

FICTION IN

REVIEW



D A V I D G A L E F

What does it mean to be a quintessentially American writer? America by now has gone in too many directions to characterize, but the previous two centuries showed a veneration of the open road, the sweeping vista, the natural world, and the frontier; the American novel as a vast canvas with a focus on hard-bitten romantics slightly larger than life, idiosyncratic characters with a predilection for violence, and expansive language to cover this territory. The writer himself, with an emphasis on “him,” tended to be a tough guy with a long list of odd jobs and places he’d been. It was a life of opportunity and second chances (Fitzgerald’s declaration “There are no second acts in American lives” is plain wrong).

Annie Proulx, a writer of great scope and beauty, follows that path. In her early work – the short story collection *Heart Songs*, the novel *Postcards* – she traces the lives of the rural poor and the down-and-out, and their attempts to make good or evil. By the time the novel *The Shipping News* was published in 1993, Proulx was firmly in her element: intricate descriptions of desolate sea-

Barkskins: A Novel, by Annie Proulx (Scribner’s, 736 pp., \$32)

scape and tormented individuals. On any given page of that novel, you're likely to spot marvels: "Billy Pretty warned, pointed to the northeast horizon at violet clouds pulled from a point as a silk scarf is pulled from a wedding ring. In the southwest they saw rival billows in fantastic patterns, as though a paper marbler had worked through them with his combs making French curls, cascades and winged nonpareil fountains." Proulx endows Newfoundland, in all its isolation and idiosyncratic weather, with a desperate appeal. *The Shipping News* won a Pulitzer Prize, a National Book Award, and the *Irish Times* International Fiction Prize.

After that, Proulx moved on to Wyoming, with its own brutal weather, its cowboys and rodeo riders and hard-luck ranchers. Three story collections followed: *Deep Range*, *Bad Dirt*, and *Fine Just the Way It Is*, as well as the novel *That Old Ace in the Hole*. She also published a house-building memoir called *Bird Cloud*, which tells us more about concrete flooring and the wind around the North Platte River than about Annie Proulx. We learn that she's of French Canadian ancestry, tough-minded, deeply concerned about the land, and no longer as young as she used to be.

Her new novel, *Barkskins*, is extremely ambitious, an attempt to sum up the history of a territory through its logging. Though "barkskins" refers to a species of woodcutter, Proulx in the dedication includes all manner of loggers, ecologists, "foresters, ring counters and the rest of us." It's a multigenerational chronicle of French Canadians and Native Americans, a paean to nature and a curse against those who ravage the forests. Beginning in the 1600s in New France, the precursor to Canada, it introduces two men who will help develop an entire industry, René Sel and Charles Duquet:

In twilight they passed bloody Tadoussac, Kébec and Trois Rivières and near dawn moored at a remote riverbank settlement. René Sel, stiff black hair, slanted eyes, *yeux bridés* – in ancient times invading Huns had been at his people – heard someone say "Wobik." Mosquitoes covered their hands and necks like fur. A man with yellow eyebrows pointed them at a rain-dark house. Mud, rain, biting insects and the odor of willows made the first impression of New France. The second impression was of dark, vast forest, inimical wilderness.

The vast, brooding presence of the forest makes for a heart of darkness worthy of Conrad, with just as many evocative descriptions. The prose bears non-kin relationships to Barbara Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible* ("First, picture the forest") and the idiosyncratic scenes from eighteenth-century America in Thomas Pynchon's *Mason & Dixon*. At the same time, Proulx preserves a certain pantheistic mysticism. As W. S. Merwin writes in his poem "Witness": "I want to tell what the forests / were like // I will have to speak / in a forgotten language."

But the novel also displays Proulx's mastery of nomenclature, including alder queaches, a river "transparent as dark chert," "five arpents" as a measure of land, and "a motte of trees." People eat cacamos, moose-bone marrow; later, colonialists will dine on flumeries and syllabub.

As the decades and then centuries pass in chopping and sawing wood, the forests give way to almighty civilization. Involved in the process, however, is the same casual and unremitting violence as in another of Proulx's era-spanning novels, *Accordion Crimes*, though violence is a theme in all of Proulx's work. She's like Cormac McCarthy in that regard, both authors fixated on death and destruction and summing them up in muscular prose. In *Barkskins*, people meet their end from infection, scalping, stomach cancer, a sledding accident, a cholera epidemic, typhus, dropsy, suicide by hanging, freezing in a steamship on the Great Lakes, and of course on the job, in one instance trying to free a logjam in the river and getting poled by a thirty-foot log: "Franceway folded backward like a sheet of paper, his heels came past his ears and now a butcher's package of meat, he went under the grind." Proulx also focuses on the plight of the Mi'kmaw and other native tribes, forced off their land and treated abominably by white settlers. Nature has been a giant antagonist for much of human existence, but humanity has become efficient at killing both nature and people. Even some out-of-control forest blazes, such as the 1825 Miramichi fire, which killed massive numbers of people and trees alike, was probably caused in part by human carelessness. To say that Proulx is obsessed with mayhem and strife may simply be to note that she's a student of history. As she remarks of a conversation between the logging magnate Lavinia and her rival but even-

tual suitor Dieter: “Somehow they could not let go of catastrophes as a subject.”

