

NATIONAL BOOK AWARD WINNER
AND NATIONAL BESTSELLER

THE Shipping News



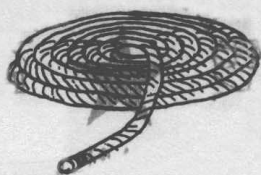
"Strikingly original,
richly energetic . . .
a stunning book, full of
magic and portent."
— Douglas Glover,
Boston Sunday Globe

A NOVEL

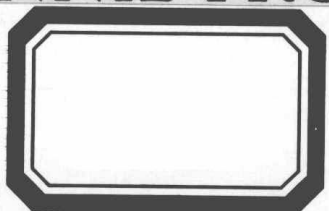
WINNER
OF THE
PULITZER
PRIZE

E. ANNIE PROULX

THE SHIPPING NEWS



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SCRIBNER PAPERBACK FICTION
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SCRIBNER PAPERBACK FICTION

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WINNER OF THE 1994 PULITZER PRIZE
FOR FICTION

WINNER OF THE 1993 NATIONAL BOOK AWARD
FOR FICTION

WINNER OF THE IRISH TIMES
INTERNATIONAL FICTION PRIZE

Named one of the notable books of the year by *The New York Times*
Winner of the *Chicago Tribune* Heartland Award

"Ms. Proulx blends Newfoundland argot, savage history, impressively diverse characters, fine descriptions of weather and scenery, and comic horseplay without ever lessening the reader's interest."

—*The Atlantic*

"Vigorous, quirky . . . displays Ms. Proulx's surreal humor and her zest for the strange foibles of humanity."

—Howard Norman, *The New York Times Book Review*

"An exciting, beautifully written novel of great feeling about hot people in the northern ice."

—Grace Paley

"*The Shipping News* . . . is a wildly comic, heart-thumping romance. . . . Here is a novel that gives us a hero for our times."

—Sandra Scofield, *The Washington Post Book World*

"The reader is assaulted by a rich, down-in-the-dirt, up-in-the-skies prose full of portents, repetitions, bold metaphors, brusque dialogues and set pieces of great beauty."

—Nicci Gerrard, *The Observer* (London)

"A funny-tragic Gothic tale, with a speed boat of a plot, overflowing with black-comic characters. But it's also that contemporary rarity, a tale of redemption and healing, a celebration of the resilience of the human spirit, and most rare of all perhaps, a sweet and tender romance."

—Sandra Gwynn, *The Toronto Star*



ALSO BY E. ANNIE PROULX

Heart Songs and Other Stories

Postcards

For Jon, Gillis and Morgan

"In a knot of eight crossings, which is about the average-size knot, there are 256 different 'over-and-under' arrangements possible. . . . Make only one change in this 'over and under' sequence and either an entirely different knot is made or no knot at all may result."

THE ASHLEY BOOK OF KNOTS

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**T H E
SHIPPING
NEWS**

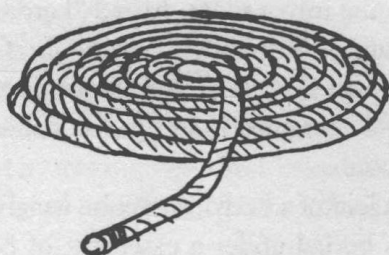


Quoyale

Quoyale: A coil of rope.

"A Flemish flake is a spiral coil of one layer only. It is made on deck, so that it may be walked on if necessary."

THE ASHLEY BOOK OF KNOTS



HERE is an account of a few years in the life of Quoyale, born in Brooklyn and raised in a shuffle of dreary upstate towns.

Hive-spangled, gut roaring with gas and cramp, he survived childhood; at the state university, hand clapped over his chin, he camouflaged torment with smiles and silence. Stumbled through his twenties and into his thirties learning to separate his feelings from his life, counting on nothing. He ate prodigiously, liked a ham knuckle, buttered spuds.

His jobs: distributor of vending machine candy, all-night clerk in a convenience store, a third-rate newspaperman. At thirty-six, bereft, brimming with grief and thwarted love, Quoyale steered away to Newfoundland, the rock that had generated his ancestors, a place he had never been nor thought to go.

A watery place. And Quoyle feared water, could not swim. Again and again the father had broken his clenched grip and thrown him into pools, brooks, lakes and surf. Quoyle knew the flavor of brack and waterweed.

From this youngest son's failure to dog-paddle the father saw other failures multiply like an explosion of virulent cells—failure to speak clearly; failure to sit up straight; failure to get up in the morning; failure in attitude; failure in ambition and ability; indeed, in everything. His own failure.

Quoyle shambled, a head taller than any child around him, was soft. He knew it. "Ah, you lout," said the father. But no pygmy himself. And brother Dick, the father's favorite, pretended to throw up when Quoyle came into a room, hissed "Lardass, Snotface, Ugly Pig, Warthog, Stupid, Stinkbomb, Fart-tub, Greasebag," pummeled and kicked until Quoyle curled, hands over head, sniveling, on the linoleum. All stemmed from Quoyle's chief failure, a failure of normal appearance.

