Close Range Short Guide

Close Range by E. Annie Proulx

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The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites".

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Contents

Characters

Proulx's characters are remarkable for their familiarity—they seem like real people. Each character, it seems, is a tool for Proulx to meditate on human nature; each faces a particular struggle dealt with, one imagines, as anyone might.

Many of the struggles faced by Proulx's characters involve family relations. Mr. and Mrs. Tinsley face a peculiar struggle in "People in Hell Just Want a Drink of Water."

Their son, Ras, is horribly disfigured in a car accident. In spite of his helplessness and the contempt he showed for them before his accident, his mother and father take him in and offer unconditional love. Even when Ras begins to expose himself to local girls, his parents defend him against an infuriated society. The Tinsleys thus become Proulx's vehicle for demonstrating the power of parental bonds.

Proulx has numerous foils for the Tinsleys, however. Just as they demonstrate the giving capacity of parents, Mero, protagonist of "The Half-Skinned Steer," shows how passionately children can reject their parents. From an early age, Mero is unhappy with ranch life. His dreams are of Cadillacs and expensive suits. Mero epitomizes the common desire of rural people to escape their agrarian roots and demonstrate their prowess in the urban world.

In addition to these familial struggles, Proulx introduces characters who demonstrate various means of dealing with the physical struggles of Wyoming life. Sheets, the wind-hardened rancher of "The Blood Bay," is an archetype of the rugged, resourceful rancher. While sloughing through a blizzard, Sheets comes across a dead rancher in a pair of expensive boots. Unwilling to let ethics or squeamishness keep him from warming his feet, Sheets amputates the cowboy's feet (they are too frozen to get the boots off) and thaws the boots by a fire.

This seeming callousness is celebrated, in a way, as supreme resourcefulness.

Social Concerns

Proulx's main concern is with the hardness of life in Wyoming. The subtitle of her short story collection, "Wyoming Stories," indicates her interest in the dynamics of a particular place. The time of her stories spans over a century. She relates the difficulties faced by ranchers in the nineteenth century as well as the failure of modern farmers. In the conclusion of "People in Hell Just Want a Drink of Water," Proulx explicitly states her belief that Wyoming residents of today face the same privations endured by their ancestors a century ago: "That was all sixty years ago and more.

Those hard days are finished. . . . We are in a new millennium and such desperate things no longer happen. If you believe that you'll believe anything." Of course, the experience of reading her stories makes the sarcastic final sentence unnecessary. Close Range makes a clear statement that life for those who scrape a living out of the wild land of Wyoming has improved little with the advent of modern technology. Proulx's social concerns, therefore, are bound by space but not the historical facts of a particular time.

The opening story, "The Half-Skinned Steer" tells of a man who tries to escape the harshness of Wyoming life but is ultimately a victim of the unforgiving environment of the state. Prompted to return to his boyhood home by the death of his brother, Mero ventures out to the family ranch in his Cadillac, a car suited for civilization but not for the harsh natural environment of Wyoming's snow-covered back roads. When the car breaks down, he is left utterly unable to cope with the storm blowing around him. His success in the urban world leaves him ill-prepared for survival in what Proulx implies is an untamed, uncivilized place.

Thus, at the outset of her collection Proulx establishes the fact that Wyoming is not a place that one can deal with in the same ways as more developed spaces of the East.

Throughout the collection, Proulx replays the drama of this opening story: a man, confident in his ability to overcome nature's fury, succumbs to its irresistible power.

There are, however, more socially constructed causes of the strife endured by Proulx's characters. Life in Wyoming is difficult because of unrelenting nature, but other factors such as the emptiness and isolation breed crushing loneliness and an absence of real economic opportunity. Proulx explores the most diabolical result of social isolation in "55 Miles to the Gas Pump."

The story ends with the somewhat innocuous line, "When you live a long way out you make your own fun." The sublime understatement of the line depends on the fact that the fun made by Croom, the story's protagonist, and discovered by his wife after his death involved the murder of several women and the retention of their bodies. Here, then, Proulx suggests that the distance from any civilization can inspire more than loneliness: it can prompt full blown madness.

Even for those who can cope with the isolation, however, Proulx's Wyoming offers only a meager and uncertain existence.

