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Winter 2012

## Review of *Bird Cloud: A Memoir* by Annie Proulx

Alex Hunt

*West Texas A&M University*

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Hunt, Alex, "Review of *Bird Cloud: A Memoir* by Annie Proulx" (2012). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 2750.  
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*Bird Cloud: A Memoir.* By Annie Proulx. New York: Scribner, 2011. xiii + 234 pp. Map, illustrations, notes. \$26.00 cloth, \$16.00 paper.

Annie Proulx's latest is nonfiction, recounting her attempt to inhabit a section of land in south-central Wyoming. While tough winters and unmaintained roads make year-round residence too difficult, Proulx glories in the wild isolation of a place that inspires her to research and write as well as to build fence and monitor eagles. *Bird Cloud* is a book that Proulx's regulars will find both enjoyable and revealing; however, its self-indulgence and lack of polish leave us with a feeling akin to Proulx's own house high in the mountain valley—it remains raw and isolated.

This is not entirely a negative. Proulx's 2002 Southern Plains classic *That Old Ace in the Hole* is a wonderful book due to its structural imperfection, its sense of something fastened together out of historical research and fictional narrative, excess material pounding in the wind.

*Bird Cloud* begins with the story of Proulx's search for genealogical roots and a habitable solitude, leading to her discovery of a wild section of Wyoming land. Much of the book is comprised of Proulx's struggles to complete her house. It must be said, however, that in the noteworthy literature that follows Thoreau's account of building his dwelling, Proulx's struggles to find architects, builders, and competent concrete men who will work in the remote location are more tedious than compelling.

To her credit, Proulx acknowledges the cranky and obsessive aspect of her personality that shows in the years-long frustration of getting a house built. What is wonderfully interesting in the matter of designing and building the house is the parallel between architecture and writing, particularly in questions of how form and material interact with landscape. Those who admire Proulx's fiction will gain a wonderful sense of her thoughts on form and place.

Proulx's subsequent discussion of the land's environmental history—from cattle and sheep

ranching to Indigenous anthropology, ecology, and especially birdlife—is also engaging. Proulx reminds us of her skill as a historian and researcher as she performs her narrative excavation of the place, yet there is something too forced in the organization of the material. Had the building of the house as primary narrative contained these sections on history, anthropology, and ecology, the book as a whole would feel more organically composed.

But this may be the point. As much as Proulx succeeds in building a house in this remote and beautiful place, as a habitation it rests uneasily, and Proulx cannot make of the place the permanent and final dwelling she had desired. As much as one may try to build and write to suit the landscape, the landscape remains intractable. To pretend otherwise would be a lie that Proulx has too much integrity to tell.

ALEX HUNT  
Department of English, Philosophy,  
and Modern Languages  
West Texas A&M University