A great damp loaf of a body. At six he weighed eighty pounds. At sixteen he was buried under a casement of flesh. Head shaped like a crenshaw, no neck, reddish hair rucked back. Features as bunched as kissed fingertips. Eyes the color of plastic. The monstrous chin, a freakish shelf jutting from the lower face.

Some anomalous gene had fired up at the moment of his begetting as a single spark sometimes leaps from banked coals, had given him a giant's chin. As a child he invented stratagems to deflect stares; a smile, downcast gaze, the right hand darting up to cover the chin.

His earliest sense of self was as a distant figure: there in the foreground was his family; here, at the limit of the far view, was he. Until he was fourteen he cherished the idea that he had been given to the wrong family, that somewhere his real people, saddled with the changeling of the Quoyles, longed for him. Then, foraging in a box of excursion mementoes, he found photographs of his father beside brothers and sisters at a ship's rail. A girl, somewhat apart from the others, looked toward the sea, eyes squinted, as though she could see the port of destination a thousand miles south. Quoyle recognized himself in their hair, their legs and arms. That

sly-looking lump in the shrunken sweater, hand at his crotch, his father. On the back, scribbled in blue pencil, "Leaving Home, 1946."

At the university he took courses he couldn't understand, humped back and forth without speaking to anyone, went home for weekends of excoriation. At last he dropped out of school and looked for a job, kept his hand over his chin.

Nothing was clear to lonesome Quoyale. His thoughts churned like the amorphous thing that ancient sailors, drifting into arctic half-light, called the Sea Lung; a heaving sludge of ice under fog where air blurred into water, where liquid was solid, where solids dissolved, where the sky froze and light and dark muddled.



He fell into newspapering by dawdling over greasy *saucisson* and a piece of bread. The bread was good, made without yeast, risen on its own fermenting flesh and baked in Partridge's outdoor oven. Partridge's yard smelled of burnt cornmeal, grass clippings, bread steam.

The *saucisson*, the bread, the wine, Partridge's talk. For these things he missed a chance at a job that might have put his mouth to bureaucracy's taut breast. His father, self-hauled to the pinnacle of produce manager for a supermarket chain, preached a sermon illustrated with his own history—"I had to wheel barrows of sand for the stonemason when I came here." And so forth. The father admired the mysteries of business—men signing papers shielded by their left arms, meetings behind opaque glass, locked briefcases.

But Partridge, dribbling oil, said, "Ah, fuck it." Sliced purple tomato. Changed the talk to descriptions of places he had been, Strabane, South Amboy, Clark Fork. In Clark Fork had played pool with a man with a deviated septum. Wearing kangaroo gloves. Quoyale in the Adirondack chair, listened, covered his chin with his hand. There was olive oil on his interview suit, a tomato seed on his diamond-patterned tie.



Quoyle and Partridge met at a laundromat in Mockingburg, New York. Quoyle was humped over the newspaper, circling help-wanted ads while his Big Man shirts revolved. Partridge remarked that the job market was tight. Yes, said Quoyle, it was. Partridge floated an opinion on the drought, Quoyle nodded. Partridge moved the conversation to the closing of the sauerkraut factory. Quoyle fumbled his shirts from the dryer; they fell on the floor in a rain of hot coins and ballpoint pens. The shirts were streaked with ink.

"Ruined," said Quoyle.

"Naw," said Partridge. "Rub the ink with hot salt and talcum powder. Then wash them again, put a cup of bleach in."

Quoyle said he would try it. His voice wavered. Partridge was astonished to see the heavy man's colorless eyes enlarged with tears. For Quoyle was a failure at loneliness, yearned to be gregarious, to know his company was a pleasure to others.

The dryers groaned.

"Hey, come by some night," said Partridge, writing his slanting address and phone number on the back of a creased cash register receipt. He didn't have that many friends either.

The next evening Quoyle was there, gripping paper bags. The front of Partridge's house, the empty street drenched in amber light. A gilded hour. In the bags a packet of imported Swedish crackers, bottles of red, pink and white wine, foil-wrapped triangles of foreign cheeses. Some kind of hot, juggling music on the other side of Partridge's door that thrilled Quoyle.



They were friends for a while, Quoyle, Partridge and Mercalia. Their differences: Partridge black, small, a restless traveler across the slope of life, an all-night talker; Mercalia, second wife of Partridge and the color of a brown feather on dark water, a hot intelligence; Quoyle large, white, stumbling along, going nowhere.

Partridge saw beyond the present, got quick shots of coming events as though loose brain wires briefly connected. He had been born with a caul; at three, witnessed ball lightning bouncing down a fire escape; dreamed of cucumbers the night before his brother-in-law was stung by hornets. He was sure of his own good fortune.

He could blow perfect smoke rings. Cedar waxwings always stopped in his yard on their migration flights.



Now, in the backyard, seeing Quoyale like a dog dressed in a man's suit for a comic photo, Partridge thought of something.