The world she describes is one without social safety nets or cushy, white-collar jobs.

Men and women are left to earn wages from their physical labor and to push on, come what may. This is a sharp contrast, Proulx implies, to the urban world of soup kitchens and welfare lines.

Diamond Felts, hero of "The Mud Below" demonstrates this perhaps better than any of Proulx's other characters. Desperate for a better life than that enjoyed with his parents, Diamond gets the rodeo bug as an adolescent. He finds that holding onto a bucking horse comes surprisingly easy to him. For years he manages to support himself with rodeo winnings, despite his mother's best efforts to dissuade him from participating in the sport. It is, however, a scarce living. Brief, dangerous performances are separated by all-night driving sessions as Diamond and his traveling partner cart themselves from one western town to another in an effort to stay one step ahead of their debts. Finally, though, Diamond gets caught on a horse, wrenching his shoulder from its socket and possibly disabling himself. Nevertheless, he receives no sympathy from his traveling partner: "Got hung up, hah . . . throw his shoulder out? Can he drive? It's his turn a drive. We got a be in south Texas two o'clock tomorrow afternoon." For this rodeo rider, as with all of Proulx's Wyoming residents, life and the desperate need to work to sustain it do not stop with a setback. Furthermore, Diamond's friends offer no more support than the land.

Even after his injury, he is dependent solely on himself.

Obviously, Proulx's intention is not to suggest that something as tenuous and dangerous as the rodeo constitutes a cornerstone of the Wyoming economy. However, "The Mud Below" does work amazingly well on a metaphorical level. Ranching is, by analogy, quite similar to riding a wildly bucking bronco. Both professions carry great risk; there are no good support systems for those who fail at either profession. Unfortunately, there are not many better options for those who live in the harsh, unsettled environment of Wyoming.

Proulx demonstrates the impossibility of enjoying a typical career for Wyoming residents in her story "Job History." At once a story about western isolation (the narrative is punctuated with reference to major news stories of the twentieth century that seem to have no effect on the characters in her tale) and about the difficulty of finding steady work amidst the ranches of the plains, "Job History" focuses on Leeland Lee's various efforts at economic security. After getting married at seventeen, Leeland takes work in the service station of his bride's father.

The changing face of America's highways leads to the downfall of this venture, and the first of innumerable calls to find something else. So, Leeland takes up ranching, fails, moves on to something else which fails, and so it goes. Proulx clearly finds this inconsistency unsettling. Leeland does not wander, he is not restless. Instead, the very

land he calls home seems to resist his becoming too comfortable. The sparseness of the landscape and its relative isolation make it impossible, it seems, for people to set down the kind of roots that make life routine.

At the same time she suggests that the land and society of Wyoming resist the development of routine, she shows a concern for the way in which the rural culture deals with deviations from the norm. "People in Hell Just Want a Drink of Water," a tragic story set some sixty years in the past, centers on the unexplained disfigurement of Ras Tinsley. Returning to his Wyoming home after a horrible accident, Ras finds himself unable to associate with his neighbors in any normal way. He cannot speak and is awful to look at. What begins as innocent wandering quickly evolves into voyeurism and exhibitionism. Proulx, however, is not concerned with Ras's deviance but with how the rural society deals with the outcast. The Dunmire boys, a law unto themselves, launch their own reprisal because, Proulx suggests, without the services available in urban centers, rural culture must discipline those who would harm it.

The Dunmires' spite leads to Ras's gruesome death, underscoring the violence and the wildness of rural Wyoming.

Techniques

Proulx's talent for bringing a distant part of the country alive to her readers depends largely on her descriptive techniques. Like any place-centered narratives, the stories in Close Range include a great deal of descriptive detail about the setting. Proulx controls this description, however, and prevents it from intruding on the general flow of the narrative. In "The Mud Below" for example, Proulx interweaves the drive of her protagonist from one rodeo to another with lush description of the landscape through which he moves: they ended on rimrock south of the Wyo line, tremendous roll of rough country in front of them, a hundred-mile sightline with bands of antelope and cattle like tiny flecks that flew from hard-worked nib pens on old promissory notes. They backtracked and sidetracked and a few miles outside Greybull Diamond pointed at the trucks drawn up in front of a slouch ranch house.

