THE FRICTION BETWEEN PAST AND PRESENT: THE AMERICAN DREAM, LANDSCAPE AND IDENTITY IN THE NOVELS OF ANNIE PROULX

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By

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ABSTRACT

The novels and short stories of Pulitzer Prize winning author Annie Proulx are deeply impacted by the rural communities in which she lives and works. Her fiction is also considerably influenced by her research oriented academic training in history, specifically the *Annales* school, and subsequent twenty-year career as a journalist and non-fiction writer. Proulx’s concern with ecological issues, although always a persistent undercurrent throughout her writing, increasingly dominates her later work, most notably her fourth novel *That Old Ace in the Hole*, as well as two recent books of non-fiction, her memoir and a history of Wyoming’s Red Desert.

In separate chapters devoted to examining three of Proulx’s novels, *Postcards*, *Accordion Crimes* and *That Old Ace in the Hole*, this thesis provides a critical evaluation of the major themes common to the author’s work with specific attention to the interplay of social, economic and environmental forces upon the lives of individuals caught amid the chaotic forces of change. This analysis also examines how each novel’s primary protagonists reconcile the nature of success and their own identities within the idealized vision of the American Dream.
In *Postcards* the Blood family, rural New England dairy farmers, struggle to adapt as the rapidly modernizing post war economy disrupts their traditional way of life; in *Accordion Crimes*, a diverse group of immigrants are compelled to shed all vestiges of their cultural heritage amid enormous pressure to assimilate in order to become American; and finally *In That Old Ace in the Hole* rural residents in the Texas panhandle, threatened by the encroachment of large-scale corporate hog farming operations, fight to preserve their community and traditional way of life. In conclusion, this analysis demonstrates that, despite the perceived notion that the American Dream is attainable by all people regardless of national origin, social or economic status, Proulx’s novels reveal it to be a deeply flawed promise.
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INTRODUCTION

The rural communities in which Annie Proulx chooses to live and work significantly shape her worldview and define her distinctive approach to fiction.

Proulx’s fascination with the repercussions of social and economic change upon these places—Vermont, Newfoundland, Texas and Wyoming, among others—finds its expression through her detailed examination of a particular place. She remarks upon these influences in an interview:

Place and history are central to the fiction I write, both in the broad, general sense and in detailed particulars. Rural North America, regional cultures in critical economic flux, the images of an ideal and seemingly attainable world the characters cherish in their long views despite the rigid and difficult circumstances of their place and time. Those things interest me and are what I write about. I watch for the historical skew between what people have hoped for and who they thought they were and what befell them.

Proulx’s novels are critical commentaries upon the idealized vision many Americans harbor regarding their country’s history, a view that often fails to take into consideration its many limitations. The concept of the American Dream relies upon the idea that the freedoms guaranteed by the Declaration of Independence—that all men are created equal and possess certain inalienable rights including life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness—by its very nature presupposes the opportunity for prosperity and success, as well as upward mobility, as long as the individual is committed to hard work. In his 1931 book *The Epic of America*, James Truslow Adams describes the embodiment of this idea:

The American dream that has lured tens of millions of all nations to our shores in the past century has not been a dream of material plenty, though that has doubtlessly counted heavily. It has been a dream of being able to grow to fullest
development as a man and woman, unhampered by the barriers which had slowly been erected in the older civilizations, unrepressed by social orders which had developed for the benefit of classes rather than for the simple human being of any and every class.²

Proulx’s fiction examines the cost that this vision of the Dream exacts upon individuals who, despite their hard work and the desire to succeed, are betrayed by its promise, often due to the very attributes—social position, economic standing or national origin—over which it claims to prevail. She is often accused of a pessimistic outlook, one that overemphasizes bad luck or failure in her characters, since much of her fiction centers upon the difficult circumstances of rural, economically disadvantaged people or regions steeped in violence, bigotry and lack of opportunity. Thus she counters:

Rural life … for many, [is] suffused with a trapped feeling, a besetting sense of circumstances beyond individual control. Real rural life, enlivened with clear air, beautiful scenery, close-knit communities and cooperative neighbors, builds self-reliant, competent, fact-facing people; but it is also riddled with economic failure, natural disaster, poor health care, accidental death, few cultural opportunities, narrow worldviews, a feeling of being separated from the larger society. Literary critics who live and work in urban and suburban milieus characterized by middle-class gentility and progressive liberalism are rarely familiar with the raw exigencies and pressures of rural life.³

Despite its unsavory portrayal of this country and its people, however, Proulx’s fiction is not without beauty or empathy. Her irony and wry sense of humor injects an element of the absurd or the sanguine that helps to relieve the relentless depiction of difficult lives lived within harsh, often desperate circumstances. She manages to find something redeeming within the landscape itself or in the briefest of shared moments between characters such as the way she captures the sense of community among a
group of aging women as they reminisce with one another in *That Old Ace in the Hole*:

“They all agreed that hailstones were bigger in the olden days, men and the wind stronger, and the sweetness of life rarer but more intense.”

Proulx’s remarkable ability to capture the essence of her characters in such abbreviated terms and to express their humanity without condescension or sentimentality speaks to her talent and critical acclaim as an author.

One of Proulx’s “greatest pleasure[s]” as a writer includes the research process that underpins each of her novels and short stories. In addition to examining the climate, geography and history of a particular place, she also reads a variety of less conventional materials such as pamphlets, advertisements, manuals, dictionaries, local histories and newspapers in order to enrich the smallest of details within her stories. Proulx finds elements of dialogue and regional dialects in the conversations that she overhears in the bars, stores and other public places that she encounters on her travels throughout the country. These regional features augment her photographs and paintings of landscapes, visuals she draws upon to help establish the deep sense of place so dominant in her fiction.

Proulx’s graduate training in history, specifically the *Annales* school approach to historiography, deeply influences the perspective she takes in her fiction. The *Annales* school focuses upon the detailed examination of ordinary people’s everyday lives, often in neglected places, over an extended period of time and is less concerned with the impact of significant events and major political or military leaders upon history. This method, by its very nature, also takes into consideration the role of the
environment, incorporating aspects of climate, topography, geology and ecology, to determine how economic and social forces shape events. Often such investigations reveal that the defining qualities of a particular place—its natural resources, weather, soil conditions or access to water—have a far greater impact upon the lives of its inhabitants than their actions have upon it.

Prior to the publication of her first collection of short stories in 1988, Proulx’s twenty-year career as a journalist and non-fiction writer of how-to books emerged primarily from the need to make a living in rural areas where jobs were scarce. It has been noted that elements of the subjects in these early articles and books, frequently about hunting, fishing and rural life, reappear later in her novels and short stories such as the trapping techniques that Loyal Blood employs in Postcards or the details of grouse hunting found in Proulx’s short story “The Unclouded Day.”

This thesis focuses on three of Proulx’s novels, Postcards, Accordion Crimes and That Old Ace in the Hole, works chosen for their longer length and greater potential to demonstrate the interplay of larger social and economic events upon the environment, communities and individual lives of her characters. Each novel spans approximately fifty to one hundred years, allowing the narratives to encompass the lives of multiple generations while also setting them within the broader sweep of history and time. I purposely excluded Proulx’s second and most critically acclaimed novel, The Shipping News, because it takes place primarily in Canada, and I am specifically interested in how the notion of the American Dream of success, prosperity and social mobility plays out within the United States itself. I also excluded her four
collections of short stories, although many of them share similar themes with her novels, because of their abbreviated format and the lack narrative continuity among the stories.

This analysis will explore how Annie Proulx both incorporates and disrupts the concept of the American Dream throughout her fiction. By way of close examination of the novels *Postcards*, *Accordion Crimes* and *That Old Ace in the Hole*, as well through discussion of her work in critical and interpretive essays, this thesis will examine how Proulx confronts the perceived promise inherent to the American Dream to reveal its fundamental flaws.
CHAPTER ONE

WHO IS ANNIE PROULX?

Annie Proulx’s literary success was as much a surprise to her as to anyone. In her early 50s, she wrote not just one critically acclaimed, award-winning novel, but two—in short succession. Her first, *Postcards*, published in 1992, won the PEN/Faulkner Award (she was first woman to receive it) in 1993, the same year that her second, *The Shipping News*, was published. *The Shipping News* won four major prizes in quick succession: the *Chicago Tribune* Heartland Prize for Fiction, the *Irish Times* International Fiction Prize and the National Book Award in 1993, as well as the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1994. The novels and their awards together generated a deluge of attention, both critical and popular, that rapidly launched Proulx into literary stardom. *The Shipping News* became a bestseller, was quickly optioned by Hollywood and, in 2001, became a movie of the same name.

Following the publication of her first collection of short fiction *Heart Songs and Other Stories* in 1988 and under contract for a novel, Proulx began work on *Postcards*. An advance from her publisher and grants from the Vermont Council for the Arts and the Ucross Foundation in Wyoming, enabled her to concentrate exclusively on writing fiction for the next two years. As it turned out, all her subsequent books to date were written in Wyoming: *Postcards; The Shipping News* after numerous trips to Newfoundland with the help of a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts (1991) and a Guggenheim Fellowship (1992); and *Accordion Crimes* (1996) before she moved there permanently in 1995. Her three collections of
Wyoming stories Close Range (1999), Bad Dirt (2004) and Fine Just the Way It Is (2008) and fourth novel, That Old Ace in the Hole (2002), as well as her latest two books of non-fiction, Red Desert: The History of a Place (2008), a collection of essays and photographs, and Bird Cloud: A Memoir of Place (2011), about building her home, were all written in her nearly two decades of residence in Wyoming.

Proulx’s short stories have also garnered critical praise, most notably her story “Brokeback Mountain,” originally published in the New Yorker in 1997, which won both a National Magazine and an O. Henry award before it was collected in Close Range. The story is probably best known as the 2005 film adaptation of the same name by Larry McMurtry and Diana Ossana that itself won a number of awards, among them three Oscars, a BAFTA, and a Golden Globe. Her short story “The Half-Skinned Steer,” also from Close Range, has been anthologized in both The Best American Short Stories 1998, edited by Garrison Keillor (Proulx edited the 1997 edition) and The Best American Short Stories of the Century (1999) edited by John Updike.

One of the advantages of success for Proulx is the freedom it allows her both professionally and financially. The drawbacks, an increasingly hectic schedule including requests for speaking engagements, publicity tours, book signings, and invitations to judge short story contests, have left her little time to do what she loves most: write.

In terms of interruption of work it’s absolutely devastating—unless one can say no. At first I couldn’t say no and I did a lot of things that I shouldn’t have. …It is possible to make a living not through writing but through celebrity appearances. Some writers do it. But writing is utterly absorbing for me, and I resent anything that pulls me away from it.
In recent years she has increasingly removed herself from public attention, preferring to preserve her privacy. Although she continues to host friends and family as well as travel herself, Proulx remains a solitary person who spends much of her time doing research and writing.

One of the author’s pet peeves lies with the misinterpretation of her work, most notably “Brokeback Mountain.” In a 2009 Paris Review interview she spoke about the public response the movie version of the story engendered. Her irritation stemmed not from the negative reaction of people in Wyoming—something she had anticipated—but the fact that the story was so widely misunderstood.

I think it’s important to leave spaces in a story for readers to fill in from their own experience, but unfortunately the audience that ‘Brokeback’ reached most strongly have powerful fantasy lives. ...a lot of men have decided that the story should have had a happy ending. They can’t bear the way it ends—they just can’t stand it. So they rewrite the story, including all kinds of boyfriends and new lovers and so forth after Jack is killed. And it just drives me wild. They can’t understand that the story isn’t about Jack and Ennis. It’s about homophobia; it’s about a social situation; it’s about a place and a particular mindset and morality. They just don’t get it.3

Despite her frustration with “Brokeback,” the response was an anomaly. Proulx did not experience a similar reaction to the film version of The Shipping News, although she is aware that sometimes residents of the places in which she sets her stories get upset at her portrayal—often unflattering—of their area. Proulx’s fascination lies in getting under the surface of a place and revealing what happens on a more subtle level—a method that often involves airing the unmentionable: prejudice, abuse, ignorance and violence among them—for which she remains unapologetic.
Regarding the reaction of Wyoming people to “Brokeback,” she says, “the story was published a year before Matthew Shepard was killed. What can I say? You can deny that this kind of thing happens here, but sorry, it does.”

Although Proulx’s fiction frequently addresses social issues, especially those felt in rural communities when economic conditions shift, such as the post-war decline of Vermont’s small family-owned dairy farms in Postcards or the collapse of Newfoundland’s cod fishing industry in The Shipping News, her primary purpose is not to inspire social change. Instead, it is a much more subtle investigation of how people deal with change. How they evolve to face new circumstances and interact with one another within their communities, especially in rural areas that are at the mercy of decisions made elsewhere. Many of her characters live hard scrabble lives in bleak, unforgiving landscapes lacking in just about everything—education, opportunity, cash—and little chance of changing their circumstances. Yet they aren’t entirely without redemption as Proulx instills them with the same unsentimental stoicism she admires in many of the real people she encounters in the rural places where she chooses to live. Her interest is drawn to these ignored places because they possess “pockets of individuality,” a rich variety of culture, accents, ways of life that are increasingly rare in our urban and suburbanized culture.

