



## **Barkskins**

*Annie Proulx*

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## **Barkskins** Annie Proulx

From Annie Proulx—the Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award-winning author of *The Shipping News* and *Brokeback Mountain*—comes an ecological masterwork, five years in the writing: an epic, dazzling, violent, magnificently dramatic novel about the taking down of the world's forests.

In the late seventeenth century two penniless young Frenchmen, René Sel and Charles Duquet, arrive in New France. Bound to a feudal lord, a “*seigneur*,” for three years in exchange for land, they become woodcutters—barkskins. René suffers extraordinary hardship, oppressed by the forest he is charged with clearing. He is forced to marry a Mi'kmaw woman and their descendants live trapped between two inimical cultures. But Duquet, crafty and ruthless, runs away from the seigneur, becomes a fur trader, then sets up a timber business. Proulx tells the stories of the descendants of Sel and Duquet over three hundred years—their travels across North America, to Europe, China, and New Zealand, under stunningly brutal conditions—the revenge of rivals, accidents, pestilence, Indian attacks, and cultural annihilation. Over and over again, they seize what they can of a presumed infinite resource, leaving the modern-day characters face to face with possible ecological collapse.

Proulx's inimitable genius is her creation of characters who are so vivid—in their greed, lust, vengefulness, or their simple compassion and hope—that we follow them with fierce attention. Annie Proulx is one of the most formidable and compelling American writers, and *Barkskins* is her greatest novel, a magnificent marriage of history and imagination.

## **Barkskins Details**

Date : Published June 14th 2016 by Scribner (first published January 5th 2016)

ISBN :

Author : Annie Proulx

Format : Kindle Edition 737 pages

Genre : Fiction, Historical, Historical Fiction, Abandoned, Literary Fiction

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## From Reader Review *Barkskins* for online ebook

**Doug says**

### **I Couldn't Enjoy *The Forest For The Trees***

Annie Proulx is a great writer. I have tremendous respect for her and *The Shipping News* (winner of both the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and the National Book Award for Fiction) is one of my favorite novels. I was therefore very honored and excited when Netgalley and Scribner granted me an ARC of *Barkskins* for review. I bowed down and waved my arms, just like Garth and Wayne. I'm definitely not worthy.

Proulx must have done a ton of research in order to come up with the level of historical and cultural detail on display in this massive novel. Her efforts are obvious and admirable and I learned a lot. At the same time, many of these details felt extraneous to me - as though the author thought "well, I took all of this time to unearth all of these factoids so I'm definitely going to find a way to stuff all of them in here". And so she did. Frankly, much of this minutiae bored me (particularly the details centered around the business dealings of the Duquet/Duke family). It also slowed the story down, prevented me from feeling immersed in it, and kept me from fully enjoying it.

This novel covers many many *many* generations and I have to admit I got lost in the forest trying to keep track of all of the connections (especially on the Duke side). I assume Scribner will include some sort of genealogical charts when this is published in June and that will help a lot. If not, all of you readers had better carry bags of breadcrumbs with you on the trail.

2.5 stars.

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**Leah says**

Abandoned at 30% on the grounds of trying not to die from boredom. Another case of an author doing a ton of research, binging it all down on paper and thinking that's enough to make a novel. It isn't. Let me save you reading the whole 700+ pages - spoiler alert! White man bad - destroys land, forest and indigenous way of life! There! Bet you're as astonished at that major revelation as I am...

In fairness, other reviews suggest that eventually she widens it out to clarify that ALL men are bad...

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**Perry says**

**An Awe-Inspiring, Far-Reaching Epic of the Descendants of 2 French Settlers, Charles Duquet and Rene' Sel, in 1693 in New France (in an area now in Nova Scotia) and Their Destinies Over the Next 320 Years**

[review 6/29; updated 9/28/16]

I enjoyed this sweeping epic covering nearly 320 years. Although it's 736 pages, there's no one protagonist or

any character that is fully developed. In fact, I believe it's difficult, if not impossible, to write an three-century epic like this that is *very compelling or moving* in the usual sense of literary fiction. That is to say, this is an epic that does not go back to one original narrator's storyline but instead travels straight through 320 years from 1681 to 2012 (no backward and forward except for explanation's sake) and thus does not lend itself to the reader's personal attachment to a character or a love affair, or to a development of either in the way that has become the custom for today's readers. Perhaps the only sure way to have such an attachment is if the author develops these ingredients, adding another 500-700 pages, in which case most won't read it. In any case, Proulx's obvious intent was to tell a story that shows her necessary truth about the land, the intermixing of families, and the biblical battle always present, here greed versus good (the former winning much more over the centuries than the latter).

The greed and rage of Charles Duke (formerly Duquet) is on full display here:

“Inside Duquet something like a tightly closed pine cone licked by fire opened abruptly and he exploded with incensed and uncontrollable fury, a life’s pent-up rage. ‘No one helped me,’ he shrieked, ‘I did everything myself. I endured. I contended with powerful men. I suffered in the wilderness. I accepted the risk I might die. No one helped me!’ The boy’s gaze shifted, the fever-boiled eyes following Duquet’s rising arm closing only when the tomahawk split his brain.”

I certainly appreciated the change from the typical literary structures, which tend to wear me out upon much accumulation, such as when it takes 30 pages to ponder a madeleine cake.

I loved seeing how much families change over time, how they blended, nearly ended, how one member of a generation can have a dramatic impact on the next gen but each member of a generation can be pegged into one of 2 general camps favoring 1) love of money and accumulation of wealth for the family in the rich, and, in the poor, simply survival above all else, versus 2) love of others including future generations and, for the Indians, saving of their traditional ways, the land of their ancestors and the spirit of the land that they have revered and befriended.

