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ANNIE PROULX'S

*Brokeback Mountain
and Postcards*



BY MARK ASQUITH

A READER'S GUIDE

Annie Proulx's
Brokeback Mountain
and *Postcards*

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The Novelist

'Books speak even when they stand unopened on the shelf. If you would know a man or woman, look at their books, not their software.'

Annie Proulx, *New York Times*, 26 May 1994

Creating Proulx the novelist

Since E. Annie Proulx appeared on the literary stage with her collection of short stories *Heart Songs* (1988), she has cut a figure every bit as enigmatic as some of her fictional characters. Living most of her life in the country and enjoying rural pursuits, she has been portrayed, particularly by British critics, as a latter-day pioneer: in *The Times* Jason Cowley described her as a 'Pioneer poet of the American Wilderness', while David Thomson in the *Independent on Sunday* sought a Western cliché, describing her as 'The Lone Ranger' with 'dark, watchful eyes ... eyes to fit the Wyoming character, the former gunfighter who reckons on dying

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peaceably'. Proulx has rejected such labels as the product of 'commercialization' but nevertheless seems happy to cultivate such a persona. The photograph of the author that stares out from the dust-jacket of her novels establishes the element of choreographed authenticity that Proulx brings to the management of her image: it is both posed and natural – she is a rural woman and happy to project herself as such, bringing the same degree of care and attention to her creation of her literary persona as to her fictional characters. An early interview with David Streitfield in the *Washington Post*, for example, found her enumerating a catalogue of youthful adventures in a paragraph that would not have looked out of place at the beginning of one of her stories: 'Leaping a barbed wire fence and not making it; being grabbed on a lonely back lane by a strange older guy but biting and escaping; running away through the rain on the eve of a wedding ...'

To some extent, Proulx's most enduring character creation is her own persona, which emerges as the product of careful mediation between author, publisher and journalists. Like her characters, she appears in critical profiles as carved from the landscape; epithets such as 'gnarled', 'grizzled' and 'chiselled' punctuate descriptions of her face, while her eyes are invariably fixed as some point in the middle distance. Nicci Gerrard described her as a 'frontier woman' in an early review in the *Observer* – 'weather-worn, life-worn, as if she has spent years walking on hard earth against bitter winds'. In the *Independent* Ros Wynne-Jones made clear the fictional aspect in Proulx's presentation of herself by imagining her as an older character in one of her own stories: 'At 86, she had skin like a slipcover over a rump-sprung sofa, yet her muscled forearms and strong fingers suggested she could climb a sheer rock-face.' Complementing this hardy Western persona has grown the myth of Proulx the no-nonsense interviewee. One of her earliest profilers,

Katharine Viner of the *Guardian*, noted ‘There is no other way to approach an interview with E. Annie Proulx except with fear . . . she tells you if she finds your questions boring; she detests small talk.’ David Thomson suggested worse, that to stray onto topics that she regarded personal was to be left ‘leaning into the gunfighter’s intransigence’. Aida Edemariam recorded just such a look when she asked a personal question during an early profile for the *Guardian*: ‘her face hardens with a joke that’s not quite a joke: “it’s a good thing I put the guns away”’. To some extent all are playing a game which allows Proulx to perform a role while being deadly serious: the character she projects allows her to be evasive while conforming to the role of the rural writer who ‘tells it as it is’. As fellow writer and Laramie neighbour Mark Jenkins has claimed, ‘there is a part of her that’s playing the character of the great American writer’. Part of that character is a brutal honesty.

Ironically, Proulx’s most high-profile performance to date followed the 2006 Oscars in which Ang Lee’s adaptation of *Brokeback Mountain* lost out to the film *Crash* in the category of Best Picture. Her response in the *Guardian*, menacingly entitled ‘Blood on the Red Carpet’, deliberately presents herself as a hick outsider and the voice of a mainstream American common sense, while simultaneously branding the LA metropolitan elite as ‘conservative heffalumps’ trapped in gated communities and deluxe rest-homes and dangerously out of touch with ‘contemporary culture’. This is no mean feat when we consider that the subject of the film is rural homophobia and that it was condemned by the Middle America that she is seeking to represent, but Proulx pulls it off with the tone of gentle mockery and perceptive observation that we have come to admire in her work. (Exactly who is that man in the kilt who always appears at award ceremonies? she asks.) Her defiant closing statement both disarms her critics while carefully

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projecting her character: 'for those who call this little piece a Sour Grapes Rant, play it as it lays'.

Proulx's writing career

The biography available to the public is largely a composite of the various in-depth interviews with journalists, internet websites, and books such as Karen Rood's comprehensive study of the author's work, *Understanding Annie Proulx*, and Alikì Varvogli's excellent study of *The Shipping News*, which is part of this series. What follows is a résumé of her career to date, followed by an analysis of some of the major characteristics of her fiction.

