Proulx, Annie


Annie Proulx arrived late on the literary scene but soon caught up with her contemporaries. Since the publication of her first book of stories in 1988, she has produced three further story collections and four novels. Both popular and critically acclaimed, she has been awarded numerous literary prizes: the PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction (1993) and both the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction (1994). Her work is often associated with regional writing, and most of her books are set away from cities in rural areas underrepresented in American fiction. Proulx dislikes being categorized as a "woman writer," preferring her work to be read and assessed for literary merit rather than for the author's gender.

Proulx was born in Connecticut on August 22, 1935, the eldest of five daughters, though she often wished for a brother she could join in outdoor pursuits. Her adult life and writing style are associated with qualities usually described as masculine; her main characters are often men, and she writes about farming, hunting, and generally living and working outdoors. After studying history at the University of Vermont and Concordia University, she moved to a rural area on the US-Canada border and wrote journalism and various how-to manuals. Her academic training and her non-fiction writing gave her a taste for meticulous research she employs in her fiction writing. Her books open with long lists of acknowledgments, which reveal the breadth and variety of her research. Although she is happy to show the readers what sources she consulted, she is reluctant to discuss other authors and does not acknowledge any major influences, though she has often been compared to Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, and Cormac McCarthy.

*Heart Songs* (1988) comprises 11 stories set in rural New England. As in all of her fiction, Proulx does not romanticize her subjects or locations; along with the humor and thoughtful, empathetic descriptions of quiet, hidden lives, there is an awareness of the hardship involved in rural living, and her fiercest criticism is often directed at city folk who come to "consume" the countryside for their vacation. *Close Range* (1999), *Bad Dirt* (2004), and *Fine Just the Way It Is* (2008) are three volumes of western stories she published since moving to Wyoming in 1994; they have been praised for their authenticity. Most involve families with dark secrets and violence lurking beneath the surface. Despite her attention to verisimilitude, she also includes elements of the fantastic, such as a talking tractor in *Heart Songs*, or the Devil thinking of refurbishing Hell in *Fine Just the Way It Is*. In the same volume, "Tits-Up in a Ditch" attracted considerable attention and shocked readers with its theme of the Iraq War, but perhaps her most celebrated story is "Brokeback Mountain," which tells of a love affair between two cowboys. It is
a moving story that shows Proulx’s considerable gift of imaginative empathy and showcases the literary treatment of her chosen location.

The novels Postcards (1992), The Shipping News (1993), Accordion Crimes (1996), and That Old Ace in the Hole (2002) are set in rural areas and deal with characters unlike the author herself. She has acknowledged the influence of landscape on her writing, and she is fascinated with language, collecting dictionaries of dialects and phrases. Postcards tells the story of Loyal Blood, who kills his partner and leaves the family farm to travel across America. As well as a story of family tragedy, the book can be read as a portrait of postwar America. The Shipping News, set in Newfoundland, is the story of a bereaved father who rebuilds his life in a small community after leaving New York. The novel has been praised for its depiction of landscape and weather, but it is equally admirable for its complex narrative structure, which involves tortured personal and familial history, local history, dialect and mores, and fragmented sentences that mirror a pained consciousness.

Accordion Crimes combines the author’s interest in both the genres of the story and the novel. It is a collection of self-contained stories held together by the presence of an accordion, brought to the US by a Sicilian and passing through the hands of immigrants from different countries for whom the instrument provides a link to their cultural past as well as a means of survival and assimilation in the New World. That Old Ace in the Hole tells of the struggle between small farming communities and big agricultural business. It is more humorous and light-hearted than the previous books, but it still deals with serious issues such as family relations, the exploitation of the land, and the disappearance of some older ways of life.

SEE ALSO: Faulkner, William (AF); Hemingway, Ernest (AF); McCarthy, Cormac (AF); Postmodernist Fiction (AF)

REFERENCES AND SUGGESTED READINGS


ALIKI VARVOGLI

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