I was dumbstruck by the destruction of the forests, their role in our environment and future, and the complete apathy of nearly all humans toward anything to do with the environment, either ignoring the current problems on the thought that it's all a myth, it's not my problem it will be their problem, or they are incapable of conceiving that it will one day be a huge problem for Earth.

I would definitely read this novel again. I gained a better appreciation for the outdoors, wildlife, forests and trees from reading this novel, as well as a somber realization of how so many people died over the past 300 years as a result of human greed, the billions made in the pillage and the plunder of forests in the United States, Canada, as well as in *New Zealand*, where a good 40-page chunk of the book was set.

*Kauri Tree in New Zealand, where part of novel takes place*

Proulx is a great writer. This is the first book of hers I've read. I'd definitely recommend this for a worthwhile change of scenery in your summer reading.

In fact, I've talked myself into giving this 5 stars. 4.5 stars, realizing the above-stated negatives and positives of a 736 page book covering 320 years. Did Ms. Proulx accomplish what she set out to write and did it affect me? Absolutely yes on both counts. If I gave this 4, it would be due to the inability to fully develop

characters/relationships that results from the ambitious scope of the book. Why can't a writer focus on the story more than any particular character? Who says? She did an excellent job in creating this realistic world over so many deaths and births, marriages, abandonments, murders, capsizes, betrayals, hope and hopelessness. It deserves 5 stars.

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## Will Byrnes says

**...the newcomers did not care to understand the strange new country beyond taking whatever turned a profit. They knew only what they knew. The forest was there for them.**

*Barkskins* is Pulitzer Prize winner Annie Proulx's (the author of *Brokeback Mountain* and Pulitzer winner for *The Shipping News*) magnum opus, a wide ranging historical novel in which the central character is the land itself, more particularly the primeval forested land of (primarily) North America. Proulx plants a pod with two seeds, the arrival in New France of René Sel and Charles Duquet in 1693. They are contracted to remain with a local *seigneur*, in essence a feudal lord, for a limited number of years. Duquet flees the seigneur's cruelty, and uses his considerable native intelligence, strength, guile, and ruthlessness to become a fur trader and much more. Sel suffers greatly at the hands of the lord, even being forced to marry a native woman.

From these roots, there grows an overview of more than three hundred years of history, as the Sel (towards the Native American side) and Duquet (to a logging dynasty) lines branch out in numbers and geography, are periodically pruned back by disasters both natural and political, but persist through time, like the trees some of their representatives are often so eager to fell. Proulx takes us all the way up to 2013.

**For me, the chief character in the long story was the forest, the great now-lost forest(s) of the world. The characters, as interesting as they were to develop, were there to carry the story of how we have cut and destroyed the wooden world.** - from The New Yorker interview

It was not solely the wooden world that was ravaged. The native peoples who lived in and near those woods were cut down no less than the trees that had helped sustain and define them.

**Annie Proulx** - Photo by Wiqan Ang for the Wall Street Journal

There are ten parts in the book (not noted by rings) covering diverse durations, from 10 years at the low end to 227 in the final, hurry-up part. Proulx walks us through stages in the denuding of North America's woodlands, beginning in what is now Canada, then moving east and south to Maine, heading west to take in the Ohio Valley, then up to Michigan and touching briefly on southern and western woodlands. There are forays outside the continent as well, with looks at forestry practices in the Old World of Germany, a look-see at some of the magnificent old giants of New Zealand and a quick trip to take in the unimaginable diversity of the Amazon. She shows us how native peoples were driven off the land, pressured into accepting European ways and interbred, willingly and not, with the eastern invaders.

Proulx paints a bleak portrait of what life was like for those unlucky enough to make their living at the bottom of the logging world power structure. Death was a daily visitor, danger a constant companion, and

discomfort and worse from wet, cold, fire, disease and buzzing pests offered persistent hardship. One of the lumber barons, a female head of a logging business family, demonstrates how the media was used to manipulate workers.

**She urged editors to praise the manliness and toughness of shanty men, inculcating axmen with the belief that they could take extreme risks and withstand the most desperate conditions because they were heroic rugged fellows; the same sauce served settlers into the third generation, who believed they were “pioneers” and could outlast perils and adversities. Loggers and frontier settlers, she thought, would live on pride and belief in their own invulnerability instead of money.**

The European loggers’ approach to their work was not based, at least at first, on pure greed. There was that, of course, but there was also a considerable shortage of actual knowledge.

**“How big is this forest?” asked Duquet in his whinging treble voice. He was scarcely bigger than a child.**

**“It is the forest of the world. It is infinite. It twists around as a snake swallows its own tail and has no end and no beginning. No one has ever seen its farthest dimension.”**

While the book is a long-term scan of the despoilation of landscape by the ignorant and avaricious, it is not entirely charcoal and birch. We know a lot more now about the worldwide supply of woodland than it was possible to know then. This is reflected in Proulx’s characters, who consider decisions made in the light of what was known at the time. This changes, as eventually it becomes known that the woodland is not mythically eternal. But she also points out that in certain areas there was indeed knowledge available of less horrific forestry practices used in other parts of the world that was largely ignored by the North American logging industry.

