-mindedly deplored nor simple-mindedly embraced bloodshed. Fiction often dwells most fruitfully in the crevice between beliefs that appear mutually exclusive. This crevice is particularly interesting when it divides some kind of external need for violence and the desire to eschew violence—or at least to regret its necessity.

Melville's *Moby-Dick* is by any measure a violent novel, and many of the sections that focus on the bloody business of whaling make difficult reading. The long passage describing the whale that Stubb kills, for instance, makes clear not only the physical difficulty the men undergo, but also the death throes of the whale itself. Melville focuses first on the animal's initial outrage at the harpoons, and then on its anguish as it tries, more and more painfully, to breathe. Melville does not glory in the whale's destruction. Far from it. He records the whale's spasmodic surges, its "sharp, cracking, agonized respirations," while at the same time noting how Stubb's boat is flung about, the frantic crew in danger of being killed by the whale's thrashing. All the lives in this scene are at risk, and all the lives are shown as worthy—though Stubb, unlike his men, remains distressingly untouched, reacting to the literal bloodbath by relighting his pipe. Later, as we watch Ahab pursue the white whale more and more obsessively, the scene with Stubb lingers, reminding us that reactions to violence are by no means predictable.

The point is significant, because in *Moby-Dick*, as in much American literature, violence acts as a kind of psychological reagent: characters exposed to violence expose their true natures. Such reactions are not unique to American fiction, of course—think of Dostoevsky or Anthony Burgess—but they recur more dependably in American stories and novels than in the literature of other countries. Presumably, then, violence plays an unusually large role in our national psyche—which indeed seems to continue to be the case, given the steady emergence of mass murderers and teenaged shooters in American cities. Violence exists for us as the option that is not quite forbidden. It is always possible, always imaginable. And for many American writers, brutality itself has become the object of their quest, the beast to be penetrated as we try to understand what essential humanity we lose when we are drawn into bloodshed, and what essential humanity we lose when we aren't. …

Readers of Annie Proulx know that she also has a memorable vision, one that is even more pitiless than [Tom] Franklin's—and more pitiless than that of any other writer I can think of except Cormac McCarthy, with whom she shares a bone-deep nihilism. Again and again her novels and stories depict the puniness of human effort in a natural world that is indifferently and indiscriminately savage.

Proulx has become well known for her novels, in which she follows boatkeepers, farmers, geologists—people constantly touching water and dirt. Bad fortune and weariness shadow these characters; moments of insight, when they come, are hesitant and often bitter. The stories in *Close Range*, Proulx's new collection, follow this basic pattern, but the compression of the short form distills her strength of characterization and description,
and the impact of many of these pieces was enough to make me have to close the book for a little while and recover from the shock.

Hurt, both psychological and physical, shudders through every page of this book. Characters inflict all kinds of meanness on one another, fighting and flailing through their days. Even when characters fall in love, as do Ennis and Jack in the exquisite “Brokeback Mountain,” they can barely admit it, lacking both the language and the courage. Instead, after a summer job ranching together, the men part without a word about their feelings or future. “Within a mile Ennis felt like someone was pulling his guts out hand over hand a yard at a time. He stopped at the side of the road and, in the whirling new snow, tried to puke but nothing came up. He felt about as bad as he ever had and it took a long time for the feeling to wear off.” Still, he says nothing. What is there to say, and to whom?

Whatever fierceness the characters show toward themselves or one another, their violence is child's play compared to what nature can do to them. In Close Range weather and land are vindictive, destroying crops, withholding sun or rain for months, sending up sudden blizzards that can confuse and kill a man just a few miles from his home. Proulx intimately knows her territory—all the stories are set in Wyoming—and her familiarity shows in her precise details, sometimes gorgeous, sometimes harrowing. She is one of the few writers I know who can write descriptions that are themselves exciting. “People in Hell Just Want a Drink of Water” begins:

You stand there, braced. Cloud shadows race over the buff rock stacks as a projected film, casting a queasy, mottled ground rash. The air hisses and it is no local breeze but the great harsh sweep of wind from the turning of the earth. The wild country—indigo jags of mountain, grassy plain everlasting, tumbled stones like fallen cities, the flaring roll of sky—provokes a spiritual shudder. It is like a deep note that cannot be heard but is felt, it is like a claw in the gut.

The writing is authoritative, full of freshness of vision and power. But what a vision. Unlike the perspective of Rick Bass, say, or Barry Lopez, both writers who have extensive knowledge of western landscapes and who see in those landscapes rejuvenation and a last hope for human goodness, Proulx sees in the wild land a cosmic will to destroy. Her Wyoming, with its terrible summers and worse winters, grinds people down to their mean, bitter essentials. In the end, some readers may find this relentlessly fixed view unsatisfying. But Proulx attaches some extraordinary storytelling to her bleak perspective, and her stories are difficult to forget.

In “The Mud Below,” a story fueled by the rage of its main characters, rodeo rider Diamond is taken by his mother to visit Hondo, a former saddle bronco rider. One day, thirty-seven years before, a horse flipped and landed on Hondo's head. Now Hondo is deaf, crippled, dim, a saddle cleaner and an object lesson. When Diamond and his mother leave, Diamond is “so deeply angry he staggered.” On the drive home his mother says,

“I would take you to see a corpse to get you out of rodeo.”

“You won't take me to see anything again.”

The glassy black river flowed between dim willows. She drove very slowly.

“My god,” she shouted suddenly, “what you've cost me!”

“What! What have I cost you?” The words shot out like flame from the mouth of a fire-eater.
The low beams of cars coming toward them in the dusk lit the wet run of her tears. There was no answer until she turned into the last street, then, in a guttural, adult woman's voice, raw and deep, as he had never heard it, she said, "You hard little man—everything."

Her line is startling because it doesn't sound like the words of a mother, but of a lover, and suggests that at this moment Diamond's mother experiences her son as simply another foolish, danger-loving, wastrel man who will bring her grief. As he assuredly will.

Unlike the other books discussed here, Close Range is full of women. They enter the stories forcefully, and the world Proulx describes feels fuller and more social as a result. Like the men, the women are hardened, marked by the places where they live. In “Pair a Spurs” Inez Muddyman is memorably described as awkward and stave-legged, dressed always in jeans and plain round-collared cotton blouses stained light brown from the iron water. Her elbows were rough, and above her amorphous face frizzed bright hair. She didn't own a pair of sunglasses, squinted through faded eyelashes. In the bathroom cabinet next to Sutton's kidney pills stood a single tube of lipstick desiccated to chalk in the arid climate.

This is gentle compared to the description of the Dickensian Mrs. Freeze in the same story. That woman “had the lean of an old fence post … the hard old woman was like a rope stretched until there was no give left.” Improbably enough, both of these unyielding women wind up bringing Car Scrope, a local rancher, to moaning sexual yearning when they wear a particular, peculiar, ornate set of spurs.

Such a plot is pure yarn, of course, similar to the one involving Tom Franklin's mystical game warden, and Proulx is drawing on an honored Western tradition of tale-telling when she creates magical spurs or, in other stories, a malevolent half-skinned steer or a horse with, as its owner proudly thinks, “the sand to eat a raw cowboy.” But Proulx doesn't play these tales for big laughs or charm. At the end of “Pair a Spurs,” Car Scrope's foreman reports to Mrs. Freeze that Car is spending his days sitting on a kitchen chair at the side of the river:

“What the hell does he do down there?”

“Nothin. I told you. Don't do no work. It wasn't for me and Cody Joe that ranch'd go down the hole. He just sets there and stares at the water. Sometimes he dabbles his hand in it. Stuck his head down in it the other day. He don't fish, nothin like that. It's kind a funny. I don't know what he's going a do when the cold weather comes.”

“Nobody got a answer on that one,” said Mrs. Freeze. She signaled for another glass of whiskey, something to hold on to, … and that was more than Car Scrope had, ill-balanced on his sloping mudbank.