In any event, the tale Proulx tells isn’t as simple as logging and despoliation. It’s also a narrative of economics and colonialism, of the changing needs of a continent, and here Proulx may have cut off more than she could chop. At its best, the novel depicts a multigenerational business, an ecosystem, a way of life, an era – all of a piece if you consider humanity’s fouling of its nest to be one sad period. But to put that entirety on the page is a strain, and the many chapters contain forced exposition, with recitation rather than dramatization. Sometimes the information is put in dialogue: “‘James,’ said Lennart Vogel, ‘by now you know that timber profits are almost entirely based on transportation costs.’” When no interlocutor is around, the forest will serve as one: “‘The fur trade moved north and west,’ he said to the tree. . . .” There’s also some uncharacteristically slack language. “The damp sky sagged downward” is a fine image, but is there any other direction to sag? There are also descriptions like “the man’s glaring expression” when “glare” would do.

But the novel has to move on. We sail to China in the seventeenth century, opening a new market for lumber, then glimpse America’s shift toward independence in the 1700s, stopping in Boston, Amsterdam – wherever the timber trade takes us in its insatiable need for more trees to fell.

As the logging industry grows, two lineages emerge. Duquet becomes Duke Lumber while Sel represents the nether side, with a legitimate but ignored claim to the company. The novel follows their generations of offspring alongside an array of ornery, rapacious, strong-willed individuals. Proulx is a quick psychologizer, with a gift for summing people up in a few sentences. But there’s little nuance in these portraits, mainly stubbornness, greed, and lust. As one character describes a Dutch-born timber consultant: “He believed that men, when confronted with a vast plenitude of anything, feel an irresistible urge to take it all, then to smash and destroy what they cannot use.” This assertion is a major point in the book, enacted over and over. It even emerges as an excerpt from the King James Bible, misquoted and misappropriated: “And God said replenish the earth, and subdue it, and have dominion

over the fish of the sea and every living thing that moveth, and every green tree and herb.” Moreover, the dominion must follow the ways of the whites, not those of the less ecologically intrusive Indians. As one of Proulx’s more fair-minded lumbermen thinks in response to another character’s criticism of the “Indans”: “Why was hunting and plucking berries not considered as use of the land?” Proulx’s chronicling of the Mi’kmaw tribe, the displacements and other injustices it suffers, brings up this point again and again: Indians versus whites, natives in nature versus despoilers, and societies that abuse women versus those that respect them (this last division seems more wishful than grounded in fact).

One way or another, interlopers keep encroaching on the forests, sometimes interbreeding with the natives to create a panoply of minor characters: Theotiste, Elphage, René, Nöe, Zöe, Achille, Marie, Bernadette, et alii, et aliae – too many to keep track of because too little space is accorded most of them. They exist as something between cameos and half-view portraits or, to switch imagery, threads in the carpet of history. They move along as a profusion of adoptees, cousins, sons, uncles, business acquaintances, limned in baroque sum-ups. The exceptions are a few powerfully drawn eccentrics, such as the naturalist Outger from the Duquets, who settles in Holland and sends specimens of weeds to scientists back home; or Kuntaw from the Sel family tree, who pursues the old Indian ways.

Proulx also provides a look at different sexualities: Birgit, a man disguised as a woman married to Bernard and discovered as such only after his death, or the logger Jinot Sel, who mourns his logging partner Franceway the way Achilles sorrowed after Patroclus. Angélique, a cook’s daughter, is stronger than most men.

Strength can also emerge as force of character. Posey Duke and her hard-charging daughter Lavinia are always pushing the boundaries of the family enterprise, investing in fresh territory, new means of transport, and more uses for lumber. In fact, though *Barkskins* may be heralded as an ecological epic, it’s also a business novel. This book covers manifold aspects of the timber industry, from tree to log transport, the interior of a sawmill, and ax making.

Any longueurs are mainly redeemed by Proulx’s contrapuntals. A long expository dialogue on lumber and court cases precedes an account of logging fights and the sum-up “it was a wonderfully

wicked place.” A smudge in the sky is how Proulx betokens the flight of passenger pigeons, which (it’s understood) will all too soon be extinct. Proulx has always chronicled the dying out of old ways, from habits to species. She’s almost a Romantic in the nature worship sense, though not such a fool as to think nature is kind.

The pages do contain vintage Proulx, moments captured: “Months later they were again alone in a coach that stank of stale urine on the way to Bangor, and Mr. Bone, who seemed unable to speak of his past unless in jolting motion, continued his history.” “Kahn’s pet kaka flashed his red underwings and shouted whenever he felt like it, which was frequently, a call that sounded to Joe Dogg like someone ripping boards off the side of a barn.” “The road degenerated into a stew of stones and mud. Felix clenched the wheel, drove very slowly, and the car struggled forward.” As Proulx sweeps along in her history, she also devotes a section to people who didn’t benefit from the American dream: “For some it did not come at all: a logger whose cheap boots fell apart during the spring drive, another who did not regard a slice of raw pork dipped in molasses as the acme of dining, the man laid up for six months by a woods accident immobile in bed while his wife took in ‘boarders’ who stayed in the house less than twenty minutes, a drought-ruined Kansas family eating coyotes to stay alive.”

The novel ends with warnings: talk of soil erosion once tree roots are gone; the necessity but belatedness of replanting and conservation. Two characters talk about the inadequacy of tree farms as a replacement for the woods. A final irony is that the family logging company might in fact belong to the Indians, if the presumptive heirs cared to trace back the lineage. But by then, Duke Lumber has been dissolved and sold to International Paper. The concluding scenes focus on a few people of Indian descent, trying to bring back the old Mi’kmaw knowledge of medicinal flora from the old forest.

Is it too late to reclaim the forests? As an old Indian woman muses, “What if it was already too late when the first hominid rose up and stared at the world?” The message is all too clear. Yet in this regard, *Barkskins* is no departure: Proulx has always been of this bent. One of her earliest published stories, back in 1964, “All the Pretty Little Horses,” is a science fiction tale with an ecological message. Sadly, the theme is more urgent than ever.