



Library podcast

Annie Proulx reads from 'Barkskins'

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[00:00:35] Hi everybody thanks so much for being here tonight. I'm Stesha Brandon. I'm the Literature and Humanities Program Manager at Seattle Public Library. Welcome to the Central Library and to tonight's event with Annie Proulx. I would like to thank our author series sponsor Gary Kunis and the Seattle Times for their generous support for library programs. We're also grateful to the Seattle Public Library Foundation private gifts to the foundation from thousands of donors help the library provide free programs and services that touched the lives of everyone in our community. Let's take a moment to thank all of the wonderful folks who have helped make tonight's event possible. Now let me turn the podium over to Rick Simonson from Elliott Bay Book Company who will introduce tonight's program.

[00:01:21] Thank you Stesha and thank you all very much for being here tonight for us and Elliott Bay there's sort of a funny night because I think it was over a year ago that we got to read any proves extraordinary novel Barkskins was being published and we were part of an evening that seal Arts and Lectures actually sponsored but I had to sort of carry round talking about the book in my way of talking about books to people one by one and not having this kind of a moment until now a year later as the as Barkskins has just come out in paperback. But to say any proof being here tonight actually marks a return to her being here at the this library two years ago. Maybe her first public appearance since moving to this part of the U.S. and that something she's done if you didn't know that she lives in the area now. And it was the occasion was a memorial reading for Ivan Doig. The public a posthumous publication of his last novel The last bus or bus to wisdom a wonderful book that Annie and Annie actions during these wonderful writers read and Ivan Doyle's memorable language but we could start not to hear Ivan's own voice in that but Annie was a friend of Ivan's and was a wonderful part of that night. She's here tonight with this book that has just come out in paperback. And for me it's a chance to say that I can think of very few works of any kind fiction and nonfiction that do what Barkskins does.

[00:02:48] It's a novel that over 300 years of North American history though it goes other parts of the world telling the story of two linked families starting out in a particular place. And it was then called New France and their descendants and where things went over the ensuing three hundred years

particularly as it as it became a matter of what happened to the force of North America. The one family became involved with the operating logging company timber cutting trees down the other family more or less connected to the native local Mic Mac tribal group that was in that area. Their descendants became involved. First of all losing so much of their way of life but also often doing the work of the trees and becoming laborers. And it's a story on so many levels of what we have you know with how this continent was both built and also devastated. And of telling these stories of people whose lives vivid language beautiful writing and through it all what's befalling the trees is that there are there is this notion of what a forest is and what what endures and how despite all this the forest itself is also a character this book and whatever and he's gonna do up your night she can't do all of it because there's a 700 page book but it's actually one that reads Don't be put off by that length.

[00:04:22] I just I just reread it. I don't. That's all the books I've got to read. I've found it is wonderful to book to go back and reread and there is even more in it in rereading it. And it's it's a powerful beautiful book. So she will read from it tonight and take some questions when she's done with that part of it. We'll have a little one or other announcement to make that's connected to this book. Barkskin's and then she'll sign copies of her books we have her other books I have even you know. And it proves one of the great writers of our time author of nine previous books most of them fiction most notably the novel shipping news The Shipping News which received the Pulitzer and National Book Awards. All her books have kind of been enduring persisting favorites of people and that this book Barkskins can she's here which I think is the book that was really the book to date. She should be read for a book that will really truly endure. It's actually a hard book to talk about because it's got so much in it. So for all of that the best thing for you is you're going to get here hear her herself. But we thank you again for being here tonight. And now please ask you to join in welcoming the great and necessary writer any proof.

[00:05:40] Thanks for coming. I'm delighted to be here. Because the book is so long I'm not going to read all of it tonight. But I'm going to read a bit. One of my favorite characters in writing the book was James Duke. This is in the early part of the 19th century. He was one too. I think the third or fourth generation of the dukes descended from Duke who was one of the original characters in the book. This is one of the families and this is where the family begins to really accumulate its money said Lee Duke James's father became very wealthy through stealing vast tracts of White Pine Land in Maine and Oregon.

[00:06:36] So I'm going to introduce you to James Duke tonight.