"Ed Punch, managing editor down at the paper where I work is looking for a cheap reporter. Summer's over and his college rats go back to their holes. The paper's junk, but maybe give it a few months, look around for something better. What the hell, maybe you'd like it, being a reporter."

Quoyale nodded, hand over chin. If Partridge suggested he leap from a bridge he would at least lean on the rail. The advice of a friend.

"Mercalia! I'm saving the heel for you, lovely girl. It's the best part. Come on out here."

Mercalia put the cap on her pen. Weary of writing of prodigies who bit their hands and gyred around parlor chairs spouting impossible sums, dust rising from the oriental carpets beneath their stamping feet.



Ed Punch talked out of the middle of his mouth. While he talked he examined Quoyale, noticed the cheap tweed jacket the size of a horse blanket, fingernails that looked regularly held to a grindstone. He smelled submission in Quoyale, guessed he was butter of fair spreading consistency.

Quoyale's own eyes roved to a water-stained engraving on the wall. He saw a grainy face, eyes like glass eggs, a fringe of hairs rising from under the collar and cascading over its starched rim. Was it Punch's grandfather in the chipped frame? He wondered about ancestors.

"This is a family paper. We run upbeat stories with a community slant." The *Mockingburg Record* specialized in fawning anecdotes of local business people, profiles of folksy characters; this thin stuff padded with puzzles and contests, syndicated columns, features and cartoons. There was always a self-help quiz—"Are You a Breakfast Alcoholic?"

Punch sighed, feigned a weighty decision. "Put you on the municipal beat to help out Al Catalog. He'll break you in. Get your assignments from him."

The salary was pathetic, but Quoyle didn't know.



Al Catalog, face like a stubbled bun, slick mouth, ticked the back of his fingernail down the assignment list. His glance darted away from the back of Quoyle's chin, hammer on a nail.

"O.k., planning board meeting's a good one for you to start with. Down at the elemennary school. Whyn't you take that tonight? Sit in the little chairs. Write down everything you hear, type it up. Five hunnerd max. Take a recorder, you want. Show me the piece in the A.M. Lemme see it before you give it on to that black son of a bitch on the copy desk." Partridge was the black son of a bitch.

Quoyle at the back of the meeting, writing on his pad. Went home, typed and retyped all night at the kitchen table. In the morning, eyes circled by rings, nerved on coffee, he went to the newsroom. Waited for Al Catalog.

Ed Punch, always the first through the door, slid into his office like an eel into the rock. The A.M. parade started. Feature-page man swinging a bag of coconut doughnuts; tall Chinese woman with varnished hair; elderly circulation man with arms like hawsers; two women from layout; photo editor, yesterday's shirt all underarm stains. Quoyle at his desk pinching his chin, his head down, pretending to correct his article. It was eleven pages long.

At ten o'clock, Partridge. Red suspenders and a linen shirt. He nodded and patted his way across the newsroom, stuck his head in Punch's crevice, winked at Quoyle, settled into the copy desk, slot in front of his terminal.

Partridge knew a thousand things, that wet ropes held greater weight, why a hard-boiled egg spun more readily than a raw. Eyes half closed, head tipped back in a light trance, he could cite baseball statistics as the ancients unreeled *The Iliad*. He reshaped banal prose, scraped the mold off Jimmy Breslin imitations. "Where are the

reporters of yesteryear?" he muttered, "the nail-biting, acerbic, alcoholic nighthawk bastards who truly knew how to write?"

Quoyle brought over his copy. "Al isn't in yet," he said, squaring up the pages, "so I thought I'd give it to you."

His friend did not smile. Was on the job. Read for a few seconds, lifted his face to the fluorescent light. "Edna was in she'd shred this. Al saw it he'd tell Punch to get rid of you. You got to rewrite this. Here, sit down. Show you what's wrong. They say reporters can be made out of anything. You'll be a test case."

It was what Quoyle had expected.

"Your lead," said Partridge. "Christ!" He read aloud in a high-pitched singsong.

Last night the Pine Eye Planning Commission voted by a large margin to revise earlier recommendations for amendments to the municipal zoning code that would increase the minimum plot size of residential properties in all but downtown areas to seven acres.

"It's like reading cement. Too long. Way, way, way too long. Confused. No human interest. No quotes. Stale." His pencil roved among Quoyle's sentences, stirring and shifting. "Short words. Short sentences. Break it up. Look at this, look at this. Here's your angle down here. That's news. Move it up."

He wrenched the words around. Quoyle leaned close, stared, fidgeted, understood nothing.

"O.k., try this.

Pine Eye Planning Commission member Janice Foxley resigned during an angry late-night Tuesday meeting. "I'm not going to sit here and watch the poor people of this town get sold down the river," Foxley said.

A few minutes before Foxley's resignation the commission approved a new zoning law by a vote of 9 to 1. The new law limits minimum residential property sizes to seven acres.

"Not very snappy, no style, and still too long," said Partridge, "but going in the right direction. Get the idea? Get the sense of