This image of Car might be seen as fantastic—a man bewitched, his mind befogged by an evil spell. But the resolution of “Pair a Spurs” isn't terribly different in its range or tone from the end of “The Half-Skinned Steer,” in which the protagonist, after being stalked by the ghost of a half-dead steer, is left stranded in a blizzard. And neither of those stories ends on a more positive note than “A Lonely Coast,” a meanly realistic story that concludes with three people dead from a shootout and the narrator saying, “Friend, it's easier than you think to yield up to the dark impulse.” Whether Proulx's imagination takes her into the thin air of fantasy or the cold air of realism, the results are pretty much the same.

Still, hers is a potent vision, strong and vivid and forcefully expressed. A clear vision is almost always attractive, particularly when it is conveyed with such formidable skill. And at her best, which is most of the
time, Proulx uses language like a glass-cutting tool to etch out her dark world. When Ennis and Jack leave Brokeback Mountain, where they have fallen in love,

they packed in the game and moved off the mountain with the sheep, stones rolling at their heels, purple cloud crowding in from the west and the metal smell of coming snow pressing them on. The mountain boiled with demonic energy, glazed with flickering broken-cloud light, the wind combed the grass and drew from the damaged krumholz and slit rock a bestial drone. As they descended the slope Ennis felt he was in a slow-motion, but headlong, irreversible fall.

John Noell Moore (review date September 2000)

[In the following positive review, Moore commends the “beauty of the language” in Close Range.]

I discovered Annie Proulx's latest collection of short stories on the list of contenders for The New Yorker Book Award for best fiction of 1999. I resolved to read it because years ago I had purchased her Pulitzer Prize winning novel The Shipping News, and (need I say this?) I had never gotten around to reading it. The stories in Close Range grabbed me “like a claw in the gut,” a simile I borrow from one of the stories: “This wild country—indigo jags of mountain, grassy plain everlasting, tumbled stones like fallen cities, the flaring roll of sky—provokes a spiritual shudder. It is like a deep note that cannot be heard but is felt, it is like a claw in the gut” (“People in Hell Just Want a Drink of Water” 99). I was not prepared for the “spiritual shudder” that came in the brutality of some of the tales, their terrifying imagery, their graphic sexual scenes. I was also not prepared for the exquisite beauty of the language, the shaping of metaphor and symbol, the poetry in Proulx's pages. Her title is literal and metaphoric. She startles us with her close-ups of life on the range; her characters move in landscapes that are unforgiving of their flaws, impervious to their tiny triumphs. Her vision is metaphoric: She studies her people and their land at close range, too, in detail that opens them up to our wonder and amazement, to our disgust, and, in some cases, to our admiration.

For the epigraph to these stories Proulx chooses a quotation from Jack Hitt's article “Where the Deer and the Zillionaire's Play” in the October 1997 edition of Outside. A retired Wyoming rancher explains, “Reality's never been of much use out here.” In her acknowledgments, Proulx elaborates on his words and gives us a hint about how we might read her world: “The elements of unreality, the fantastic and improbable, color all of these stories as they color real life. In Wyoming not the least fantastic situation is the determination to make a living ranching in this tough and unforgiving place” (11). The eleven stories in Close Range vary in length from the very short ones (2–7 pages) to a number of stories that are 35 or so pages long. Proulx juxtaposes tales about a story heard in youth that comes back to haunt a dying man (“The Half-Skinned Steer”), a young bull rider following the rodeo circuit to avoid the pain of family life (“The Mud Below”), a mixture of fairy tale and romance (“The Bunchgrass Edge of the World”), and the deep and unspoken bond between two men (“Brokeback Mountain”).

Proulx's stories are about love and loss, about suffering and endurance. The last lines of “The Bunchgrass Edge of the World” speak a recurring theme: “The main thing in life was staying power” (148). In “The Governors of Wyoming” a rancher voices a similar world view: “The main thing about ranchin,’’ he says, is “last as long as you can, make things come out so it's still your ranch when it's time to get buried. That's my take on it” (236–37). Proulx explores the distance between where lives begin and end and the ways in which her characters negotiate the terrain in between. The last sentence of the last story makes a pronouncement on the way Proulx's characters read their world: “There was some open space between what he knew and what he tried to believe, but nothing could be done about it, and if you can't fix it, you've got to stand it” (“Brokeback Mountain” 285). Many of the stories are about just that: standing, enduring the way things work
"The Half-Skinned Steer," the first story in the collection, serves as a good introduction to this major theme of negotiating distance and to the complex plotting that we encounter in subsequent stories. It is a story about acts of storytelling, about fact and fantasy. In the first sentence we meet the aging Mero:

In the long unfurling of his life, from tight-wound kid hustler in a wool suit riding the train out of the Cheyenne to geriatric limper in this spooled-out year, Mero had kicked down thought of the place where he began, a so-called ranch on the strange ground at the south hinge of the Big Horns.

(21)

The story is about Mero's memory and his journey back to that beginning place.

The story opens as Mero learns of his brother Rollo's death and determines to drive the long distance to the funeral. Moving in and out of the past, Proulx weaves together his story and a fantastic tale he remembers from his youth. A map of these intertwined narrative threads illustrates her complex plotting:

Mero 1 Present: News of Rollo's death; the decision to travel
Storyboard 1 Past: Introduces Mero's father's girlfriend, a "teller of tales of hard deeds and mayhem" (24)
Tin Head 1 Past: The girlfriend's story about a man named Tin Head begins
Mero 2 Present: Mero's fitful sleep and bad dreams before the journey
Tin Head 2 Past: How "things went wrong" on Tin Head's ranch
Mero 3 Past: An anthropologist gives Mero a lesson in human sexuality.
Mero 4 Present. Travelling, near Des Moines, Mero wrecks the car, buys another. Approaches the ranch: "Nothing had changed … the empty pale place and its roaring wind, the distant antelope as tiny as mice, landforms shaped true to the present" (31).
Tin Head 3 Girlfriend continues her story of a steer, half-skinned and left while Tin Head eats supper. "She was a total liar," Mero thinks (32).
Mero 5 Traveling toward home
Mero 6 Memories of the past
Mero 7 Nearing the ranch, he senses "an eerie dream quality" (34) about it. Mero runs "on the unmarked road through great darkness" (35).
Tin Head 4 When Tin Head returns, the steer has disappeared.
Mero 8 Misses turnoff to the ranch, backs car into hole.
Tin Head 5 Tin Head finds steer, interprets it as a sign of fate.
Mero 9 No hope of getting the car out, Mero senses doom: "It was almost a relief to have reached this point where the celestial fingernails were poised to nip his thread" (39).
Mero 10 The ending

I will not ruin the story by revealing how it ends, but I will say that the way in which Proulx weaves together the two tales offers us that sense of having come to a moment in a story where what happens seems to be just right.

In "People in Hell Just Want a Drink of Water," Proulx plots similarly, weaving together the stories of two families, the Dunmires and the Tinsleys. Their alternating stories pull us rapidly forward, but it all ends by
challenging our belief in what we have just witnessed: “That was all sixty years ago … We are in a new millennium and such desperate things no longer happen” (117). The final sentence teases us: “If you believe that you'll believe anything” (117). Similarly, “The Governors of Wyoming” presents two sets of characters who have opposite views about the value of cattle ranching. Wade Walls who “seemed to come from nowhere and belong to no one” (217) believes that cows are “world-destroying” (218), that the “domestication of livestock was the single most terrible act the human species ever perpetuated. It dooms everything living” (219). He envisions a paradise where native grasses and wildflowers cover the earth, where antelope, elk, and bison roam: “If I ran the world, I'd … leave the winds and the grasses to the hands of the gods. Let it be the empty place” (220). The story unfolds as Wade's determination to act against cattle ranchers escalates into a revenge plot with a surprising twist in its final scene.

“Job History,” a tight little story told in the present tense, although it begins in 1947 with the birth of its central figure Leeland Lee, happens quickly and cuts through the imagination sharply. It is a perfect example of an idea about how a story happens, taken from The God of Small Things: “Little events, ordinary things, smashed and reconstituted. Imbued with new meaning. Suddenly they become the bleached bones of a story” (Roy 32). “Job History” is seven pages long; its characters never speak. Their lives are stripped to the bone in Proulx's portrayal of the inexorable rush of time.

