

[HARDCOVER: US]

Who needs hell when you have Wyoming?

The devil crops up as an interior designer in Annie Proulx's latest batch of grim tales from the American west

BY TIM ADAMS

THE GUARDIAN, LONDON

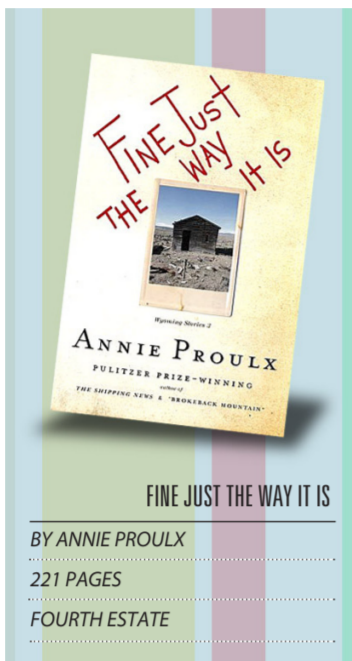
Annie Proulx has proved herself — with the unwieldy architecture of her novels *Postcards* and *Accordion Crimes* — to be something of a sucker for an over-ambitious structure. She's at it again here. She prefaces her third volume of Wyoming stories with a quote from John Clay's *My Life on the Range*: "On the surface," Clay observed of the American west, "everything was lovely, but when you got into the inside circle you soon found out that the lines of demarcation were plainly marked." This innocuous observation resonates for Proulx, you are led to understand as this book unfolds, because of that phrase "inside circle." There are nine stories here, each of them hellish in different ways; the dust bowl, having been so many things to Proulx already, is here made to stand for her inferno.

She makes this more explicit than she needs to by interspersing her usual, surprising saddle-sore realism with two tales told by Satan — Stygian satires in which the Prince of Darkness, cast as an interior designer, dreams up new looks for eternal damnation. Leading through the *Guardian*, and assisted by his secretary Duane Fork, the devil cooks up all kinds of torment: tsunamis, global warming and e-mail havoc, in which he is happy to see the world upstairs conspires. Down below, this being Proulx, he has particular fun with old cowboys, Butch Cassidy and the rest, "bowlegged men lolly-gagging near a boiling water hole" in Dis. He gets the Four Horsemen to ride them down, brand, rope and castrate them.

These two stories are unnecessary for a couple of reasons: the silly ironies scupper the tone of what is otherwise another gutsy, exact collection of tales and, moreover, the cartoon torments of hell are nothing compared to the daily lives Proulx depicts elsewhere with such a clear eye. Leaving aside those embarrassing intruders, though, and concentrating on what Proulx does as well as anyone — simple human misery, with highly local understanding, and singular description, there are plenty of vintage stories here.

She starts out, in *Family Man*, in that very real purgatory on earth, a western-themed retirement home, "furniture upholstered in fabrics with geometric 'Indian' designs, lampshades sporting buckskin fringe." Ray Forkenbrock is a former horse-catcher and ranch-hand now spending his days looking at the high sierra in the distance. He has a family history to tell to his eager granddaughter with her tape recorder, but the history is not the mythology of western frontiersmen she hopes to be able

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BY ANNIE PROULX

221 PAGES

FOURTH ESTATE

to pass on to her children; it is a much nastier story of a father with four families in different corners of the state, and of half-forgotten sex crimes. In his 80s Ray still can't handle it all, and neither can his granddaughter; "You'd think there would have been closure by now," she observes.

But this is Wyoming, and there never is: "Everything you ever did or said kept pace with you right to the end." This sense of a regional family, inbred and in denial, mostly silent about its past and its desires, is what makes Proulx's state such an uncomfortable place to be. It's what gave the authentic charge of transgression and pathos to *Brokeback Mountain*. The opening of *Them Old Cowboy Songs* makes all that plain: "There is a belief that pioneers came into the country, homesteaded, lived tough, raised a shoeless brood and founded ranch dynasties. Some did. But many more had short runs and were quickly forgotten."