At the same time, Proulx resists sentimentality and avoids “happy” endings to her stories, although she says she’s “not immune to the flashes of humor and intense moments of joy that illuminate our lives,” she is all too aware that she is “not and never [will] be in a world that [is] reasonable or just.” To the criticism that Postcards...
was “too dark” she decided to serve up the desired “happy” ending in *The Shipping News*—with an ironic twist. The novel closes on, as Proulx puts it, “a negative definition—here happiness is simply the absence of pain, and so, the illusion of pleasure.”

*Postcards* chronicles the slow decline of the Blood family’s rural Vermont diary farm over nearly fifty years, following each member as their lives diverge during the tumultuous changes of the post-war period. Described by *The New York Times* reviewer David Bradley as “a family running on empty,” the Blood’s cannot catch a break, suffering misfortune and tragedy time and again. Following the accidental murder of his fiancé, the novel’s protagonist Loyal Blood flees his home, condemning himself to a life of isolation and endless drifting as “the price of getting away.” As he crisscrosses the country, Loyal’s journey takes him from one job to another—miner, fossil hunter, trapper, and migrant worker—physical labor he chooses to punish his body and blunt his emotions.

The postcards of the novel’s title open each chapter and serve to tie the characters together as well as offer insights into their lives. The personal notes and advertisements that make up this correspondence also propel the story through time and place by foreshadowing events or tying up loose ends. *Postcards* is also a condemnation of the American Dream, exposing it as avaricious self-centered individualism that forsakes traditional ways of life, the environment and personal connection for profit, materialism and instant gratification.
Perhaps Proulx’s best-known novel, *The Shipping News* is the story of Quoyle, a large but meek underachiever married to an abusive and unfaithful wife. As his pathetic life limps along, Quoyle experiences disaster threefold: he loses his job as a “third-rate newspaperman,”¹⁰ his parents commit suicide upon learning they both have cancer and his wife dies in a car accident shortly after running away with her lover. No longer tied to their home in upstate New York, Quoyle and his two daughters agree to relocate with his aunt Agnis Hamm to the family’s abandoned ancestral home in Newfoundland in order to “start a new life in a fresh place.”¹¹

The uncompromising landscape of the remote Canadian province, which is host to a variety of unusual characters, ultimately provides Quoyle his means of redemption. He overcomes his emotional and personal failings to become a responsible and loving father to his daughters, gain professional respect as a columnist for the local newspaper, and reconnect with his familial past. Quoyle also finds love with the widow Wavey Prouse, mother to a retarded son, who has also experienced the fall out from lost love.

*The Shipping News* is Proulx’s most hopeful novel despite its lack of a “happy” ending because, as one biographer notes:

> [I]t champions the underdog and affirms the notion that even the most damaged and demoralized people have the innate potential to redeem themselves and reclaim their lives. Furthermore, the novel celebrates the virtues of genuine—as opposed to abusive—love, home, family (however constituted), and a rooted sense of community as the true underpinnings of a viable self.¹²

*Accordion Crimes* (1996), Proulx’s third novel, is ambitious in its breadth and depth. Spanning over a century from the 1890s to the 1990s, the story centers on the
immigrant experience in America as it evolves though time and place among a
dizzying array of characters spread among diverse ethnic groups. The accordion serves
as the thread that ties the individual stories and characters together by way of their
common desire to become American. Proulx considers it to be the best book she’s
written, enjoying its historical sweep as well as being drawn to the sacrifices involved
in assimilation: the abandonment of the culture, language, history and values of the old
country in order to adopt those of the new one. The novel has been criticized for its
vivid depictions of violence to which Proulx responds, “the point of writing in layers of
bitter deaths and misadventures that befall characters is to illustrate American violence,
which is real, deep and vast.”

*Close Range* (1999), Proulx’s first collection of short stories set entirely in
Wyoming, is a return to her favorite form of writing. She finds the demands of short
fiction “more interesting and more difficult to write than longer work” but enjoys the
limitations in that it pares down every element of the story: dialogue, character, details
as well as language. “Every single word counts heavily. The punctuation is critical.
Finding the right words and making honorable sentences takes time.” The collections
*Bad Dirt* and *Just Fine the Way It Is* return to the spare, unforgiving landscape of
Wyoming and the hard-bitten characters who people it.

*That Old Ace in the Hole* (2002) was originally conceived as a novel about a
windmill repairman in the Oklahoma and Texas panhandles. However, due to the
declining use of windmills in favor of diesel-run pumps and her inability to find
adequate information on their repair, she sidelined the idea in favor of exploring the
proliferation of large-scale hog farms moving into the area. The novel is peopled by a colorful cast of characters and delves into local lore combined with regional history and ecology.

Place is of great importance to Annie Proulx. Not only to where she chooses to live and write—in Wyoming—but to the creation of her fiction. The settings of her stories, often the landscape itself, play such a central role in her work that they are frequently considered by critics and readers as characters in themselves. To Proulx, the details matter and she puts a great deal of time into getting them right: everything from geography, climate, historical and current events, to people’s occupations and the food in their cupboards shape her novels and short stories. She is also keenly interested in change. “I try to define periods when regional society and culture, rooted in location and natural resources, start to experience the erosion of traditional ways, and attempt to master contemporary, large-world values. The characters in my novels pick their way through the chaos of change.”

Having lived nearly her entire life in rural places, aside from brief periods in Tokyo and New York City that she declared in an interview were her “lifetime’s worth of urban life,” the outdoors remains tremendously important to Proulx. Once an avid fisherperson and bird hunter, the details of which populate many of her stories, Proulx’s interests have shifted to cross county skiing and observing the variety of wildlife that inhabits her property.

Proulx’s choice to build a house in Wyoming is the long delayed desire to settle down: it is the place where she hopes to “end [her] days” after a lifetime of moving
around. Born in Connecticut in 1935, Edna Annie Proulx (pronounced “pru”) is the oldest of George Napolean Proulx and Lois “Nellie” Gill Proulx’s five daughters. Throughout Proulx’s childhood, her family moved frequently up and down the east coast, living in Vermont, North Carolina, Maine, Rhode Island, Connecticut and New York as her father worked his way up to an executive position in the textile industry.\textsuperscript{21}

She writes in her memoir that her father’s “obsessive desire to escape his French Canadian heritage and reinvent himself as a New England Yankee” fueled many of the moves—that and his determination to escape poverty and ascend to the middle class.\textsuperscript{22} Proulx’s mother descended from an old New England family established in the 1630s—a close clan who considered themselves superior due to their early arrival in the country. As a result, her mother’s family never accepted what they perceived as her father’s “inferior” immigrant roots, an attitude that caused tension among the extended families.\textsuperscript{23} The immediate family was close knit with a love of nature and the outdoors. Proulx credits her mother, an artist and naturalist, with teaching her to “see and appreciate the natural world, to develop an eye for detail, and to tell a story.”\textsuperscript{24}

Proulx attended Colby College in Maine as an undergraduate but dropped out to marry her first husband in 1955. They had one daughter, Sylvia Marion, who was raised by her father after he and Proulx divorced in 1960. She married again several years later and had two more children, sons Jonathan Edward and Gillis Crowell. Her second marriage also ended in divorce. Returning to school in 1963, Proulx received her B.A. cum laude in history from the University of Vermont in Burlington in 1969.
In the same year she married her third husband and had one more son, Morgan Hamilton, before that marriage too ended in divorce.\textsuperscript{25}

Proulx then went on to Sir George Williams University (now Concordia University) in Montreal for graduate school, earning her M.A. degree in history in 1973, with plans to pursue a doctorate in Renaissance economic history. She passed her oral exams in 1975 but chose not to complete her dissertation, deciding instead to move to Vermont’s Northeast Kingdom.\textsuperscript{26}

Due to the area’s isolation and lack of jobs, Proulx turned to writing articles about the outdoors, hunting, fishing, cooking and gardening as well as nonfiction how-to books in order to support herself and her children. It was while she was writing these articles that one of the magazines, concerned that their primarily male audience might object to reading articles about hunting and fishing written by a woman, suggested she use the name E.A. Proulx as her byline. Later, it evolved to E. Annie and finally by 1997 she got tired of writing the E and dropped it.\textsuperscript{27} From then on she has gone by just Annie Proulx.

While working as a freelance journalist, Proulx wrote short stories when she had the time and opportunity, publishing many of her early works of fiction in \textit{Gray’s Sporting Journal} as well as contributing nonfiction articles. She credits the “intense camaraderie and shared literary excitement among the writers whose fiction appeared in \textit{Gray’s}” as a motivator. “Without it I would probably never have tried to write fiction.”\textsuperscript{28} Never considering herself a writer, she “backed into” the job out of the need to make a living and in the process realized she could do it. “I’m basically a
reader,” she says, “which is the best way to learn to write.” Her first collection of stories, *Close Range*, came about when the editor of *Esquire*, Tom Jenks, who had previously published several of her stories in the magazine, left to join Scribner and encouraged Proulx to collect her short stories into a book.

Proulx derives great pleasure in the research behind her novels, spending a year or more collecting information, from photographs and drawings to notebooks filled with details about climate, geography, and names that she assembles from looking through records, archives and libraries, driving back and forth across the country as well as listening to the people around her talk. “Place” informs and shapes the creation of her characters, the circumstances of their lives and the story itself, an essential element that must be settled before all the other elements come together—and Proulx always writes the ending first. She is unsentimental when it comes to her fictional creations. “Characters are made to carry a particular story; that is their work…. I do not indulge characters or give them their heads and ‘see where they go….’ The character, who may seem to hold center stage in a novel, and in a limited sense does, actually exists to support the story.”

Regarding her plans for future projects, Proulx has said, “I came to writing late, and I’m racing against the clock to get everything down. My head is jammed with stories; they are pushing to get out.” Thus after finishing her fourth collection of short stories, *Just Fine the Way It Is* (2008), the last with Wyoming as their setting, she decided to stop writing fiction set in the state and focus on a new novel about “logging
and lumbering from Prince Edward Island to New Zealand” a project for which she’s spent over ten years collecting materials.\(^{33}\)

Two of her latest projects have included a return to non-fiction: the anthology *Red Desert: The History of a Place* (2008), a collection of essays and photographs with Wyoming’s Red Desert as their subject, and *Bird Cloud: A Memoir of Place* (2011) about Proulx’s search to find a place on which to build her ideal home. She was originally asked to write just the preface of the Red Desert book, but ended up writing ten of the twenty-seven essays. As she writes in its preface, the book’s greater depth came about when she was unable to find any books about the Red Desert and became intrigued by the prospect of writing something herself. She ended up enlisting over a dozen scholars to contribute essays about the history, geology, archaeology and anthropology of the place as it has evolved and changed, especially in the face of oil and gas exploration. Yet she remains unsentimental about its future. “It’s not going to be saved. It’s not possible to save it. This is Wyoming; it’s an energy state. The best we can hope for is that part of it not be given over to oil and gas extraction. We’ll see how that one goes,” she says. “I’m not holding my breath.”\(^{34}\)

*Bird Cloud*, Proulx’s memoir, is less about the person than her surroundings. It reveals little more than brief glimpses of its author: parts of her family history going back several centuries; a number of childhood experiences and interests; the geographic and natural history of Wyoming and the 640 acres encompassing her property, Bird Cloud, in particular. But what can be gleaned about Proulx as a person
is limited to the trials and tribulations surrounding the planning and construction of her home upon this challenging terrain.

It is a disappointment to read a memoir in which the author does practically everything in her power to not talk about herself. Each chapter varies in its ability to draw in and keep the reader’s attention. The genealogical section gives more insight into the formative experiences of Proulx’s early life, disclosing some very personal memories and observations about her upbringing than any previous interview or biography reveals to date. The sections detailing the area’s history are informative, giving insight and dimension to the lesser-known aspects of the state. The book is also shot through with entertaining anecdotes about Proulx’s troubles with Wyoming’s often extreme weather conditions, her neighbors and various animals—both wild and domestic.

Some of the most humorous parts are those describing the personalities and conflicts among the work crew, architect and engineer as they attempt to construct the house under challenging conditions alongside her wry commentary regarding various disasters that ensue throughout the process. These aspects of her memoir come close to the style of writing so familiar in her novels and short stories, but it is all too brief. The majority of the book reads as a long and tedious complaint about the frustration and expense that anyone who has built or renovated a house knows all too well. Reviews of the book struggle to find good things to say and many give up altogether: as one puts it, “‘a kind of wooden poem’ is how she comes to think of Bird Cloud. It might also describe her memoir.”
Although the *Red Desert* and *Bird Cloud* books highlight Proulx’s ecological interest in the Wyoming landscape, she treats it as she does her fictional creations—with skillfully wrought language and exhaustive research but unencumbered by sentimentality. On frequent drives back and forth across the country, the author came to realize that Wyoming was her “place to write,” noting the “long sightlines that called [her] to walk and explore. It loosened ideas, created images, even sentences and phrases.” Proulx is a writer because she loves “the shape of stories and sentences and the creation of different worlds on a page.” Despite the difficulty involved in shaping and reworking those sentences into the “indefinable substance” of a story, she sees it as “a joyous task. It’s hard, but it is joyous. Being raised rural, I think work is its own satisfaction. …[T]here’s a pleasure in constructing something that really works.”
CHAPTER TWO

POSTCARDS

Through the lives of the Blood family, Annie Proulx tells the story of a nation. Her novel, Postcards (1992), spans the latter half of the twentieth century and echoes the microcosm of her characters’ experiences within the tumultuous booms and busts the country underwent in the wake of World War II. The story reflects the varying aspects of post-war modernization, both its advantages and its unforeseen or unavoidable consequences, on families, communities and the landscape.