When I read “The Bunchgrass Edge of the World,” the story of the Touheys—Old Red; his Vietnam veteran son, Aladdin, and his wife, Wauneta; and their three children Tyler, Shan, and Ottaline, “the family embarrassment” (121), I found myself singing and remembering fairy tales. In a set of short stories filled with dashed hopes, violent and unrequited love, more misery than we can take, this story offers a brief respite and even some humor. We follow the longings of Ottaline, the oldest daughter “distinguished by a physique approaching the size of a hundred-gallon propane tank” (125). She despairs of ever escaping the ranch as her siblings have done, but she maintains a thread of hope: “Someone had to come for her” (130). In the repetition of this idea in the story I found myself singing “Someday My Prince Will Come” from Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs. Because she “craved to know something of the world” (134) Ottaline listens to her scanner where she often only hears couples arguing.

Her story takes a wonderful turn when one of her father's discarded tractors strikes up a conversation with her one day as she walks though the family gravel pit: “Hello, sweetheart. Come here, come here. It was the 4030, Aladdin's old green tractor” (132). Of course! This tractor is the frog prince of the fairy tale. Ottaline lives, after all, in a fantastic world; when your father's name is Aladdin, anything can happen. When she complains to the tractor that she is fat, it replies “What I like” (137). The tractor explains that what tractors want is a human connection, and Ottaline sets out to repair the green machine. If you remember the fairy tale, you may be able to predict the ending of this story. Remember, though, this is a Wyoming story, and Proulx has made it clear that we live here in a fantastic unreality.

Each of these stories profoundly engages me as a reader. “A Lonely Coast” warns that “it's easier than you think to yield up to the dark impulse” (207). The two shirts in “Brokeback Mountain” etch this tale of “the grieving plain” into my memory as they hang in the closet, a heartbreaking symbol of a love not tolerated at close range, “the pair like two skins, one inside the other, two in one” (283). “The Mud Below” tells the sad story of Diamond Felt's hunger to know who his father is while he destroys his future and his body rodeoing. He learns that life “was all a hard, fast ride that ended in the mud” (80). And I get the sense in “The Blood Bay” that, even though someone always has to pay the cost, some things do add up at close range: “The arithmetic stood comfortable” (96). These are stories to savor, to read slowly, to read again.

Nowhere in Close Range does Proulx give me a better context for inviting you to read her stories than in the closing scenes of “A Lonely Coast.” We're driving toward the town of Casper, and our arrival becomes a metaphor for making meaning:
You come down a grade and all at once the shining town lies below you, slung out like all western towns, and with the curved milk of mountains behind it. The lights trail away to the east in a brief and stubby cluster of yellow that butts hard against the dark. And if you've ever been to the lonely coast you've seen how the shore rock drops off into the black water and how the light on the point is final.

At the shore, the narrator tells us, we see the “old rollers coming in for millions of years,” and here, on the range at night, the wind rolls, reminding us that “the sea covered this place hundreds of millions of years ago, the slow evaporation, the mud turned to stone.” Proulx wraps up the scene with an idea that seems to capture how I feel after reading this book: “There's nothing calm in these thoughts. It isn't finished, it can still tear apart. Nothing is finished. You take your chances” (203).

I invite you to take your chances, to drive through Proulx's shining towns. Prepare to be deeply moved, angry, shocked. Keep driving, though. The journey is worth the effort.

Michael Kowalewski (review date winter 2001)

[In the following excerpt, Kowalewski discusses the significance of place in American fiction and offers a mixed assessment of Close Range.]

Writing about “place” in American literature has often focused upon the fine-grained appreciation and celebration of American landscapes, in all their mind-bending intricacy and prodigality. American places have been repeatedly honored for their capacity (in Wes Jackson's words) to stimulate human “en-light-enment,” 1 to teach us about the persistence of nature in our lives, if we will but learn how to observe, understand, and immerse ourselves in it in creative, responsible ways. There is a kind of essential mystery about the delicate and complex biological processes by which we have been hard-wired, over evolutionary time, to respond to the places in which we have lived. As the naturalist David Rains Wallace puts it, “The eye that looks through the microscope teems with more cellular life than the water drop on the slide.” 2 One need think only of the serendipity of “imprinted” psycho-sensory experiences in our everyday lives—the way, for instance, certain up certain places—to glimpse the ways in which place and physical identity are embedded in the mental and emotional maps of ourselves.

American writers have also repeatedly demonstrated that the “spirit of place” is intimately wrapped up with the spirit of time, with a three-dimensional layering of human and natural history in what William Least Heat-Moon calls “deep maps.” The celebratory, often lyrical habit of mind in this writing, however, sometimes obscures its shadowy twin, the quite different but just as persistent rhetorical impulse to object to the conditions of American life that threaten to destroy or utterly alter individual places and distract us from appreciating them. Prickly, polemical, combative, and quick to invoke ominous (sometimes whimsical) predictions and jeremiads, writers from Henry David Thoreau and Mary Austin to Edward Abbey, Leslie Silko, and Charles Bowden have all successfully used these techniques as a way of goading readers into action and inspiring a change of heart.

The analysis and evocation of place in contemporary America often seems somewhat embattled, unsettled, and besieged: at odds—often overwhelming odds—with attitudes and economic and social forces that threaten the local distinctiveness of the American landscape, both rural and urban. Three recent, very different works (one in sociology, one a documentary work of environmental history, and one a collection of short stories) might stand as representative examples of current explorations of place. If there is a common denominator in
the varying perspectives of these books it is a concern, either explicit or implied, that the future of America, as glimpsed through the lenses of various local habitats, looks increasingly bland, intolerant, unhealthy, and consumer-oriented. With the prospects for diversity once so promising in this country, where did we go wrong? The towns and cities in which we live, the communities and neighborhoods with which we do or don't identify, the landscapes and wild areas we treat so paradoxically—for these authors, all these phenomena exemplify complex social, cultural, and even spiritual symptoms that we ignore at our peril. Elegy, regret, and loss color all these books and cast doubt on whether Americans can care for or even care about the places in which they live and work.

As with several other recent cultural and sociological analyses of contemporary life, the problems confronted in these books seem easier to identify than to counteract, much less “solve.” Jaded, overscheduled, and overstimulated Americans, the argument goes, seem to have grown numb to the importance of place in healthy lives and communities. Part of a self-created “attention deficit disorder” society, they have increasingly opted for privacy, convenience, and consumption over community, shared public spaces, and a dense street culture. They are increasingly distracted by information technologies that claim to connect but that also isolate and replace human contact. They have fallen prey to an image-based “hypercapitalism,” in which brand names replace products. Citizens are reduced to mere consumers and livable communities are seen as commodities to be purchased rather than entities that must be created, often with great effort, for ourselves. (“The universities now offer only one serious major,” Wes Jackson quips: “upward mobility.”) Americans are surrounded by a Velveeta landscape of sprawling, look-alike suburbs, traffic-choked expressways full of impatient drivers on cell phones, and huge, corporate superstores with acres of parking lots. The spiritual as well as physical “macadamization” of contemporary America has eroded the distinctiveness of individual places and preemptively discouraged people from caring about them.

This is, of course, a one-sided, reductionist view of American life. But the possibility that this view may be even partly true has kindled a number of searching critiques of contemporary America. Each of the three books under consideration here [Close Range by Proulx, Farewell, Promised Land by Robert Dawson and Gray Brechin, and The Old Neighborhood by Ray Suarez] exposes a dark underside to recent American prosperity, reminding us of some of the uglier residues of former “flush times” in this country, from toxic waste sites in northern California to failing ranches in Wyoming and crack houses in inner-city St. Louis. All of them pose vexing questions about the kind of world postwar baby boomers are leaving their children and that former transient communities have left to present residents. …

The Wyoming of postcards, of Jackson Hole and Yellowstone, is nowhere in sight in Close Range, though we do get a glimpse of some tourists on a dude ranch, who are taken “up into the mountains where tilted slopes of wild iris aroused in them emotional displays and some altitude sickness.” For the most part, however, Proulx's Wyoming is at “the bunchgrass edge of the world.” She creates a memorable, hardscrabble Rogue's Gallery of knotheads, troublemakers, lonely hearts, and dreamers, living lives of not-so-quiet desperation. The characters who drift in from out of state are B-actors from television serials or workers pink-slipped somewhere else in a company downsizing. The ones who stay at home are the ones too fat, ugly, injured, pimpled, or poor to get out.

