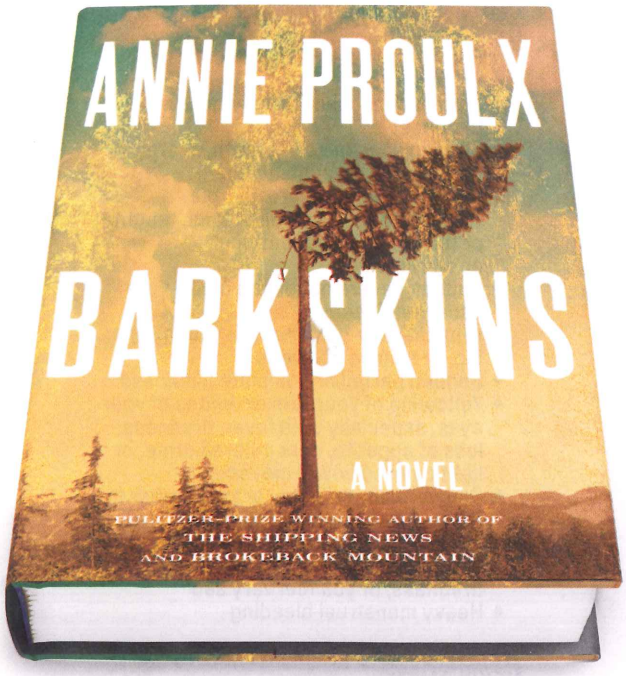


INTO THE WOODS

Annie Proulx returns with a *great, big* novel. By Laura Hohnhold

Humans trouncing nature: As narrative themes go, few match it for drama and pathos. From Wallace Stegner's *Angle of Repose* and Jonathan Franzen's *Freedom* to the essays of Joy Williams and Barbara Kingsolver, literature is rife with stories of men and women (mostly men) defiling pristine landscapes for profit. Annie Proulx's stunning new *Barkskins*—736 pages, you long-readers!—continues the tradition, epically. No dirge, it's a bracing, full-tilt ride through 300 years of U.S. and Canadian history, told through two families whose fortunes are shaped, for better and worse, by the Europeans' discovery of North America's vast forests.

For readers, like this one, who consider Proulx one of America's finest living writers, the 14 years since her last novel (and eight years since her last short-story collection) have been frustratingly long. Turning the chestnut "write what you know" on its head, Proulx has made a career of following her curiosity wherever it takes her in order to write what she doesn't know. As a result, she is renowned as a writer of place, from the craggy Newfoundland of her Pulitzer-winning novel *The Shipping News* to the Wyoming backcountry of her short story "Brokeback Mountain." With *Barkskins* (Scribner), she blows out the horizons. The novel has a satisfying global sweep, with the type of full-immersion plot that keeps you curled in your chair, reluctant to stop reading. Proulx came late to the literary scene; she was well into her fifties when she published *The Shipping News*. She's now 80, an age that often prompts critics to proclaim a fat new book a masterpiece. In this case, it wouldn't be hyperbole—*Barkskins* was worth the wait.

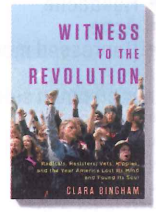
A synopsis can't do it justice, but here goes: In 1693, Frenchmen René Sel and Charles Duquet arrive in Canada, then known as New France, to work as tree cutters—barkskins—in dense virgin forest teeming with animal and plant life. Proulx's descriptions of this wilderness are visceral. There are "so many birds the sky rattled, so many fish the bay boiled like a pot." The winter sky has the odor "of cold purity that was the essence of the boreal forest." By dint of sheer size and vitality, these woodlands seem able to withstand the incursion of foreign settlers. If only. Like F. Scott Fitzgerald's "fresh, green breast of the new world," paradise eventually collapses under the weight of human aspiration.

Sel marries a native woman of the Mi'kmaw tribe named Mari, and as the decades pass, their descendants struggle to retain a way of life that's disappearing as quickly as the pine trees of what is now Quebec. Duquet fathers a long line of timber barons whose ax-happy ambition propels them from New England to New Zealand to the Midwest, leaving mountains of sawdust in their wake. Duquet's great-great-granddaughter Lavinia, the family's sole boss lady, takes to the lumber business with a fervent aggression similar to what her mother unleashed in the marital bed. Another shrewd and independent Duquet woman has children with a Sel, and the native and European families blend in a way that, in a different book, might be redemptive. But Proulx doesn't deal in healing moments, and the mixing of the bloodlines is ruefully ironic.

Societal change and dissolution are Proulx's recurrent themes, and in that respect in particular, *Barkskins* is a tour de force. Nature takes a beating, again and again. Characters slide in and out of the story, dying almost incidentally—of disease, drowning, forest fire, sundry types of murder. But Proulx's wry voice and inclination toward dark comedy lighten the tale. The above-mentioned sex maniac kisses with a "fierce and spitty ardor." Her reprehensible father wears pants "of the awful thousand-pleats style, so baggy they concealed a heavy abdomen and could accommodate a forked tail." As in all of Proulx's work, characters have delightfully quirky names, such as Benton Dred-Peacock, Dud McBogle, and Hans Carl von Carlowitz (who happens to be a dog). She delights in oddballs and absurd twists of fate, and accepts that bad luck and heedless behavior are inescapably inherent to the human condition. Here we are in another fine mess, she seems to be telling us. Might as well make the best of it.

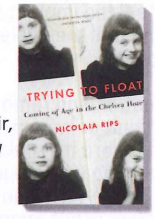
TRUST US

THE MORE THINGS CHANGE...



Journalist Clara Bingham's *Witness to the Revolution: Radicals, Resisters, Vets, Hippies, and the Year America Lost Its Mind and Found Its Soul* (Random House) is a copiously reported and illustrated oral history covering the 12 months in 1969 and 1970 when—weary of the Vietnam War, assassinations, and brutal police actions—"hundreds of thousands of young Americans took to the streets...fueled by marijuana, LSD, and rock and roll; inspired by the third-world freedom revolutions." Bingham conducted 100 interviews over three years with major figures of the 1960s peace movement: SDS founder Tom Hayden, Weather Underground cofounder Bernadine Dohrn, and Pentagon Papers leaker Daniel Ellsberg, among others. Drawing on these voices, as well as memoirs, protest songs, and other secondary sources, Bingham builds an indelible portrait of a traumatized, transforming nation: "It was the crescendo of the sixties, when years of civil disobedience and mass resistance erupted into anarchic violence." Bingham's big take is brave, brash, and bold.

IT'S LIKE *ELOISE* MEETS WES ANDERSON



Nicolaia Rips, at a mere 17 (Tavi, you have company), is an old-soul sophisticate who's written a breezy memoir, *Trying to Float: Coming of Age in the Chelsea Hotel* (Scribner), celebrating growing up with arty parents among the kooky creative class of the storied New York institution. Of her closet-size bedroom, Rips writes, "During my parents' many dinner parties, people would inadvertently toss their coats on top of me while I slept."

MAD GOOD

The 10 stories in *Vice* fiction editor Amie Barrodale's debut collection, *You Are Having a Good Time* (FSG), seduce with scenes of sudden human intimacy—face to face, over the phone, via text, across distant time zones—dashed by disconsolation. In a story we loved, "The Sew Man," a visitor to Kashmir finds the suit of his dreams but not the love of his life. "This is the way it is for me," he muses. "We are people who never get it right."—*Lisa Shea*