The Blood family is down on their luck, desperately poor and burdened by debt and the slow failing of their small Vermont dairy farm. Their troubles are due as much to the rapidly changing post war economy as to the departure of their oldest son, Loyal, the person upon whom the family has hung their hopes for a better life. Beginning in 1944, the novel tracks the lives of the Blood family for nearly fifty years. The story opens with Loyal Blood in the act of killing his girlfriend Billy. As he stands over her, light-headed and gasping for breath, he is desperate to flee. Billy’s death was unintentional, brought about in a moment of passion and rage, but Loyal is convinced no one will understand it as such. He carefully conceals her body in an abandoned fox den within a heavy stonewall behind the family farm. He stumbles home, still in shock, to collect his few possessions, some money, and his car, and to tell his family that he and Billy are “going out west, someplace out there, buy a farm, make a new start.”

The other members of the Blood family are each marred by one or another
unfortunate assemblage of traits, variously described as awkward, unattractive, ill mannered, and resentful of one another in myriad ways. Loyal seems to be the sole bright spot, the only capable, attractive and well-liked member of the family. As he departs, his brother Dub remarks, “Hey, you leave Loyal, you’re finishin’ off this farm” (11). Loyal represents the family’s salvation, its shot at achieving some degree of prosperity and a better life. When he leaves so abruptly, he dashes their hope.

Long before Loyal’s betrayal however, the origin of the Blood family troubles start with its patriarch Mink, whose name suggests his temperament and demeanor: volatile and vicious. Mink’s irrational and wasteful anger, “the Blood temper,” plagues the family as does his physical and verbal abuse. He is stubborn and small-minded, uninterested in the improvements and technical innovation Loyal is so keen to implement on the farm. The matriarch’s personality unfolds more slowly: Jewell is hardworking and shuttered, her resentment and her love constrained as she cares for her husband and children within the limited world of the house and the farm. As she hangs clothing out on the line her thoughts are revealing. She “glances at her ruined hands, then at the worn scene, the same fields falling away, the fences, the scalloped mountains to the east, the same thing she has seen since she hung out her first wash here thirty years earlier” (78).

Dub, the second son, “knew he was the fool of the family” (7). He and Mink dislike one another and hold very different ideas about life. Dub likes to “wander” as his family refers to it, going out, getting drunk and taking in new experiences such as listening to the Blues and eating Chinese food. He sees his father’s life as narrow—
Mink considers cattle auctions the height of entertainment—and his ideas monotonous.
Dub frequently disappears for months at a time, riding the rails, seeing all sorts of places and bringing home odd gifts to the family until one day he returns in rough shape, his left arm amputated. He stays home after that, but is able to provide little help, especially with the milking.

Dub is desperate to escape the farm, his family, and the town, but fails to convince Mink to sell the farm. He has plans and hopes: to marry his girlfriend Myrtle, take a piano tuning course and make a separate life for himself. He and Myrtle plot “a hundred escapes and futures and every one without a farm in it” (44), but they lack the money to do it. Mernelle, the youngest of the Blood children, with “teeth too big for [her] face … the family hands with crooked fingers and flat nails … [and] Mink’s diffident slouch” (6) also wants something more for herself than the limited life her parents lead.

With supplies tight due to war rationing, low milk prices, no electricity and barely enough kerosene to fill the lamps, Mink and Dub are unable to keep up with the milking and life on the farm gets considerably worse. Dub thinks wistfully about having a working radio, a milking machine and water piped to the cow stalls like the neighboring Phelps farm. His hope to attend piano tuning school is thwarted due to his lack of perfect pitch and single arm so he tries to get a job as a hired man at another farm but doesn’t know how to use the mechanized milking machines. He applies for every job he can find but gets pushed out by the returning servicemen. Myrtle leaves him but he doesn’t blame her. Nothing is going right. Mink is suffering from arthritis,
slowing down and wearing out. The family is never able to get ahead, instead slipping farther and farther behind. The farm is mortgaged to the hilt, and the cows have mad itch. If they sell it, even for a good price, they’d have nothing left after the debts are paid. At the end of his rope, Mink decides to shoot the cows, burn down the barn and try to collect the insurance money.

The plan works until the fire is re-investigated by an ambitious claims adjuster, and, after confessing, Mink and Dub are each sentenced to several years in prison for insurance fraud. Almost immediately, Mink hangs himself in his cell. Jewell has no choice but to divide up the farm and sell two parcels of land, keeping a small plot with the house to live on. Her neighbor teaches her to drive, which allows her to get a job at the local cannery and not, as she worries, become a burden to anyone. Mernelle drops out of school following Mink’s arrest, becoming quiet and secretive around Jewell. She writes to a young man who advertises for a wife in the newspaper, a 19-year old lumber grader seeking a fellow lonely soul. They agree to meet, he comes to pick her up, and they leave together to see how they get along. The reader can’t help but root for her and hope she finds the life she so desperately desires.

Although her writing has been criticized for its dark qualities, Proulx insists in an interview that “I am not immune to the flashes of humor and intense moments of joy that illuminate our lives.” This is true of Postcards, as the novel is liberally sprinkled with Proulx’s deadpan humor, ironic twists and absurd incidents. Plus not every event in the novel ends badly; in fact, some of the least likely characters ultimately flourish. Dub, Mernelle, and especially Jewell each manage to choose their
own path once they are free of the farm and Mink’s tyranny. Both Jewell and Dub, arguably the most vulnerable members of the family—she an aging widow and he a disabled ex-con—end up successful and content in their new lives.

Learning to drive, something Mink would never allow her to do, becomes Jewell’s liberation, her chance at personal and economic self-determination. A whole world opens up and reinvigorates her: “Continuity broke, when she drove, her stifled youth unfurled like ribbon pulled from a spool” (126). Behind the wheel, Jewell feels “dizzy with power for the first time in her adult life” (127). She loves the choices driving provides: what turns to take, where to stop, and wonders if men feel the same way. Previously, her life was limited to the house and the farm, the same routines day in and day out for thirty years, but now she has a job outside the house and her own income, a freedom she still delights in whenever she buys herself something. She wonders to herself if the pleasure she now feels is not from the driving but from finally being liberated from Mink’s oppressive anger and control that “had crushed her into a corner of life” (127).

Jewell sees the landscape changing, as everything around her does, and she embraces it. The town grows as new opportunities draw people to the area while many of the old residents go to work in factories. Jewell is on her own for the first time in her life but savors it, “alone in a solitude that tasted like a strange but sweet tropical fruit” (128). She moves out of the room she shared with Mink, choosing instead to sleep in the spare room. No longer required to cook big meals or wash piles of laundry, she eats in restaurants and sleeps late. She marvels at her new life.
Of the entire Blood family, Dub is ultimately the most successful. Despite his time in prison and his missing arm, he continues to try and make a better life for himself time and again. Once released from prison, Dub wants a fresh start so he heads down to Miami with one of his fellow inmates to run scams by mail. He gets his lucky break when one of his targets, despite being unconvinced by the scam but willing to take a risk to help someone trying to find a legitimate career for himself, offers him $500. Dub’s partner takes his cut of the money and skips town to continue the scam elsewhere while Dub seeks a “legitimate career” by enrolling in a real estate course. Inspired by his instructor’s motivational approach to success, he builds a career developing Florida real estate. Dub is also savvy enough to choose the right employee when he hires Pala Suarez, an ambitious and connected young Cuban woman, whom he later marries. Together they build a vast and profitable real estate empire.

Despite past misfortune, each of the remaining Bloods manage to overcome their circumstances to live better lives, especially Dub, a true rags-to-riches triumph and self-made man. His perseverance in the face of numerous setbacks and overwhelming odds make his story all the more astonishing. The Blood family fool makes good while Loyal, the son with the greatest potential for success, ends up a lonely wanderer.

Loyal’s fatal action derails his life and dogs him to his dying day, forcing him to abandon the one thing he truly loves: the farm. He mourns its loss more than that of his family or Billy. While on the road, he dreams of being lost and then finding his
way again on the farm:

A sense of his place, his home, flooded him … all the effluvia of his body were in that soil, part of that place. The work of his hands had changed the shape of the land … the smooth fields were echoes of himself in the landscape, for the laborer’s vision and strength persists after the labor is done…. The air was charged with his exhalations. The deer he’d shot, the trapped fox, had died because of his intentions and commissions, and their absence in the landscape was his alteration. And Billy. The last time with Billy replayed like a cracked film jerking through a projector. (76-77)

For him, the farm is emotionally and physically linked to Billy’s murder. In order for Loyal to escape her, he must also cut himself off from the land that is so much a part of him.

Without that deep connection, Loyal loses his sense of identity and purpose:

He didn’t think where he was going, just heading out. It seemed to him there didn’t have to be a direction, just a random traveling away from the farm. It wasn’t the idea that he could go anywhere, but the idea that he had to go somewhere, and it didn’t make any difference where. …West, that was the direction. That was where Billy thought there was something. (24)

Billy was the ambitious one who dreamed of something more than the struggle of farm life. She wanted a good job that wouldn’t break her back or muss her nails. She was intensely motivated to get out of small rural towns and back to the “civilization” of the larger cities she had briefly known as a girl. She wanted to dress up and go out on a Saturday night or sing in a club. Billy “had a strange glamour, like a magazine advertisement, strange and beautiful … dressed all the hell up … [and for] some reason she had picked him” (75-76). Loyal never wanted to leave the farm, never was interested in anything else, and yet, ironically, Billy was staying behind while he was on his way.
Billy’s death does more to Loyal than estrange him from the only life he has known, the only life he wants, it also affects his ability to relate to women. When Loyal goes out to a bar on New Year’s Eve with some of his fellow factory workers, he ends up next to an attractive woman. He becomes excited by her proximity and, as he touches her, he is suddenly unable to breathe and passes out. A doctor tells him his response is probably an allergic reaction, but Loyal knows what it is: women.

But Loyal knew it wasn’t anything he’d swallowed. It was the touching. Touching the woman. If it wasn’t Billy it wouldn’t be anyone else. The price for getting away. No wife, no family, no children, no human comfort in the quotidian unfolding of his life; for him, restless shifting from one town to another, the narrow fences of solitary thought, the pitiful easement of masturbation, lopsided ideas and soliloquies so easily transmuted to crazy mouthing. Up there beside the wall some kind of black mucky channel that ran from his genitals to his soul had begun to erode.

Because Loyal is unable to come to terms with his culpability in Billy’s death, he resolves to deal with it by folding deeper into his own solitude, holding all people—male and female—at arm’s length. He is so afraid of losing control over his volatile passion, his Blood temper, that he tries to smother all of his emotions by avoiding close relationships of any kind. But in so doing, Loyal not only robs himself of family, but of community as well. His constant wandering from state to state only perpetuates his lack of connectedness to place as much as to people.

His escape westward is not an act of renewal, a shedding of the past and a reinvention of self but rather an act of alienation. Upon meeting Loyal, a future employer remarks, “There’s something haywire about you. There’s something truly fucked up about you. I don’t know what it is, but I can smell it. You’re accident-
prone. You suffer losses. You’re tilted way off center. You run hard but don’t get anywhere. And I don’t think it’s easy for you” (172). Ben is the first person Loyal tells why he can’t be around women, that he has a kind of asthma when he gets interested in one because of “something that happened a long time ago. Something I did.”

Ben observes that Loyal punishes himself with work, but doesn’t “get anywhere except a different place” (172) and asks if he’s tried a “head doctor.” Loyal thinks he is talking crap. “No. Don’t believe in it. Life cripples us up in different ways but it gets everybody. It gets everybody is how I look at it. Gets you again and again and one day it wins.” To which Ben replies, “Oh, yes? And the way you see it you just have to keep getting up until you can’t get up? Question of how long you can last?” To which Loyal responds, “Something like that” (173).

Loyal does just that. He keeps getting up, persevering through injury and illness, good fortune and bad, injustice and satisfaction. Throughout his nearly five decades on the road, Loyal tries his hand at countless jobs: machinist, miner, uranium prospector, fossil hunter, observatory assistant, trapper, farmer and migrant worker. He crisscrosses the county from South Dakota to New Mexico and back, spends time in Wyoming, Montana, Idaho, and California.

Loyal buys some land in North Dakota, but doesn’t think of it as a farm and he just calls it “the place.” That’s what it was, a place. “In the back of his mind he had believed and not believed that the work of a farm would set him right. His trouble seemed to shift rather than repair” (189). He owns the place for a few years but loses it
and most of what he owns aside from his dog and his truck when a prairie fire wipes him out, and it turns out he doesn’t have insurance. He hits the road again, referring to the cowboy bars he frequents from Arizona to Montana as his “living rooms.” The sounds of these places are his “home sounds,” the other people in them his “relatives.” He lives in a handmade trailer pulled behind his truck that contains everything he needs along with his trapping equipment. He parks it in untraveled places and spends most of his time alone, but doesn’t go crazy from the solitude as some do.