**Even if everyone knew it was too late, we’d still keep on. There seems to be something in the human psyche that is unable to stop and step back and repair and fix things. It’s not willing to. It’s like we can’t shift easily. There’s just something in people. It’s the fatal flaw in humanity, I think. Once we start doing something, we keep on.** - from the Globe and Mail article

There is much in here about what one might call the American spirit, or more likely the entrepreneurial spirit, as there are plenty of representatives more than willing to undertake daring ventures, risking much and sometimes all in hopes of reaping a reward. But there are several sorts of enterprise on display. When a logging executive, newly arrived from Europe, sees a relative greasing the palm of a state official to ensure access to attractive parcels of forest, he remarks that the man had truly become an American. Strong women play key roles here. I was reminded in one case of Jeanne Anne McCullough from the *The Son*, another historical of eastern invaders and local devastation.

#### **A Maine clearcut** From the Forest Ecology Network

Proulx offers some beacons of hope (a light in the forest?) in her grim landscape. One European forester brings a notion of sustainability to the lumber business. We are thus exposed to extant theory of the era of how it might be possible to carve out a *modus vivendi* between humanity and nature. Not that this happens, of course, but the ideas are introduced. There are also sprigs of the family bush that find more interesting ways to think about the land than in terms of potential board feet. One dedicates his life to studying the diversity of the Amazon, another, well, several others, devote themselves to studying the complex

interactions and interdependence of ecosystems.

And just as some seek to restore a sense of understanding, of sanity, to human interaction with natural resources, others feel the pull of their family, of their cultural roots, and seek those remaining stands of tribal knowledge and life.

Proulx tosses into each chapter bits about the time that allow us to place where we are, and what is happening Oh, that first came in there? Cool. And that began there, and then? She accomplishes this quite deftly, so that it does not at all come across as excess exposition. More like easily identifiable road signage that fits in nicely with its surroundings. Changes in fashion and foods mark the times as well. Part of the progression is a look at the step-wise changes in logging technology.

The downside of this book is that because it takes in such a long period, it is impossible to give enough time to any of the many wonderful characters that inhabit the space. Of course, had she attended to more of them fully, the book could easily have tripled in length. And there are certainly plenty of characters who will engage your interest and many episodes that will touch your heart, however brief the encounter. Proulx is a master of saying a lot with few words.

From the Forest Stewardship Council

There is a considerable body count here, as one might expect in a novel covering more than three centuries. Character A is dispatched so we can move on to characters B and C in the next step of social and economic development, or landscape rape, as the case may be. And they are carried off in diverse ways, some that were new to me. One unlucky fellow is tossed overboard during a cold-weather storm and is later found encased in ice. (a corpsesicle?) Infections, fires, starvation, a scalping, More than enough to fill an Edward Gorey couplet book or three (S is for Steve who got stuck in a tree, T is for Tom who was frozen at sea). A cough here or a pain there are likely, within a page or two to turn terminal. Hi, lovely to meet you. Where are you going? Oh nooooo! There is definitely a “They’ve killed Kenny” vibe that pops up with some regularity. I suspect Proulx had a bit of fun figuring out how to off so many of her tale-bearers. Not as much as Tim Dorsey, maybe, but still. Perhaps she uses Annie’s Spin-the-Death wheel. Ok, what are we gonna do to this one? Crushed by floating logs? shot by invaders? a surprise scalping? (could we call that skullduggery?) nifty house fire? forest conflagration? done in by unfriendly natives? infected cut? heart attack? contract assassination? Go ahead, give it a turn. (I think we’re gonna need a bigger wheel.) The list goes on.

**these things happened to people. ... I mean, if you've got to kill off a character, you might as well do it with a bit of panache.** - from the NPR interview

There are some magical scenes of sylvan idylls as native people traverse remote lands to engage in a traditional hunt. And moments of beauty dapple the tale as those open to the glory of the wild allow the wonder all about them to find its way inside. But beyond that there is nothing enchanted about these woods, although a cleric at a residential school for Indians might bear a strong thematic resemblance to the woodland resident encountered by Hansel and Gretel. People are indeed transformed by their experiences in the forest. But, while it may be a place of opportunity, it is hardly a place of refuge. There are indeed dark scenes in this book that would seem suitable for the woodsy horrorlands of the Grimms. Plenty of two-legged troll-like monsters to go around, more than happy to engage in unspeakable acts of violence and cruelty. Were Tom Bombadil to have been found by the invaders, his home would soon have been burned to the ground, and he would have been lucky to escape with all four limbs, his head on his neck, and his scalp still covering its top. And were any ents to wander in from Middle Earth they would well recognize the sort of holocaust being practiced on their cousins. The enchantment has been driven from these woods, with

sharp steel edges and fire. For North American forests after the arrival of Europeans, it is winter all the time and never Christmas.

In his seminal look at how human societies have gone to ruin, Collapse, Jared Diamond identifies one of the most important elements in furthering this destruction as national deforestation. While Proulx looks primarily at forests here, she is using them to stand in for a range of short-sighted activities that are ruining our home planet. Reliance on fossil fuels, for example, overpopulation, over-fishing, pollution. That is not in the book, per se, well, not much, but it is pretty clear that this is what her intended larger picture includes.

Film rights have been bought by National Geographic and are being developed by Scott Rudin. It seems to me that the best possible cinematic outcome for this work would be as a lengthy series of *The Game of Thrones* sort. This would allow the story to be told without racing off to the morgue every ten pages or so to clear a path for the next set of characters. There are many wonderful personalities in this book, and a more leisurely look at their experiences would be most welcome, and well supported by the material. Fingers are crossed.

*Barkskins* is a triumph. It cuts a swath through a large historical spanse, offering a brilliant and engaging look at how the traditional rape-and-plunder formula for resource extraction has scarred the landscape, ruined many of its inhabitants, destroyed endemic culture, and contributed to making our planet one that is choking on its own smoke, warming to the boiling point and threatening to extinguish those who have treated it so fecklessly. In folklore the forest may be a place where people are afraid, but today, and for many centuries now it has been clear that it is the forest that must shiver at the sight of man. Many have gone into the woods, but far too few have allowed the woods to go into them. In the Anthropocene we have become the darkness we feared.

