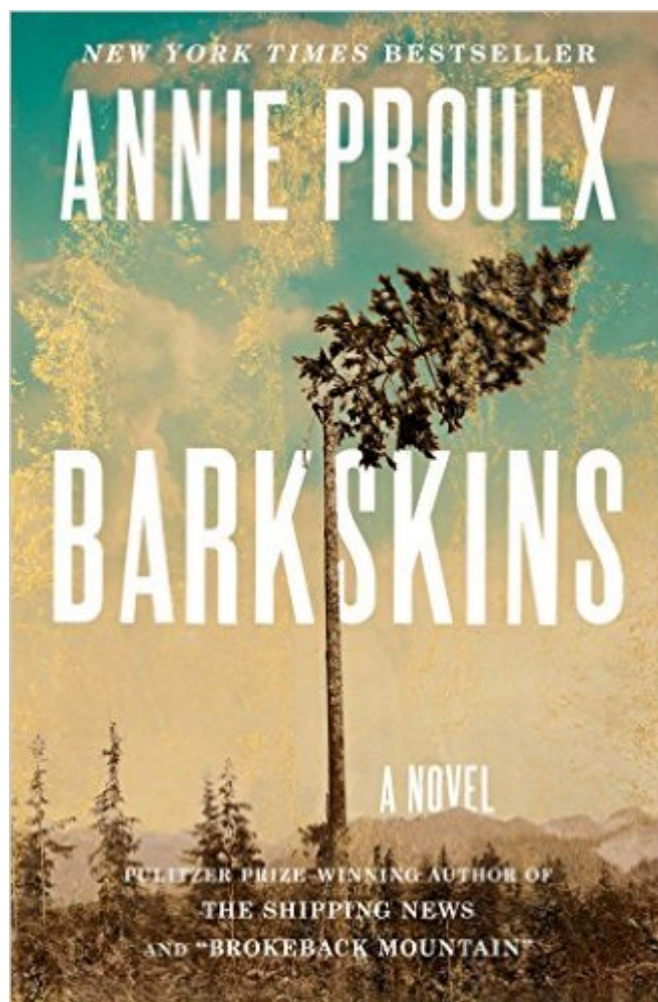


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# Barkskins: A Novel



## Synopsis

THE NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER From Annie Proulx "the Pulitzer Prize- and National Book Award- winning author of *The Shipping News* and *Brokeback Mountain*, comes her masterwork: an epic, dazzling, violent, magnificently dramatic novel about the taking down of the world's forests. In the late seventeenth century two penniless young Frenchmen, René Sel and Charles Duquet, arrive in New France. Bound to a feudal lord, a seigneur, for three years in exchange for land, they become wood-cutters' barkskins. René suffers extraordinary hardship, oppressed by the forest he is charged with clearing. He is forced to marry a Mi'kmaq woman and their descendants live trapped between two inimical cultures. But Duquet, crafty and ruthless, runs away from the seigneur, becomes a fur trader, then sets up a timber business. Proulx tells the stories of the descendants of Sel and Duquet over three hundred years—their travels across North America, to Europe, China, and New Zealand, under stunningly brutal conditions—the revenge of rivals, accidents, pestilence, Indian attacks, and cultural annihilation. Over and over again, they seize what they can of a presumed infinite resource, leaving the modern-day characters face to face with possible ecological collapse. Proulx's inimitable genius is her creation of characters who are so vivid—in their greed, lust, vengefulness, or their simple compassion and hope—that we follow them with fierce attention. Annie Proulx is one of the most formidable and compelling American writers, and *Barkskins* is her greatest novel, a magnificent marriage of history and imagination.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Barkskins is a sweeping saga recounting the ecological costs of progress. Forests are destroyed and Native Americans are marginalized. Reminiscent of James Michener's "Centennial" the author reminds us that this land is only ours to borrow and pass down to succeeding generations. Two illiterate woodsmen, Rene Sel and Charles Duquet arrive in "New France" in the 17th Century only to endure extraordinary hardship as indentured servants. The goal is to work for 3 years in exchange for a plot of land. Sel is forced to marry a Mi'kmaq Indian and becomes a barkskin or wood cutter. Duquet escapes, travels the world, and starts a logging empire. Duquet researches the timber trade learning the value of white pine trees to the Europeans. Duke & Sons Logging Co. is established. The Dukes realize that the forest is not eternal but deforestation still occurs as new settlers set fires to clear land. Only a small amount of forest becomes usable lumber. Most forest land is burned or abandoned in the name of progress as settlers build log cabins and RR ties are cut to build a transcontinental railroad. Rene Sel and his descendants carve out a meager existence. Hunting places are destroyed, and the salmon rivers are clogged with logs and sawdust. Medicinal healing plants are destroyed as the forests are pushed back. To survive, the Mi'kmaq must take jobs the white men don't want. They become wood choppers and loggers. They are considered to be disposable labor, good as long as they last. Annie Proulx gives us a detailed, extensively researched look into deforestation and the destruction of the Native American way of life. Proulx reminds us that we must find ways to renew our forests. I highly recommend this tome. Thank you to Net Galley for an advanced digital copy of Barkskins.