[00:06:40] Chapter 42 the inlaid table Captain James Duke in his early 50s was complicated dark haired and somewhat handsome. He took a hard headed and hard handed stance to disguise an inner recognition of his worthlessness quixotic a swung from morbid self-pity to rigid authority over his crews and himself the future flickered before him as a likely series of disappointments on the annual occasion of an old day drunk his ill starred birthday. He dragged out the pit his litany that he had been pitched onto a British ship as a midshipman in his tenth year as an unwanted puppy dog is tied to a sapling in the woods and left to be torn apart by wild beasts even his appointment had come about only because his grandfather old Nicholas Duke wrote to the more ancient dread Peacock and

begged the favor of a recommendation the favour granted. Nicholas Duke and the antique peer died within weeks of each other and could be depended on no more but James Duke lasted repeatedly passed over for promotion in favor of candidates from influential landed families or members of the peerage. He lasted he had done moderately well on the examination then stalled for years as a past midshipman but the Napoleonic Wars had let lofted him swiftly over a lieutenant tendency to post captain and there he stayed until in his fifty first year.

[00:08:28] A letter arrived from his Boston cousin free grace Duke asking if he would consider a director's seat on the board of Duke and sons to fill the vacancy left by the death of his father. Sadly that his father had died was a shock to James. He had heard no news of him nor of him from him nor of him for many years. He had never had a letter nor a remembrance never a visit. He thought that if sadly had left him anything in his will it would be an insultingly paltry sum as a single shilling or a savage castigation for causing the death of his first wife. James's mother he had always known by his father hated him as the days passed. He considered the idea of sitting on the board of the family timber company. Little had ever come to James from the Duke's beyond a yearly allowance of fifty pounds if he accepted he would have to make concessions would have to revert to being an American. He would bring a touch of English distinction to the no doubt squalid board and meetings of Duke and Sons. Likely the reason they invited him to join them. He could imagine those meetings a scarred oak and table with half a dozen lit back woodsman slouched around it on Pine benches tankers of rum laced home brewed beer tipsy ribald.

[00:09:59] For he had no illusion that the Dukes were models of moral behavior before he could draft his cool note of refusal a letter arrived from a Boston law office signed by attorney Hugh Trumbull. It was late December. The day's short and dark the worst of the English year advocate Trumbull begged James's attendance at Trumbull and tendril as soon as he might manage the journey in order to hear something to his advantage enclosed was a draft for one hundred pounds drawn on Duke and sons for his passage to Boston so rarely had the words something to your advantage come to him that he decided on the minute to accept free Grace's offer and remove permanently to Boston advantage meant more than a single shilling. He made his arrangements and booked passage for Boston the Western blessing was crowded with German emigrants journeying to Pennsylvania to found a utopia and these people quarreled incessantly with each other about the details of the earthly paradise to come to keep free of them James. Duke stayed in his cabin during the day coming out only to take the wintery air or to dine and drink with Captain Euclid gun who was even older than himself but of an equal rank over a roast chicken. They raced through see acquaintances held in common.

[00:11:40] They spoke of retired and disabled friends as the level sank in the decanter cap Richard Maurer one of the most ablest even I ever knew is forced to open a herring stall in Bristol. You are a fortunate man Captain do to be connected to a wealthy family. Some of us depart from the sea to live out our lives ashore selling fish or driving a goods cart and I myself have no expectations of a rich sinecure. I hope I will go to Davy Jones afore I wheel a barrow of mussels shocked to hear that Dick Moore has come to such a pass.

[00:12:24] But Captain Gunn I'm sure that a happier freight a happier future awaits you than mongering do you not have a reputation for fashioning small attractive tables. Oh it's only my amusement you know never to make a living from it. You might try. Everyone admires small tables as that one he said and he pointed to an example of the captain's handiwork and Ebony's side table inlaid with a ship in full sail cut from walrus tusk ivory. Any mariners family would be happy to possess such a handsome article of furnishing.

[00:13:05] Oh you must have it when you disembark. I will make another but you should take that one as a memento of your years at sea and this VI edge.

[00:13:15] I insist. Look is a secret drawer where you may keep your love letters.