Three narrative styles structure the novel: visual representations of postcards, “What I See” sections, and the titled chapters themselves. Individual postcards, complete with messages, addresses and stamps, open each chapter and help ground the novel in time since all but a few are dated with a month and year. They also serve to foreshadow events that take place within the chapter as well as to advance or tie up some of the novel’s various storylines. The short “What I See” sections, set off in bold type, are interspersed periodically throughout the novel and help to fill gaps within the overall narrative. They also allow the author to introduce a looser structure, as many of these sections have a dream-like or stream of consciousness quality. The individual chapters make up the bulk of the narrative, telling the story of the Blood family as well as providing details about friends, neighbors and extended family whose lives intersect with theirs.

*Postcards* is composed of many stories, some abbreviated and others intricate, that come together to make up the novel. Some of them are able to stand on their own as short stories but together give the novel greater depth and breadth. The overarching
narrative, the Blood family saga, is broken up into tightly encapsulated pieces with each chapter moving from one character’s perspective to another’s as time passes. Proulx creates this layering in order to “take the reader inside a house of windows, each opening onto different but related views—a kind of flip book of place, time, and manners.”

These multiple stories are small pieces of the larger human mosaic being played out across the country and through time. They represent many of the larger environmental, economic and social issues that face the nation as a whole, but Proulx manages to bring them down to human scale through her characters which allows the reader to get a sense of what these their lives are like, how their actions and choices affect them. The reader is brought to understand the character’s perspective, his or her background or circumstances, even if he or she doesn’t agree with it. Proulx notes:

I try to understand place and time through the events in a character’s life…. The person, the character, is one speck of life among many. The ending, then, should reflect for the reader some element of value or importance in the telling of this ending among the possible myriad of stories that might have been told.

Success and wealth have changed Dub, draining him of any empathy he may have had for his family, other people or the environment. His petty scam for quick cash turns on a stroke of luck that results in the seed money for a career in real estate. A career that turns out to be just another, albeit more “legitimate,” scam as Dub’s success stems in part from his lack of concern for the broader ramifications of his business dealings. He names his development company Eden Inc., an ironic sobriquet for an entity both the idea of selling Florida as a tropical paradise while at the same
time contributing to the destruction of its natural environment through heedless development.

In a “What I See” segment, Dub enjoys floating through a lovely primordial swampland with his wife and brother-in-law as they savor a temporary escape from the clamor and crime of Miami. At the same time, he is relishing his role (as well as his profit) in the secret plans to develop the area into the future site of Disney World. Dub and his wife Pala are voracious accumulators who have no qualms about sacrificing their personal and professional ethics in exchange for material comforts and financial gain. The couple deals entirely in exclusive properties for high-end clients (all with a hint of the illicit about them), since they “knew the importance of discreet arrangements and offerings…. They could talk to sheiks, seekers of political asylum, men who had business dealings in the south” (248). A letter from the IRS informing Dub of an impending audit implies that the legitimacy of some of his “dealings” is questionable.

Over the years Dub keeps in some contact with mother or sister but rarely sees them. He does not have any children of his own as Pala prefers to pursue her career and accumulate real estate, the properties standing in for children. Dub has already distanced himself from the daily aggravations of work and life, preferring instead to sit inside his manicured garden and enjoy gourmet food brought to him by servants. As the violence in Miami worsens during the 1980s, Dub and Pala decide to sell up and leave the area for Houston, preferring to retreat into the protective fold of their wealth and ignore the outside world.
At the end of the novel, a bum (whom we assume is Loyal) routing through the garbage is observed and disparaged by a woman to her companion as they dine in a nearby restaurant. She is unsympathetic to his plight because she assumes his circumstances represent his own personal failings rather than those emblematic of society at large. She dismisses him as a drunk, a failure resulting from his own shiftlessness. As a homeless bum, wracked by illness, he is a faceless, forgotten part of the society, the nightmare that no one wants to deal with. As he lies dying, alone and anonymous, he loses the last thing he possesses: his humanity.

Loyal’s situation is part choice, part circumstance, but he chooses to live only in the present, failing to renew or reinvent himself when he flees westward. He avoids personal relationships and establishing a permanent home, preferring to rely upon physical labor to occupy both his body and his mind. His deepest desire is to go home, to be reconciled with his family and reunited with the farm, but he chooses to continue a life of self-imposed exile. The reader is left to mourn Loyal’s wasted potential as well as try to comprehend his senseless act of violence. If, as Proulx remarks, his journey represents “an ironic and miniature version of the American frontier expansion westward,” then as a nation we can never entirely escape our past.
CHAPTER THREE

ACCORDION CRIMES

Annie Proulx takes on the ambitious task of defining the American identity in her third novel *Accordion Crimes* (1996). She accomplishes this by telling a host of different stories peopled by countless characters from diverse backgrounds rather than writing from the more limited narrative perspective of a single character or group, as the story of America cannot be wholly contained within such constraints. As a country almost entirely composed of immigrants with a history spanning centuries, the American experience is at its roots the immigrant experience. The only way to encompass the complexity of the American story is through a series of narrators, both newcomers and native-born, over a long enough span of time to comprise multiple generations and the effects of social and historical forces.

*Accordion Crimes* looks at the immigrant experience from the perspectives of characters within specific ethnic groups that, taken together, raise many larger questions regarding American identity and the nature of success. It strives to examine the often-ignored aspects of that experience in twentieth-century America with stories that encompass the bigotry and exploitation that was, and sometimes still is, a commonplace occurrence.

Commencing in the 1890s and spanning a century, each of the novel’s main storylines are self-contained glimpses into the lives of a particular group of immigrants in a distinct part of the country. They range from first-generation Italians, Irish and Poles who fled Europe seeking greater opportunities to long established residents such
as the descendents of former slaves, the Cajuns in Louisiana and the Tejanos (Texans of Mexican origin) in Texas, who migrated, were brought or otherwise absorbed into the nation. Proulx details the struggles many immigrants faced as they sought the American idea of boundless opportunity and success, abundant resources and the freedom from ideological or individual constraint. She is unsentimental in her portrayal of the wretched, sometimes brutal, circumstances that comprised the lives of many of these people such as the enduring cycle of racism that simmered among established groups and towards new arrivals in a seemingly ceaseless struggle for resources, power and identity.

Aside from shared thematic aspects, the novel’s eight chapters are self-contained stories linked together by a little green accordion, the only object to appear in every chapter. Adopting this narrative approach enabled Proulx to circumvent the demands of a historical novel that, as she remarks, “plod[s] onwards from 1890 to the present”¹ as well as eased the accordion’s transitions among each group of immigrants as it crisscrossed the country through urban and rural areas from raucous dancehalls to dusty pawnshops. The nine main storylines (chapter five has two distinct stories) are then split into “an increasing multiplicity of shorter stories of intersecting lives” that chronicle the history of several generations of a particular family, and within that, what Proulx refers to as “tiny flash-forwards, fiction bites.”² Parenthetical remarks also provide details—both humorous and horrible—to fill out or add a twist to a story or, more often than not, reveal a character’s demise in any number of unusual ways.

While the little green accordion provides the primary link among the stories, a
different illustrated accordion heads each chapter. Each varies in style and origin and competes with the little green accordion for the attention of the characters and reader alike. Sometimes the green instrument plays a primary role in a story, while other times it is relegated to a passing appearance. In a way, it becomes the main character of the novel and its existence parallels that of the other characters. It is created, suffers trials and travails, experiences periods of good fortune when it is prized and protected and periods of misadventure when it is abused and neglected before, inevitably, meeting its end. Although Proulx doesn’t write from the accordion’s perspective—as she sometimes does with animals in her other novels and short stories—the green accordion takes on a sympathetic quality similar to that engendered by a treasured possession.

**The Accordion Maker**

The novel begins in 1891 with the green accordion’s Italian creator, a man who remains nameless throughout the story. He is a poor but talented craftsman and musician who desires to make his fortune in “La Merica” as an instrument maker. He plans to make the journey with his family until his wife is struck by a mysterious paralysis that forces him to leave her and their daughters behind and continue on with only their eleven-year old son, Silvano. In a Sicilian train depot he is befriended by a “helpful” stranger who convinces him to book passage to New Orleans where the weather is warm, the jobs plentiful and the musicians in desperate need of instruments, rather than his original destination of New York—a place the stranger describes as
crowded, cold and overrun with instrument makers. With this decision, “the accordion maker veered onto a fatal course.”

The accordion maker and his son experience the grim reality that their dream of coming to America turns into once they arrive in New Orleans. Unable to speak “American” and without friends or family connections, they are at the mercy of the Italian bosses who control the local market for labor. They work long hours as longshoremen, unloading produce from South America and live in a filthy, overcrowded slum among a variety of immigrants. Proulx’s vivid language evokes the city’s hustle and bustle, its sights, smells and sounds that alternatively bombard the senses with awe and revulsion, delight and fear.

One night the accordion maker and his son get swept up and thrown in jail alongside other Italians who have been rounded up as suspects in the murder of a local police chief, an element of the story based on an actual historical event in New Orleans. They are retained because they cannot understand or answer the police questions and languish in jail for several months. Following the prisoners’ acquittal, a group of prominent businessmen, frustrated with the problems that they blame on the malcontented foreign workers, head up a vigilante group to mete out their own justice. In the ensuing mêlée the mob attacks and kills many of the prisoners, the accordion maker among them.

Silvano escapes, frightened and hopeless until anger overtakes him. “He despised his father for being dead. A hardness began to form in his chest, a red stone of hatred, not for Americans but for the foolish, weak Sicilian father who had failed to
learn American ways and let himself be killed” (59). Resolving to reject his past, a past that proves a very dangerous thing to hold onto, Silvano changes his name to an American one, Bob Joe, and finds work on a shrimp boat. In a parenthetical aside the reader learns his fate. He progresses from shrimping to the oil and gas fields of Texas and Oklahoma on down the “Golden Lane” to Venezuela, “where his game ended as he crouched in the jungle trying to relieve himself and a hostile Indian’s arrow pierced his throat” (30).

The green accordion ends up in the hands of Apollo, a black musician and the accordion maker’s first customer to commission a custom instrument, who is opportunistically murdered by his companion on a raft heading upriver. Along for the ride, the accordion ends up in a Midwestern general store, traded for a pittance, where it languishes until coming into the hands of a German farmer in the following chapter.

The accordion maker and his son are typical of the immigrants coming to America in the late nineteenth century, a period of time when thousands of Italians were leaving their country along with many other Europeans. They fall prey to swindlers and are taken advantage of due to their lack of English and local connections upon arrival in America. Still, they manage to find work and begin to get their bearings. The accordion maker receives a commission that is a step towards his dream when historical forces arise to thwart his progress. The accordion maker is a victim of circumstance, random violence arising from anti-Catholic and anti-immigrant feelings commonplace to the time. Silvano survives (until meeting his own bizarre end) by adapting—rejecting his Italian background and becoming American by necessity.
**The Goat Gland Operation**

This story brings together three Germans, Ludwig Messermacher, Hans Beutle and William Loats to one of the Iowa’s last patches of unoccupied riverside prairie land in 1893. The place was twice abandoned by previous residents due to hardship or tragedy but re-settled by the trio and named Prank. Despite their success and community involvement, “the farms showplaces of thrift and good management, although they played music for every dance, the Germans were disliked” (84). They are ostracized by the other immigrants, mostly Irish, settling in the town who resent the Germans’ prosperity, freethinking ways (as all are self-confessed agnostics) and Beutle’s staunch dedication to the traditions of his country of birth. Gossip flourishes, “juicy tales of German lubricity and incest… most routed back to Beutle and his insatiable [sexual] appetites” (84). These same appetites prove his eventual undoing, causing periods of marital strife as well as a drawn out death from gangrene due to the implantation of goat glands in his scrotum by a quack calling himself Dr. Squam in a botched attempt to reinvigorate his waning virility.

The Germans’ good fortune turns with the onset of World War I: “hatred came on slowly, like chill air rolling down a slope at sunset” (86). Anti-German sentiment is rampant as are newspaper articles critical of the “German hyphen Americans” loyalty to their adopted country. One questions whether “some Americans need hyphens in their names because only part of them have come over. But when the whole man has come over, heart and thought and all, the hyphen drops of its own weight out of his name” (86-87). Beutle becomes infuriated by this example of close-mindedness and

Then the town residents turn on the Germans and their families completely. Messermacher’s son Karl, a telegraph operator, is set upon by an angry local mob—a mob made up of people with whom he went to school—who accuse him of working as a German spy. Badly beaten, he barely escapes a lynching that mirrors a highly publicized attack on another German man in Illinois, and leaves town. The Germans receive threats, stones are thrown at them and Beutle’s fields are burned by the residents of Prank. A year after the war ends, his eleven-year-old twin granddaughters mysteriously disappear and return home disheveled and bloody, raped (the old men suspect) as revenge for German war atrocities.

Over the years, although the old Germans and their wives stay close to home, their children and grandchildren go into Prank, where “the malevolent, sniffing nose of public hatred was scenting new dangers—Reds, Jews, Catholics, other foreigners, not just Germans” (96). They go on to marry Americans, move away to cities like Minneapolis and Chicago, start their own businesses, buy cars and modernize the farms. Karl becomes a successful stockbroker in Chicago and changes his name, “for Charlie Sharp found life easier than had Karl Messermacher” (97). In 1924 his father follows his example and changes the family name to Sharp before moving them to Texas to grow cotton. He takes the little green accordion with him, a long ago gift
from Beutle. Beutle is furious and curses his old friend as a traitor for selling his land and abandoning their little community.

