



STUTTGART BOOK CLUB READING GUIDE

The Shipping News by E. Annie Proulx

About This Book

From the get-go, Quoyale is a loser. Not only is he physically unattractive with a "great damp loaf of a body," but he is also not too bright. His father despises him, and his brother constantly taunts him. He drifts from job to job, never able to keep one for more than a few months. He gets married, only to have his wife sell their two daughters to a child pornographer and leave him.

THE SHIPPING NEWS describes Quoyale's psychological and spiritual rebirth. Left with two children to raise after he rescues them, and no job, he returns to Newfoundland, the land of his ancestors. A sometime newspaper reporter, he gets a job reporting on shipping news with a local publication, and becomes a minor celebrity. Gradually he is transformed into a loving father and a valued neighbor.

Discussion Questions

1. Proulx describes Quoyale as "a great damp loaf of a body." What kind of man is Quoyale? How does Proulx's sublime, comic style make you feel about him?
 2. When Quoyale writes for the Mockingburg Record he never seems to understand the dynamics of journalism, yet in writing "The Shipping News" he transforms The Gammy Bird and eventually becomes managing editor of the paper. Discuss some of the other changes Quoyale experiences from the beginning of the novel to the end.
 3. As Quoyale arrives in Newfoundland, he hears much of his family's past. In fact, there is an old relative, "some kind of fork kin," still alive in Newfoundland. Why does Quoyale avoid Nolan -- seem angry at the old man from the start? Is the reason as simple as Quoyale denying where he came from, especially after learning the details of his father's relationship with the aunt?
 4. Proulx tells us the aunt is a lesbian, yet never makes a specific issue out of the aunt's sexual orientation. Does this fact add dimension to the story for you? Does it add to the aunt's character? We, as readers, assume that characters are heterosexual without needing to hear specifically about their sexual life. Does the matter-of-course way Proulx treats the aunt's sexuality help make the reader a less judgmental critic?
 5. Discuss Quoyale's relationship with Petal Bear. Can you justify his feelings for her? Even after her death, she continues to have a strong hold on him, and her memory threatens to squelch the potential of his feeling for Wavey Prowse. Is this because Quoyale doesn't understand love without pain? Both Quoyale and Wavey have experienced abusive relationships previously. How do they treat each other?
 6. Newfoundland is more than the setting for this story, it is a dreary yet engaging character onto itself. Does the cold weather and the rough life add to your enjoyment of the book?
 7. Do you think the chapter headings from *The Ashley Book of Knots*, *The Mariner's Dictionary*, and *Quipus and Witches' Knots* add to the atmosphere of the book? Did their humor illustrate some of Proulx's points, or did they simplify some of her issues? Notice especially the headings for chapters 2, 4, 28, 32, 33, and 34.
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Author Biography

"I am the oldest of five girls. I was born in Connecticut in 1935, where my mother's English ancestors -- farmers, mill workers, inventors, artists -- have lived for 350 years. My father's Franco-Canadian grandparents came to New England in the 1860s to work in the woolen mills. My father was in the textile business and we moved frequently when I was a child as he worked his way up the executive ladder. I suspect my intense and single-minded work habits stem from his example. My mother is a painter and amateur naturalist, and from her I learned to see and appreciate the natural world, to develop an eye for detail, and to tell a story. There is a strong tradition of oral storytelling in my mother's family and, as a child, I heard thousands of tales and adventures made out of nothing more substantial than the sight of a man digging clams, an ant moving a straw, an empty shoe.

"I've lived in Vermont for more than three decades, studies history at the University of Vermont and Concordia University in Montreal. In hindsight, I recognize that learning to examine the lives of individuals against the longue duree of events was invaluable training for novel-writing.

"There were few teaching jobs in history in the seventies, and I shifted from academic study to freelance journalism and for the next 15 years wrote articles on weather, apples, canoeing, mountain lions, mice, cuisine, libraries, African beadwork, cider, and lettuces for dozens of magazines. Whenever I could squeeze in the time I wrote short stories.

"In 1988, Scribners published a collection of these stories, *Heart Songs and Other Stories*. My editor encouraged me to write a novel, and this first effort was *Postcards*. Around the time *Heart Songs* was published I made my first trip to Newfoundland.

Rarely have I been so strongly moved by geography as I was during that first journey up the Great Northern Peninsula. The harsh climate, the grim history, the hard lives and the generous, warm characters of the outport fisherman and their families interested me deeply. Yet I could also see contemporary civilization rushing in on the island after its centuries of isolation and the idea for *The Shipping News* began to form. Over the next few years I made nine trips of Newfoundland, watching, observing, taking notes, listening. I am keenly interested in situations of change, both personal and social, and in this book I wanted to show characters teetering along the highwires of their lives yet managing to keep their balance, lives placed against a background of incomprehensible and massive social change.

"The manuscript was completed several months before the Canadian government, alarmed at the decline of the northern cod stock, imposed a fishing moratorium in Newfoundland. Two years later the cod have not recovered, but are at the point of near-extinction. With their disappearance the Newfoundland fishing economy has collapsed. It is now generally observed on the island that the old outport fishing life that sustained Newfoundlanders for centuries is finished."