
A Review of Annie Proulx's
Fen, Bog & Swamp:
A Short History of
Peatland Destruction
and Its Role in the
Climate Crisis

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By Debra Huron

At no time during 174 pages of delightful description balanced with deftly delivered data does author Annie Proulx become punny. So, there's no need to fear becoming bogged down – and certainly never swamped – by the “short history” she offers readers.

Annie Proulx loves peatlands, which is a broad term that describes all manner of sphagnum moss lands. Brownish black and dense, peat passes for “soil” down below, while what grows atop sphagnum varies from place to place on the planet, and even within a seemingly contiguous ecosystem.

Grasses and sedges exist as fens. Small trees, orchids and shrubby cranberry bushes create the intricate beauty of a bog. Swamps appear forested, covered as they are with shrubs and larger trees.

In the 1950s, the term “wetlands” was coined to describe all manner of peatlands. Proulx seems to prefer more specific terminology, and as promised in the title, she divides her little book into three sections dealing with fen, bog and swamp.

Known best for her 1993 Pulitzer Prize-winning-novel *The Shipping News*, the 87-year-old Proulx has chosen to delve into fields that she cannot rightfully claim. She is not an historian, not a botanist, not an archaeologist. Instead, as an intelligent author, her slim volume overflows with a meandering mix of art, literature, paleontology, wetland archaeology, history, science and personal reflection. If you want an academic tome, seek elsewhere. Proulx's book communicates passionately about something that matters to her, and maybe to you, too.

"Proulx's mind, her heart and her learning take us on an unforgettable and unflinching tour of past and present, fixed on a subject that could not be more important." —BILL MCKIBBEN

Annie Proulx

Pulitzer Prize-winning author of
BARKSKINS and THE SHIPPING NEWS

FEN, BOG & SWAMP

A Short History of
Peatland Destruction
and Its Role in
the Climate Crisis

At the start, in describing the “why?” of this book, she tells readers: “The literature is massive and I had to narrow down the focus to those special wetlands that form the peat that holds in the greenhouse gases and the methane—the fens, bogs and swamps and how humans have interacted with them over the centuries.”

Although the title promises a “short history,” readers must not expect any kind of straight-as-an-arrow chronology, or typical “history,” ever, at all. Instead, Proulx’s impressive research often highlights the arcane, obscure and quirky on one page, followed on the very next by a detailed plain language description of scientific fact (about how sphagnum works, for example) or a précis of scientific books/studies on peatlands.

The book promises to describe centuries of drainage, which is how demonic humans destroy fens, bogs and swamps. They are watery worlds,

she tells us, and man’s desire to repurpose swathes of peatland for agriculture (and even, in the 1980s in England, for commercial tree planting!) has unleashed tonnes of CO₂ and methane. Proulx says these invisible gases are still being emitted from the same acreages. Tot up the somewhat passive thawing of permafrost (muskeg) in Canada’s northern expanses, throw in the Premier of Ontario’s war on wetlands, and the word crisis applies today, as much as it did to deeds inflicted on peatlands yesterday.

In essence, this is a serious book tackling important topics: biodiversity loss, the sucking dry of a territory’s life blood thanks to an obsession with concepts like “economic growth” and the sad reality that, for centuries, draining the swamp has dominated how humans have chosen to interact with these fragile and complex ecosystems.

In the book’s final words, Proulx pays homage to water: “There never is an end with wetlands as long as there is water.” She laments how a deep disrespect of water, waterways, and oceans (on whose margins mangroves have thrived) may be the deadliest of our environmental sins.

This is a book large in scope and rich in detail. You’ll learn about the English fens, and about bogs and marshes all around the world (mangroves, too). And if you heed Proulx’s advice, you may adopt the flexibility of mind (akin to water’s miraculous flexibility) she thinks we need in order to “...face up to a world quivering with upheavals.” 🐾