Beutle refuses to modernize his farm or install electricity and plumbing in the house, but in 1929 Karl/Charlie manages to get the old man into the stock market. Beutle, “dazzled by the proof, after thirty-odd years of experience to the contrary, that in America prosperity was for the taking after all, put a mortgage on the farm and, through Charlie, bought a hundred shares of [RCA] at 120 1/2” (98). The stock ratchets up, at one point valued at $50,000. His fortune secure, Beutle splurges on a battery-powered radio but soon begins to worry about fate. His old friends Messermacher and Loats have died that same year, both sixty-four, and the only thing he has done differently from them in life was engage in “good honest lust” (99). His increasing fears over a waning libido are calmed by a radio commercial for Dr. Squam.

He dies before the stock market crash and leaves his long-suffering son nearly penniless. Years later, it is Beutle’s grandson, a successful businessman, who goes in search of his family heritage in Prank. He buys up and reassembles parts of his grandfather’s old farm, “gave money to start the Prank Farm Pioneer Museum and …moved heaven and earth, hired private investigators, to find the old green accordion his grandfather played” (104). He meets his end by accidentally falling into a “seething hot spring” (104) in Yellowstone after slipping on a roll of film.

The story juxtaposes the prejudice among immigrant groups during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries with the idea that success and prosperity, those very American virtues, are begrudged rather than celebrated when one group’s fortune
flags as a different one’s rises. Another foundational aspect of American culture, the free expression of personal, religious and intellectual preferences, also comes under attack when differing ethnicities react to the lifestyles of their neighbors. The story shows that ideals such as success, prosperity and open-mindedness provide little protection against entrenched racism and resentment.

**Spider, Bite Me**

The green accordion makes its appearance once again in the possession of “that great accordion player who was also a busboy, Abelardo Relámpago Salazar” (107) who purchased it out of a barbershop window in 1924. Abelardo is a man who invents his past, making “the most common events into stories, minor incidents swelling with drama as his voice pumped them up” (109) which vexes the waiters he works with and embarrasses his children. His passionate personality extends into the *conjunto* music that he plays in the evenings and on weekends for enthusiastic and adoring crowds. He teaches each of his sons to play the accordion and they perform with him at parties and dances, but Abelardo refuses to let his only daughter even touch the instrument.

One morning he accidentally discovers that she is the most talented member of the family, a self-taught accordion virtuoso with a beautiful voice. Yet he rigidly refuses to acknowledge her talent, insisting that the accordion is a man’s instrument and berating her singing, telling her no musician will want to play with her because she is a woman. Shortly afterwards, a week before her *quinceañera*, the traditional Latino celebration of a girl’s fifteenth birthday that symbolizes her transition from childhood
into womanhood, she runs away. In her wake she leaves a knife plunged into the green accordion’s bellows as a symbol of frustration with her father’s chauvinism that blocks the realization of her own musical ambitions.

Abelardo, although “not a Relámpago by birth or heritage or blood but by informal adoption… became heir to all the Relámpagos had owned, for the eleven other children died early or disappeared” (112). His inheritance consists of a crumbling three room adobe house set next to a muddy river on a scrap of land. A house his wife and children live in until “somehow it was proved the property of a big cotton grower” (113). His wife, Adina, pushes their children find opportunities beyond farm labor or restaurant work typical to those who surround them. She gives them American names and warns them that if they speak Spanish they will end up in the fields, but if they speak American and get an education they will find good jobs. But education is not the solution, as the children encounter the same pervasive racism within the classroom as they do beyond its walls.

Abelardo’s youngest sons Baby and Chris continue playing with him as they get older, but following the Second World War their traditional conjunto music wanes in popularity. Abelardo despair that he will never be able to make a living as a musician. Baby tries his hand at growing chilies “to do some throwback thing, associated with a regard for the agricultural laborer” (140) but loses interest and gives it up. He is denied a job as a bus driver since the company only hires Anglos and drifts from job to job. He finally marries and has two children after which his musical abilities seem to increase prodigiously. Abelardo tells him he is good enough to be
famous but Baby does not want to Anglicize his name as many of the other Latino musicians have done in order to succeed. As they continue to play together, he grows to appreciate his father’s music, its inventiveness and his contribution to *conjunto* musical tradition.

The *conjunto* music that Abelardo and the other Tejanos (Texans of Mexican descent) play is less the inherited music of a former homeland than it is the creation of a uniquely American music—akin to jazz, the blues and rock and roll. * Conjunto, or musica nortena* (northern music as it is known outside of Texas) became “the most powerful musical symbol of working-class culture”⁴ that has remained popular for over a century beyond its creation, in part due to its commercialization via records and radio during the 1920s. A musical tradition that continues to evolve and adapt over time, *conjunto* is “endowed with [a] kind of symbolic power” allowing it to hold its own “against other types of music that appear from time to time to challenge its dominance among a vast audience of working-class people” and preserve Mexican and Mexican-American culture.⁵

Abelardo dies an agonizing death from multiple spider bites, failing to tell anyone in his family about the fourteen $1000 bills he has secreted in the bellows of the green accordion. The money came from a regular restaurant patron who asked him to deliver a package into a parked car once a month. The man stopped coming after just over a year, and when Abelardo asks around about what has become of the man, he is told not to inquire (implying the possible involvement of drugs and violent criminal gangs).
Following Abelardo’s funeral the fates of the remaining Relámpagos are taken up. Chris is arrested for drug trafficking, something that explains his inexplicable financial gains, and shot dead by his Anglo wife’s missionary father while in the courthouse just prior to his trial. Baby becomes a popular musician, cuts numerous records and tours the country. In 1955, following a performance in Chicago, his sister seeks him out. Félida/Betty is also a successful singer who plays the piano accordion, a virtuoso who can play practically anything with her ability to mimic groups of instruments. She becomes especially adept at performing the “ethnic stuff” as her husband refers to the music. She and Baby get into an argument because he is “too connected to her painful childhood, that enemy of her true self” (157). She has made a new life for herself and Baby’s presence dredges up old family resentments and unpleasant memories. He fills her in on the family nonetheless, but she doesn’t care, as she has considered them “all dead to her” (158) since she ran away.

Félida/Betty criticizes Baby for continuing to play the traditional *conjunto* music of their father and calls the button accordion the “instrument of unsuccessful men, of poor immigrants and failures” (159). To which he replies, “That’s my music. My music, that’s what they want to hear and what I play. Tex-Mex, tejano with more snap, more country in it, and the traditional *conjunto* our father played, that is my music. …There’s plenty of musicians try new stuff. But they come back to the old stuff too, they come to the well with their pitchers” (158). Following a musical showdown, with each sibling displaying his or her masterful accordion playing in an
attempt to out-do the other, Baby walks out on his sister in a rage and accidently forgets the green accordion in a taxi on the way to his hotel. He never sees it again.

Baby remains true to his family and cultural traditions and manages to become the self-supported successful musician his father dreamed of being. Félida/Betty is equally successful through her own hard work and dedication but chooses to reject her father’s music, as she was once rejected by him. For her, the *conjunto* music represents a stigma of class, gender and ethnicity she was only able to overcome by abandoning the culture and traditions that prevented her from realizing her own dream.

**Hitchhiking in a Wheelchair**

Dolor Gagnon’s frustrated struggle to piece together his lost family history is perhaps the novel’s most poignant story. Beginning at age two, he spends sixteen years of his life at Birdnest, an orphanage in Rattle Falls, Maine. The institution is housed in an ornate mansion built for a nineteenth-century railroad baron but seized by the town for back-taxes. Sometime in the late 1930s Dolor is left there with his twin sisters and brother, never realizing his siblings reside in a different part of the same building. At one point, he is briefly adopted but later returned to the orphanage. A timid and quiet child, he remains “fastened tightly into himself” (176) throughout his life.

Dolor spends his childhood waiting in vain to be reclaimed by his family as some of the other kids from the orphanage have been. In the fourth grade he is teased mercilessly about his name and to remedy the problem the director of the orphanage
decides to change it to “a regular boy’s name” asking him which he prefers, Frank or Donald. He chooses Frank, “and another fragment of self fell away like a flake of rust” (177). After graduating from high school Dolor/Frank, at last free to leave Birdnest, boards a bus to Portland (Maine) with the brown paper package the director hands to him upon his departure along with an envelope containing the orphanage’s standard letter of good character and twenty dollars. He opens the package during the journey to find “nothing but a wrecked accordion, the wood case charred on one corner, the bellows torn open. …He examined the instrument, the paper it was wrapped in, but there was no message, no note or photograph or letter, and his past remained unknown” (178-179). Unbeknownst to Dolor, the accordion is the last tangible item his father left behind in America. In a rage Charles Gagnon stuffed this ill-fated accordion into the woodstove before he left his wife and children in order to return to France, an event that left Dolor’s mother destitute and forced her to leave the youngest four of the six Gagnon children in the orphanage before leaving the area to find work.

Upon reaching Portland Dolor/Frank joins the army where he gives up the name Frank in favor of enlisting as Dolor Gagnon. For him, life in the army is similar to that at the orphanage where he “did what he was told and kept out of the way” (179). He attempts to get his father’s accordion repaired but since it is too far-gone he throws it out. In 1955, after a year and a half in the army, he is given a medical discharge, the result of the inexplicable semi-paralysis in his legs. Dolor finds the little green accordion in a Chicago taxi when he returns to the U.S. (where Baby left it) before heading back to Maine to seek out his lost family. His birth certificate points him to
the town of Random as his hometown, a place where no one remembers the Gagnon family.

Dolor tries to teach himself how to play the green accordion since the instrument represents a symbolic connection with his past. Wilf, a guy from his job at a logging operation, recognizes him from Birdnest and the two begin playing music together with Wilf on the fiddle and himself on the accordion. Over time, Dolor falls in love with Wilf’s wife Emma, partly because she speaks French but mostly because of her “dozens of relatives… the complex interconnections of blood extending up over the border and to the St. Lawrence south shore and down through New England and into the south, [to] Louisiana” (198). She tells him that his name, Douleur means pain in French, commenting on how “funny” it is that, despite being French, he can’t speak it. He is not amused thinking:

He knew all about how funny it was, his name taken from him, the language lost, his religion changed, the past unknown, the person he had been for the first two years of his life erased. He saw how a family held its members’ identities as a cup holds water. The person he had been as a child, a French-speaking boy with a mother and father, brothers and sisters, had been dissolved by the acid of circumstance and accident. He was still that person. He would return someday, like an insect cracking out of its winter case, he would wake speaking, thinking in French, a joyous man with many friends, his lost family would come back. (194)

As he and Wilf become better musicians and begin playing gigs, Dolor becomes increasingly drawn to the old French style accordion music, but cannot find any to listen to since it is no longer popular. He knows it exists: people tell him about it and request it when he plays at dances, occasionally he even catches snatches of it on the radio near the Canadian border. He is mostly frustrated, however, in his search.
One day he drives up to Montmagny in Québec and unexpectedly happens upon a gathering of Canada’s most talented and well-known accordionists. Looking around the room, he realizes that he is finally among his own people and the music that “belonged to him by blood inheritance” (207). For the first time, Dolor feels he is connected to something larger than himself. It is the happiest night of his life. As he returns to Maine the next day, to his life in Random, that happiness drains as he sinks into the “familiar depression… a chronic tearing misery that never completely retreated. …The journey to Québec had only compounded his sense of alienation and inadequacy” (207).

Several months later, following the death of Wilf (who was impaled by a tree in a tragic truck accident on an icy road) Dolor’s legs are suddenly paralyzed once more. The VA doctors cannot figure out what is wrong with him and, unable to work, he stays at home, occasionally wheeling himself out to the road to hitchhike into town. One day Emma shows up with an invitation to join her at the wedding of one of her relatives. While in attendance and unbeknownst to him, Dolor is introduced to his mother Delphine, the bride’s aunt. She knows who he is but says nothing.

Dolor meets Emma’s sister Mitzi who, sympathetic to his disability, offers to take him to the St. Jude shrine to pray for deliverance from his pains—a fitting tribute as St. Jude is the patron saint of lost causes. They travel for two hours across the state to reach their destination and Dolor gives an offering in the form of a tiny silver leg and makes a promise to give up playing the accordion if he is healed. As he sits there, “some unknown sensation—was it faith?—stirred in him and he thought, no, he was
sure he heard a holy voice” (217). Infused by sudden hope or faith, Dolor walks again. He and Mitzi get married, the wedding attended by Delphine who later calls him to her deathbed and accuses him of marrying his cousin but never reveals that she is his mother. Dolor does not fully understand her comment and fails to make the connection that he is somehow already related to the family he just married into.

Dolor seeks to connect with some one or some place, to be a part of something. When he does finally achieve this desire through his marriage to Mitzi and by way of that connection to her extended family, only the reader knows that he is also finally reconnecting to his own lost family. Believing that his happiness cannot last, he commits suicide, leaving a note that reads, “I am happy” (223). (He decapitates himself with a running chainsaw strapped to a tree.) It is left to the reader to wonder why. Perhaps, aware of the transience of happiness, it is his way of allowing himself to die a happy man before his paralysis or depression returns. Perhaps he simply cannot bear the possibility of losing his new family to chance or circumstance.

