Proulx may well be the most uncompromising realist of all contemporary New England authors who deal with rural themes. She wields her scalpel unflinchingly, exposing unsavory behavior of all kinds and transcending all class distinctions. Accused of being incapable of producing a happy ending, she wrote *The Shipping News,* but the only thing happy about its ending, she admits, is "the absence of pain." And, yet, Proulx is not a depressing writer. Her scalpel keeps revealing those undernourished but still beating hearts in the most unlikely of places, and in spite of ourselves, we keep finding a pulse of hope wherever she makes her incisions.

About the author

Edna Annie Proulx was born in Connecticut in 1935 and graduated from the University of Vermont in 1969 with a degree in history. She left graduate school at Concordia University before finishing her dissertation and embarked on a career as a freelance journalist. During her 19 years of writing for hire, she began to write short stories, which were first collected in 1988 in *Heart Songs.* Her first novel, *Postcards,* appeared in 1992 and was followed by *The Shipping News* (1994), which won both the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize. Her more recent work includes the novel *Accordion Crimes* (1996) and the story collection *Close Range* (1999).

Discussion questions

1. Most of Proulx's short stories are written from the point of view of men. Proulx has said that she writes about men because "I always wanted a brother and liked the things that men did. When I was growing up, women didn't go skiing, or hiking, or have adventurous canoe trips, or any of that sort of thing. If you live in a woman's world and that's all there is, the other side of the equation looks pretty interesting." In the stories, is there more to it than that? Who does the "interesting stuff" and who has the power?

2. Typically in New England fiction, those from "Away" are cast as cultural carpetbaggers, strip-mining the countryside in search of charm. Snipe, in Proulx's title story, "Heart Songs," falls into this category, yet he is portrayed somewhat sympathetically. Does Proulx like Snipe? Do you? Why?

Further reading

Carolyn Chute. *The Beans of Egypt, Maine: The Finished Version.* Harcourt, 1995.

Carolyn Chute. *Letourneau's Used Auto Parts.* Houghton, 1988.

E. Annie Proulx. *The Shipping News.* Simon & Schuster, 1996.

Howard Frank Mosher. *Northern Borders.* Houghton, 1994.

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Heart Songs and Other Stories

by Annie Proulx

StoryLines New England Discussion Guide No. 8

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StoryLines America

A Radio/Library Partnership Exploring Our Regional Literature

Heart Songs and Other Stories

by Annie Proulx

Annie Proulx was in her fifties when she began to publish fiction. Before she won the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize for *The Shipping News* in 1996, and before her debut short-story collection, *Heart Songs,* appeared in 1988, she made her living writing how-to manuals on various aspects of country life: grape growing, fence mending, salad gardening. Traces of the fence mender and the grape grower are still detectable in the nine stories that that make up *Heart Songs*. These stories achieve a definite poetic intensity, but its source isn't highly decorated language, lush with metaphor and allusion; rather, Proulx's prose is pared down and precise, the language of how-to directions. And yet, it is in her seeming flatness of tone that Proulx not only expresses the taciturn nature of rural New Englanders, but also manages to tap into the roiling undertow of pathos, dark humor, loneliness, and tragedy that lies beneath the unmoving surface.

Landscape is omnipresent in Proulx's stories, but its function is never merely to create ambience. In an interview in *Atlantic Online,* Proulx noted, "I always place my characters against the idea of mass, whether landscape or a crushing social situation or powerful circumstances." If landscape is intended to represent mass, what better setting could a writer find than the granite country of Vermont, where farming is defined as much by breaking and hauling rock as it is by nurturing soil? In such stories as "Bedrock" and "Stone City," Proulx's characters are crushed finally because of their inability to deal with other people. But though the immovable forces may be human, they seem somehow imbued with the granite that supports them. In "Bedrock," the widower Perley manages to fight the rocks beneath his soil to a draw, but he is no match for the woman Maureen, who strips the life from him as easily as she splits wood. Perley may be powerless to stop her from subduing him. He understands completely what this human incarnation of something harder even than granite is doing:

"The farm was a thin mantle of soil that lay over granite bedrock scarred by glaciers and meteorites. The wineglass elms, the beech, the pad of stubbled grass, the interknotted roots, could all wash away again. Another deluge, he thought, would strip the rock bare, uncover the hard pit of the earth's core."