And there's not much escape. The last story here is also the best, not least for its title, which might describe the collection as a whole: *Tits-up in a Ditch*. Dakotah believes she can get away from the life she's been given by joining up, going to Iraq; she finds love there for a while with fellow female recruit, Marnie — a self-conscious counterpoint to *Brokeback Mountain*. But she has to come back of course, and home is every bit as much a war zone as where she has been; returning to familiar roads "she realized that every ranch she passed had lost a boy, lost them early and late, boys smiling, sure in their risks, healthy, tipped out of the current of life by liquor and acceleration, rodeo smash-ups, bad horses, deep irrigation ditches, tractor rollovers and 'unloaded' guns..." This is the territory Proulx stakes out for herself. Who needs hell when you have Wyoming?

law, and he won a Pulitzer Prize for a series of dispatches he smuggled out to avoid censorship.

With this type of personal narrative, it's no surprise that a publisher signed Darnton to write a memoir about his father's influence on his own life. Darnton, however, had a more difficult time writing about himself than he did about others, he has said, so he turned to this, his fifth novel, as a "kind of avoidance book." The result, a murder mystery that unfolds in the newsroom of a thinly disguised family-run broadsheet headquartered near Times Square, is a satirical roman a clef that draws in equal parts from Elmore Leonard and Evelyn Waugh.

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Schmalfuss and the ESO: making sweet music together

Gernot Schmalfuss is enthusiastic about his job as music director and chief conductor of Taiwan's Evergreen Symphony Orchestra, the world's only wholly-privately-funded orchestra

BY BRADLEY WINTERTON

STAFF REPORTER

"I love music, but sometimes I think I don't understand it. I can perhaps say why a composer writes this or that note, but that's not understanding in the way you understand the workings of, say, a machine. With music, unlike a machine, there are simply so many mysteries."

So said Gernot Schmalfuss last week. He's in every way a highly charismatic figure. You feel it the moment he begins to conduct his Evergreen Symphony Orchestra (ESO). His enthusiasm is manifest, and it's hardly surprising that the sounds the orchestra produces are the sweetest, clearest and often the most heartfelt to be heard anywhere in Taiwan.

"Take the fugue," he continued. "There are rules for how to write one, but then you find Bach going in some totally different direction. Why? We can admire the end product, and we can love it, but can we really say we understand it? In the end it's a bit like religion. Who can honestly say he understands God?"

The ESO receives no public funding, but is instead the brainchild of the Evergreen Group's (長榮集團) Chang Yung-fa Foundation. It's the only wholly-privately-funded orchestra anywhere in the world. And if that isn't enough to mark it out as unique, it also has an exceptionally youthful composition — something special even in Taiwan, where the ages of all orchestral musicians are far below the global average.

"The ESO's average age is somewhere in the 20s, just as it is in a good football team," Schmalfuss told me smiling.

"One of the results of being privately funded," he went on, "is that we have to develop our own talents rather than rely on bringing in soloists from abroad, though the ESO has played with many celebrated foreigners. And it's true — the orchestra does play from the heart, not only because it's our duty, but also because that's how the musicians genuinely want to play."

"Because they're young, they're immensely enthusiastic. Whenever we have a week free from rehearsing for concerts we play other scores, just for the pleasure of it — Bruckner, for example, a composer who's rather difficult to understand but who presents a challenge that the instrumentalists relish."

"We try to get close to the heart of things. Working with such a young ensemble is a dream because their desire is the same as mine, to get to the inner heart of what we're playing. We never actually reach the heart, of course. But sometimes, perhaps, we come near it."

I asked him what the orchestra's particular strengths were. "First of all, technique. Everyone is able to play in all the different musical styles. Secondly, commitment. Thirdly, openness of mind — they're very quick to accept new ideas. And finally, they're more than willing to adapt their sound to the various requirements of different kinds of music."

No one who heard the ESO's fabulous rendering of Bach's B Minor Mass last March, performed with the Taipei Philharmonic Chorus and soloists, will doubt for a moment the truth of



PHOTOS COURTESY OF ESO

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— Gernot Schmalfuss, Evergreen Symphony Orchestra music director and chief conductor

this. Their mastery of the baroque style was manifest, even though a guest conductor, rather than Schmalfuss, was on the podium on that occasion.

