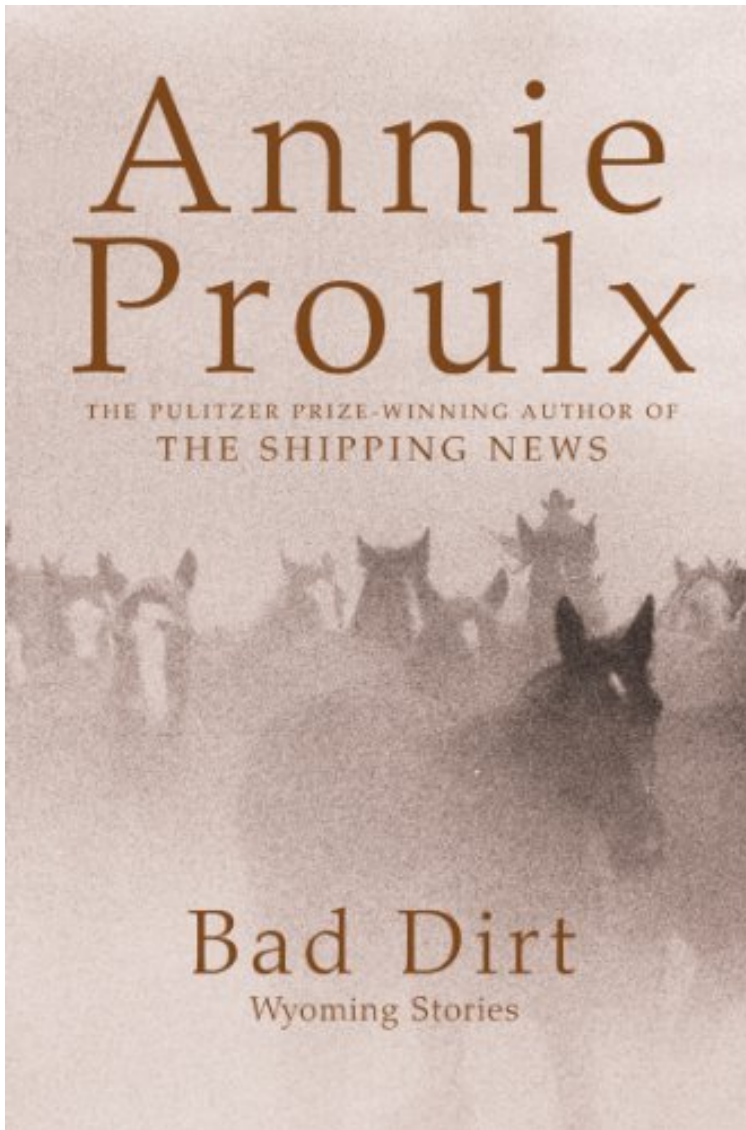


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## Bad Dirt: Wyoming Stories 2



*Par Annie Proulx*  
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### Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurPulitzer Prize-winning author Annie Proulx follows the success of Close Range with another remarkable collection of short stories set in Wyoming.Bad Dirt is filled with the vivid and willful characters for which Proulx has become known. Each occupies a community or landscape described in rich and robust language, with an eye for detail unparalleled in American fiction.In The Contest, the men of Elk Tooth, Wyoming, vow to put aside their razors for two seasons and wait to see who has the longest beard come the 4th of July. Deb Sipple, the moving protagonist of That Trickle Down Effect, finds that his opportunism and his smoking habit lead to a massive destruction. And What Kind of Furniture Would Jesus Pick? is the story of Gilbert Wolfscale, whose rabid devotion to his ranch drives off his wife and sons.Proulx displays her wit in every story of this stunning collection, as well as her knowledge of the West, of history,

of ranching and farming. Her profound sympathy for characters who must use sheer will and courage to make it in tough territory makes this collection extraordinarily compelling. From Publishers Weekly The beautiful and harsh terrain of Wyoming and the tough and often eccentric people who make their lives there are again on display in this collection of stories (a sequel to the much-lauded *Close Range: Wyoming Stories*). In "What Kind of Furniture Would Jesus Pick?" Gilbert Wolfscale struggles with drought and debt to hold on to the ranch that has been passed down in his family for generations, driving off his wife and two sons, who have no interest in continuing the legacy. Many old-time ranch owners in this territory are women, and they face similar struggles: in "The Trickle Down Effect," Fiesta Punch hires local ne'er-do-well Deb Sipple for a long-distance hay haul, with disastrous results. Proulx does leaven her tales of hardship and woe with a dry humor, and she doesn't forget to tackle the misguided romance sought by newcomers to the land, as in "Man Crawling Out of Trees," in which a retired couple from the Northeast find that the quiet truce of their marriage can't survive encounters with the resentful locals. While none of the stories in this collection approaches the sweep and wholeness of "Brokeback Mountain" (the standout story from *Close Range*, and soon to be a major film), and other pieces are little more than whimsical sketches (sometimes with a touch of the magical), they paint a rich, colorful picture of local life. Copyright Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. From The Washington Post's Book World/washingtonpost.com The blasted Wyoming countryside was the true protagonist of *Close Range*, Annie Proulx's 1999 collection of stories. Against this backdrop of "dangerous and indifferent ground," Fate pistol-whips doomed cowboys and past-their-prime ranchers: "The tragedies of people count for nothing although the signs of misadventure are everywhere." Proulx is not the sort of writer who lets you forget her presence; her eccentric, serpentine sentences and jarring imagery preen like peacocks. In *Close Range*, numerous descriptions of the landscape often come as lavish strings of clauses that read like chants: "Indigo jags of mountain, grassy plain everlasting, tumbled stones like fallen cities, the flaring roll of sky." If her prose has a mesmerizing rhythm that sweeps the reader along, it can also eclipse real human feeling; so many purple depictions of terrestrial features leave little room for characters' souls to bloom. Still, in "Brokeback Mountain," the story of two cowboys grappling with their mutual sexual attraction, she hit emotional pay dirt. Reading it was like watching a wrestling match between showy style and deeply felt anguish and desire; here, the human element claimed a victory. Proulx has toned down the poetry in *Bad Dirt*, her second volume of Wyoming stories. Instead, she's chosen a more straightforward narrative voice.

