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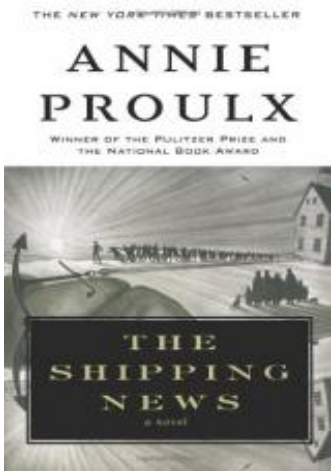
The Shipping News

by Annie Proulx



About the Book

From the get-go, Quoyle is a loser. Not only is he physically unattractive with a "great damp loaf of a body," but he is also not too bright. His father despises him, and his brother constantly taunts him. He drifts from job to job, never able to keep one for more than a few months. He gets married, only to have his wife sell their two daughters to a child pornographer and leave him.

THE SHIPPING NEWS describes Quoyle's psychological and spiritual rebirth. Left with two children to raise after he rescues them, and no job, he returns to Newfoundland, the land of his ancestors. A sometime newspaper reporter, he gets a job reporting on shipping news with a local publication, and becomes a minor celebrity. Gradually he is transformed into a loving father and a valued neighbor.

Discussion Guide

1. Proulx describes Quoyle as "a great damp loaf of a body." What kind of man is Quoyle? How does Proulx's sublime, comic style make you feel about him?

2. When Quoyle writes for the Mockingburg Record he never seems to understand the dynamics of journalism, yet in writing "The Shipping News" he transforms The Gammy Bird and eventually becomes managing editor of the paper. Discuss some of the other changes Quoyle experiences from the beginning of the novel to the end.

3. As Quoyle arrives in Newfoundland, he hears much of his family's past. In fact, there is an old relative, "some kind of fork kin," still alive in Newfoundland. Why does Quoyle avoid Nolan -- seem angry at the old man from the start? Is the reason as simple as Quoyle denying where he came from, especially after learning the details of his father's relationship with the aunt?

4. Proulx tells us the aunt is a lesbian, yet never makes a specific issue out of the aunt's sexual orientation. Does this fact add dimension to the story for you? Does it add to the aunt's character? We, as readers, assume that characters are heterosexual without needing to hear specifically about their sexual life. Does the matter-of-course way Proulx treats the aunt's sexuality help make the reader a less judgmental critic?

5. Discuss Quoyle's relationship with Petal Bear. Can you justify his feelings for her? Even after her death, she continues to have a strong hold on him, and her memory threatens to squelch the potential of his feeling for Wavey Prowse. Is this because Quoyle doesn't understand love without pain? Both Quoyle and Wavey have experienced abusive relationships previously. How do they treat each other?

6. Newfoundland is more than the setting for this story, it is a dreary yet engaging character onto itself. Does the cold weather and the rough life add to your enjoyment of the book?

7. Do you think the chapter headings from The Ashley Book of Knots, The Mariner's Dictionary, and Quipus and Witches' Knots add to the atmosphere of the book? Did their humor illustrate some of Proulx's points, or did they simplify some of her issues? Notice especially the headings for chapters 2, 4, 28, 32, 33, and 34.

Author Bio

Annie Proulx is the author of eight books, including the novel THE SHIPPING NEWS and the story collection CLOSE RANGE. Her many honors include a Pulitzer Prize, a National Book Award, the *Irish Times* International Fiction Prize, and a PEN/Faulkner award. Her story ?Brokeback Mountain,? which originally appeared in *The New Yorker*, was made into an Academy Award-winning film. Her most recent novel is BARKSKINS. She lives in Seattle.

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