"They also learn very quickly," Gernot Schmalfuss continued. "If you give them a particular direction for a certain passage early on, and that passage recurs, they remember what you said and

play it that way themselves the second time, without having to be reminded."

"Also, there's none of the rivalry you sometimes find among musicians. I was an oboist in an orchestra for many years, and I know what can happen!"

Taiwan's Evergreen Group specializes in maritime transport, air transport (including Eva Air) and the hotel business. The ESO was founded six years ago, and Schmalfuss has been its music director since January of 2007. It's 70-strong, smaller than some of the world's great orchestras. But this smallness contributes to the special nature of its sound. In addition, as Schmalfuss pointed out, if he needs more players for a particular work, there's no shortage of talented instrumentalists in the Taipei area.

Gernot Schmalfuss is himself a celebrated oboist. As a member of the elite Consortium Classicum, he's recorded many chamber works for wind instruments by, among others, Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven and Schubert.

He's also known in the musical world for having discovered some lost scores by Antonio Casimir Cartellieri, a contemporary of Beethoven who died young. He'd been looking for them in the libraries of castles and ducal palaces for 10 years, he told me, and finally discovered two of his four symphonies. They're in a style that lies somewhere between Haydn and middle-period Beethoven, he said. They'd never been played in modern times, and therefore never recorded.

It appears that Schmalfuss actually bought these antique scores

himself, but he was untypically — and tantalizingly — reluctant to go into details. So I asked him if maybe they provided a recording opportunity for the ESO.

"Well, we do have plans to issue more CDs and DVDs, but exactly what and when have yet to be worked out. We're also thinking about opera — and ballet too, in conjunction with some of the local dance companies."

In 2007 the ESO performed in Los Angeles to a very enthusiastic critical reception. They've been invited back, but next month they're going to Shanghai to give a concert in the 2,000-seat Shanghai Oriental Arts Center in Pudong. They'll also provide the musical accompaniment for the opening of a new Evergreen building in the city.

Orchestral versions of Taiwanese folk songs have always been an important ingredient in ESO concerts, and they constitute the boarding music on Eva Air flights. Will they play Taiwanese folk songs in Shanghai, I asked. "Oh yes!" said Schmalfuss. "But also Japanese, Indonesian and Chinese ones as well."

As I got up to go, Schmalfuss said, "You can't say Brahms is my favorite composer, or Bach, as some people do. I just like good music — and even not so good music as well!" He laughed.

Such honesty was typical of the man's generous and tolerant spirit, I thought. Small wonder, then, that the sparkling ESO can be guaranteed to provide such an enjoyable, and even rejuvenating, evening's entertainment on a regular basis.

[HARDCOVER: US]

From a veteran journalist, a murder thriller on deadline

As the bodies pile up in the newsroom, everyone from the beaten-down hack in the next cubicle to the scheming executive emerges as a potential suspect

BY SETH MNOOKIN

NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE, NEW YORK

John Darnton was 11 months old when his father, Byron Darnton, was killed off the coast of New Guinea while covering World War II for the *New York Times*. His father's sacrifice propelled Darnton toward his own four-decade career at the paper's West African correspondent, he was jailed and then expelled from Nigeria, a turn of events that was least partly the result of his friendship with the marijuana-loving Afrobeat pioneer Fela Kuti.

Two years later, when the Ugandan dictator Idi Amin was driven from power, Darnton was on the scene, poking around in the deposed strongman's basement refrigerator to see if he really did keep human hearts on ice. (He didn't.) He was in Poland for the birth of the Solidarity movement and the establishment of martial

law, and he won a Pulitzer Prize for a series of dispatches he smuggled out to avoid censorship.