Before his death, Mitzi wants to leave Random, convinced that it is necessary for them to go elsewhere in order to be successful. To become true Americans, she feels they need to leave behind their French Canadian background and stop living between two cultures. She thinks changing their name from Gagnon to Gaines will help, but Dolor is against it as his name is the only thing he has left of his people. Mitzi takes for granted her family and her connectedness to a place and a cultural tradition while Dolor is torn having finally found his lost past. He resists abandoning it. Dolor resists change and seeks comfort in the past.
Don’t Let a Dead Man Shake You by the Hand

This chapter encompasses the stories of two distinct families linked by geography and a passing acquaintance with one another. It begins with the Cajun Malefoot clan whose male relations find work on the offshore oil rigs following the slow decline of traditional fishing and farming in the marshes, prairies, and wooded river areas of the Louisiana bayou where their family has lived for generations. Their story briefly intersects with that of a black family, via Octave, a musician and fisherman. The chapter then takes up the story of Octave’s family, telling its history from slavery up to the civil rights era through Octave’s own life and those of his mother and sister.

The little green accordion is purchased by Buddy Malefoot from Emma and her new husband Emil during their honeymoon. He overpays for the instrument out of sympathy for Emma’s recently widowed sister Mitzi. The Malefoots are the Cajun descendants of the Acadians, French colonists who settled in the Canadian Maritimes during the seventeenth century. Many of them, following expulsion from their homeland by the British during the French and Indian War (1754 to 1763), settled in Louisiana where their own distinct language and culture evolved and mixed with other ethnic groups in the region including West Indians, Spaniards, Germans, Anglos and native Indian populations. A combination of factors produced the distinct Cajun culture:

By the end of the nineteenth century, the term Cajun had become a socioeconomic descriptor for sometimes distinct groups. In addition to the descendants of Acadians, Cajuns came to include poorer Creoles in the prairie
and bayou areas, recent French immigrants, and downwardly mobile Anglo farmers in south Louisiana. Poverty became the bonding agent that brought them together despite their ethnic differences, and by the early twentieth century they had created a common, French-based culture that included contributions from other groups and came to dominate south Louisiana. South Louisiana was a racially segregated place, but common poverty between blacks and Cajuns led to cultural exchanges that influenced modern Cajun music and cuisine and Zydeco music among African Americans in the area.  

The Malefoots’ story continues to illuminate the Acadians’ deep connection to the land and country as a whole after centuries of intermixing with diverse groups in the area. It highlights their adaptability to chance and circumstance while still maintaining much of their French-based religion, language and culture. The Cajuns remain one of the few groups in the novel to resist complete capitulation into the American melting pot long enough for its distinct culture to become recognized and preserved for future generations.

Lamb, the daughter of an illiterate black sharecropper, is a single mother who works in the kitchen of a white college president’s house. She raises her three children, Octave, Ida and Marie-Pearl, on her own following the death of her boyfriend in a roadside accident. Octave, musician and odd-jobber, buys the little green accordion from Buddy following a gig they played together. He pays too much, $250 (twice what Buddy spent), because he really liked that it “sounded good and loud and could sound better, but most of all because it had looked him in the eye… [making] the instrument powerfully alive” (255). Octave takes it to Chicago with hopes of making it as a musician, playing zydeco, but “nobody danced, it was all blues, blues, blues, not the old delta blues either, not rock, not anything but electrified guitar urban blues, loud...
and fast and gritty” (263). He blames himself for the lack of jobs, but the city is no longer the boomtown haven for cheap labor it had once been following World War II.

Octave plays less and less, eventually pawning the green accordion to help support his “little [drug] habit.” Working construction, he experiences periods of success and lives what he considers the good life: some money, women, nice clothes, good liquor, drugs, parties and clubs. As he becomes more urbanized, playing zydeco embarrasses him. He dismisses it as “country nigger music” and learns to like the blues and jazz that he once despised. After getting laid off, Octave tries a number of different jobs—all short-lived—and discovers he has developed a temper he never had living in the bayou. His subsequent time in prison and eventual success is told at the end of the story in a parenthetical aside. He takes junior college business courses while in prison, reads up on investments, tries to figure out what the world needs and discovers the perfect business to pursue: sludge. Following his release in 1978, after being turned down repeatedly for loans, he robs a supermarket to set himself up in business back in Louisiana where he makes his fortune from dealing in other people’s waste.

Ida is an angry girl, tall, ugly and fat as her mother is always reminding her, a contrast to her attractive sister Marie-Pearl who men constantly pursue. Ida is a life-long collector of the stories and possessions of black women, the ordinary people whose lives typically go unnoticed. She joins the civil rights sit-ins throughout the south beginning in the 1960s but after a year is kicked out of the movement because “she turned every sit-in into a riot, fought and kicked and shouted, jumped up
slugging.” A group leader tells her, “you don’t understand passive resistance. You hurtin the cause. You got too much top anger sister. We got to channel rage, else it eat us up, destroy us too. You go home, figure out a different kind a way to help your brothers and sisters” (278). Ida returns to her mother’s house, packs up all her books and papers and then moves to Philadelphia. She remains at the same company for thirty years and spends her weekends driving throughout the south gathering the stories of the everyday black woman in an attempt to preserve their collective history and folkways.

Ida is aware that her collections do not help anyone or offer solutions to the crime, violence and deep injustice that black people face in a wealthy nation that leaves behind the poor and insulates itself against their suffering. She has lost touch with her own family, an irony of which she is all too aware. “Wasn’t that the old evil thing, families torn up like scrap paper, the home place left and lost forever” (279), giving voice to the plight of the novel’s many faceless and forgotten characters swept up by time and circumstance.

**Hit Hard and Gone Down**

The role of the little green accordion in the novel begins to dwindle with this story, only appearing late in the chapter and no longer the primary music-making instrument. In 1950, Chicago’s South Side is still a robust Polish community where the sixty-six year old Mrs. Przybysz retires in the house she “purchased herself with her wages as a cigar maker” (283) after her husband abandoned the family. She
stubbornly remains in her home as the neighborhood slowly deteriorates, the original immigrant community disperses and black families begin to move in following integration and the city’s creation of several high-rise public housing projects nearby. The neighborhood continues to decline through to the 1970s but Mrs. Przybysz stays on.

Hieronim, her oldest son, and his family live with her. Grandson Joey is fascinated by the family history and her stories of the old country. Mrs. Przybysz is full of pride for the Polish people and their contributions to America and despairs at how they have been displaced and disrespected, their traditions misinterpreted by the Americans who indiscriminately lump different nationalities together, referring to them all as “hunkies.” The Americans assume that all these immigrants are dirty, illiterate peasants, the men drunks and the women without morals, no better than animals. She tells Joey, “it is not easy to remain yourself, to keep your dignity and place, in a foreign country. He [her husband] could not talk American and later he was too proud to learn it” (293). She respects her husband’s memory despite the fact that he abandoned her and their children. Hieronim changes the family surname to Newcomer and his own to Harry. One day in 1967, following a week of heavy rain, he plugs in his worm probe prior to a day of fishing and electrocutes himself. The funeral is held the same weekend that Joey marries his fiancée Sonia.

An educated man unable to stand work as a meatpacker, Mrs. Przybysz’s husband becomes a travelling cigar roller who sends money home to his family until one day he stops, never to return. Left with five kids to care for, Mrs. Przybysz takes
in boarders and eventually gets herself a job at a cigar company, working her way up from cleaning to the more prestigious work of rolling cigars. She misses the job once she retires because of the camaraderie among her fellow workers, a time she refers to as her happiest years.

Joey, his wife Sonia and their two kids Florry and Artie hardly ever come to visit. Joey’s mother Dorothy complains that it is because of the declining neighborhood while Mrs. Przybysz blames Dorothy’s terrible cooking, “the deluded woman thought she was a notable cook because she had taken part in something called The Grand American National Bake-Off, had won a set of aluminum pots with her imitation T-bone steak made out of hamburger and Wheaties, a carved carrot for the bone” (287). Mrs. Przybysz despises the American supermarkets full of packaged and canned foods and the cookbooks “by made up women with American names” (287) like Betty Crocker and the tasteless recipes they recommend. She despairs at the loss of the good local Polish stores that provided traditional foods. An excellent cook before age got the better of her, she once made her own sausage, kept a backyard garden and hunted for wild mushrooms in nearby parks.

As a young couple, Sonia and Joey become touring accordion players, travelling the country to play at the ethnic festivals that are experiencing a nationwide revival during the 1960s and 1970s. On their way to a contest in Chicago, their fancy matched accordions get stolen out of the car en route to the gig. Both are argumentative as they are low on funds, barely scraping enough money together for gas, and the kids are sick. In Chicago Joey books the family into a cheap “hot-bed
motel” and leaves to find replacement accordions before the evening’s performance. They leave the kids with the hotel’s night manager while they go to the contest where Joey and Sonia win the top prize of $1,500 after disaster strikes down their closest competition. Elated, Joey returns the borrowed pawnshop accordions and picks up the little green one as a gift for his wife. A few years later, the family moves to Texas to raise catfish before they happen into the business of supplying ladybugs for the organic market and make a modest fortune. Sonia dies of throat cancer in 1985, Joey remarries, Florry plays the accordion professionally and Artie emigrates to Australia. The little green accordion has been previously sold at their “Moving to Texas” yard sale.

This chapter portrays the American melting pot as a homogenization of richly diverse cultures into a bland artifice. “Ethnic” becomes a mix of traditions from various European origins combined by second and third generation Americans who alter and adapt it to suit their tastes and what they imagine is authentic. The festivals at which Joey and Sonia perform evolve from displays of ethnic solidarity in the 1960s into venues for popular entertainment in the 1970s and onwards, the audience no longer interested in “cultural esoterica” (i.e. the real thing) but in having a good time. Although Joey and his wife play accordion music, they perform few traditional songs in Polish, opting instead for generic polkas, standards or covers of popular music. They are told by a festival organizer not to play the “old-time stuff,” the mournful folk music, but a “good fast happy polka. Fast and happy. Show them what it means to be ethnic” (327).
The Colors of Horses

The re-emergence of a dead and buried horse, Old Egypt, in this chapter foreshadows the many things that lie buried throughout the story. It is the summer of 1980, and Josephine is driving cross-country from New York to her parents ranch in Montana with her fiancé Vergil. They pick up the green accordion at a yard sale as they pass through Chicago. Both have been previously married, she to a man who, when visiting her parents for the first time, shot her father’s prized Appaloosa horse. Her father then shot him, after which their marriage soon deteriorated. Vergil is divorced from a nurse he met while serving during the Vietnam War, a union full of “crazy drinking, drugs, fighting and punch-ups” (343) that Josephine assumes he is “over.” The marriage perhaps, but not his violent streak. As they drive, Jo tells Vergil stories about the family’s ranch hand Fay McGettigan, praising his skill with horses and his kindness towards her when she was a kid.

Josephine’s parents, Bette and Kenneth Switch, are eastern transplants to Montana. Their house is decorated in the “western style.” But neither the furnishings nor the people are entirely authentic, presenting the surface appearance of the real thing, but lacking the substance of the genuine article. Jo refers to Fay as “the real thing” implying that her parents are not, “that they were imposters and the Appaloosa ranch a fraud and that everything would collapse as it had twice before if it were not for Fay who held it all together through the strength of his hat” (353).

Fay grew up in a rough and tumble life, son of an Irish mail-order bride and a father who was “hard-willed, sought relief in drink, burned impatient with men,
women, children and animals; barely literate, he got seven children on Margie [Fay’s mother] and one day in 1919 walked out of the house, mounted his good horse and rode into the sunset, leaving her with the foreclosure, a sucking baby, and a hundred and twelve gaunt mortgaged cows” (382). The story details Fay’s family history back to his grandfather’s arrival in the U.S. from Ireland in 1863, through his army service during the Civil War and then the Indian Wars that brought him to the west before cheating death and deserting to rustle cattle in Texas. He gets caught red-handed by a rancher “with a sense of humor” and dies one of Proulx’s more creatively grotesque deaths, his elbows and knees shot out, his body sewn up inside a cowhide and left in the sun for the coyotes and buzzards to finish off.

Fay recognizes himself as homely, uneducated and graceless, a man who easily falls in love with fine-looking women beyond his reach. He is a life-long ranch hand and an aging bachelor (Jo guesses around 70) with few possessions and no place of his own. An employee who knows more about horses and ranching than his boss, but profits very little from it. Kenneth does acknowledge his expertise and seems to genuinely appreciate him, turning a blind eye to Fay’s day-long drinking binges whenever he goes into town to pick up supplies.

Bette and Kenneth arrive in Montana from Boston in 1953, thrilled by the opportunity to move west. They buy a run down ranch with money that Bette assumes is an inheritance but, as the reader discovers in an aside, that Kenneth actually embezzled while working at a credit union. They experience years of boom and bust in the cattle business before getting into breeding Appaloosas, a choice made due to a
resurging interest in restoring the breed. Kenneth happens upon his prize stud, Umbrella Point, purely by accident while picking up some horses for an auction. Fay recognizes a good thing and advises him to purchase the horse on the spot.

Kenneth’s Appaloosa breeding operation is a success due to Umbrella Point who turns out to be a prize-winning horse whose stud fees become a mainstay of the family’s income. Kenneth talks endlessly to anyone who will listen about horse breeding and the virtues of Umbrella Point who was accidentally shot dead by Jo’s first husband, a tragedy that Kenneth mourns as much for the loss of potential stud fees as for the horse itself.