Proulx's stories are peopled with ne'er-do-well antiheroes who alternate between despondency, reverie, and horniness. They sport first names like Tee, Clayt, Pake, Elk, Ash, Flyby and Wauneta: Wauneta Hipsag. They move through a world of run-down ranches, all-night truckstops, crazy weather (hail, snow, sleet, “every kind of precip”), working-class homes where dinner is microwaved chicken breast and dehydrated potatoes, and bars with old, dented jukeboxes “with the neon gone dead and a flashlight on a string for patrons fussy enough to want to make a choice.” Freshly tarred highways are “so deep a black the yellow stripes seemed to float above the surface.” One family spends the Fourth of July sitting together on the porch, “watching a distant storm, pretending the thick, ruddy legs of lightning and thunder were fireworks.” Nearly all the men, young and old, seem capable of only a crude sexuality; they insistently fantasize about “riding” or
mounting” women, maybe even using pigtails as reins. (The men in the final story in the book are slightly more tender when they start coupling with each other.) One father tells his daughter, who is “distinguished by a physique approaching the size of a hundred-gallon propane tank,” that they'll be attending a bull sale. “I'll give you a pointer you don't want a forget,” he says earnestly. “Scrotal circumference is damn important.”

Proulx's women tend to be mannish and independent: ranch hands who ride horses and drive mud-splattered pickups, or waitresses and cooks who try to hide their muscles under “fuss-ruffle clothes with keyhole necklines.” Most have been through “rough marriages full of fighting and black eyes and sobbing imprecations.” Hair trigger tempers come with the territory:

Wyos are touchers, hot-blooded and quick, and physically yearning. Maybe it's because they spend so much time handling livestock, but people here are always handshaking, patting, smoothing, caressing, enfolding. This instinct extends to anger, the lightning backhand slap, the hip-shot to throw you off balance, the elbow, a jerk and wrench, the swat, and then the serious stuff that's meant to kill and sometimes does.

This observation comes from the only first-person narrator in the entire collection, the unnamed woman who narrates “A Lonely Coast.” Typically, Proulx relies on a knowing, rueful narrative voice, more than half in love with the tang and bite of western idiomatic speech. There's a hardened, mordant wit to many of the offhanded exchanges her characters have, remarks that ground these stories and form the verbal equivalent of a tough, rosined rodeo glove. A wife complains at one point about her randy, 96-year-old father-in-law. “Wauneta, what a you want me a do about it?” her exasperated husband asks. “Drown him in the stock tank? He will kick off one a these days.” “You been saying that for five years,” she retorts. “He is takin the scenic route.” In another story, a newlywed husband grumbles about his domineering father-in-law. “My block don't fit his tackle,” he whispered.

“It sure fits mine,” she whispered back.

Proulx exercises the same fondness for harsh landscapes and grisly violence in these stories that she has in her previous fiction about Newfoundland and New England. The body count rises as one moves through the book. She once told an interviewer that she tried for a “lawn sprinkler effect” in her fiction, “a kind of jittery, jammed, off-balance feeling,” and something like this occurs in Close Range. Proulx often works by snapshot (one “story” is simply a seven-page summary of some characters' feckless “job histories”). Proulx often offers up encapsulating remarks or scenarios that seem to equate bluntness with credibility. “My brothers slept in the bunkhouse,” one woman character says. “That flat remark,” Proulx adds, captured all of this woman's childhood: “sequestered, alert, surrounded by menace.” This kind of micro-portraiture is thrown into relief by occasional reflections on the ancient geological history of the landscape: “the sea that covered this place hundreds of millions of years ago, the slow evaporation, mud turned to stone. There's nothing calm in those thoughts. It isn't finished, it can still tear apart. Nothing is finished. You take your chances.”

“Nothing is finished” seems an apt phrase to describe many of these stories. Characters are so dwarfed by a raw landscape, buffeted by a declining economy, and portrayed in such ambivalent ways by Proulx, that we can't be sure whether we're supposed to care about them or simply see them (in the words of one character) as “twist-face losers” who prove that Wyoming’s “gene pool was small and [that] the rivulets that once fed it had dried up.” The epigraph to the book, an anonymous rancher's statement that “Reality's never been of much use out here,” is meant to help justify elements of the fantastic and the improbable in these stories. Some of the tales are adaptations of folktales; sometimes, as in “The Blood Bay,” the results are in the best tradition of comic tall tales. In other stories, the effect is enfeebled, as when one character talks to a ruined tractor that talks back, sometimes in Urdu. Much of the unevenness of the collection comes from the fact that “reality” is actually of great use in these stories, which come to life less from the use of High Plains Gothic
than from the kind of gritty realism Proulx so adeptly invokes. And thereby hangs an ambivalence, for Proulx is clearly fascinated with the Cowboy Myth. She wants to revise the portrayal of the lives of the ranch-hands one finds lyrically celebrated, for instance, in Gretel Ehrlich's *The Solace of Open Spaces* (1985). But her need to “keep it real” also ends up half-romanticizing the blood, sweat, and semen of hard ranch life. Adrenaline, or “euphoric heat,” repeatedly pumps through these stories, and when characters start feeling a “dark lightning” in their guts when riding a bull we know we’re halfway to being in a Garth Brooks song. In fact, some of the characters might have a future as country-western lyricists. “It was all a hard, fast ride that ended in the mud,” one of them muses. At their best, Proulx's stories are hard and fast and filled with an inventive energy. At their weakest, in the words of one character, “the juice ain't worth the squeeze,” and Proulx ends up riding under the big Stetson she herself would like to discard.

In their various ways, the authors of all three of these books suggest that fruitful thought about place in contemporary America must avoid soft-focus or “feel good” conceptions of homes, neighborhoods, and communities. The implicit or explicit advice offered is, “don't forget who—or where—we're actually talking about.” Many places in this country are so badly battered, contaminated, or ill-regarded as to be virtually unreclaimable. Yet if an author focuses too much—too insistently, too ironically—on the process of battering or the ruined results, the impetus to care about a place may actually be impeded. That tendency, to a greater or lesser degree, appears in each of these works. Ultimately, however, each of them also records acts of courage and imagination that loom larger than the specter of lost potential, and each suggests that there is no easy self-exemption when one cares about a place. An indictment of outside forces will only be credible when it is, at least in part, a self-indictment. We must see ourselves as a part of—not aloof or separate from—a larger failure of will and lack of imagination that have caused us, collectively, to “lose our place.” We must expect more of ourselves, these writers suggest. The problems we face in dealing with inner-city blight, toxic waste, and rural poverty have deep roots in the past. But a fresh understanding of that past may remind us that we were, as the song goes, so much older then. We're younger than that now. (Or at least it's pretty to think so.)

**Notes**

4. Jackson, 3.
5. I am indebted in my thinking about Proulx to my colleague Robert Bonner.

Karen L. Rood (essay date 2001)

*[In the following essay, Rood provides an overview of Proulx's life, career, body of work, critical reception, and the salient themes and narrative style of her fiction.]*

Annie Proulx achieved renown as a fiction writer relatively late in life, when her first novel, *Postcards* (1992), earned her the 1993 PEN/Faulkner Award. More honors followed for her second novel, *The Shipping News* (1993), which won a National Book Award for Fiction, a *Chicago Tribune* Heartland Prize for Fiction, and an
Irish Times International Fiction Prize in 1993, as well as the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1994. The novel became a best-seller, earning Proulx, at fifty-eight, a reputation as an important “new” fiction writer. Proulx, however, had been writing short fiction for magazines since the 1950s and had been supporting herself and her three sons as a writer of mostly nonfiction since the mid-1970s, polishing the distinctive prose style that eventually brought her acclaim. Though her first four works of fiction were published under the name E. Annie Proulx, she announced in 1997 that she would prefer to be known as Annie Proulx and would use that name on all future writings.