Published - June 14, 2016

Review Posted – August 26, 2016

=====EXTRA STUFF

Whew, I managed to get through this without saying that Annie Proulx has an axe to grind with the logging industry, or that she has impressive writerly chops, or that she lets let the woodchips fall where they may. Oh...sorry.

Relevant Entertainments

- The Lorax - the non-feature-length animated version
- Into the Woods - the stage production
- Colors of the Wind - from Disney's animated *Pocahontas*

Interviews

- 'Barkskins' Author Annie Proulx Is Restless in Seattle
- by Jennifer Maloney – Wall Street Journal – June 9, 2016
- Annie Proulx's Bloody New Novel 'Barkskins' Is About More Than Deforestation - NPR staff – June 10, 2016
- Annie Proulx Discusses her Upcoming Novel, “Barkskins” - in The New Yorker - by Cressida Leyshon – March 14, 2016
- Into the Woods - by Jared Bland – June 24, 2016 – for The Globe and Mail



An excerpt – via the Wall Street Journal

November 14, 2016 - *Barkskins* is named to the KIRKUS list of the Best Historical Novels of 2016

November 23, 2016 - *Barkskins* is named to the NY Times list of 100 Notable Books of 2016

A National Geographic page on deforestation

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## **PattyMacDotComma says**

5★

Wonderful, memorable characters, some of whom live long lives and make fortunes and some who meet sudden, miserable, grisly fates, including one poor fellow who became “meat”. Sadly, he was one of the good guys, but there are many who are rascals or downright evil, and it’s satisfying when they are chewed up and spat out of the story. Or cut in half and flung overboard on one of the many horrendous sea voyages.

In 1693, two lone Frenchmen. Rene Sel and Charles Duquet, arrive to appalling conditions as indentured servants in the 1700s, where they are faced with a vicious master, freezing winter, and the thickest woodland they’ve seen. [I defy readers not to feel cold and miserable!] They are to chop trees down for the next three years to earn their freedom, so they ask about the thick forest.

***“It is the forest of the world. It is infinite. It twists around as a snake swallows its own tail and has no end and no beginning. No one has ever seen its farthest dimension.”***

And that’s what they believed. A never-ending supply of timber, because they couldn’t see the forest for the trees. They forgot some of those enormous trees took hundreds, perhaps thousands, of years to grow. And the other plants and organisms in the forest were needed to make trees healthy, and vice-versa, as well as sources of food and medicine.

Proulx pulls no punches when it comes to how hard life was for those “opening up” the new world or for those who were there first. This is not a warm, cosy read.

There are a lot of French and Indian words sprinkled throughout, which I liked. Incidentally, the terms “Indians” and “whites” are used, as they would have been then, while the names of different tribes and family groups are used by both whites and Indians.

As I said, the author pulls no punches and isn’t worried about political correctness—she’s worried about the world. She may be preaching to the converted, those who don’t measure a forest by board-feet but who value it for other reasons. In her dedication, after she names specific people, she adds:

*“And for barkskins of all kinds—  
loggers, ecologists, sawyers, sculptors, hotshots,  
planters, students, scientists, leaf eaters,  
photographers,  
practitioners of shinrin-yoku, land-sat interpreters,*

*climatologists, wood butchers, picnickers, foresters,  
ring counters and the rest of us.”*

(She never clarifies what a *barkskin* is, but it seems to be anyone who is as rough as bark and/or works, uses, or appreciates trees. )

Of the original Frenchmen, Duquet escapes, but Sel sticks it out. Because the Indians aren't "using" the land, (as God intended), it rightly belongs to those who do use it (chop and crop)—the white man. Most of the Indians succumb to disease, whiskey, and starvation as their food sources disappear and they are pushed out. Fish and eel traps are torn apart, medicinal herbs and plants are eradicated.

This isn't any secret, but the characters are so clear, that it's easy to get irate all over again. We follow both European and Indian families, and I was pleased Proulx dates her chapters and reminds us which family we're in to keep us on track.

And the discussion of the timber industry around the world is detailed and extensive. More than some may wish to know, but I found most of it interesting. There is a section near the end in more modern times which dragged (for me), but for the most part, it does what good historical fiction does. It tells the truth in such a memorable way that we can't pretend we don't know what happened.

Proulx shows the ax and sawmills eating their way across North and South America and New Zealand.

Joni Mitchell put it well in *Big Yellow Taxi*:

*“They took all the trees  
And put them in a tree museum  
And they charged all the people  
A dollar and a half to see 'em  
Don't it always seem to go  
That you don't know what you've got  
'Till it's gone  
They paved paradise  
And they put up a parking lot”*

It would be nice to think this will have the sort of effect that *Silent Spring* did for alerting the public to poisonous chemicals, but I'm not sure Proulx thinks we will learn. As one of her European characters, who raises and plants seedlings, says of Americans (and it could be said about most self-interested politicians):

***"Americans have no sense of years beyond three--last year, this year and next year. I suppose I keep to my own ways. I like to know that there will be a forest when I am gone."***

I'd like to know that, too.

Thanks to NetGalley and HarperCollinsUK for allowing me to read an advance copy for review.

Below is a link to an interesting interview with Proulx, who says she was sad to discover she's allergic to red cedar!

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/201...>

And this is a link to an article about what appears to be a very old expression (possibly from the 1500s) “can’t see the wood [forest] for the trees”. Apparently Americans say “forest”.