This partial shearing away of lyrical frills might have revealed the poverty and emotional isolation of Western life in a new, harsher light. Instead, the book has the feel of a rush job, as though Proulx couldn't be bothered to add color or vividness. The stories are slackly plotted -- repeatedly, the author substitutes an accumulation of detail for suspense or narrative drive. Background is needlessly spun out. "The Indian Wars Refought" begins with eight pages of meandering wind-up; we learn about the construction of a building 100 years ago, the three generations of lawyers who occupied the building, and the third generation's fatal interest in polo playing. All of this has very little to do with the actual narrative, about a young Native American woman who finds reels of a long-lost Buffalo Bill film while clearing out the building. More than half of the 11 stories in *Bad Dirt* are mere squibs, each only a few pages long, set in the fictional town of Elk Tooth, where regulars gather at a bar called Pee Wee's. Proulx borrows the voice of a barfly, retelling some fantastical local tall tales. In "The Hellhole," a Fish and Game warden finds that he can dispatch poachers to Hades via a magically appearing hole in the ground. A group of Elk Tooth men spend the winter in a beard-growing competition in "The Contest." In one puzzling piece, a badger is convinced he is the object of desire of a rancher's wife. Unfortunately Proulx is a terrible jokesmith -- she can't really figure out what to do with these thin conceits, and her punchlines drop like lead balloons. With the exception of another half-baked tall tale (about a tea kettle that grants wishes), the remaining, longer stories concern the ways the country bests its inhabitants, both the old-timers and the newcomers -- who are, predictably, nearly always despised. The most substantial work here is "What Kind of Furniture Would Jesus Pick?," in which Proulx positions stubborn rancher Gilbert Wolfscale against the modern world. He tries to raise turkeys, but customers just like the supermarket brands. His frustrated wife leaves the wind-bitten ranch, and his growing children have no interest in coming around to visit ("It stinks out there," they complain, "there's nothin a do"). His elderly mother sinks her savings into a mail scam, and Gilbert is left to pay her funeral expenses. One of his sons is gay. Despite these Job-like burdens, it's not easy to muster up much sympathy for Gilbert. We're given little access to his interior world: A briefly sketched childhood memory of watching men working on the county road is all that explains his bond with the place. We're told he loves his ranch, but we're not offered any way

to feel it. Proulx is not kind to her Wyomingites. Their faces are grotesque: One character's "contained enough material for two faces: a high brow, a long chin, wide cheekbones with fleshy cheeks like vehicle headrests, and a nose like a plowshare." Another's "face was so oily it seemed metaled. . . . She had a spit-frilled way of talking." They have ridiculous names -- Creel Zmundzinski, Cheri Wham, Frank Frink, Sedley Alwen. Throughout *Bad Dirt*, Proulx stacks the deck against her characters. She makes them crusty, mean or relentlessly shallow, then heaps on endless indignities. "The Wamsutter Wolf" savors the description of a broken-down trailer existence: "It stank of cigarettes, garbage, and feces. . . . On the floor several feathers were stuck in a coagulated blob. Wads of trodden gum appeared as archipelagos in a mud-colored sea while bits of popcorn, string ends, torn paper, a crushed McDonald's cup, and candy wrappers made up the flotsam." The details of redneck life -- dirty diapers, stale pink cakes, outrageous flatulence -- continue for pages. Proulx seems to have little affection for the upper-middle-class couple, Brooklynites come to settle in Wyoming, at the center of "Man Crawling Out of Trees." From the story's first sentence, she cuts them no slack: "Mitchell Fair and his wife, Eugenie, sped over the whiskey-colored plains in their aging Infiniti, 'cutting prairie,' said Mitchell under his breath, thinking it sounded western." Proulx is a strange kind of puppeteer, cackling at the misfortunes of her creations. But if an author has no love for her characters, why should the reader? ed by Peter Terzian Copyright 2004, The Washington Post Co. All Rights Reserved.