The daughter of George Napoleon Proulx and Lois “Nellie” Gill Proulx, Edna Annie Proulx was born in Norwich, Connecticut, on 22 August 1935, the eldest of five daughters. (Her last name is pronounced “pru.”) Her mother's family, the Gills, emigrated from the west of England to New England in 1635. Two years later, the Proulx's left France for Quebec. In the 1860s her father's grandparents immigrated to New England to find employment in the textile mills. Proulx's father also worked in that industry, eventually becoming a company vice president and traveling to South America and Russia as a textile expert.1 Proulx credits her mother, an artist and amateur naturalist whose family had “a strong tradition of oral storytelling,” with teaching her “to see and appreciate the natural world, to develop an eye for detail, and to tell a story.”2

Because of George Proulx's job, the family moved frequently during her childhood, living in towns in Vermont, North Carolina, Maine, and Rhode Island. Annie Proulx attended a one-room school in Brookfield, Vermont, Black Mountain High School in North Carolina, and Deering High School in Portland, Maine, before enrolling at Colby College in Waterville, Maine, in the class of 1957.3

Before earning her degree, Proulx dropped out of Colby and married H. Ridgely Bullock Jr. in 1955. They were divorced in 1960, and their daughter, Sylvia Marion, was brought up by her father. Several years later Proulx married again. Two sons, Jonathan Edward and Gillis Crowell, were born of this marriage, which also ended in divorce. In 1963 Proulx returned to Vermont and went back to school. She earned a B.A. cum laude in history at the University of Vermont in Burlington in 1969. In that year she married James Hamilton Lang, who adopted her children from her second marriage. Lang is the father of Proulx's third son, Morgan Hamilton. This marriage also ended in divorce.4

After graduating from the University of Vermont, Proulx attended graduate school in history at Sir George Williams University (now Concordia University) in Montreal. She earned an M.A. in 1973 and then did doctoral work in Renaissance economic history, passing her oral examinations in 1975. As Proulx told an interviewer in 1999, during graduate school she was “attracted to the French Annales school, which pioneered minute examination of the lives of ordinary people through account books, wills, marriage and death records, farming and crafts techniques, the development of technologies.”5 Rejecting the narrow definition of history as a record of the political and military activities of so-called great men, these historians look at the evolution of everyday life in the context of larger social, economic, and even geological change.6 Proulx's statement that she is “keenly interested in situations of change, both personal and social” 7 and her focus in her fiction on individuals living in periods of major social and economic upheaval demonstrate the extent to which her academic training has shaped the course of her career as a novelist.

Proulx had begun writing short stories for magazines before she entered Sir George Williams University. Each year she was in graduate school, from 1970 through 1974, Seventeen, which first published a story by Proulx in 1964, took one or two of her stories. These stories are written for a teenage audience and address subjects commonly found in such fiction—such as popularity, social values, and self-awareness. Yet some of the themes of Proulx's mature fiction are already apparent. Her first Seventeen story, “All the Pretty Little Horses” (June 1964), and her last, “The Yellow Box” (December 1974), both emphasize the value of understanding the past and preserving one's heritage. “All the Pretty Little Horses” also introduces the ecological concerns that run throughout Proulx's fiction for adults. “The Ugly Room” (August 1972) and “Yellow-Leaves” (April 1974) are about teenage girls growing up among the rural poor of New England, the

In 1975 Proulx decided against a career in teaching and dropped out of graduate school. Living with a friend in Canaan, Vermont, in the area of the state known as the Northeast Kingdom, Proulx found few employment opportunities in this rural area near the Canadian border and turned to freelance journalism to support herself and her three sons. For more than a decade she wrote articles on subjects including fishing, black flies, apples, cidermaking, canoeing, mountain lions, gardening, and cooking for magazines such as *Gourmet, Horticulture, Gray's Sporting Journal, Blair and Ketchums, Outdoor Life, National Wildlife, Organic Gardening, and Country Journal*. After a few years she was writing nonfiction on assignment for magazines and “scribbling away on short stories” when she had time. The majority of her fiction during this period was published in *Gray's Sporting Journal*, a magazine with high literary standards for the outdoor stories it publishes. In 1999 Proulx recalled the “intense camaraderie and shared literary excitement among the writers whose fiction appeared in *Gray's*. Without this experience, she asserted, she “would probably never have tried to write fiction.”


Proulx dismisses her nonfiction books, which are now in demand among book collectors, as assignments for hire that she wrote to earn money. Like most how-to books and cookbooks they were not widely reviewed. Yet brief notices in periodicals such as *Publishers Weekly, Booklist,* and *Library Journal* praised their thoroughness and usefulness to the general reader, and Proulx won a Garden Writers of America Award in 1986.

For the student of Proulx's later fiction her nonfiction is interesting for the historical perspective that she often brings to her subjects. For example, the reader finds histories of cider and the dairy in the books she wrote with Nichols, and *The Gardener's Journal and Record Book* is illustrated with engravings from nineteenth-century garden books “because they instruct and inform us with a richness of detail sadly absent in our own gardening works.” *Plan and Make Your Own Fences and Gates, Walkways, Walls, and Drives* is particularly interesting for its histories of early American fences, stone walls, and brickmaking. It also includes an anecdote about late-twentieth-century articles in popular periodicals that mistakenly identify root cellars built in hillsides “by great-great-grandfather to store his turnips” as ancient Celtic or Phoenician structures. Similar examples of such “Modern ignorance” appear in *Postcards* and “Electric Arrows,” a short story collected in *Heart Songs and Other Stories*.

Like Proulx's nonfiction, her fiction is based on extensive research, which has contributed to the wealth of detail that reviewers have often praised in her fictional style. Information about what people eat, how it is prepared, and how cooking has changed over time is threaded through her fiction, adding depth to characterization and supporting social commentary. Her fascination with this important aspect of everyday life is apparent in Proulx's nonfiction books and articles on food, including fascinating accounts such as “The
Curious, the Bizarre, the Delectable, and the Impossible” (**Gray's Sporting Journal**, September 1978), in which Proulx and Nichols describe how many varieties of game birds were cooked and eaten from ancient times through the first half of the twentieth century, and “North Woods Provender” (**Gourmet**, November 1979), in which Proulx describes dishes that have been served in the lumber camps of northern New England, Quebec, and New Brunswick for two centuries and traces their roots to the cooking of French Canadians of Norman ancestry.

During the years in which she made a living from writing nonfiction, Proulx at first sold her short stories mainly to sporting and outdoor magazines, but in 1982 her fiction reached a national audience of general readers when Tom Jenks accepted “The Wer-Trout” for the June issue of *Esquire*. He accepted two additional stories for the magazine before taking a job with Charles Scribner's Sons and inviting Proulx to collect some of her short stories into a book.\(^{13}\)

The result was *Heart Songs and Other Stories*, published in October 1988. The reviews were mostly the sort of brief comments typically accorded a collection of short fiction by a little-known author, but they were on the whole laudatory. The *Publishers Weekly* reviewer called Proulx “a writer to watch” (19 August 1988), while Kenneth Rosen, writing for the “In Short” column of the *New York Times Book Review* (29 January 1989) praised her “sometimes enigmatic, often lyrical images.”\(^{14}\)

Proulx's contract with Scribner's included a novel. Thinking of herself as a short-story writer, Proulx was at first uncertain that she would be able to write a longer work of fiction, but once she started writing *Postcards*, she found the process easier than writing short fiction. A publisher's advance and grants from the Vermont Council on the Arts in 1989 and the Ucross Foundation in 1990 allowed her to devote herself to fiction writing for the first time in her life. She drove cross-country “several times to catch the unfolding of the landscape and translate it into the vanished landscape of the 1940s and '50s.”\(^{15}\) She wrote *Postcards* in 1990, during a six-week residency at the Ucross Foundation in Clearmont, Wyoming, in the foothills of the Big Horn Mountains. She found that she could write easily there and wrote her next two novels at the foundation as well.

