

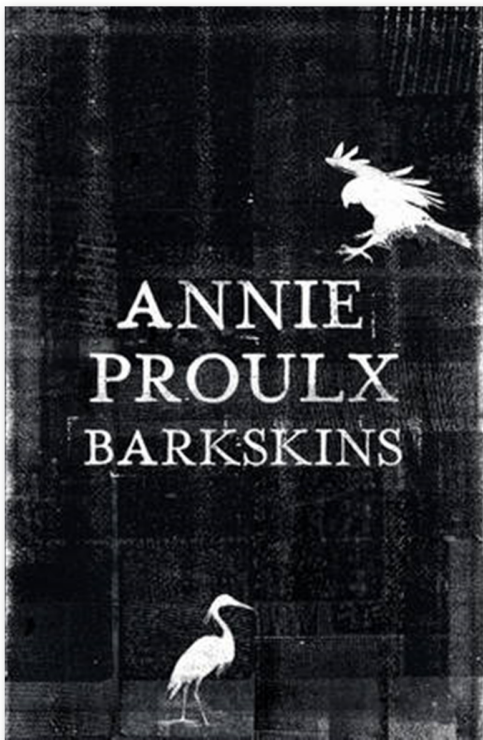


Helping you choose  
your next book

## LoveReading Reader reviews of **Barkskins** by Annie Proulx

# 4<sup>th</sup>

Below are the complete reviews, written by LoveReading members.



**Ed Robson**

***With the publication of 'Barkskins', Annie Proulx can justifiably lay claim to the title of America's greatest living writer.***

*This novel represents both a summation and a distillation of Proulx's previous writing in a magnificent work that spans centuries and contains a multitude of strongly drawn characters. Ostensibly about the members of two families and their divergent paths, the novel describes the destruction of traditional ways of life in North America and the rapaciousness of both business and colonialism. As with her previous novels, Proulx demonstrates a deep understanding of both human nature and the natural world, in prose*

*that is both muscular and direct, straightforward but never simplistic. Readers of her previous novels will be pleased to know that many characters meet sudden and shocking ends (something Proulx perfected in *Accordion Crimes*) but this never feels forced: rather, they are a representation of the violent and dangerous times that the characters inhabit. One of the strongest aspects of the novel is her portrayal of deeply flawed characters that never feels predictable or cynical.*

*I have long held the view that Proulx is a great (as opposed to good) writer. I have also been wary of terms like 'masterpiece' to describe well-received novels. I can think of twenty works of fiction I have enjoyed prior to *Barkskins* that*

*truly deserve that epithet: I can now honestly say that I have read twenty one and I urge you to read this wonderful book.*

### **Ann Peet**

#### ***Magnificent, epic novel.***

*The scope of this novel is staggering. The time span is from the 1690s to the present day and, while it is mainly set in the forests of North America, there are journeys all over the world. Annie Proulx tells the story of two illiterate French woodsmen, Sel and Duquet, who travel to North America seeking work. We follow the stories of their descendants through the generations but always with the background of the forests - discovery, exploitation, destruction and finally attempts at conservation.*

*Sel marries an Indian woman and his descendants work mainly in the logging camps. Duquet starts a logging company that prospers and is expanded by subsequent generations. It feels rather like reading three or four novels as I became engrossed in the fortunes, good and bad, of the different generations. Just occasionally towards the end I felt the author's concern for the destruction of the forests and campaigning for conservation outweighed the fictional elements but this is a minor quibble about an extraordinary and epic novel. The large cast of characters - Lavinia in the nineteenth century was my favourite - are all brought to life brilliantly and vividly. It is a long novel, over 700 pages, and yet it never drags because of the excellence of the writing and because you are so caught up in the stories. **An amazing feat of the imagination!***

### **Catherine Jenkins**

#### ***The Great American Novel of our time, which considers the lives of indigenous inhabitants against a backdrop of deforestation.***

*This tour-de-force spans centuries of history to tell the tales of family trees in more ways than one. Trees not only have a genealogical significance in the lineages of those whose lives are intertwined in their branches, but also an environmental message which resonates at a time when widespread forest fires and continued deforestation are threatening the organisms which we rely upon to survive.*

Follow Catherine on Twitter: @CathLynneJ

## **Sarah Musk**

***A magnificent book detailing just over three hundred years of Canadian history through the eyes of two very different families descended from the French settlers from the late seventeenth century.***

