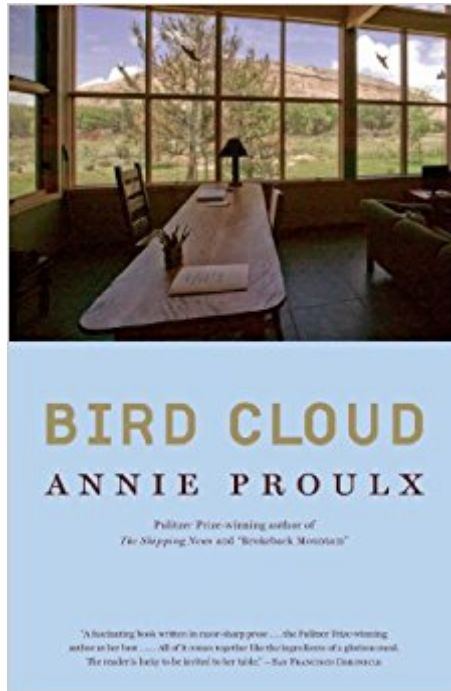




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# Bird Cloud: A Memoir Of Place



## Synopsis

Part autobiography, part natural history, *Bird Cloud* is the glorious story of Annie Proulx's piece of the Wyoming landscape and her home there. "Bird Cloud" is the name Annie Proulx gave to 640 acres of Wyoming wetlands and prairie and four-hundred-foot cliffs plunging down to the North Platte River. On the day she first visited, a cloud in the shape of a bird hung in the evening sky. Proulx also saw pelicans, bald eagles, golden eagles, great blue herons, ravens, scores of bluebirds, harriers, kestrels, elk, deer and a dozen antelope. She fell in love with the land, then owned by the Nature Conservancy, and she knew what she wanted to build on it: "a house in harmony with her work, her appetites and her character, a library surrounded by bedrooms and a kitchen. Bird Cloud is the story of designing and constructing that house with its solar panels, Japanese soak tub, concrete floor, and elk horn handles on kitchen cabinets. It is also an enthralling natural history and archaeology of the region inhabited for millennia by Ute, Arapaho, and Shoshone Indians and a family history, going back to nineteenth-century Mississippi riverboat captains and Canadian settlers. Proulx, a writer with extraordinary powers of observation and compassion, here turns her lens on herself. We understand how she came to be living in a house surrounded by wilderness, with shelves for thousands of books and long worktables on which to heap manuscripts, research materials and maps, and how she came to be one of the great American writers of her time.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

The Pulitzer Prize winner and author of *Brokeback Mountain* portrays her flawed paradise in the majestic, hardscrabble West in this vibrant memoir. Proulx bought a 640-acre nature preserve by the North Platte River in Wyoming and started building her dream house, a project that took years and went hundreds of thousands of dollars over budget. In her bustling account, Proulx salivates over the prospect of a Japanese soak tub, polished concrete floor, solar panels, and luxe furnishings that often turn into pricey engineering fiascoes. The meticulous master builders she dubs the James Gang are the book's heroes. Though the house never quite lives up to its promise, it does inspire the author's engrossing natural history of the locale. Proulx drives cattle off of the overgrazed terrain; finds stone arrowheads; recounts the lore of the Indians, ranchers, and foppish big-game hunters who contested the land; and documents the antics of the eagles, magpies, mountain lions, and other critters who tolerate her presence. Like her fiction, Proulx's memoir flows from a memorable landscape where "the sagebrush seems nearly black and beaten low by the ceaseless wind

Part memoir, part nature journal, part history, and part construction journal, *Bird Cloud* is, as the *Boston Globe* sums up, "a strange, disjointed, often beautiful book." • The first point many critics commented on was its curious timing given the foreclosure crisis. "There is a whiff of unexamined privilege" • throughout, notes the *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, and most did not disagree. Yet whether in good taste or bad, that wasn't the main point of contention. Reviewers generally agreed that Proulx is a master of capturing place, and her descriptions of the wild landscape held even naysayers' interest. However, many thought the writing unrestrained and circuitous, with no sense of unifying story. In the end, *Bird Cloud* may offer the most for design lovers "and those with \$3.7 million to spend, as the property is now up for sale. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