Jo and Vergil’s relationship is strangely dispassionate, almost as if they can barely stand one another’s company. They seem to have no love or sympathy for one another, and their tedious conversations mirror the artifice that Jo condemns in her parents’ relationship. The only passion she and Vergil express is tinged with sexual violence during a tryst on their last day together when they both realize their relationship is over. It is a relief when Vergil departs although Proulx lets the reader in on his fate in a parenthetical aside. A few years later he goes to prison for “bilking the credulous residents of a blue-chip retirement home through his fraudulent investment company promising large returns on stocks selected in ‘environmentally sound corporations’” (375). Jo stays in Montana and marries a rancher. Fay is given the green accordion by Jo and eventually passes it on to a Basque sheepherder (a man who dies from a snakebite while pasturing his animals alone in the hills). Along with the
rest of the shepherd’s belongings, the little green accordion once again ends up consigned to a pawnshop.

Perhaps the weakest of the novel’s stories, “The Color of Horses” has a grotesque quality similar to that found in Proulx’s short story collections, especially those concerning the west. Aside from Fay, all the other characters are unremarkable. Vergil proves himself to be a crass and violent bully while Jo seems unwilling to engage with the other characters in any but the most superficial of ways. Kenneth is so bland and droning that the reader almost forgets he is there and his wife Bette barely makes an appearance. Fay has no illusions about himself as he appears to be content while those around him, especially Jo, choose to see him as an ideal of their own making. These other characters serve as foils to Fay’s “authentic” cowboy persona. He is the real deal in that he represents a vastly more realistic version of a cowboy rather than a romanticized version of one. His life also suggests how all those lone cowboys populating countless novels and movies might end up after they ride off into the sunset often enough to become old men.

**Back Home with Reattached Arms**

The final chapter opens with Ivar Gasmann, the grandson of Norwegian immigrants, in circumstances that seem to suggest he is homeless. Described as a “familiar figure in Old Glory, Minnesota, in the late 1970s” (391), he pushes a shopping cart down the street as he picks up discarded cans and other refuse. Ivar is a purveyor of junk, and although the small community considers him “slow in mind and
dirty in person” (391), he provides a useful service by removing their unwanted things. He repairs and repurposes these items and sells them to tourists seeking ephemera from the past, eventually building his collecting into a multi-million dollar enterprise dealing in antiques and flea market finds.

Ivar will also clear out the occasional house for someone who doesn’t want to deal with the life’s accumulations of a dead relative. He buys the contents of a recently deceased local funeral director’s home from his out-of-town daughter who wants to be rid of his stuff as much as she desires to be out of Old Glory itself. Ivar discovers many treasures, original art, antiques and cash secreted away behind wallpaper and taped under drawers. He ends up making $111,999 profit from his one dollar investment, which becomes the foundation of his fortune. This story connects back to a previous chapter with a small detail concerning a lost Remington painting of a cavalry charge. In “Don’t Let a Dead Man Shake You by the Hand,” one of the old oil guys working on the same rig as Buddy Malefoot tells him about a $25,000 reward offered to anyone who finds the painting. The guy remembers seeing it someplace during his travels, just can’t to remember where. Years later, Ivar ends up recovering it.

The story is titled for the tragedy suffered by Vela, the daughter of Ivar’s loud and self-satisfied brother Conrad. In a freak accident involving a sheet of recycled metal that flies off the back of a passing truck, Vela gets her arms sheered off above the elbow while outside her home. Although reattached, her arms hang uselessly. For a teenager in the late 1980s, she possesses an unusual love for old-time music and
accordions, a preference her father finds bizarre. The little green accordion is picked up by a neighbor from the junk table at one of Ivar’s chain of antique stores, Out West Antiques. Despite the fact that she cannot play it, he gives it to Vela along with a garbage bag full of old time accordion music cassette tapes he thinks she might enjoy. Both are rejected outright by the embarrassed Vela, whose rap music loving friends are visiting, and she tells her mother to throw them away.

The green accordion is picked out of the landfill by a garbage man, Whitey Kunky, who happens to be the son of the truck driver responsible for Vela’s accident. The accordion ends up on a Mississippi-bound semi transporting garbage (perhaps to Octave’s facility). Thrown from the window by Whitey as the truck speeds down the highway, it is picked up by a group of poor black kids playing beside the road. They find one of Abelardo’s $1000 bills inside and, thinking it is a dollar, go into a nearby convenience store to buy themselves sodas. The shop clerk, who considers keeping the money herself, thinks the better of it and decides to give the “change” to their mother. The accordion remains in the road and gets run over by another passing semi, $1000 bills flying through the air. It is the end of the accordion.

More than simply a chronicle of injustice and violence, *Accordion Crimes* seeks to explore the intricacies of identity. Whether the characters are escaping, seeking, or recreating themselves and their circumstances, the novel raises the question of what defines a person as American. If, aside from the Native American populations, everyone else arrived from a different place at some point in their near or distant
history, what then are the dynamics that allow one group to dominate another—to succeed where others fail?

The nature of success is also challenged: hard work is not necessarily rewarded nor are the wealthy or innocent immune to unfortunate twists of fate. As is often the case in life, a character’s destiny is a combination of factors—many completely arbitrary, others the result of his or her particular circumstances or geography. Proulx creates situations that beg these questions: is the petty criminal who builds a legitimate and profitable enterprise more or less successful than the bumbling innocent who gets a lucky break or the hard working menial laborer who slaves in the fields to provide his family with the possibility of a better life? Proulx’s stories address these matters with her signature dose of irony and unexpected, often bizarre, circumstances, but they do not attempt to provide solutions to their ambiguities, to moralize or to argue an agenda.

As with her previous novels, Proulx addresses a host of social issues throughout *Accordion Crimes*. She is particularly critical of the portrayal of the American melting pot as a national ideal. Instead, the novel portrays it as a means of cultural homogenization that has left this country poorer for its loss of ethnic vibrancy and diversity rather than richer. As she comments in an interview with the *Missouri Review*:

> A major aim in writing *Accordion Crimes* was to show the powerful government and social pressures on foreigners that forced them into the so-called melting pot. The social pressures were enormous, and the cost of assimilation was staggering for the immigrants—their lives were often untimely truncated. They did not belong, they were ridiculed outsiders, they worked at the most miserable and dangerous jobs. They gave up personal identification and respect. The successes went to their children, the first generation of
American-born. These American children commonly rejected the values, clothing, language, religion, food, music of their parents in their zeal to be 100 percent American.\textsuperscript{9}

The interplay of these social and historical forces with the individual’s struggle for identity, the “cost of coming from one culture to another” intrigued Proulx to explore the immigrant’s “rite of passage”\textsuperscript{10} as they redefined themselves as Americans. The accordion represents the immigrant and the crimes of the novel’s title infer the many injustices perpetrated against them. Proulx remarks, “I don’t think any other instrument could have been used as effectively as a character. This is the only country in the world where the accordion is despised. Where ethnic jokes are made about a musical instrument.”\textsuperscript{11}

In the final story, the destruction of the accordion in a shower of cash makes clear that the price of American prosperity is steep and fickle. Its end represents a deep disillusionment with the American dream, one that too often is built by the labor of scores of nameless, faceless people who never get the opportunity to share in its bounty.
CHAPTER FOUR

THAT OLD ACE IN THE HOLE

It has often been noted that the landscape in Annie Proulx’s fiction is so dominant a feature as to become virtually a character in itself. *That Old Ace in the Hole* (2002) explores not only how people impact the geography of a place, but how it in turn shapes them. The novel tells the story of the Texas panhandle through precise technical details relating to farm equipment, methods of irrigation, windmills and the like—a signature quality of Proulx’s work to which three pages of acknowledgments prefacing the book attest—in combination with the cultural and historical context provided by a cast of quirky characters. From its last days as open grassland, home to wild buffalo and nomadic Native Americans, through its first settlement by nineteenth century homesteaders seeking land and opportunity, the landscape evolves. It morphs from free-range cattle ranching into farming that brings about the fencing in of the open prairie and the extensive tapping of the Ogallala aquifer. Following the boom and bust days of oil and gas exploitation the panhandle presently winds up as a preferred location for large scale agribusiness: hog farms, cattle feed lots and mono-culture farming.

The novel also brings to the reader’s attention that, with increasing urbanization, many Americans have become divorced from the natural world and possess little, if any, connection to the landscape beyond the boundaries of their cities or suburbs. The vast expanses of the country far from urban centers are frequently marginalized, completely forgotten or simply dismissed as lacking in interest or appeal.
But Annie Proulx is fascinated by these overlooked places, often sparsely populated rural areas, and gives them a voice through her stories. In *That Old Ace in the Hole* she addresses this urban alienation through her protagonist Bob Dollar, a young man who seeks direction and a sense of purpose in his heretofore bland life by accepting a job that takes him to the Texas panhandle.

Bob Dollar yearns to belong. He is an orphan of sorts, abandoned on an uncle’s doorstep at the age of eight by parents who abscond to Alaska with the promise to collect him at a later date. They are never heard from again. Bob is a quiet and unremarkable youth. His uncle Tam, intelligent and dedicated, instills in him a respect for personal responsibility and a commitment to promises made, traits clearly lacking in his own parents. He lives with Tam and Tam’s business partner Wayne “Bromo” Redpoll in an apartment situated above their junk shop in Denver, the trio barely eking out a living. Although Bob is something of a social outcast due to his obviously secondhand clothing and austere living conditions, his home-life instills in him tolerance, a love of reading and a talent for crossword puzzles.

Lack of funds prevents Bob from attending any institution beyond junior college despite his “large vocabulary, good reading habits and exemplary grades,”¹ so he works for minimum wage at a light bulb factory for several years before he is fired for failing to return the widowed owner’s advances. Relieved of his tedious job, Bob’s latent ambition is once again spurred, motivating him to “aim at a high mark on a distant wall. If time had to pass, let it pass with meaning. He wanted direction and reward” (5). Bob commences to search for a more rewarding career.
He takes a job with Global Pork Rind, a multinational hog farm operator. As a site scout, Bob’s work involves finding suitable properties on which to establish new facilities in the panhandle region of Texas and Oklahoma. His boss, Ribeye Cluke, advises him to target low population rural areas and older residents who “just want to live quiet and not get involved in a cause or fight city hall. That’s the kind of population we want” (10). He warns Bob that people in the area are hostile towards hog farms, having, in his opinion, been “brainwashed by the Sierra Club” (6) into thinking they are bad. He suggests Bob create a cover story to explain his presence in the area.

Bob sets off in his company car to get to know the area and befriend the locals. His interactions with the residents of Woolybucket, Texas, especially the long conversations with his landlady and local historian LaVon Fronk, prove the inhabitants to be sharp and fiercely independent. When pressed, Bob tells them he is scouting locations for a luxury housing development, but despite several months of listening in at cafes, hanging out at the grain elevator and attending local events including the Round Robin Baptist Bible Quilt Circle, he is unable to land a property deal; the locals remain wary and unwilling to sell. Unwittingly Bob begins to fall for the landscape along with the colorful panhandle personalities. He is absorbed by the residents’ tales about the area, its history and geography mixed in among family stories and idle gossip.

Ribeye calls Bob back to Denver and threatens to fire him unless he immediately finds two properties for Global Pork Rind to buy. Emboldened, Bob tries
to explain to him why the local residents are against the hog farms, mainly due to the
terrible smell caused by the waste lagoons and the poor treatment of the animals, but

Ribeye cuts him off and proceeds to reprimand him instead:

We don’t think of hogs as “animals,” Bob, not in the same way as cats and dogs and
deer and squirrels. We say “pork units.” What they are, Bob, is “pork units”—a crop, like corn or beans. There followed a long lecture on free enterprise and the American Way, the importance of economic opportunity and the value of entrepreneurship to the general good and the well-being of America.” (302)

Ribeye justifies the use of the panhandle land for large-scale hog farms, despite resistance from local residents, as the pursuit of utility—claiming that the hog farms serve “the greater good” and will prevail against opposition.

Bob returns to Woolybucket in a last desperate attempt to find a seller and close a deal. Upon his arrival at his rented bunkhouse, LaVon congratulates him for not getting fired and welcomes him home. Bob “feels a stir at her use of the word ‘home,’ for it seemed maybe he was home, a feeling that had not come when he walked into Uncle Tam’s place” (306) on his recent visit back to Denver after living in the panhandle.

In a bizarre sub-plot, a local rancher, Francis Scott Keister, is shot dead by his wife, Tazzy, in a jealous rage following the discovery of his affair with a young woman from out of town. The woman turns out to be Evelyn Chine, a successful site scout for Global Pork Rind and Bob’s competition in the area, who is hospitalized with a gunshot wound to the head. The incident blows Bob’s cover and reveals his connection to Global Pork Rind, but it also makes him a target for Tazzy, who holds
the company responsible for her husband’s affair since Evelyn had convinced him to sell out. Tazzy Keister escapes custody in Woolybucket and, failing to find Bob, drives to Denver where she shoots up a Global Pork Rind board meeting, killing its president Quantum Goliath—a triumphant small town David slaying of the corporate Goliath.