[00:13:23] Once a week other choice guests join the captain's table and once a female misters Posey Brandon a dark haired lady of considerable stature. Quite overtopping the gentlemen at the table but sitting silent for the most part unless pressed to speak she was travelling home after a long visit with a relative to rejoin her husband. Winthrop Brandon a Presbyterian preacher who had made his name with a book of virtuous precepts another passenger Thomas Gort showed her excessive attention. James understood why Gort phoned. She had only she had great Onyx dark eyes fringed by thick eyelashes but Gort made too much of her. When Mrs. Brandon said she had visited madam to SOS exhibition at the Lyceum Theater of wax curiosities of crime Gort begged for repulsive details. The lady demurred saying she had averted her eyes before many of the exit exhibits. I did not see how a member of the gentler sex. Even a German or French lady could have fastened on such an unpleasant mode of expression she said and cut at her beat. I understand she first gained her skill in making wax flowers for family funeral wreaths and after that she said nothing more.

[00:14:58] The days of tilting Horizon passed slowly as they neared the continent. They saw increasing dozens of ships wooden Leviathans rope strung like musical instruments shimmering with raw salt. Boston Harbor was so jammed they had they anchored 20 minutes row from the docks James located his trunk a scuffed browned affair on the deck. He did not see the promised inlaid table with the boxes and bundles to go ashore and found Captain Gunn on the bridge. I thought I would thank you again for the table he said. It seemed to him Captain Gunn showed a coolness. He remarked sir I look forward to enjoying it in my new quarters or shall I fetch it on deck myself.

[00:15:53] What girl. He bellowed at a sailor fetch the small table in my cabin to the deck for the gentleman it was undoubtedly a sneer embedded in the word gentleman.

[00:16:04] James do guess that Captain Gunn was in his true self a parsimonious man made momentarily generous only by Madeira he was crowded into the tender with two dozen passengers Bostonians from their accents in their anxiety to get on shore. They were very restive passing bundles back and forth a portly matron stood up to receive a small trunk. The weight surprised her and she swayed tried to hold it then fell with a shriek into the wintery harbour. GASPING she clutched at the girl and her weight dislodged two more passengers. Captain Duke stretched out his hand to a terrified man and its slow but inexorable motion. The tender rose on its side and sent 10 or 12 more people

bellowing and clawing over the side gasping for he could not swim. James Duke thrashed his arms trying for the gunnels his hand touched though he could barely feel it and then he went under again as the heavy woman wrapped one arm around him. He escaped his captor and with an atavistic swimming motion burst upward into the sweet air something clenched his hair and dragged him to the side of the tender. Something got hold of the back of his coat collar and hauled relentlessly. He came up over the gunnels crashed into the bottom of the boat and looked up at his savior a woman wearing a black bonnet and staring at him with lustrous intensely black eyes. Mistress Brandon who had exhibited the strength of two men chattering thanks and promises to call on his rescuer in a few days James to return to his homeland on the first day of February in a sopping freeze. He managed a cab to take him to the pine tree in waiting for his trunk to arrive. He stood as close as he could to the fire drinking boiling tea at last. The trunk was hauled up to the room and trembling.

[00:18:17] He pulled on his warmest clothes wool wool. Good English wool.

[00:18:23] That was exceedingly cold in Boston. Snow fell in an inch or two every day for a week until all was muffled and silent roofs carriages and still the snow came two days after his arrival and with a drunken headache drumbeat headaches. Sorry. James Duke walked to the offices of Trumbull and tendrils slipping on icy cobblestones the clerk who let him in took his hat and gave him two swift startled looks before his habitual air of indifference returned an empty expression that classified the people he met as side chairs or pen wipers. It was the same with advocate Hugh Trumbull. Whose mouth fell open and then closed. He sprinkled face suddenly creaked into a smile. He might have been English thought James taking in the fashionable double breasted coat with notable lapels half laughing and welcome Trumbull made James comfortable in a chair near the snapping fire. The clerk brought in tumblers of hot rum Toddy. You quite shook me. It's uncanny how much you resemble your late father Trumbull drank off half his glass of rum and waved his hand at the window where the flying snow half obliterated the street and the building across the way. Would you believe that I have killed deer from this window. He asked. Of course it was many years ago and deer are now scarce now sir he said to business. And over the next hour laid out the details of steadily Dukes will elated and confused James Duke returned to the pine tree with a wait of keys in his pocket.