In this and many similar passages Proulx's poetic voice and her talent for pushing the story irrevocably toward its usually tragic ending meet seamlessly.

Proulx's ability to narrate stories set in widely scattered eras also contributes to the success of her short story collection. To a great extent, she is interested in the aspects of Wyoming life which remain unchanged over long periods of time. It is important, therefore, that she describe contemporary events as vividly as those of the nineteenth century. She seems to move effortlessly back and forth, tracing much of twentiethcentury history in "Job History," recounting modern struggles in "The Mud Below," and rendering the winter of 1886 in "The Blood Bay." Because of her attention to detail, each of these stories works as a historical document, capturing the flavor of its time.

Finally, Proulx's stories benefit from her astute ear and wry insight into human nature. Her characters, struggling against a harsh, unforgiving nature, come across clearly and naturally largely because of the fluidity of Proulx's dialogue. The conversations between characters never seem stilted and always convey a good deal of information about their natures. Furthermore, the natures revealed by Proulx's flowing dialogue seem entirely familiar. Each character faces struggles typical of this American life, made, in most cases, slightly more harsh by the unrelenting Wyoming environment. The characters of Close Range are ordinary people facing somewhat extraordinary challenges. Their attempts at coping mirror those that any reader might make in similar circumstances.

Themes

Though Proulx's social concerns center on the peculiar privations suffered by Wyoming residents, thematically Close Range takes up issues pertaining to the universal traits of human nature. Even while they struggle against the harsh Wyoming environment, the characters in Proulx's stories try to situate themselves in a larger society.

Sometimes, the characters yearn for general acceptance, sometimes the fight takes place on a smaller scale as individuals deal with familial strife.

One of the principal ways in which the characters of Close Range try to fit in involves meeting the expectations of gender.

Proulx suggests that Wyoming's culture places particular emphasis on masculinity, but men's need to demonstrate their manliness permeates all cultures. Her treatment of this subject, then, is truly a thematic one.

Perhaps the most obvious examples of men self-consciously trying to assert their masculinity can be found in "The Mud Below" and "Job History." In the first story Diamond reacts against the jeers he receives as a child by engaging in a hyper-masculine profession: bull riding. As a youth, Diamond's diminutive size put him at a disadvantage: "five-foot three, rapping, tapping, nail-biting, he radiated unease. A virgin at eighteen—not many of either sex in his senior class in that condition—his tries at changing the situation went wrong." Throughout the story, Proulx suggests that Diamond's actions are a response to the stigma associated with smallness and delicacy. In whatever way possible, Diamond tries to puff himself up, asserting his manhood in an effort to gain the acceptance his size denied him. Though the rodeo is a peculiarly western mode for asserting masculinity, men and boys in all cultures strive to demonstrate their prowess in some way.

For Leeland Lee, protagonist of "Job History," sex becomes a powerful tool for asserting both his masculinity and his age.

Robbed of a stable father figure, Leeland marries his pregnant girlfriend at seventeen. Rather than an act of fate or a measure of irresponsibility, Proulx frames this as a semiconscious act on Leeland's part. His early marriage and child-rearing demonstrates the fact that he is his own man, separate from his mother.

Like Leeland, other characters in Close Range have complicated struggles with their family. Just as Leeland rebels against his mother's influence, Mero, the main character in "The Half-Skinned Steer," tries to free himself entirely from his native culture.

Unhappy with his childhood on an only rarely successful ranch, Mero heads east for the relative security of a life in business.

Family affairs, however, draw him back to Wyoming where he finds himself shockingly unfit to deal with the harsh realities of the rural West. Proulx thus works with an old theme about the impossibility of returning home. Her story, though, adds a twist.

Home, it seems, will always pull one back to it, even if that home has become an unfamiliar, even dangerous place.

Adaptations

Close Range is available on audiocassette.

Simon & Schuster Audio published the unabridged performance in 1999. Proulx's stories are read by Francis Fisher, Bruce Greenwood, Campbell Scott, and Harvey Perrick.

Key Questions

Close Range contains stories about a particular corner of the world. The trials and victories of Proulx's characters are dependent upon their environment. Their reactions, however, reveal important facets of human nature. Even while they fight the peculiar difficulties of Wyoming ranch life, Proulx's characters face more mundane challenges of personal identity and familial strife.