*This is a masterly book - covering just over three hundred years of Canadian history. The story centres round two families - Sel and Duquet (to become Duke). The two main ancestors start together in the New World but very quickly separate to follow very different paths. The Sels stay close to the landscape and the Canadian Indian culture and the Dukes become timber merchants and mill owners.*

*Annie Proulx incorporates a lot of discussion about the ethics of exploiting and despoiling the new land which they find. The tragedy of the mighty forests being destroyed is very keenly felt. For the reader she portrays with great feeling the brutal felling of the trees and the very, very slow change in attitudes right up the present day as the ancestors of the Dukes - who are one of the instigators of the despoilation - realise what they have done. There is a sort of reckoning at the end but it feels quite incomplete and insubstantial and, it is too late.*

*I loved the continuation of the family line through the ages - especially with the Sels - who are actually the real heirs to the timber business. The only fault I found with it was that I found it difficult to follow the French Canadian names - which were quite strange and obscure - and at times, it became very technical in relation to timber logging. I wish in that respect, there had been a bit less detail - I found it difficult to follow and, at times, it was not very interesting.*

*Apart from that, this is an epic book detailing magnificently the early history of Canada - the native Indians and the settlers who took the land and made Canada what it is today.*

## **Jane Gilman**

*'Barkskins' is an epic novel in the tradition of great story telling such as Michener. It follows the destinies of two families, the Sels and the Duquets and thereby follows much of the early histories of Canada and North America from 1693.*

*In the late Seventeenth Century Rene Sel and Charles Duquet are trying their luck at a new life in New France as an escape from life in Northern France.*

*We follow their children and other descendants as the fortunes of both families are inexorably tied to the great forests that are being exploited for profit. Huge fortunes are made from logging and the men who brave brutal conditions, accidents and pestilence as they try to make a livelihood. Destroying the source of that wealth in the process.*

*Rene Sel marries an Indian healer and the mixed cultures coupled with the disappearance of the traditional way of life makes life hard for their children.*

*Charles Duquet travels the globe and back starting a logging company that will prosper and decline.*

*We meet a host of characters so vibrant in their depiction that they seem as well-known as our own family and avidly following their lives makes this a page turner. Proulx draws the reader into the narrative so skilfully that its length is barely noticed and she still left me needing more. Each section cleverly reads like a short novel.*

*The great boreal forests of the world are a major character in the novel as is the lesson to the human race of what we are doing to them at our peril.*

***Greed, love, lust, revenge, sorrow and compassion. Those that desecrate and those that nurture, this novel has it all.***

***Proulx fans will be delighted and I am sure this will gather her many more.***

### **Sheila Johnson**

***If you like long historical family sagas then this is your sort of book. It is a long story. Probably the longest I have ever read and I am 67!!***

*It starts in the seventeenth century with the early chopping down of forests and then comes up to the present time very gradually. It is possible to immerse oneself completely in the characters and places that are depicted. I think the book will particularly appeal to American/Canadian readers as it describes many locations that would be familiar. The Indian (First Nation) heritage that is referred to constantly whilst being of some interest sometimes jars with the story as if it was there for effect rather than essential to the story. Some of the dialogue can be a bit stilted but this more than compensated by the excellent descriptions of scenes and characters. Sometimes the story jumped whole decades and I had to check occasionally that I wasn't mixing up the characters. Overall an excellent read but would need a good long holiday to absorb it!*

## **Andrea Rayner**

*Towards the end of the seventeenth century, two men, Rene Sel and Charles Duquet, travel from France to New France (the French colonies in North America) to start a new life. When they get there, they work for a local landowner in the harsh conditions of the dense forest. Rene Sel marries a Mi'kmaw healer and Charles Duquet builds a fortune, travelling as far as Holland and China. As time passes, the descendants of these two men become entwined in a single dynasty. A dynasty that is responsible for clearing great swathes of North American forest. This family, like the many in the new nation, are not only responsible for the destruction of the forests, they are also bound to them and defined by them. It is the history of this dynasty, from the late seventeenth century to modern times, that charts colonial expansion, the devastation of the indigenous culture and the destruction of the existing landscape.*

***This is an epic book. It is monumental both in size and in subject matter.*** *It presents us with a history of the emergence of modern Northern America through the loves, lives and losses of a colonial family as it becomes a dynasty. The characters and their exploits, although often hard to like, are gripping from the start. **But perhaps most striking of all, is the author's love, implicit in the language, of a ravaged landscape.***