[00:20:15] In essence sadly Duke had regretted his long hatred and left half his rich estate to James including his dwelling house north of Tremont Street complete with six acres of garden land of fruit orchard 20 acres of fresh meadow a 12 stall stable two carriages and six matched pair of horses nearly two million acres of forest in Maine passed to sadly from Charles Duke's old partner for from a collection of Indian relics a stuffed crocodile eight silver platters four and twenty pewter plates a turtle shell have a nice knife. A library of 84 books to hogs heads of Portuguese vino eight barrels of rum to waste coats embroidered with bucolic scenes five Turkey carpets six warehouses of lumber twenty seven acres of salt marsh part interest and several ships potash manufacturers a shingle factory Ohio timberlands bank accounts and stocks and more that he could not remember. Trumbull had enjoyed detailing the provisions of the will the servants are staying on with the house so they hope they will retain them. You may remember that your father called the property Black Swan populated his pond with those birds 40 odd years ago it was all rough. Gloomy forest and now we see handsome estates.

I would advise you to keep the servants as they understand the particularities and virtues of the place.

[00:22:01] We'll make the transition to Boston pleasant here for you. James sat with his mouth open hardly believing what he was hearing. Mrs. Trumbull and I hope you will do us the favor of dinner with us oblique hints some of your cousins will be in attendance and we thought you might wish to meet them away from the offices sir said James. Sir his head aching fiercely in his throat a raw ribbon of fire. He took to his bed at the pine tree for the next four days and they swooning and dreaming of the delights that lay before him. He would move to the house as soon as he was well and then pay a call on the Winthrop Brandon's. And thank mistress Brandon properly with a gift. But he was embarrassed to have been pulled from the water by a woman. He should have saved her. And should he wait until the crumbles. Dinner party or immediately pay play a call on cousin free grace Duke who certainly knew of James's unexpected fortune. No doubt he would try and sweet little way to himself and the other Duke's or at least to the failing business coffers for the gang of back woodsman had likely put the company in disarray perhaps steadily Duke had been the White sheep and a black flock. Thank you. Is. This novel. To. The death of Freddie. And. I would like

[00:23:51] Elizabeth the ring was my history teacher when I was in high school in Maine in Portland Maine. There is another Portland you know on the other side of the country. She loved history and her enthusiasm for the past just resonated with me. It was quite infectious. Her particular subject was Aaron Burr whom she thought had been wrongly and unfairly portrayed as a traitor and a bounder. So she spent quite a few years working on Aaron Burr and wrote a book about him. I don't have a copy of that book. I've never seen it but I think it was published anyway are our time together was one year of history class and then my family which moved frequently moved away and I never saw Elizabeth ring again. But the love of history remained with me and I never forgot her. And I know that her memory is revered in Maine as a fine historian of that place. That's all I can tell you about Elizabeth ring. She was great.

[00:25:12] Everybody should be so lucky as to have a teacher like that and maybe some of you did.

[00:25:20] I'm supposed to repeat the questions. He the first one was about Elizabeth ring. And the gentleman over there would like to know for what the that I write diverse subjects and what the inspiration is. And in a nutshell I suppose it would be to say that I look for social problems. So each book that I do write is about something that puzzles and bothers me and then I want to know more about. So really writing a novel is like an exploration for me. I find out more and the reader. If somebody reads it finds out more the first book. That I wrote you know I can't remember the names of these things. I'd have to look I really would. It was about Hill Farms in Vermont. I was living in Vermont at the time and the hill farms are pretty much gone the milk trucks refused to go up the steep hills anymore and it changed the whole dairy character of the state in the 1920s and 30s when when the farmers couldn't get their milk picked up anymore. A lot of them just had no other income and they moved away. So there was a period of lots and lots of empty farm houses sitting around in Vermont and then people from Boston and New York and Montreal discovered these cool houses in a very beautiful place and began buying them up for peanuts.

[00:27:12] And that went on for many many years. It's still going on but the prices are much higher now. So that book whose name I can't remember her about the Hill Farms is one. Accordion Crimes was about immigrants I was interested in immigrant difficulties and I liked music and I thought the accordion was a very good instrument to write about because it was the immigrants instrument. It was small. It was light. It could be easily carried it could reproduce the music of home. It was it was an important thing in the settlement of this country. The accordion. Who knew. So I had a lot of fun traveling around the country and listening to the different kinds of music made with it. Visiting with accordion makers and hearing people who were very skilled at. Playing different kinds of accordions and bandoneons and the rest concertina US and the rest of it of that musical group. And it was fun and interesting to weave stories around these different instruments and the travels of of green accordion from hand to hand through a couple of generations.