In this way, Close Range works as a window into the generic human condition. How, it asks, do people endeavor to define themselves within their families and their cultures?

Still, the regionalist description Proulx offers is extremely valuable. For all its insight into the human condition, Close Range works like a travel narrative, offering lush description and historical information on a small space of the world. Stories such as "Blood Bay" are historical pieces that show where Wyoming has been, and tales like "The Half-Skinned Steer" assert that the struggle against the difficult terrain continues even today.

1. What roles do women play in Proulx's stories? Clearly, many of the stories take as a theme the hyper-masculinity of the environment, but women do play key roles in some stories. What qualities allow these individuals to stand out?

2. To what degree is Close Range a history of Wyoming? The stories cover a broad range of time. Is Proulx tracking the "civilizing" of the state, or is she making a statement about the area's resistance to change?

3. Many of Proulx's stories do not have definitive, closed endings. Imagine that "The Half-Skinned Steer" or "The Mud Below" continued for several more pages. What might happen to the protagonists?

4. If you have ever been to or lived in Wyoming, consider how Proulx's description of the place matches your own experience. Does she overestimate its isolation? Are the social mores she describes accurate? Is the culture as harshly judgmental as it appears in "People in Hell Just Want a Drink of Water" or "The Half-Skinned Steer"?

5. If you have never been to Wyoming, do Proulx's stories increase or diminish your desire to visit? Why?

6. In some of Proulx's stories outsiders or deviants are violently cast off by Wyoming society. Why might this be?

Literary Precedents

Proulx's stories fit into a significant tradition of regional writing. Though an inordinate amount of the canon of American literature is set in the major metropolitan centers of the East, many authors have endeavored to turn readers' attention to regions that, though less populous, are no less interesting.

Hamlin Garland, writing from the end of the nineteenth century through the 1920s, focused his attention on the Midwestern farm and the privations suffered there. His Main-Travelled Roads (1891) is a collection of stories that take as their subject Midwestern farm life. In stories such as "Under the Lion's Paw" Garland draws attention to the privations and inequities endured by farmers and actively solicits calls for social reform. Though not nearly as reform-minded, Proulx is equally interested in the particular problems faced by the residents of a particular place.

Another reform-minded regionalist was John Steinbeck, who in his masterful creation of characters, is more akin to Proulx than Garland. Proulx's Wyoming falls in between Garland's Midwestern farms and Steinbeck's California tales. In Of Mice and Men (1937) and The Grapes of Wrath (1939), Steinbeck draws attention to the plight of itinerant farmers trying to gain a living. The tenuousness of life for Steinbeck's characters reflects that sense of being rootless endured by Proulx's Wyoming residents.

Where Steinbeck's novels forward a clear socialist agenda, however, Proulx's imaginative re-creation of Wyoming is dispassionate, related more objectively than politically. Nevertheless, Proulx and Steinbeck have a strong similarity in their creation of character. Natural dialogue and believable sentiments permeate the work of both authors and make their characters undeniably human.

Related Titles

Throughout her career, Proulx has shown a great talent for capturing the essence of a particular corner of the world in her fiction.

Like her meditation on Wyoming in Close Range, Proulx's other publications focus on a single place and bring out its character and spirit. Proulx works diligently to prepare to write her works, often living in the region she wishes to depict for a substantial period of time.

Her debut collection, Heart Songs (1988), focuses on working-class life in New England. The stories take place in rural areas where blue-collar characters confront the migration of middle- and upper-class urbanites to their neck of the woods. She thus reveals a schism between those who make a living from the northeastern landscape and those who can afford to enjoy its pastoral splendor. Like the workers in Close Range, those who appear in the stories of Heart Songs are painted with a much more sympathetic brush than their bourgeoisie foils.

Proulx's best known work is her novel The Shipping News (1993). For this work about the fishermen of Newfoundland, Proulx won the 1993 Pulitzer Prize for fiction. Like Close Range, The Shipping News gives the flavor of a corner of the world where people and nature come in close, often fierce contact. Proulx deftly captures the atmosphere of the place and the peculiar personality of its people. She relies heavily on folklore and family legends of the area to capture the details of a way of life that may be quickly disappearing.

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