## **Humaira Kauser**

***A complex read that took me a while but was generally good.***

*This book was an okay read but it wasn't that great. It was long and some parts lost me but that may be because it was really long, complex and a little confusing. I've never read anything by Annie Proulx but I've heard nothing but good things about her writing and I feel slightly disappointed. Honestly though I feel like I can't fully appreciate her work because it's simply not my genre and probably not the right audience (I only just turned 18). Nevertheless I do hope to be won over and become a fan someday!*

Follow Humaira on Instagram: [https://www.instagram.com/cookie\\_bookie/](https://www.instagram.com/cookie_bookie/)

## **Alfred Nobile**

*This is a vast sprawling book. Covering nations, cultures and the clashes that*



result. Though I enjoyed this book I got lost in the details. There was so much to take in and a family tree and or a glossary would have been of a help. I also thought too much emphasis was placed on family relationships and not enough given to the effects of the settlers on the native culture and the environment. I think this book would have been better being two or maybe a trilogy. **A difficult subject handled by a very competent writer. Though I enjoyed this book I much prefer her shorter fiction.**

### **Val Rowe**

***This is probably Annie Proulx's most magnificent novel ever and one to grace people's bookshelves for decades to come.***

*Seeking a living in New France in the seventeenth century, Rene Sel and Charles Duquet never give up hope of securing their future despite being bound to their feudal lord. Imagining a successful life within the realms of the commercial value of the forest, their paths divert, each pursuing a quite diverse lifestyle. The novel relates their adventures, and those of their descendants, intertwined with the tales of their allies and foes, in their search for good fortune and success against a backdrop of harsh and diverse conditions.*

*Five years in its creation, 'Barkskins' is a magnificent novel, vivid in its description and portrayal of characters. As the complex plot evolves, the reader experiences a wealth of emotions, many events taking ones' breath away. Skilfully weaving events occurring between the two main families, the plot is complex and often surprising.*

*My one criticism is that at times I became confused by the sheer number of characters, needing to reread some sections to ensure understanding.*

*A novel to take on holiday perhaps or to explore when you have the time to do it justice.*

### **Kathryn Whitfield**

***An amazing powerful story.***

*I found this a really interesting story and I love family history. It follows the family tree of two French woodsmen from 1693-2013 and starts when they leave France on a journey to a new living. It is a very long novel and that could put people off but you are rewarded with Annie Proulx's amazing writing and attention to detail. It is heartbreaking to read at times and makes you wonder*

*how humans can treat each other this way and have little regards for earth and trees. I have never read anything by Annie Proulx before, I think she is amazing writer and will pick up her other work.*

Follow Kathleen on Twitter: @kathreenieA

### **Annette Woolfson**

***How I wanted to love this novel. Parts of it were stupendous - beautiful prose, characters full of passion and tenacity but they, like young seedlings on the forest floor, were nearly starved of light.*** This novel needed two things to make it work for me – a lot of judicious editing and a character list. Generations of men struggling to make a living (or even to stay alive) in the forest, all started to merge. The characters that stood out, René Sel, Charles Duquet and Lavinia, all moved the story on whereas the others by and large just cut down trees and died horrible deaths! Yes, Annie Proulx had an axe to grind (sorry) but I feel she could have made a better case for looking after the world's natural resources in half the number of pages, thereby of course, saving a few trees!

### **Paula Dennan**

***An epic and meticulously detailed novel about the destruction of the world's forests, that sadly lacks in character.***

*At 736 pages, 'Barkskins' is not a quick read, but Annie Proulx's words have always demanded to be savoured rather than rushed past. Proulx is a master storyteller; The Shipping News is one of my favourite novels and Brokeback Mountain is, to my mind, the greatest short story ever written.*

*Spanning more than 300 years and different generations of interconnected families, 'Barkskins' is a story about the destruction of the world's forests. Proulx's research is meticulous and it shows. At times it reads more like non-fiction, than a novel.*

*'Barkskins' didn't get under my skin the way her other works have. I felt disconnected from the characters. None of them stood out. I wasn't invested in what happened to them.*

*Maybe my expectations were too high. Maybe this was never going to be the book for me. This epic novel felt like a chore towards the end and I never thought I'd be saying that about words written by Annie Proulx.*

<http://cornflakegirlsmusings.com/>