[00:28:41] I have to admit that I like a string of time when I'm writing a novel I like to go from an early period to a later one because that way you can put change in and because when I studied history it was the French an old school with an emphasis on the long delay of events so that for me has always been central to anything I write a story that involves change social change difficulties difficult problems and long period of time it's just the way I guess I see the world.

[00:29:22] So that was Accordion Crimes. I really can't. I should have brought a list. This is a hard question sir.

[00:29:30] Yes. First of all I wanted to thank you for

[00:29:36] Having this free reading.

[00:29:39] I wanted to see you when you came when you had the reading last year but unfortunately they were charging 45 dollars for it which you're a good author but is a little out of my budget and my question is what made you move to Seattle and do you envision a book coming out that coming out of here.

[00:29:59] Curiosity I was I was living in Wyoming and had been living in Wyoming for about 20 years from Vermont. I moved to Wyoming I liked Wyoming a great deal. I loved skiing in the champagne powder for 18 years and the problem was I was getting older. I was living out in my nearest neighbor it was two miles from my house and it was seven miles to the post office. It was a long way to the grocery store because there was one grocery store in town. And it was a really retarded IGA that was not good and I like to eat so I would drive down to Fort Collins Colorado to go grocery shopping and that took a day to get all the way down there do the shopping and back before everything decayed. So there came a point where I began to get very tired of driving to Denver to the doctor to the airport to the dentist and so forth and decided I should find a place more convenient put the house up for sale which I didn't want to do but did and it sold and I had to go somewhere. My youngest son was staying with me at the time and he said why not Seattle. He went to school University of Washington

and loved the area. Why not. Sure. I had never really seen this part of the country so I moved Yes ma'am.

[00:31:39] Thank you so much. I don't know how to word it exactly but how do you zone in on such a wonderful understanding of social issues that you have. I'm thinking about to Middle East. I saw that were made from books and one of them was the shipping news and I want to know if you can tell me at all. What kinds of things keep you inspired to write and. And where did that start with childhood. Is it in the family so to speak or help me.

[00:32:20] There's nothing else that I can really do well so. So I might as well wright. I have always written since I was a little kid. I've liked to make the shapes of letters and sentences on a piece of paper. My mother was an artist and I and my sisters all grew up with pens and pencils in our hands and drawing and sketching and writing are closely connected. And so it was just natural. I was very fond of the shapes of letters and numbers. And for me each letter had personality so it was play it was it was like drawing it was making something and it was a kind of creation and I still write by hand. Most things and then put it on the computer later. But writing by hand for me is the way to do it. I don't think fast enough to to type well and I think it's easy take it make a terrible mess fall into cliché land when you're typing but if you write slowly with a pen on paper you see the bad stuff more easily but that's a curiosity and fun is inspiration enough and I'm interested in the past. With the shipping news. I knew that you should writers should stay away from the whole thing. Film is different than the book or the story. I also know that writers who thought they would be welcome on a set and went there and were rudely rebuffed regretted it and had a lesson and different forms of art that they didn't like very much so I avoided that. I really did not have much to do with the shipping news. I liked the director and I wasn't crazy about the casting as much as I like Kevin Spacey I didn't think he was right for Coyle but the one thing that I begged of them is that they would shoot it in Newfoundland which is an incredibly beautiful and fine place with great great people.

[00:34:58] And even though the stars and the movie people had to bunk with locals instead of in five star hotels they grew to love it too. And Newfoundland itself became the star of the film and it's led many many people to discover a truly marvelous place on the globe which badly needed some attention because the cod fishing which was the principal way people made their living not too long ago just fell apart. People had to move to the mainland to find jobs stocking shelves in Wal-Mart. So once again you had lots of empty houses sitting around the shores and they were cheap and they were beautiful.