This is a saga in the vein of Michener's works. It follows the generations of two French wood cutters after they come to the New World as indentured servants, and the impact of European immigration on the indigenous people and arboreal forests of North America. There is a wealth of detail here, and of course the writing is superb. However, the history of the last 100 years was barely touched on: the first two and a half centuries get over 500 pages while the last gets about 100. It felt like the author suddenly got tired of the whole thing and just wanted to quit, although it may be that once the great forests were gone, there was "nothing to tell" anymore, and she was illustrating that as the richness of the forest disappeared, so did the richness of the generations so dependent on them. I gave it a 4 because it drags in some places. Well worth a read, but not in the league of my all time favorite of hers, "The Shipping News".

Has it really been 14 years since the last novel by Annie Proulx? For me, any new book by Proulx is a treat but this new novel is something exceptional and meant to be savored. Barkskins is a

multigenerational saga that follows the fortunes and misfortunes of two families over a period of three hundred years. Rene Sel and Charles Duquet are two poor, illiterate young Frenchmen who come to French Canada as indentured servants, bound to a feudal lord for three years in the hopes of receiving their own land in exchange. Their stories quickly diverge as Duquet runs off to make his fortune and his legacy and Sel remains to work the land. This is a big doorstop of a novel at 700+ pages. But by alternating between the stories of the two families, this book reads more quickly than its length would imply. Proulx takes her characters from French Canada to Europe, China, New Zealand, and across North America, wherever there are trees to be cut and money to be made. The story of these two families is also the story of the use and abuse of natural resources, in this case, the forests of the New World by settlers from the Old and their descendants. The trees are seen as inexhaustible and there to be cleared for farmland or sold for profit. Along the way, the author takes us into the lives of the Native Americans and mixed-race inhabitants of the northeast and conveys her well researched knowledge of the forest trade and the men and women who worked in it and profited from it. If there's one shortcoming, it's that the final few chapters (taking us up to modern times) seem rushed but after 700 pages, it's hard to call anything "rushed". As with her other works, Proulx creates characters that are vivid, colorful and engaging and this is no small task in a novel of this length with its ever-growing cast of characters. For me however, it's her lyrical use of language that makes each new book from her something special. Oftentimes I'll find myself skimming over long descriptive passages when reading other authors. But with Annie Proulx, becoming immersed in her prose is a big part of the enjoyment. The description of a cold night in the woods becomes "The moon was a slice of white radish, the shadows of incomparable blackness. The shapes of trees fell sharply on the snow, of blackness so profound they seemed gashes into the underworld. The days were short and the setting sun was snarled in rags of flying storm cloud." If you've read Annie Proulx in the past, you know what a treat this book will be. If you haven't, then pick up this book and dive in. It's a rich experience just waiting for you to enjoy.

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