Published in January 1992, *Postcards* met with positive reviews. Writing about three first novels in *Chicago Tribune Books* (12 January 1992), novelist Frederick Busch devoted more than an equally apportioned amount of space to *Postcards*, describing it as more like a fifth or sixth novel than a first attempt and calling Proulx a “richly talented writer.”\(^{16}\) In the *New York Times Book Review* (22 March 1992), David Bradley went even further than Busch in his praise, saying that Proulx had “come close” to achieving the impossible goal of writing the Great American Novel: that is, a novel epitomizing the American experience as a whole.\(^{17}\)

Published in March 1993, Proulx's second novel, *The Shipping News*, is set in Newfoundland, which Proulx visited for the first time in the mid-1980s during a fishing trip with a friend.\(^{18}\) She later bought a house on the Great Northern Peninsula of the island and spends time there each year. By the time she completed *The Shipping News* with the help of a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts in 1991 and a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1992, she had made nine trips to the island, “watching, observing, taking notes and listening.”\(^{19}\) Filled with closely observed details of Newfoundland life and language, *The Shipping News* won the enthusiastic praise of critics and became a best-seller. The novelist Sandra Scofield, writing in the *Washington Post Book World* (1 August 1993), described it as “a novel that reinvents the tale and gives us a hero for our times.”\(^{20}\) In *Chicago Tribune Books* (29 March 1993) Stephen Jones called the novel “a lyric page turner,”\(^{21}\) and Howard Norman, writing for the *New York Times Book Review*, praised Proulx's “surreal humor and her zest for the strange foibles of humanity.”\(^{22}\) The most accessible of Proulx's novels, *The Shipping News* was also her most widely acclaimed, bringing her four major awards.

Proulx has recounted that she developed the idea for her next novel, *Accordion Crimes*, while she was still writing *The Shipping News*, as she “sat shaking and aching in the middle of the night in the hours after a bite
by a Brown Recluse spider.” She used that experience in the third section of Accordion Crimes, which is set in Texas and is the only part of the original draft she included in the final version. At first her plan was for the entire story of an accordion passing from one immigrant group to another to be set in Texas, “a state with an extremely rich immigrant population,” but after she did not receive a hoped-for residency fellowship that would have allowed her to spend six months in Texas fitting her plotline into the landscape of the state, she had to rethink the book. The result was much more ambitious than her original plan: an attempt to define the entire American “immigrant experience and the individual and cultural costs of abandoning the past and reinventing oneself.”

With eight sets of characters spread over more than a century and a wide range of locations, the novel is more epic in scope and less tightly structured than Proulx's first two novels. Some critics were bothered by the bigger and looser structure, and the reviewer for the influential New York Times Book Review (23 June 1996) disliked the frequent depictions of violence in the novel. As Proulx commented in 1999, it is hard to take seriously criticism of the violence in the fiction. After all, “America is a violent, gun-handling country.” Adding that in most cases the violence suffered by her characters is “drawn from true accounts of public record,” she explained that her characters’ “bitter deaths and misadventures … illustrate American violence which is real, deep and vast.” Other reviewers, including the critics for the Washington Post Book World (16 June 1996) and Chicago Tribune Books (9 June 1996), praised Accordion Crimes, and John Sutherland wrote in the New Republic (7 October 1996), that while The Shipping News demonstrated that Proulx is “a good novelist,” Accordion Crimes revealed that she is “a great novelist.”


The overarching concern of Proulx's fiction is the way in which ordinary people conduct their lives in the face of social, economic, and ecological change. From Heart Songs and Other Stories, with its focus on the interactions of the rural poor and the city people who are gradually buying up their land, and Postcards, which depicts the decline of the small New England family farm in the period of accelerated urbanization that began during the Second World War, Proulx went on, in The Shipping News, to show how the intrusion of modernization and big government is gradually destroying a traditional way of life in Newfoundland. Taking on the American melting-pot mentality that expected immigrants to give up the cultures of their homelands in order to gain acceptance, Accordion Crimes covers roughly a century of American life, from the 1890s to the 1990s. It looks at the people left behind in the rush toward “modernity” and the American Dream of prosperity. In Close Range Proulx illustrates the plight of Wyoming ranchers succumbing to the same general forces of modernization and big government as the New England farmers and Newfoundland fisherman in her earlier fiction.

Ever since the publication of Postcards—a novel about a man who murders his fiancée and wastes his life on the run, simultaneously obsessed with guilt and self-justification—reviewers have compared Proulx's fiction to that of Frank Norris and Theodore Dreiser. Postcards has a thematic connection to Norris's McTeague (1898), in which the title character kills his wife, and Dreiser's An American Tragedy (1925), about a young man who kills his fiancée. Yet Proulx goes beyond the old-fashioned genetic and social determinism that lies at the heart of these novels. Though nature and nurture are factors in her characters' fates, she expresses a more complex view of the forces that influence their lives. “Geography, geology, climate weather, the deep past,
immediate events, shape the characters and partly determine what happens to them,” she explained in 1999, “although the random event counts for much as it does in life,” and her characters “pick their way through the chaos of change.” The world of Proulx’s fiction offers no certainty, for good or for ill. Yet regardless of the hardships her characters encounter, Proulx notes, they harbor “the images of an ideal and seemingly attainable world.” She reveals in her fiction “the historical skew between what people have hoped for and who they thought they were and what befell them.”

A closer antecedent of Proulx's fiction is the early fiction of John Dos Passos, with its focus on the ordinary, working-class American trying to cope in an increasingly urban and industrialized capitalist society during the first half of the twentieth century. The broad canvasses of Postcards and Accordion Crimes may be considered attempts to define the American experience for Proulx's generation in the same way that Dos Passos's U.S.A. trilogy (1930–1936) forced his contemporaries to take a critical look at the American Dream.

Proulx admires her characters' traditional lifestyles and is well know for weaving information about topics such as language, customs, food, and craftsmanship into her narratives. She has been widely recognized for her lyrical prose style, her ability to create strikingly original images to express stark, sometimes horrifying truths. She is also well known for her wry humor, which often lightens the mood of violent scenes and pessimistic observations on human nature. Though she does not wholly dismiss the redemptive power of love or the possibility of selfless actions, she more often than not portrays human beings as motivated by selfish concerns, showing how insecurity and hurt tend to spawn not compassion but anger, hatred, prejudice, and violence.

Proulx's intermixture of the humorous with the horrific bears comparison to Flannery O'Connor's. Yet, for O'Connor, a devout Roman Catholic, her bizarre characters and frequent use of violence were part of an attempt to show her readers how far the modern world has strayed from true Christianity. She had fixed religious and moral standards against which to measure human actions. Because Proulx's world of shifting values has no such guideposts, it is a more frightening place than O'Connor's world. The most humorous and most grotesque caricatures in O'Connor's fiction are individuals who have unwittingly or willfully fallen away from God's Grace and become agents of the devil. According to Proulx, she created her characters “to carry a particular story.” She refuses to “give them their heads and ‘see where they go.’” Yet her characters are complex beings, and she adds that the “work of inventing a believable and fictionally ‘true’ person on paper is exhilarating, particularly as one knowingly skates near the thin ice of caricature.” In their roles of carrying the plotline Proulx's characters sometimes become what may be called secular versions of O'Connor's grotesques. The most extreme of them become so obsessed with their emotional scars that they gradually turn into little more than personifications of single overwhelming emotions. Because they are more complex and their emotional deformities have different, and more varied, roots than those of O'Connor's apostates, Proulx's grotesques also have more varied fates. Some, including Quoyle in The Shipping News and Ottaline in “The Bunchgrass Edge of the World” (1998), who both feel like outsiders because of their huge bodies, become progressively less grotesque as they discover possibilities for human relationships. Others, such as Rivers in “The Wer-Trout” (1982), Hans Beutle in Accordion Crimes, and Car Scope in “The Governors of Wyoming” (1999), are seriocomic. The reader recognizes their self inflicted plights but is too amused by their folly to feel much sympathy. Hawkheel in “On the Antler” (1983), Mme Malefoot in Accordion Crimes, and Mero in “The Half-Skinned Steer” (1997) are among the characters who, more pathetic than funny, nonetheless elicit laughter at their single-minded obsessions. Some characters, including Dub Blood in Postcards and Howard Poplin and Ivar Gasmann in Accordion Crimes are less-than-admirable comic grotesques who experience undeserved successes, while purely pathetic grotesques, such as Vela Gasmann in Accordion Crimes, are doomed to unhappiness. Proulx's most grotesque character is the murderer Loyal Blood in Postcards who deserves his fate but still draws reader sympathy because of Proulx's ability to describe his complex feelings of anger, self-justification, and guilt.
Just as Proulx's characters can become exaggerated versions of real people, her plotlines are occasionally interrupted by excursions into magical realism, a technique in which a plausible narrative enters the realm of fantasy without establishing a clearly defined line between the possible and impossible. Though Proulx often gives the reader “realistic” explanations for bizarre happenings, sometimes she purposely leaves such puzzles unresolved.