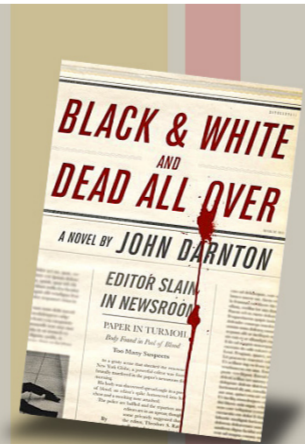
With this type of personal narrative, it's no surprise that a publisher signed Darnton to write a memoir about his father's influence on his own life. Darnton, however, had a more difficult time writing about himself than he did about others, he has said, so he turned to this, his fifth novel, as a "kind of avoidance book." The result, a murder mystery that unfolds in the newsroom of a thinly disguised family-run broadsheet headquartered near Times Square, is a satirical roman a clef that draws in equal parts from Elmore Leonard and Evelyn Waugh.

When the book opens, the *New York Globe* is fighting for its survival, with the bean counters on the business side pushing for staff cuts and a crass New Zealand media mogul named Lester Moloch plotting a takeover. Those existential threats to the paper's identity seem less pressing after

Theodore S. Ratnoff, a tyrannical assistant managing editor, is discovered in a pool of blood on the newsroom floor. Ratnoff was reviled for his withering put-downs of the paper's copy editors — "critical notes of Teutonic exactitude" — and attached to the editor's spike sticking out of his chest is a piece of paper with the same two-word phrase Ratnoff used when he would fire off the rare attaboy inquiring as to the author of a particularly advantageous headline: "Nice. Who?"

The story of Ratnoff's murder is assigned to Jude Hurley, a 35-year-old metro reporter who lives in an East Village walk-up with his German shepherd-Irish setter mix. Hurley, like his progenitor, is an old-school romantic, a shoe-leather reporter who gets off on "the adrenaline rush of working on deadline and nailing a story just right" and who clings to the quaint belief that a journalist's job is "to afflict the comfortable and comfort the afflicted." When the novel opens, his

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BLACK AND WHITE AND DEAD ALL OVER

BY JOHN DARNTON

351 PAGES

ALFRED A. KNOPF

most pressing problem is figuring out what to do about Elaine, his tedious "almost-live-in girlfriend."

He's soon overwhelmed by more immediate concerns, which include catching a killer, staying alive and navigating a nascent flirtation with Priscilla Bollingsworth, the overeducated homicide detective assigned to the case (and one of the novel's several clichéd characters). Ratnoff, it turns out, was just the first of the killer's victims, and as the bodies pile up in the newsroom, everyone from the beaten-down hack in the next cubicle to the scheming executive in the boardroom emerges as a potential suspect.

Throughout, Darnton does a wonderful job capturing the nerve-jangling excitement and ulcer-inducing tension that come with chasing a big, breaking story. One of the nicest grace notes in a book full of them comes after a close call, when Hurley realizes that he had "never come that close to death. But even more trying,

he had never written so much on deadline."

In the solipsistic media world, much time has been spent tittering about the real-life antecedents of characters like Edith Sawyer, a floundering former hotshot who had done "a stint in Latin America, where, rumor had it, she bedded an array of dictators and banana magnates, emerging pregnant with stories," and Hickory Bosch, a disgraced former executive editor who "settled in an old saltbox cottage on the shore of Cape Fear, where he indulged his passion for clammung." That manner of insider arcana shouldn't intimidate the civilians out there; you don't need to have spent a lifetime obsessed with media gossip to enjoy this any more than you need to know that Woody Allen was referencing Fellini's *Amarcord* to appreciate the opening scenes of *Annie Hall*.

Black and White and Dead All Over is above everything else a page-turner, but there's also a message contained therein. By the

end of the book Darnton's respect for the life-and-death power of the written word is readily apparent: a pilfered paragraph from *War and Peace* leads to one character's downfall, the novel's denouement is brought about by a couple of lines of Byron, and a crucial plot point stems from an epically clumsy lead paragraph.

This always-present subtext, along with Darnton's palpable anxiety about the threats to modern journalism, brings him closer to the intent of his original task than it appears at first. Fittingly, his bittersweet nostalgia for a bygone era in journalism — one that Darnton and his father both embodied, in their own ways — is captured best in a toast offered up by Jimmy Pomegranate, a Falstaffian scribe with "the self-regard of Orson Welles" and a passport that's been stamped in 182 countries:

"Here's to us
"Who's like us?
"Damned few
"And they're all dead."