[00:35:50] They needed some work but there they were. And after the shipping news was done I bought one of those houses. So it was post facto not before the film was made. If I paid ninety five thousand dollars for it but I might have paid less anyway it was a gorgeous place in the tourist industry helped a bit.

[00:36:15] It's still a place that's very rugged. It's also a place that has become quite dependent on tourism

[00:36:23] And there is a very upscale very very expensive place now. I want to say on Fogel island it's this great rambling wreck of a creature although it's not old it's new on stilts. Right on the rocks with the sea crashing around practically underneath the hotel. And if you have a thousand dollars a night you can stay there. It's very very beautiful and well appointed I hear. I've never stayed there myself.

[00:37:01] Hi. Thank you so much for reading. I came out tonight because I love your fiction by your introduction jogged a memory for me and I hope I'm not misremembering this but have you also written a book on cider making. Am I remembering that correctly.

[00:37:16] Oh yeah I did long yeah.

[00:37:18] Okay. I'm not. I'm not forgetting that I'm not misremembering that. Why.

[00:37:22] One of the things I love about Washington is the great cider here and I'm wondering if you have a favorite type of cider in Washington.

[00:37:30] No I don't. My youngest son is a cider aficionados but I haven't had a glass of cider for quite some time. Yeah I wrote that before I started writing fiction. There was a period in my life when I lived in northern Vermont in the woods with a guy and to have some money coming in I would write articles for magazines and he would write articles for magazines and we made cider because we couldn't afford anything else. And I got very interested in it and together we wrote that book and went to England to visit some of the cider orchards and get the real thing which we hadn't had before. It was part of the adventure of. Going to the place where it started and getting the good stuff right from the beginning instead of imagining it finding out about it. And that's what we did with the cider. We went and had great cider in France and in and in England came back and wrote the book

[00:38:45] So yeah I wrote it.

[00:38:47] We have time for one more question from the audience. Anybody have something they're just dying to ask. What are you working on now.

[00:38:56] I'm not working on anything. I'm thinking I'm slow. So it takes me a long time of thinking and casting my eye around since I haven't been here very long. I don't know what I'll be writing about. I'll probably write something but who knows when. Not me. I'm in the process of moving I'm not moving out of the state I'm moving out to the peninsula because my house that I'm living in now is in the middle of red cedar forest. It's very beautiful and I admire the red cedar tree but boy am I allergic to it. So it's really making me pretty ill. And it took a long time to figure out just what it was. It was not a visitation from the heavens or something I'd done wrong. It was the red cedar. I was very amused to have a friend recently send me an article about the Florida FBI offices. They bought a large beautiful sculpture made of red cedar put it in place in the in the rotunda or the entranceway of the offices and people began falling ill at once. So the FBI sent I forgot what it was now about 10 or 14 people to the hospital with this bizarre ailment. If you live on the other side of the Rocky Mountains you don't come

in contact with red cedar. There's probably nobody in this room who's allergic to it except me and it's because I come from you know which way is east here that way. Okay. I come from that way. I suppose if I live long enough I might get more used to it but it's better to go where there's not so much red cedar.

[00:41:01] Well thank you so much. We have one more thing. Yeah let's give Annie a round of applause.

[00:41:11] You have one more thing I could have reassume a place up here for a moment. Not to keep talking about the book although there's so much more that could be said. But Baskins in its publication last year received many citations from newspapers such as the New York Times the San Francisco Chronicle The Boston Globe The Seattle Times NPR as one of the top books of the year and the most significant. And if you look at the especially the paperback you these little little brief lines snipped out of out of the reviews and the substance of a Chronicle I believe called it possibly the greatest environmental novel ever written. Boston Globe our friend John Freeman there said this is the masterpiece any proof was meant to write so you get those little things in our books are we actually said this was the greatest Northwest novel not set in the northwest because it's so the forest and and you know what's happened to them are so important to hear even though this book is really set mostly in the east. The book sellers of the Pacific Northwest do an annual award and it's my pleasure on behalf of the Pacific Northwest Booksellers. They do an award that goes to a number of books published in a year. And it's my pleasure and honor to present this to Annie tonight for a buckskin. So this is this award which is yes. Assists That's. What happened later. New York New York. Hold this up. HQ. This is marvelous.

[00:42:48] I will have to put it on the wall of the new house when I get there. If I can find one with a strong enough wall

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