<https://alexpolistigers.wordpress.com...>

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## **Dana Kenedy (Dana and the Books) says**

This review can also be found on my blog, Dana and the Books.

There aren’t an abundance of Canadian history novels of this type, so I jumped on this book like Torontonian spotting a Tim Horton’s on a long road trip.

I loved the overall story of the book. Long historical epics are awesome. Long historical epic about Canada are even more awesome.

References and settings in places I have actually visited helped me picture and get more involved with the story. However, I did feel a disconnect from the characters. I didn’t get emotionally attached to any of them; I was just there on the sidelines watching them do their thing.

Despite the distance from the characters, it was still an interesting read (especially for someone who has an interest in Canadian history and Native Canadian history).

At just over 700 pages it’s by no means a quick read. I read it slowly over the course of a couple months, but it wasn’t the length that made me read slowly, it was the density. Some chapters glazed over important events with several years passing in the span of just a few pages. I wanted to experience events with the characters, but instead it was just a paragraph of explanation and then moving on to the next thing. Unfortunately, it made for a bit of a dry read in places.

It was not at all a character driven story. None of the characters stood out to me and by the end of the book they had all meshed together. I wish it were longer so we could get to know the characters, flesh out events instead of glossing over them.

I love historical epics. The longer the better. But this one definitely should have been longer. If it were longer (or split into two larger books), we could get the experience of both an interesting, epic plot, as well as the characters who drive it. Instead, at times I felt like I was reading a non-fiction account of the history of two families and the ramifications of deforestation.

Interesting, yes. Captivating, no.

Thanks so much to HarperCollins UK, 4th Estate for approving me for a copy on Netgalley!

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## **Laura says**

This epic novel requires a big investment - it's long, it's complex, it covers a lot of ground. But if you're willing to make that investment you'll be amply rewarded. It's a historical eco-epic about the colonisation of North America with a focus on the destruction of vast swathes of ancient American forests by European settlers and the impact this had on the indigenous people.

The story begins with Renee Sel and Charles Duquet, two Frenchmen who move to Canada in 1693 in indentured servitude. While working for the rancorous Monsieur Trepagny, the paths of the two men diverge: pliant Sel is forcibly married to Mari of the Mi'kmaq people, but Duquet flees and proceeds to found a logging empire. Through many generations, the book traces the disparate fortunes of the two families.

In a way, it's a tale of (business) cowboys and Indians. While the white business owners profit immensely from logging and deforestation, their Mi'kmaw cousins are marginalised, displaced and abused as they watched their ancestral lands destroyed. It's also about a family split in two along racial lines, and how that privilege differential plays out over more than three centuries. The adversity faced by the Mi'kmaw characters is incredibly difficult to read at times.

For the first part of the book, the loggers and European settlers are constantly asserting that the forests are infinite, that they are so large humans could never destroy them. They're so certain that the forests are indestructible that they proactively and aggressively destroy vast tracts of woodland through logging and fire. It turns out they were wrong.

(Courtesy of Greenpeace: Map of remaining intact ancient forest in North America. The light and dark areas combined are the original extent of forest cover. The dark area only is what remains of ancient forest)

Reading the book in 2016, I found it hard to believe that people could have been so arrogant and stupid as to believe that the forests were disposable, cutting down millenium-old trees without a second thought. Then I remembered that **THIS IS STILL HAPPENING ALL OVER THE WORLD**. It's the kind of book which really brings home what a perilous situation we're in when it comes to the natural world; it's uncomfortable reading but it's also galvanising.

While the writing was always great, I must admit that my attention ebbed at a few points. In particular, there's a chapter (The Severed Snake 1756-1766) that goes into detail about the business dealings of the Duke family and the various legal problems they face. I found this quite dull and it took me a while to hack my way through. But that was the only part of the book I didn't enjoy, after that the pace picked up considerably.

An inherent problem with books that follow a huge number of characters over a long time is that there's little room to get to know individual characters. While some were given a lot of air time and stood out ((view spoiler)), it was difficult to keep track of who was who and how they were related. I read an ARC version which didn't contain a family tree, but I hope that the final published version does because I ended up having to write everything down on bits of paper to keep track.

Proulx must have undertaken years of painstaking research to be able to pull this off. It's vibrant and realistic and each historical era is clearly drawn. I would recommend it to fans of historical fiction and those interested in conservation and environmental ethics.

(With thanks to the publishers and NetGalley for providing me with an ARC in return for an honest review)

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## Marita says

*"God knows why. Take what we can get as soon as we can get it is what I say. I am not interested in fifty years hence as there is no need for concern. The forests are infinite and permanent," said Edward."*

In the late seventeenth century two men, René Sel and Charles Duquet, arrive in New France as indentured servants to work for three years as woodcutters (barkskins) in exchange for land. One of them, Duquet, manages to escape and become a fur trader, whilst Sel suffers many hardships and is forced into a marriage with an older Mi'kmaw woman. This is not only their story, but also that of their descendants. It is an historical tapestry and a multi-generational saga which spans three centuries and various continents.

In this novel where the land with its magnificent trees is really the main character, issues such as deforestation and its ramifications, as well as racism and bigotry are addressed. There is sheer rapaciousness as various characters are out to get whatever they can bleed out of the land. Frankly, I lost track of who was who in this human zoo, and who did what to whom, but that was not really important and did not detract from my enjoyment in reading this well written novel. Several characters are interesting, some are memorable, but not many have time to develop as the story moves from one generation to the next.