E. Annie Proulx (the 'E' stands for Edna: she used her initial to get her stories published in hunting magazines but dropped it as 'it seemed more and more pompous') was born in Norwich, Connecticut in 1935, the eldest of five daughters, and grew up in New England and North Carolina. Rood notes that Proulx's father, George Napoleon Proulx, a French-Canadian immigrant, worked as a bobbin boy in a textile mill, eventually rising to become company vice-president. Her mother, Lois Gill, was an amateur naturalist and painter whose family had a 'strong tradition of oral storytelling' and whose painterly attention to detail taught Proulx to 'see'. As Proulx herself recalls: 'from the time I was extremely small, I was told, "look at that" ... from the wale of the corduroy to the broken button to the loose thread to the dishevelled moustache ...' Due to her father's work, Proulx attended a number of high schools in Vermont and North Carolina, and it is during these years that she cultivated her love of reading, choosing books initially by the colour of their dust-jackets before moving onto the novels of Jack London and Somerset Maugham, which she was reading by

the tender age of seven. It is a habit that has remained with her throughout her life: 'I read omnivorously, I always have, my entire life. I would rather be dead than not read ...' Reading voraciously, she has argued, is the best way to learn to write, and yet she remains coy about literary influences, parrying questions with an evasive claim that they are too numerous to mention.

She entered Colby College in Waterville, Maine, in the class of 1957. Before graduating she dropped out to marry H. Ridgely Bullock, with whom she had one daughter, Sylvia Marion, who was brought up by her father upon their divorce in 1960. A second marriage soon afterwards produced two sons, Jonathan Edward and Gillis Crowell, but this too ended in divorce. In 1963 Proulx enrolled on a History BA at the University of Vermont, graduating in 1969; that same year she married James Hamilton Lang. Proulx had a third son, Morgan Hamilton, before this marriage also ended in divorce. Two of her marriages Proulx has described as 'terrible', noting, perhaps sardonically, that she has 'a talent for choosing the wrong people'.

After gaining an MA at Sir George Williams University (now Concordia University) in Montréal in 1973, Proulx enrolled for a PhD in Renaissance Economic History. Having passed the oral requirements, however, she was forced to leave her studies in order to look after her three sons. She moved to Canaan, on the US-Canada border, and was immediately faced with the problem of how to support a family while living in a remote rural retreat. She turned to freelance journalism, living in the woods like a latter-day Henry Thoreau producing 'How to ...' articles for local magazines on rural subjects such as cooking, fishing, hunting and gardening. It would be wrong, however, to characterize such articles as esoteric exercises in nostalgia for the urban market; rather they are part of Proulx's attempt to keep alive country traditions for future

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generations. As she explains: 'What interested me at this time was the back-to-the-land movement – communes, gardening, architecture ... observ[ing] what people were doing to make things work in rural situations'. Proulx made a good living for a number of years, dabbling with short stories on aspects of rural life 'for the intellectual stimulation' that she found fictional work provided. A number were published in *Gray's Sporting Journal*, and she recalls with fondness the 'intense camaraderie and shared literary excitement among the writers whose fiction appeared in Gray's, an experience without which, she maintains, she 'would probably never have tried to write fiction'.

Proulx's big break came in 1982 when, as Rood has observed, Tom Jenks accepted her story 'The Wer-Trout' for the June issue of *Esquire*. When he moved to take a job with the publishers Charles Scribner's Sons, he invited Proulx to collect some of her short stories together into a collection. The resulting *Heart Songs* (an old name for country and western music) was published in 1988. It focuses on the humdrum lives of the residents of Chopping County as they go about their daily routines of hunting, shooting and fishing. Beneath the veneer, however, she reveals a community brutalized by the harsh landscape and isolation, and a gallery of eccentric characters bearing ancient grudges, hidden secrets and under continual threat from outsiders – the kind of terrain that Proulx has been covering ever since. Critics were unanimous in heralding the arrival of a new and distinctive voice, characterized by its hard-bitten narrative tone, stacked metaphors and elliptical sentences that defied the rules of grammar. They also marvelled at the combination of gritty realism and surrealism. Tim Gautreaux in *The Boston Globe* placed Proulx in the same innovative category as Cormac McCarthy, claiming that behind the great stories 'there are great sentences' in which Proulx 'uses words the way a stonecutter

uses his chisel'. Britain's *Sunday Times* heralded Proulx as 'America's most impressive new novelist', combining a 'tough knowledgeable-ness' about rural lives 'with a style that is elatingly fresh and crisp with sensuous delicacy'.

Proulx's publishing contract with Scribner also asked for the publication of a novel, an idea that initially was met with incredulity by Proulx: 'I just laughed madly, had not a clue about writing a novel, or even the faintest desire. I thought of myself as a short story writer. Period, period, period.' Once she began, however, she was astonished at the speed of her adaptation: 'I sat down, and within a half-hour, the whole of *Postcards* was in my head,' and much to her surprise she relished not being restricted by a 5,000–6,000 word limit. Its critical success, of which more later, was immediate: the novelist Annie Proulx had well and truly arrived.

She was, however, troubled by criticism that *Postcards* was too dark and resolved to give her next novel, *The Shipping News*, a happy ending. As she somewhat mischievously recalls: 'A happy ending is wanted, is it? Let us see what we can do.' The setting is typical Proulx: a frozen Newfoundland fishing community threatened by over-fishing and government legislature, and her central character, Quoye – a man with 'a great damp loaf of a body' and 'a head shaped like a Crenshaw' – falls woefully short of the heroic mould. And yet, after a catalogue of disasters recorded by an ambivalent narrator, including the loss of his job, parents, best friend and faithless wife, he is slowly healed in the landscape of his ancestors by an aunt who carries her own burden of an abused childhood. Eventually he finds 'happiness' in marriage to a local woman, but here, as Proulx cynically observes, 'happiness is simply the absence of pain, and so, the illusion of pleasure'. It worked: gone were some of the stylistic excesses of *Postcards*, and with a more linear narrative and more accessible prose the book became an instant