"Atoms of this granite whirled in his body. Its stony, obdurate qualities passed up through the soil and into plant roots. Whenever he took potatoes from the heat-cracked bowl, his bones were hardened, his blood fortified. But Maureen, he knew, was shot through with some wild astral substance so hard and dense that granite powdered into dust beneath her blows."

The stories in *Heart Songs* divide into two categories. There are those, including "Bedrock," "On the Antler," and the noir-like "A Country Killing," that pit rural folk against one another, sparked by loneliness and driven by the universal human motivators of greed, sex, and jealousy. Then there are the stories that portray working-class Vermonters—farmers, stone cutters, store operators—in conflict with those universal objects of scorn in New England literature: the summer people, the flatlanders, the wealthy retirees hoping to "get away from it all" and bask in the postcard charm of country living. Flatlanders, like tourists of every stripe, represent the counterfeit running roughshod over the genuine, and, as such, they are an easy target for our scorn. Summer people in New England fiction are always blind to the realities of rural life. One-dimensional satire aimed at the tourist mentality becomes tiresome very quickly, but in the best New England stories pitting locals against outsiders, there is always complexity. In John Casey's *Spartina,* for example, the inadequacies of "piss-to-windward sailors" bring out the worst in commercial fisherman Dick Pierce, and finally, it is his own bitterness, rather than the foolishness of the summer people, that threatens the realization of his dreams.

Similarly, Proulx's story "Electric Arrows" is about much more than genuine natives versus counterfeit outsiders, although its principle action describes the conflict between the narrator's family, forced to live in an outbuilding after selling off most of their farm to pay bills, and the Moon-Azures, summer people who now own the big house. Proulx makes vicious fun of the Moon-Azures, to be sure, as they busily strip paint and make improvements to the house where the narrator was born ("I'll never get used to the way you people let these fine old houses run down"), but plenty is amiss with the genuine natives as well. Proulx's stories never take the easy way out, never settle for leaving the story with the Moon-Azures. Instead, we see the bitterness and feuding between the narrator, his aunt, and his wife, as they blame one another for being forced to sell their life away slowly and painfully, like tearing a bandage from your arm an inch at a time. Proulx's realism is like that throughout this collection. She methodically describes the skin on her characters' arms as the bandages are ripped away, and the wounds become more and more exposed. That she does it so slowly and precisely, never betraying any obvious emotion, makes it hurt all the more.

The most painful story in this collection, the title story, is also the most daring. In "Heart Songs," Proulx builds a bridge between her two prominent themes: flatlanders versus locals and locals versus themselves. Snipe, the musician hero of "Heart Songs," is the worst kind of dilettante. He and his girlfriend are dabblers in folk culture, hoping to make a killing at Peruvian weaving or country music or Shaker furniture or whatever catches the eye of the trendspotters next. As the story begins, Snipe is driving through the Vermont woods, heading toward a rendezvous with some country musicians he hopes to sit in with, and, ideally, exploit. He finds more than he bargained for: a family of musicians—think the Carters with a touch of *Deliverance*—who only play in the privacy of their home but who, led by their overweight singer, produce a unique brand of utterly pure roots music.

As we watch Snipe first attempt to ingratiate himself with the musicians (he imagines a sepia-toned album cover, complete with Shaker furniture) and then come under their sway, a remarkable thing happens. Proulx shows us a dilettante up to his exploitive worst, but we feel his pain every bit as much as we do that of the hillbilly musicians. Nobody wins in this story, no understanding is forged between rival camps, but Proulx manages something few New England authors even attempt. She gets under the skin of a flatlander and takes a good long look at the undernourished but still beating heart she finds there.