As there are many excellent reviews which comprehensively analyse this novel, I shall simply add that as I live in New Zealand I thoroughly enjoyed the inclusion of the majestic **Kauri (Agathis Australis)** and **Rimu (Dacrydium Cupressinum)** and some of the local birds such as the iconic **Tui** and the critically endangered **Kakapo**, a large flightless parrot. My heart was in my mouth when I read about these trees being cut down. Earlier this year I once again visited one of the remaining Kauri forests in Northland in the North Island where I photographed a famous two thousand year old Kauri tree, **Tane Mahuta**:

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## Ron Charles says

At more than 700 pages, covering three centuries, "Barkskins" is an awesome monument of a book, a spectacular survey of America's forests dramatized by a cast of well-hewn characters.

(Scribner)

Granted, your interest in forests may not extend to 700 pages, or even — to be honest — to seven, but such is the magnetism of Proulx's narrative that there's no resisting her thundering cascade of stories. By drilling deep into the woods that enabled this country to conquer the world, Proulx has laid out the whole history of American capitalism and its rapacious destruction of the land.

She begins in. . . .

To read the rest of this review, go to *The Washington Post*:  
<https://www.washingtonpost.com/entert...>

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## Hannah Greendale says

Click here to watch a video review of this book on my channel, *From Beginning to Bookend*.

René Sel and Charles Duquet arrive in New France as young men to work for a *seigneur*. In exchange for three years of labor they will be apportioned land on which to build a home and start a family. René is a diligent and focused woodcutter, despite a relentless onslaught of hardship. Duquet seeks an alternate life path, one that proffers a successful timber business. Building on the lives of both indentured Frenchmen, this multi-generational saga unfolds to reveal the triumphant yet sorrowful lives of both René and Duquet's ancestors over the course of centuries. With each successive generation, survival hinges on logging, and the lawless destruction of ancient forests has unforeseeable consequences for future generations.

For all its ambition, *Barkskins* is as successful as it is flawed. Its prose is most stylish when portraying the book's most expansive central figure: the forest.

*In a few hours the sodden leaf mold gave way to pine duff. The air was intensely aromatic. Fallen needles muted their passage, the interlaced branches absorbed their panting breaths. Here grew huge trees of a size not seen in the old country for hundreds of years, evergreens taller than cathedrals, cloud-piercing spruce and hemlock. The monstrous deciduous trees stood distant from each other, but overhead their leaf-choked branches merged into a false sky, dark and savage.*

*The forest had many edges, like a lace altarpiece. Its moody darkness eased in the clearings.*

The author gives a magnificent portrayal of three centuries of deforestation, highlighting the whiteman's misguided belief that the forest is everlasting and without end. Incessant logging, coupled with intentional fires and a stubborn refusal to replenish the land, devastates millions of acres. The once great forests suffer a harrowing metamorphosis on the page, a transition made more chilling for the depth of its truth.

*"It is the forest of the world. It is infinite. It twists around as a snake swallows its own tail and has no end and no beginning. No one has ever seen its farthest dimension."*

*. . . the wildness of the world receded, the vast invisible web of filaments that connected human life to animal, trees to flesh and bones to grass shivered as each tree fell and one by one the web strands snapped.*

Also recorded with painful clarity are many malicious and unjust acts inflicted on native populations by white men who believe Indians do not appreciate their land and so feel morally obligated to claim it. To clear the forest and cultivate the land (at the expense of the lives and rights of native populations) is considered civilized and moral.

*There were fewer Mi'kmaq every year and whitemen laughed and said with satisfaction that in forty more years they would be gone, gone like the Beothuk, vanished from the earth. It seemed true. There had never been so few Mi'kmaq since the beginning of time, less than fifteen hundred, the remains of a people who had numbered more than one hundred thousand in the time before the whitemen came.*

When it comes to logging operations or the history of trade practices, *Barkskins* falls into an academic rhythm, assuming the feel of a tedious history textbook.

*"To the point, in 1730 the Crown granted a five-year mast procurement license to Ralph Gulston, a Turkey merchant, one of those swarthy fellows who trade with the Levant. The license allowed him to enter Maine lands belonging to the Crown in 1691 - id est, public land - and cut mast pines for the Royal Navy." [ . . . ] "After some delay, Gulston hired a colonial logger, William Leighton, to cut the pines for him. And through the winter of 1733-34 Leighton cut them and dragged them out. No one objected. However, in the passage of years since 1691, title to the land had passed to an American, John Frost, of Berwick, Maine."*

Numerous gruesome deaths and startling injuries are reported, but each incident is delivered with an air of detachment, garnering little to no reaction from the reader no matter how violent or potentially shocking the incident.

The book's greatest offense is the overwhelming number of characters and the hollowness of their individual stories. Some character stories outshine others; however, over the course of three hundred years (following two ancestral lines across seven-hundred pages), time rarely allows for readers to develop an interest in a particular character, let alone develop an emotional attachment. René and Duquet make for a captivating start to the narrative, but by the third and fourth generation, the list of husbands, wives, and expanding broods of children are difficult (i.e. near impossible) to keep straight - a dizzying task made more complicated by the introduction of uncles, aunts, and cousins (to say nothing of unrelated tertiary characters).

A grand undertaking that succeeds in some - but not all - areas, *Barkskins* is a sweeping chronicle of our diminishing forests as portrayed through an exhaustive array of characters.

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## **Phrynne says**

It is a few years since I read *The Shipping News* but I remember that I enjoyed it so I decided to try another of Annie Proulx's books. Not sure that this was the best one to choose though!

Most reviewers seem to refer to *Barkskins* as an epic saga. It is certainly epic - at times it seemed endless. And it is most certainly a saga as it moves through a span of some three hundred years, changing main characters each time someone dies. This feature became a drawback as some of the many characters were never quite fully formed while others were remarkable and noticeably missed when they had completed their part.