Proulx rarely uses first-person narration. Only three of her collected stories—“Stone City” and “Electric Arrows” in *Heart Songs and Other Stories* and “A Lonely Coast” in *Close Range: Wyoming Stories*—are narrated from a first-person point of view. The rest of her collected stories and all three of her novels are narrated from third-person-limited perspectives that, particularly in the novels and sometimes in her longer stories, shift from character to character to present more than one point of view. Through this technique, complications in a plotline are usually revealed gradually. Though the time span of the novel or short story proceeds in a linear fashion, important events of the past, and further information about episodes that have occurred earlier in the novel, are revealed as they come to a character's mind, or as a character learns more about them. Thus, Proulx's stories tend to have a thematic, rather than chronological, order. Her third-person narrators often comment on the action, usually paraphrasing or summarizing a character's thoughts rather than interjecting an authorial viewpoint. Sometimes, however, Proulx's narrators do step out of character to offer an authorial perspective, and in *Accordion Crimes* she uses this point of view in a technique she calls the “flash-forward” to reveal what happens to a character outside the time frame of the novel.

Proulx's fiction may be seen as part of a late twentieth-century trend toward a new regionalism. While southern regional writing has always remained strong, in the early years of the century the sophisticated, dispassionate writings of the great modernists made the local-color stories of other regions—so popular at the end of the previous century—seem poorly crafted and overly sentimental. At the same time, as Americans became increasingly urban, critics began to dismiss such rural fiction as irrelevant and outmoded. By the 1980s, however, this trend seemed to be reversing, with critical praise, literary prizes, and best-seller status accorded not only to Proulx's novels but to other notable works such as Carolyn Chute's *The Beans of Egypt, Maine* (1985), set in rural New England; John Casey's *Spartina* (1989), set in coastal Rhode Island; and Cormac McCarthy's *All the Pretty Horses* (1992), the first volume of this trilogy set on both sides of the U.S.-Mexican border. Like Proulx, these writers have learned not only from the modernists, but also from the magical realists and the minimalists—writers such as Raymond Carver and Ann Beattie, who trace their understated style to Ernest Hemingway—embracing some lessons while rejecting others. Readers who approach the works of these new regionalists out of a turn-of-the-century nostalgia for getting back to their country roots quickly have their notions of pastoral serenity replaced by pictures of rural poverty and varying degrees of violence. Proulx is the most ambitious of these writers, not only in her broad focus on more than one region but also in her attempt to explore the underlying causes of the social ills she depicts. As she told the *Missouri Review* interviewer in 1999, “The novel should take us, as readers, to a vantage point from which we can confront our human condition” and “see ourselves as living entities in the jammed and complex contemporary world.”

**Notes**


29. Ibid., 83–84.

30. Ibid., 88.

Further Reading

**CRITICISM**


Bell praises Accordion Crimes as a “sweeping epic.”


Bemrose examines the role of the accordion as a plot device in Accordion Crimes.


Birkerts offers a mixed assessment of Accordion Crimes, praising Proulx's “thrillingly precise” prose, but expressing reservations about the novel's “formulaic” conclusion and relentless cynicism.

D’Souza offers a positive assessment of Close Range.


Eder evaluates the strengths of Close Range.


Hospital praises the major themes in The Shipping News, but cites flaws in the novel’s “stylistic irritations” and formulaic plot.


Kirn assesses the strengths of Close Range.


Lehmann-Haupt praises Proulx's prose in Close Range.


Scott compliments Proulx's sympathetic characterizations in Close Range.

Additional coverage of Proulx's life and career is contained in the following sources published by the Gale Group: American Writers Supplement, Vol. 7; Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: Biography & Resources, Vol. 3; Contemporary Authors, Vol. 145; Contemporary Authors New Revision Series, Vol. 65; Contemporary Novelists; Contemporary Popular Writers, Vol. 1; DISCovering Authors 3.0; DISCovering Authors Modules: Popular Fiction and Genre Authors; Literature Resource Center; and Major 20th-Century Writers, Ed. 2.
E. Annie Proulx Long Fiction Analysis (Survey of Novels and Novellas)

Thematically most of E. Annie Proulx’s writing is concerned with the gradual disappearance of the rural America that she cherishes, as urban sprawl overtakes the farmlands and forests that once constituted a major part of the United States. Proulx has always avoided cities, preferring to live in rural areas. As city dwellers have pushed farther and farther into rural America, family farms have virtually disappeared, as Proulx shows in Postcards.

Proulx is also concerned with the necessity for people to have roots, and in her novels she shows how, in an expanding society, it becomes difficult to maintain such roots. In The Shipping News, the protagonist, Quoyle, born in Brooklyn, is a deeply disturbed person who has cast about in New York State for most of his thirty-odd years, unhappy with the person he is. Only when he makes a break from his unsatisfactory life following the death of his oversexed, unfaithful wife in an automobile wreck does he develop a self-image he can live with. He leaves his sorrow at his wife’s death behind and moves with his two daughters to Newfoundland, to a dilapidated property that his family has owned for years. In returning to his ancestral roots, he begins to build a new life for himself, one based on self-acceptance.

Proulx usually employs third-person omniscient narrators in her writing. She uses her narrators to provide “flash-forwards,” which, unlike flashbacks, inform readers of the fates of characters outside the immediate time frame of the narrative. By using this device, Proulx is able to add to the intensity of occurrences in her stories by giving readers clues to impending events.

Sentimentality seldom intrudes on Proulx’s writing. An admirer of Icelandic author Halldór Laxness’s novel Sjálfstætt fólk (1934-1935; Independent People, 1946), she, like Laxness, writes about harsh, unforgiving landscapes populated by people strong enough to survive them. She understands well the dialects of her characters, using them authentically to make her characters credible. Doing her research for The Shipping News, she spent a great deal of time in Newfoundland listening to how Newfoundlanders speak and doggedly studying the Dictionary of Newfoundland English.

Proulx does not mourn for a lost agrarian past; rather, she creates situations with which her characters must cope on a day-to-day basis. Her characters do not have easy lives. Those involved in farming or fishing live at the mercy of changing variables that are indifferent to their suffering. Much that she writes about is horrific, but she tempers the horror with humor, albeit often a black humor. She admits to avoiding scrupulously what she terms a “pastoral nostalgia.”

Postcards

Loyal Blood has lived most of his early life on the family farm, improving it through backbreaking work. He has a clear vision of the farm’s potential. His roots are firmly entrenched in this farm, where he lives with his father and brother. The story Proulx relates in Postcards details events that occur in Loyal’s life between 1944 and 1988. Critics have pointed out that John Dos Passos chronicled the first three decades of the twentieth century in his trilogy U.S.A. (1937) and suggest that Proulx has taken up where Dos Passos left off. She has undertaken the herculean task of chronicling, through Loyal Blood’s adventures, more than four decades in midcentury America.

Loyal Blood has killed his girlfriend, Billy; she had rejected his advances, leading the aroused Loyal to rape her, and in the course of the rape, she died. This clearly is not a case of premeditated murder, but nevertheless it is an act that can destroy Loyal’s life. Panicked by what he has done, Loyal hides Billy’s body in an abandoned root cave. He then tells his father, Mink, that he and Billy have decided to run away and that they
are leaving immediately, without even saying goodbye to Billy’s family. Mink is furious.

