

The Shipping News. E. Annie Proulx.

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[See table of contents](#)

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REVIEWS

The Shipping News. E. Annie Proulx. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1993. x, 337p. \$25.50

STUART PIERSON

ON THE VERSO of the title page is a statement which disclaims more sweepingly than usual "any resemblance to persons living or dead." E. Annie Proulx asserts there that the "Newfoundland in this book, though salted with grains of truth, is an island of invention." The places, the characters, the practices, the paraphernalia "are all fancies." How seriously can we take this relegating of everything the book is about to a solipsistic realm of the author's fashioning? There is admittedly a convention here, and perhaps a matter of legal protection, but surely no one except a few exceedingly rigorous New Critics will take the convention as truly an exemption, and few lawyers would take a declaration to the effect "I didn't mean to be libellous" as a valid defense. If the disavowal is none of these things it must be a spell, an incantation to ward off the dangers incurred by crossing certain boundaries — somebody else's country, somebody else's town, somebody else's family, sex, fears, somebody else's own incantations.

For Proulx has valiantly and dangerously tried to get under the skin of this place. She has invented a character named Quoyile, born in Brooklyn, N.Y. of parents from Newfoundland. We never learn his first, or Christian, name, though we are told at page 288 that his initials are R.G. He is an anti-hero: neither forceful, nor in charge, nor "larger than life." In short, a loser, acted upon rather than agent. He is also fat. An unfortunate marriage goes smash, his wife is killed, he is left with no job, two daughters, and a load of paralysing grief. An aunt who has had her own rough spots takes Quoyile and his charges back to Newfoundland, to "Killick-Claw"

152 *Reviews*

(which bears some resemblance to St. Anthony), or nearby, to the ancestral Quoye house, derelict but repairable, where they all settle and start a new life. Quoye starts work as a reporter for *The Gammy Bird*, a small weekly ninety parts ads, six parts wire-service "news", two "S.A." (=sexual abuse) stories and two car-wreck stories; he manages to make himself a niche for tiny stories about the comings and goings of vessels at the port — thus the "shipping news". Aunt Agnis makes a living upholstering yachts. Little by little the family's ghastly past is disclosed — piracy, ship-"wracking," incest, the rape of children (Aunt Agnis at age twelve, by Quoye's father) but it seems to have little effect on the feelings or actions of the principals.

The reason for this is that the novel comes from books, rather than from lives. None of it could have happened without *Ulysses*:

She poured in a teacup tea, then back in the teapot tea. They cowered under their reef of counter waiting on footstools, crates upturned, waiting for their teas to draw. (Modern Library ed., p. 254)

Quoye and Nutbeem hunched over a table in the back. The restaurant redolent of hot oil and stewed tea. Nutbeem poured a stream of teak-coloured pekoe into his cup. (*The Shipping News*, p. 221)

It is a debt I can't prove, though I can feel it on every page. She never mentions Joyce.

A book she does acknowledge (not only here on the "thanks" page but also in an interview over CBC last year) is *The Ashley Books of Knots* (1944) which furnished her a rich vein of tropes for chapter titles and epigraphs, for the emblems that separate subsections of chapters, even for the end-paper design.

Other books shimmer there in the offing — Anne Tyler's novels with their ineffectual, dreamy men ("My brother Jeremy is a thirty-eight-year-old bachelor who never did leave home. Long ago we gave up expecting very much of him..." *Celestial Navigation*); John Updike's writerly books, especially the Rabbit trilogy and *The Witches of Eastwick*, which draw upon the persistence of magic, of underground currents of occult power, and of omens and portents variously and unpredictably active.

But the book that one meets with on every page (though never cited) is Story, Kirwin and Widdowson — *The Dictionary of Newfoundland English*. Proulx loves words, and especially she loves archaic words with abrupt consonants in them — stookawn, scuddy, taggled, peckled, squiddy, komatik, slindeer, sishy, glutch — all carefully cleaned from the *DNE*, where she has also found a few antiquated practices, such as the construction of a komatik (compare her pp. 75-6 with *DNE* p. 289A) and a few accounts of regional linguistic variation within the province (compare p. 163 with p. 210A). But she does this rather mechanically, without taking into account the nature of the *DNE*, how it was compiled or how it stands in relation to how people speak. It is as though everyone who lives in Killick-Claw

has all the entries in the *DNE* ready to hand. There is also — if I may just mention it here — something a little stannous about Proulx's ear. Her family names and place names are just that little bit athwart of the real thing, and sound slightly off: families Pool and Thorn without the "e", Budgel with one "l", Sop, Pilley, Cuslett on the one hand; places Killick-Claw, Lost All Hope, Bad Fortune, Never Once, Port Aux Priseurs on the other hand.

So I think she has not steered clear of the dangers mentioned above. Too many sunkers to ground on, I spose. But the real trouble is not that her Newfoundland is a fancy; rather it is that the author has made out of it a fable, and even worse, not one well-thought-out. She is explicit in seeing it as a pastoral, in which the gentle, humane bucolic past has been overcome or subverted by the violent, harsh Americanized present. "The world was all knots and lashings once — flex and give, that was the way it went before the brute force of nails and screws," says a character (pp. 75-6). Another explains

There's two ways of living here now. There's the old way, look out for your family, die where you are born, fish, cut your wood, keep a garden, made do with what you got. Then there's the new way. Work out, have a job, somebody to tell you what to do, commute, your brother's in South Africa, your mother's in Regina, buy every goddamn cockadoodle piece of Japanese crap you can. Leave home....(pp. 285-6)

(Both characters are reliable witnesses.) This is a fair summary of one version of Newfoundland's past and present that runs through the book. Another, more implicit pattern, however, can be made out alongside this one; the contrast here is a black-magical, barbarous, incestuous, primitive society held in thrall to brutal drunken men (see the party in chapter 32) over against a world of modern freedom in which a woman — e.g. Aunt Agnis — can be a lesbian, an *entrepreneuse*, move to St. John's, do what she pleases. It is not clear which of these contrasts we should believe.

The Shipping News won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction last year. There is much in the book to deserve this: it has passages of stunning beauty, it is funny and it is highly serious in the Arnoldian sense. Where it fails in my opinion (one her American judges could not be expected to share) is in its miskey portrayal of Newfoundland.