Annie Proulx is certainly a remarkable writer and the prose was just beautiful. She obviously feels very strongly about environmental issues and the book dealt with deforestation and its impact on several continents. It was interesting and thought provoking but in the end read more like a history book than a novel. Still very worthwhile reading but not as good as I had hoped.

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## **Hugh says**

What an extraordinary book. It encompasses the history of the major North American forests from the 17th century to the present day, and combines this with two loosely connected family stories. This ought to be too

complex and ambitious to work, but for me it got more compulsive the more I read.

At the start of the book we meet two poor Frenchmen, Rene Sel and Charles Duquet, who are contracted to work for a settler from a French aristocratic family in a forest in New France. Duquet runs away while Sel remains loyal, and is persuaded to marry a Mi'kmaw Indian woman who has been contracted as a cook. Duquet is an ambitious wheeler dealer who starts a business empire which concentrates on logging, while Sel's family lead a marginal existence with the vestiges of the Mi'kmaw. Both families are followed all the way to the present day, and Proulx exposes the way in which the forestry industry destroyed most of America's primeval forests and most of the Indian tribes' homelands and sources of food. The book is full of memorable characters (Lavinia, the heiress to the Duquet empire in particular), but as in Proulx's earlier novel *Accordion Crimes*, most of their lives come to premature ends.

For such a long book, this is surprisingly enjoyable, in fact it is among the best new American novels I have read in the last few years.

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### **Zoeytron says**

Grrrrr . . . I am throwing in the towel on **Barkskins** after 120 pages. I am not enjoying it, and this is not how I want to spend the next week or so of my reading time. This bottomless pile of minutiae is just too much for my old lady brain to hack through. Cutting my losses and returning it to the library for the next soul on the waiting list. I can do that, because I am big.

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### **William2.1 says**

Can dirt save the Earth?

The planet is warming not only because of fossil fuels, but also because soil, forests and wetlands are being ravaged.

Some scientists are looking into ways to put some of that carbon back into living ecosystems, changing the way we use land.

—from New York Times, 20 April 2018

Set in the seemingly infinite virgin forests of the Canadian northwest. *Barkskins* is a narrative of hurtling speed about the frittering away the earth's resources. Hyper-compressed, two pages equals two to three years. Naturally the American Indian can't be far away in such a tale, with his contrasting sustainable view of the earth. I was hooked from page 5. The story is also on one level about the vulgar development of our nation, an astonishing place much like today's corporate America with but without indoor plumbing or rule of law.

René Sel is a taciturn Frenchman who works hard and pays his way. He marries an Indian woman, Mari, and they grow movingly close before she dies. Then René dies at 40. They are survived by two daughters, Zoë and Noë. Lives are brutal and short.



Duquet, the companion with whom René came to New France, is little more than a seething mass of covetousness and greed. He's very good at making money. He cheats everyone without fail. He murders children who bother him. I was waiting for him to die horribly in the grim northern forest he was so busily destroying. Yet when the chance for violence came, Proulx deferred. She prefers her violence random. There are no just deserts. The good are mauled equally with the bad. Everyone endures the same menacing uncertainty. Money for a while insulates the avaricious from the horrors of the wild. But sooner or later they too must appear in the unforgiving landscape and take their chances.

Now we've returned to the mixed progeny of René and Mari who try to make their way in the boreal forest. It's the eve of the French and Indian War. The poor Indians, as if they were not oppressed enough, are pressed into service as conscripts against the British. This is a tragedy even more moving, if that is possible, than their loss of the land. Each generation of Mi'kmaq marries with the French. Their language and folkways are slowly diluted. They are subject to racist pogroms; their numbers, already small, further dwindle. Slowly they are subsumed by the whites so that only traces of who they were remain. It's criminal what white Europeans and their offspring did to the Indians, and that wrong can never be righted. Well, at least we have Proulx, who, after much research and inquiry, shows us something of what it must have been like. Yet the book, so engagingly written, is at the same time something of a cenotaph marking the loss of so many lives. The sheer capriciousness of the murdering takes the breath away. One can see why Proulx wanted to write such a book.

A quibble. In the ongoing rush of years, it's hard to keep track of who is older or younger, relatively speaking. The characters, barely described, seem to spit out children like tobacco juice. Proulx gives time frames in the table of contents, e.g. "1825-1840," and whenever a new section starts, but these seem insufficient. Another trick is sudden gray hair—whamo! Proulx doesn't want to bother with the space wasting time-is-passing transitions—the book is already 714 pages long—so she resorts to ages, babies and gray locks as a short cut. It doesn't always work. One feels jerked abruptly into the future. Well, one thinks, what happened in the intervening years? If I'm having these problems, as a close reader, certainly others must be too.

Don't get me wrong, I like the book a lot, and it's giving me pleasure. But there are aspects of the book I wish were otherwise. For example, the adoptive sons of Duquet, who now call themselves Duke—they are Jan, Bernard and Nicholas—are almost indistinguishable from one another. It's as if Proulx has set a challenge for herself here. Under description can be a virtue. The key is to associate the character in the reader's mind with some snappy attribute, e.g. physical, mental, moral, etc. all the while keeping the descriptive baggage as light as possible. But Proulx in my view sometimes goes too light, with the result that some characters, like Duquet's sons, lie flat on the page. As artists like to say about some piece of art or design work, it doesn't pop.