Postcards unfolds over the next forty-four years, during which Loyal, whose fervent wish has been to stay on the family farm, is ironically forced to live life on the run. His presence is essential to the farm’s survival, as Loyal alone understands how to make the most of its potential. Now Loyal’s only contact with his family is through infrequent postcards—always the same card, with a picture of a bear on it—sent to them with no return address. One card informs the family that Loyal and Billy have separated, and nobody seems eager to pursue finding her.

Ever running, Loyal moves from one menial job to another. His emotional response to Billy’s death is reflected in his having a violent asthma attack every time he tries to involve himself sexually with a woman. Meanwhile, part of the family farm has been sold to a Boston doctor who has found Billy’s skeleton, but the doctor thinks the remains are those of someone the Indians killed earlier, so nothing comes of his discovery.

Proulx’s careful research is evident in Postcards, as it is in all her writing. For example, at one point in Loyal’s meandering, he decides to search for uranium. He scans maps for places with names like “Poison Spring” and “Badwater Canyon” because such names suggest the presence of arsenic or selenium in these places, and where these elements exist, uranium may be present.

The Shipping News

R. G. Quoyle, the protagonist of The Shipping News, is an unhappy, overweight widower who, born in Brooklyn, has drifted around New York State. He falls in love with Petal Bear, a promiscuous vamp, and marries her, but she is unfaithful to him. She is fleeing from him and their two daughters when she crashes her car into a tree and dies. Still in love with Petal, Quoyle suffers the pangs of a disabling grief, but his aunt, Agnis Hamm, an unsentimental, practical woman, urges him to leave his past behind and resettle on a dilapidated family property in Newfoundland.

Quoyle and his daughters, one of whom is emotionally disturbed, follow Agnis’s advice and land in a stark world that is totally unfamiliar to them. There, Quoyle builds a new life. He finds work as a reporter for the local newspaper, The Gammy Bird, where his assignments are the shipping news and car wrecks. Quoyle thinks that he cannot endure reporting on the latter, but Agnis views his doing so as a necessary rite of passage.

Quoyle eventually fits in, making friends with the owner of The Gammy Bird and with other locals, including Wavey Prowse, a widow with a disabled son. The two find that they are kindred spirits and, for the first time in his life, Quoyle experiences something that approaches contentment and self-acceptance.

Accordion Crimes

In Accordion Crimes, Proulx explores the melting-pot nature of the United States. Her cast of characters is large, making for a complex narrative of epic proportions. The story focuses on the successive owners of a green accordion that was made in Sicily and, over the century from around 1890 to the 1990’s, is owned by people in the United States in places ranging from Louisiana and Texas to Minnesota and Illinois. Each of the eight chapters in the novel focuses on someone who has possession of the instrument.

The accordion is made a by Sicilian accordion maker who, with his son, Silvano, is about to set sail for the New World, and the instrument comes to America with them. Lured to New Orleans, probably by a pitchman employed to find greenhorns about to sail for the United States and divert them to that city, where they are needed as cheap laborers, the accordion maker is soon beaten to death by people who hate Italians. Silvano, blaming himself for his father’s death, attempts to mask his Italian heritage and changes his name to Bob Joe.
In time, the green accordion passes on to his black friend, Polio, who soon dies, as do most of the people involved with the instrument. The green accordion is ultimately found by two children in a Dumpster in the 1990’s. They fish it out, place it on a highway, and watch an eighteen-wheeler run over and destroy it.
Analysis

Other Literary Forms (Literary Essentials: Short Fiction Masterpieces)

Early in her career, E. Annie Proulx was a freelance journalist, writing cookbooks, how-to manuals, and magazine articles on everything from making cider to building fences. Her first novel, *Postcards* (1992), received good reviews. However, it was the enthusiastic reception of her second novel, *The Shipping News* (1993), that brought her international fame and popular success. Her novel *Accordion Crimes* (1996) did not enjoy the same acclaim as her Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Shipping News*. 
Achievements (Literary Essentials: Short Fiction Masterpieces)

For her Postcards, E. Annie Proulx was the first woman to win the PEN/Faulkner Award for fiction. In 1993, The Shipping News won many awards, including the Chicago Tribune Heartland Prize, The Irish Times International Fiction Prize, the National Book Award, and the Pulitzer Prize. Four stories from her collection Close Range: Wyoming Stories were selected for the 1998 and 1999 editions of The Best American Short Stories and Prize Stories: The O. Henry Awards. “The Half-Skinned Deer” was selected for The Best American Short Stories of the Century.
Other literary forms (Survey of Novels and Novellas)

Before E. Annie Proulx (prew) began her career as a fiction writer in her mid-fifties, she had done considerable freelance writing in such disparate fields as cider making, driveway and fence repair, canoeing, cooking, and gardening. Having built her own house, she had experience with which to inform how-to books. She also wrote articles of interest to adolescent girls, publishing them regularly in Seventeen. Although she dismisses such work as writing for hire, it promoted her development as a writer of fiction because she researched her topics thoroughly and presented them in the clear and precise prose that would come to characterize her fiction. Her early nonfiction writing served as a valuable apprenticeship for the writing of the fiction that followed.

Achievements (Survey of Novels and Novellas)

Before she had gained a reputation for writing fiction, E. Annie Proulx received the 1986 Garden Writers of America Award following the publication of *The Gardener’s Journal and Record Book* (1983) and *The Fine Art of Salad Gardening* (1985). After the publication of her first collection of short fiction, *Heart Songs, and Other Stories*, in 1988, Proulx received a Vermont Council of the Arts Fellowship, an award from the National Endowment for the Arts, and, in 1992, a Guggenheim Fellowship. Following the praise her short stories elicited, Proulx’s publisher urged her to write a novel. The grants she received enabled her to produce her first novel, *Postcards*, which received the PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction in 1993 and was also nominated for a National Book Critics Circle Award for fiction. Proulx was the first female recipient of the PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction.

In 1998, Proulx’s short story “The Half-Skinned Steer” was selected for inclusion in *The Best American Short Stories 1998*, and the story was also later included in *The Best American Short Stories of the Century*. Also in 1998, Proulx received the National Magazine Award for her short story “Brokeback Mountain,” which was subsequently adapted for film by Larry McMurtry and Diana Ossana. This daring story tells of two Wyoming ranch hands who, spending a summer together on the range tending flocks of sheep, become lovers. Both ultimately marry women and return to heterosexual lifestyles, although they continue to have brief encounters together in the ensuing years.

Proulx’s novel *The Shipping News*, which was also adapted as a motion picture (released in 2001), has been praised for its accuracy of dialect and for the authenticity of its descriptions of the harsh Newfoundland landscape where it is set. Proulx studied the language patterns of the people about whom she was writing and also became well versed in the folklore of their communities. This novel received the National Book Award for fiction as well as the Chicago Tribune’s Heartland Prize for Fiction and the Irish Times International Fiction Prize in 1993. In 1994, it was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for fiction. In that year, the University of Maine bestowed on Proulx an honorary doctor of humane letters degree. In 1997, Proulx received the John Dos Passos Prize for the full body of her work. In 2002, *That Old Ace in the Hole* won the Best American Novel Award.
Bibliography

Bibliography (Great Authors of World Literature, Critical Edition)


Rood, Karen L. *Understanding Annie Proulx*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2001. Rood provides a biography, introduces the themes and techniques used in Proulx’s fiction, and discusses her early work as a nonfiction writer. Includes an annotated bibliography of writings by and about Proulx.

See, Carolyn. “Proulx’s Wild West.” *The Washington Post*, July 2, 1999, p. C2. See says she is in awe of *Close Range*, claiming that Proulx has the most amazing combination of things working for her: an exquisite sense of place, a dead-on accurate sense of working class, hard-luck Americans, and a prose style that is the best in English today.


Thompson, David. “The Lone Ranger.” *The Independent*, May 30, 1999, pp. 4-5. An interview-story that describes Proulx’s life in her Wyoming home. Thompson draws out the cantankerous Proulx better than most other interviewers. He provides some context for Proulx’s life and gets her to talk about what she thinks is important.