In spite of everything, Bob finally manages to line up several prospects and arranges to negotiate the deals. However, at the last minute, both people suddenly retract their agreements because native son and vocal anti-hog farm advocate Ace Crouch convinces them not to sell. Desperate and frustrated, Bob decides to confront Ace to discover why his opinion holds such strong sway over the residents of Woolybucket.

Despite his apparent centrality to the novel, Bob makes a far smaller impact upon it than do several other characters, namely Ace Crouch and the Dutchman, Habakuk van Melkebeek. Both are introduced at the same point in the novel, about one third of the way in, and provide the narrative with its denouement. Ace is a third generation resident of Woolybucket, his family among the early settlers to the panhandle. He is introduced in a flashback chapter as an adolescent of fifteen or sixteen who is anxious to leave the family’s struggling ranch, as much to find work as to escape his abusive father. Ace is initially turned down for a job as a cowhand at the Cutaway ranch but later taken on to assist the newly hired windmill repairman Habakuk van Melkebeek.
The Dutchman arrives in the panhandle early in the 1930s, hoping to make his way, save some money and, eventually, return to his home country. While looking for employment, he happens upon the Cutaway ranch and is offered work repairing the property’s forty-one windmills spread across nearly three-dozen pastures that encompass endless acres of prairie. He gladly takes the job, one that is uniformly despised by the other ranch hands and consequently difficult to fill:

There wasn’t a cowboy in the outfit who’d voluntarily work on the mills, and when one or two were forced to get up on the towers with their grease cans they cursed [the foreman] from breakfast to bunkhouse and, after one man was blasted by a lightening bolt, a Cutaway cowboy only had to hear the word “windmill” and he would quit. (139)

Van Melkebeek possesses a natural affinity for windmill repair and the work suits his compulsively orderly personality and methodical habits. Although a challenging and solitary profession, it was a practical choice for Van Melkebeek as individuals skilled in repair work were always in demand, and functioning mills were crucial for pumping the water necessary to raise cattle or support crops in the otherwise arid panhandle.

The Dutchman manages to achieve the American ideal of wealth and success in a number of ways. He is an immigrant who, willing to do a job many others spurn, profits through hard work and judicious saving. He not only gets paid more for his work, twice as much as a cowhand, but refrains from spending it on women and liquor as do the other hired hands and cowboys. Over the course of several years, recognizing the changing nature of windmill repair, he saves enough to invest in his own equipment and leaves the Cutaway to work for himself. The Dutchman offers
Ace the opportunity to partner with him, since through their years working together on the ranch, Ace has proved himself to be equally suited to the trade. Their business is a tremendous success—as there is always demand for their services—allowing the Dutchman to retire and purchase a ranch of his own. Van Melkebeek turns the windmill business completely over to Ace and concentrates on establishing cattle pastures within his new property. While digging the water wells, he strikes oil. Decades later, a crusty old cowboy, Rope Butt, grumps to himself about Habakuk van Melkebeek’s good fortune, failing to realize the Dutchman’s success is the result of his work ethic and penurious habits.

Ace turns out to be the novel’s hidden advantage, the “ace in the hole” of the novel’s title. The allusion is a bit heavy-handed for the ordinarily understated Proulx and lends the uncharacteristically upbeat finale an unconvincing feel. Ace inherits the Dutchman’s oil fortune and decides to establish a land trust to restore the prairie and create a habitat for bison and other wildlife by buying out the existing hog farms and then purchasing properties from local residents who are interested in selling. He even offers Bob a job. Proulx allows the little people to win this one, but, as always, with an ironic twist. The fortune that Ace is tapping to buy out the hog farms and his neighbors’ properties in order to restore the prairie is the very same money the Dutchman made from exploiting its oil and gas resources.

Although Proulx only makes a passing reference to the Buffalo Commons initiative of Frank and Deborah Popper, Ace’s solution for preserving the panhandle and other areas of the Great Plains region is based upon their actual proposal. In 1987
the Poppers, a pair of New Jersey academics, argued against the continued sustainability of the drier regions of the Plains due to demographic shifts and ecological degradation of already marginal land. Their proposal pointed to the region’s ongoing decline in population and aging demographic in combination with long-term mis- and over-use of the land (often responsible for causing extensive ecological damage to native plant and animal habitats) as reasons for creating a nature preserve. Affecting six Western states, the nature preserve would be brought about by returning large portions of the drier areas of the Great Plains to native prairie and reintroducing bison as well as other native wildlife.

In terms of historian Frederick Jackson Turner’s definition of the frontier as two people per square mile, the American frontier has been expanding rather than contracting since the Dust Bowl of the 1930s:

[A]ll censuses after 1890 show the sparse frontier returning to the Plains. Thousands of disillusioned homesteaders picked up and left. Those who stayed either consolidated the land into larger farms or ranches, or eked out a substandard living.… If Turner thought taming the frontier helped define American values and character, what does it say about us that we have failed? Did Western communities ever really exist as separate and insulated from urban markets and corporate or federal capital?²

When first proposed, the Buffalo Commons initiative was greeted with suspicion and animosity. Residents of the Plains states the initiative affected widely opposed it, with most people against the conversion of privately-held land into government-run preserves which they perceived as a forced appropriation of their properties. Only ten and now twenty years later has the trajectory of events played out to prove the Poppers’ prophecy.
Frank Popper remarked in a 2004 article:

To us, the Buffalo Commons has become a shorthand description, part metaphor, part proposal, for a long-range, open-ended series of land-use changes. The Buffalo Commons has never been a specific land-use plan. Instead, it has always been an appeal for rethinking possibilities on the Plains—falling somewhere between conventional agriculture and pure wilderness.³

Proulx’s positive ecological resolution to the novel seems surprising from an author critics regularly accuse of writing “darkly” and who defends her work as unvarnished, tell-it-like-it-is realism. Such a resolution is, moreover, hardly in keeping with her otherwise relentlessly uncompromising previous work. There must be something else going on here. Bob is a persistent individual but not ruthless.

Although he desperately wishes to stick to his principles and not ignore his obligation to Global Pork Rind, he seems to realize that he must sacrifice them to the “greater good,” in this case, the desire of Woolybucket’s residents to prevent industrial hog farming from destroying their community and not the “greater good” as Ribeye Cluke interprets it: profit at any cost.

And that cost comprises more than financial loss or gain. When Bob is discussing the need to adapt to change with Ace atop a windmill, Ace asks, “What do you see out there Bob?” To which Bob responds, “Barbwire fences, the road with some trucks on it and a gate. The railroad and two sets of grain elevators, suppose one is in Woolybucket. Pump jacks.” Ace replies:

I see more. I see home. …My home country, the place my people has [sic] lived in for a hundred twenty-odd years from the canyonlands to the hills. …This is a unique part of North America. A lot of good men and women struggled a [sic] make their homes in this hard old panhandle. …You don’t
hardly know a thing about this place. You think it’s just a place. It’s more than that. It’s people’s lives, it’s the history of the country. (332-333)

Bob initially fails to realize any value aside from the utility of the land, whereas Ace speaks of it in emotional and personal terms, of his “obligation” to the land beyond its use for profit. Bob is not evil, just oblivious. He expresses the typical mindset of urban-dwelling individuals who fail to understand any part of the country beyond the boundaries of urban centers, much less the natural world. Bob begins, however, to find value in the landscape during his stay in Woolybucket:

Bob saw again what beautiful country it was when he looked past the clutter of tanks and pumps, colored by yellow light so thin and clear it slipped off the sky in huge slabs and in narrow straw-colored pipes glancing off flying birds, windshields and plate glass, throwing winks from cars and trucks. And it was crazy country too, some of the flattest terrain on earth, tractor-chewed and rectangled, rugged breaks and plunging canyons, sinister clouds too big to see in one look, rusty rivers, bone white roads and red grass. (126)

Bob does not find success in conventional terms. In fact he is a failure. Despite his inability to find properties for Global Pork Rind, his perspective shifts from that of an outsider to one with greater affinity for the local community. He is no longer the indifferent city kid, but a wiser, more mature individual whose sense of responsibility has found its focus and with that focus a meaningful trajectory. Bob begins to comprehend the landscape’s value, not solely in terms of its utility, but for its personal and historical interconnectedness with the people who live within it. He is on the cusp of this realization at the close of the novel, with the end suggesting the possibility that Bob will continue to deepen his understanding of the environment and
take a stand alongside the residents of Woolybucket against the invading corporate hoards of modern American commerce.
CONCLUSION

Annie Proulx’s novels are sagas that plumb the depths of the America Dream. They are not the triumphant stories of individuals who beat the odds—of circumstance, ethnicity or socio-economic status—to achieve success and prosperity, but chronicles of the downtrodden who cannot catch a break. Each novel serves as a nuanced exploration of different facets of the American Dream’s inherent promise and, ultimately, its limitations within a rapidly modernizing world. *Postcards* depicts the tremendous cost borne by small rural farmers as the post-war boom and bust cycles destroy their traditional way of life and their means of making an independent living. *Accordion Crimes* spans both time and place to portray the powerful pressures encountered by new immigrants to America as they strive to achieve the Dream—a process that frequently strips them of their former cultural heritage and results in harsh, often dangerous, working conditions combined with myriad forms of discrimination at the hands of other immigrants and established Americans alike. *That Old Ace in the Hole* examines the balance between the heedless pursuit of profitable enterprise and its effects upon small Western communities and the environment.

Proulx’s stories are those of people for whom access to the American Dream is tentative at best—if not entirely impossible. They are forgotten individuals in out-of-the-way rural places, a far cry from the yeoman farmers and plain folk of the Jeffersonian ideal, self made and fiercely independent. Instead, these people are wretchedly poor, lacking in options or opportunities and at the mercy of circumstances beyond their control. They are frequently unsympathetic, rough, rude, bigoted, and
violent—people incapable of imagining anything beyond their current lives or bringing about constructive change. For these people, the American Dream is a distant thing indeed.

For those who do manage to escape, the results are mixed. In *Postcards*, Loyal spends a lifetime wandering the country and dies a penniless vagrant wracked by illness and injury acquired through a lifetime of subsistence labor. Dub, although a successful real estate developer, finds his calling through a scam and once he obtains wealth and influence for himself possesses little empathy for those less fortunate. He is entirely disconnected from the natural world, despite his rural background, preferring to develop as much property as he can without regard for what he may be destroying. Dub is fully aware of what he is doing, but turns a blind eye, preferring profits instead.

The American Dream’s promise of a better, richer life draws countless immigrants to America, but often the reality they encounter turns out to be very different from what they imagined. In *Accordion Crimes*, the accordion maker and his son are exploited and discriminated against because of their nationality and lack of language skills, their lives in “La Merica” far worse than that in the poor Sicilian village they left behind. The trio of Germans who settle an Iowa prairie town manage to prosper but still encounter bigotry and intolerance, especially the anti-immigrant fear-mongering during World War I. They are also resented by their neighbors for their freethinking ways and diligent work habits—the very qualities regarded as part of the American formula for success. *Accordion Crimes* also shows the Dream’s
capriciousness, allowing some characters to thrive despite their illegal endeavors, amoral behavior or plain dumb luck while others work tirelessly just to eek out a living, the fruits of their labor to be enjoyed by future generations.

*That Old Ace in the Hole* is a cautionary tale and—due to the near complete lack of subtlety within the novel’s narrative—a morality tale as well. Many of the characters verge on caricatures, a criticism common to Proulx’s fiction, especially in regard to their names—Francis Scott Keister, Freda Beautybottoms, a cowboy named Rope Butt—and absurdly exaggerated traits. The story is also distinctly black and white, as there is little doubt that the invading corporate hog farms are bad and that the hardworking, salt-of-the-earth locals are good. Proulx even goes so far as to literally create a David and Goliath scenario with the shooting death of Global Pork Rind’s owner at the hands of a wronged local wife.

The novel’s protagonist, oblivious urban bumpkin Bob Dollar, becomes the story’s unsuspecting tool of destruction. Slowly, it dawns on Bob that there is something not quite right with his secret dealings and repeated lies to cover up the reason he is in town. Later, even as he contemplates his failure to close any property deals, he utterly fails to see the irony and hypocrisy of his actions. Instead, he sees his inability to do his job, to be “responsible” as his parents never were, as a personal defeat. In his mad rush for success, Bob fails to consider the larger repercussions of his actions—for himself, the community and the environment.

In this novel, Proulx is critical of an American public divorced from any meaningful connection to the natural world, cocooned within the fabricated
environment of our urban centers and planned suburban communities. In a mad technology-laden rush to secure our future prosperity and immediate comforts we all too easily forget our past, accepting sanitized myths in place of tangled, sometimes brutal reality. Proulx is presenting an immediate call to action in *That Old Ace in the Hole* by presenting Bob Dollar as a metaphor for the American people, a mostly benign but oblivious group who carry on as usual, ignorant of the broader repercussions of their lifestyles. We, like Bob, have a choice to take action, but if we hesitate for too long, we just may miss our opportunity.
END NOTES

INTRODUCTION


CHAPTER ONE

5. Ibid., 6.
11. Ibid., 29.


15. Ibid., 81.


22. Proulx, Bird Cloud, 11.

23. Ibid., 12.


26. Ibid., 3.


CHAPTER TWO


3. Ibid., 81.

4. Ibid., 90.

5. Ibid., 84.

CHAPTER THREE


2. Ibid.


5. Ibid.


7. Ibid.

8. Ibid.


CHAPTER FOUR


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