Yes, so the lead characters are so lightly limned that they're indistinguishable, but then perhaps that's the point. They are "woodsmen" after all. Another point, through page 245 at least, there are virtually no digressions. This dearth reminded me of the wonderfully digressive description of glove making in Philip Roth's *American Pastoral*, and of all the detail of hunting and processing the sperm whale in *Moby Dick*. There's nothing like that here though there are many opportunities to do so. We stay on the surface of the action; we are swept along by the inexorably ticking clock.

But there's only so much satisfaction in harping on what a book isn't. Let's emphasize what it is—a compact narrative of gripping forward propulsion. Its proportions are staunchly reinforced. There can be no straying if we are to finish our story in a timely manner. By that I do not mean to imply that it seems in anyway hurried. Not at all. It is masterfully self-assured. Every artwork has its limits; they are the flume that carries logs

down a mountain to a river. Ineffective art loses a sense of its own limits, or transgresses them without plan. Novels that do that, when not damned outright, are called sprawling. *Barkskins* is long but sprawl it doesn't. Proulx has an enviably complete control of her art. One can bitch about the novel's straight-jacketing format, but within those parameters one must admit there can be no complaint.

When a hunter-gatherer people are overrun by agricultural settlers, the former's way of life, so tied to the land, is sundered. Without the land, the Indians no longer has the central element grounding his culture. In short, that culture's underpinnings are stripped away in a few generations. Proulx makes a crucial point here when Kuntaw starts taking Boston men on excursions to fish and shoot. In the Indian way, learning the behaviors of game animals so they could be hunted without guns required a long apprenticeship. It was a rite of passage for males. Hunting was the Indian man's work and it was time-consuming. But the Bostonians with the guns see it as mere play, something done at leisure on vacation. The whites can't begin to see what they have despoiled and they don't understand why the Indian is so "lazy." Of course, he's not lazy, but he's been stripped of the natural setting in which his people have thrived for so long. Hunting isn't leisure, it's a way of life, now sadly gone.

Stripped of his legacy, the young Indian takes work where he can find it. In the early and mid-1800's, which is where we are now in the story, that means working in the lumber camps. Thus he contributes to the white man's destruction of his old habitat for meager pay while white fortunes are made. As for many of the Indian women, without the family which is so central to the Indian way of life, they become drunkards, prostitutes, troublemakers. The essence of the book is the destruction of the Indian culture and folkways, and its replacement by unsustainable white man ways.

Let me add that Proulx's command of detail is astonishing. It threads the story together. I have some idea of the research required for such a book, but what must the plan have looked like? There had to be some formula for it but I'll be damned if I can conceive of it. This, Hemingway said in his letters, is the mark of a truly exceptional book. You read it, and you reread it, but you never know quite how it's done. Herein lies the literary magic, which is greater than the sum of its mere parts.

This is too long. I'll have to condense it when I'm finished. My latest observation is that the unit of a lifetime, by which most novels are measured, is here a convention discarded by the author. Or shorter, think *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovitch* by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. That's what I'm used to as a reader of novels. The arc of the human life, at most a few human lives, is the chronological time span that carries one through a novel. But this book covers 4 centuries. Scores of characters are born, come to maturity, get married and die within a 100 pages. This comment speaks to the idea of hyper compressed narrative that I mentioned earlier.

Then again there comes through this idea of the ruthless inexorability of time, chewing up lives, moving on. The indifferent universe, yes. The children, especially, seem to drop like flies, such was the severity of infant mortality then. It's rather brutal the way they're all killed off in one way or another. No one spared the axe, if you will. In this respect they are like the trees murdered in their millions. And all this death is at the service of a "chronicle" of the mad impulse of deforestation in a creature, homo sapiens, who has absolutely no regard for the larger ecological significance of his actions. The attitude is laid out most succinctly in a dialogue between Armenius and Julius Breitsprecher on p. 478, in which Americans lamentable lack of sustainable forestry practices is bemoaned. The book is certainly a candidate for Great American Novel. I think an argument at least for inclusion in that esteemed category can be made. Now it occurs to me—belatedly—that even this book is made of trees, and there is no Forest Stewardship Council logo or equivalent on the colophon to show that it was sourced sustainably.

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## **Fran says**

Barkskins is a sweeping saga recounting the ecological costs of progress. Forests are destroyed and Native Americans are marginalized. Reminiscent of James Michener's "Centennial" the author reminds us that this land is only ours to borrow and pass down to succeeding generations.

Two illiterate woodsmen, Rene Sel and Charles Duquet arrive in "New France" in the 17th Century only to endure extraordinary hardship as indentured servants. The goal is to work for 3 years in exchange for a plot of land. Sel is forced to marry a Mi'kmaq Indian and becomes a barkskin or wood cutter. Duquet escapes, travels the world, and starts a logging empire.

Duquet researches the timber trade learning the value of white pine trees to the Europeans. Duke & Sons Logging Co. is established. The Dukes realize that the forest is not eternal but deforestation still occurs as new settlers set fires to clear land. Only a small amount of forest becomes usable lumber. Most forest land is burned or abandoned in the name of progress as settlers build log cabins and RR ties are cut to build a transcontinental railroad.

Rene Sel and his descendants carve out a meager existence. Hunting places are destroyed, and the salmon rivers are clogged with logs and sawdust. Medicinal healing plants are destroyed as the forests are pushed back. To survive, the Mi'kmaq must take jobs the white men don't want. They become wood choppers and loggers. They are considered to be disposable labor, good as long as they last.

Annie Proulx gives us a detailed, extensively researched look into deforestation and the destruction of the Native American way of life. Proulx reminds us that we must find ways to renew our forests. I highly recommend this tome.

Thank you to Net Galley for an advanced digital copy of Barkskins.

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