In this memoir author Annie Proulx speaks of what it means to build a home. She begins with an almost unlikely tale in which she and her sister are delayed by a very weird merchant, so much so that they come upon a car accident they might have been a part of if it hadn't been for the weird man who is instrumental in delaying them. When she tells her mother of the incident, her mother reveals that the man's name was Proulx, too. Proulx has lived in many locales but seems to have taken quite a liking to the West, most assuredly New Mexico and Wyoming, where she decides to purchase land and build a place where she will live out her days: "A bald eagle perched in a dead tree, watching us. The landscape was bold. Not only was the property on

the North Platte River but the river ran through it, taking an east-west turn for a few miles in its course. The land was a section, 640 acres, a square mile of riparian shrubs and cottonwood, some wetland areas during June high water, sage flats and a lot of weedy overgrazed pasture (46). Proulx purchases the land as the site for her house, Bird Cloud. She then gives the reader a treasure trove of history concerning her patch of land. The archaeological. The environmental. Trying to understand Wyoming's landscape where I could see the remains of Indian trails, stone flakes from their toolmaking, the tools themselves, images scratched into the dark desert varnish of rock faces, cairns and fire pits forced recognition: where there are humans there is always ecological change (165). The political wranglings. White men never understood the Indian way of consensus and insisted on dealing with a tribal leader or chief, another concept alien to Indians who learned to greatly distrust the lying, devious white men whose treaties were worthless. On the other side, most whites regarded Indian oratory as a kind of obstructionist filibustering, boring harangues, though some admired them and saw them as akin to classical Roman oratory (171). The two most interesting aspects of the book, to me, are following the narrative of Proulx's house's construction, and two, the observation of bird life. It's as if she, while telling of the building of her nest, recounts another story, as if she herself is just another bird attempting to make a home in the area. They seem to observe her as much as she observes them. The first day I saw Bird Cloud, in July 2003, I was astonished by the great number and variety of birds in this river habitat. A bald eagle sat in a tree near the river's edge. Pelicans sailed downstream. I saw swallows, falcons, bluebirds, flocks of ducks burst up the the North Platte and flew over my head in whistling flight. Ravens croaked from the cliff. I thought my great avocation for the rest of my life would be watching these birds and learning their ways (191). Proulx does much to depict the arduous nature of living in the mountainous setting. At times strong and constant winds. Foot after foot of snow. Impassable roads. Bitterly cold temperatures day after day. Gerald kept smashing a path through the drifts on the county road and managed to get in and out most days, taking a risk lover's joy in the nauseating slides toward the ditch, the scrape of ice and packed snow on his truck's undercarriage (119). Even after the house is finished, even as Proulx remains until the last day of December before fleeing to her other home in New Mexico, she finally sees she will never be able to realize her dream of living in this environment year round. So ended the first and only full year I was to spend at Bird Cloud. I returned in March and for several more years came in early spring and stayed until the road-choking snow drove me out, but I had to face the fact that no matter how much I loved the place it was not, and never could be, the final

home of which I had dreamed” (231). Sad. And yet something to admire: her almost unstoppable desire and courage to see the building of her home through to its completion, something most of us can only dream of” making Proulx a rare bird indeed.

Disappointing. This really great author bogs down in the concept of wanting to build her home in a very beautiful but highly impractical place. I was overcome with the desire to shout, "So, move!" It's hard to read her endless cogitations something so unwise. Maybe I'm lacking a sense of poetry and art.

I should have connected the date published (2011) with the fact that only 72 people purchased this book on Kindle. The reviews were mixed. I found it endlessly boring. It went on about her ancestors. Who could keep track? Who cared? It was the same with her house. I kept waiting for some movement, some interaction. The book was so bogged down with dull facts. Too bad she didn't stick to the formula of her other stories.

I usually do not care for her style, but Annie Proulx did a fine job on *Bird Cloud*. I enjoyed it, even though she was foolish enough to leave Wyoming.

The subtitle of this book is the clue to its unusual format. It started out with Proulx's earliest memories and a bit of a history of the family and seems to be organised in bundles. Occasionally the same information is returned to from a different direction, so to speak. The footnotes pop up in unusual places on the Kindle (ie. not at the foot of the page) and, like many Librarything contributors I was a bit confused and annoyed. But the story was fascinating, the history, the house building, the wildlife and the trees. I really wanted photos and spent a lot of time looking things up. Almost thoroughly enjoyable!

I've read most of Proulx's books, and I rate this the best yet. The first time I checked out the book from the library. As I wanted to share the book with friends, I ordered it...but had to read it the second time before I could lend it. Proulx shares the dream and the frustration of trying to create her ideal space to live, write, and observe and study the natural world. This is an inspiring book. Life is meant to be lived by striving toward aspirations.

One of my favorite writers. If it's by Annie Proulx, it's a sure fire great read. But this isn't fiction. It's

the story of building a house in Wyoming. The project was agonizing. Maybe all construction projects are, but this one gets to be tiresome. An enormous amount of money must have been spent for all that special luxury material sent out into the middle of nowhere. Perhaps in the current economy the winning seems distasteful or selfish.

I selected this book as my recommendation for our Book Club as I had heard a radio interview with Annie Proulx when she was in Sydney and I had visited Wyoming last year. The book was dry with none of the lilting stark prose I expected. I thought it was self indulgent and did not 'feel' Wyoming as I did Newfoundland in Shipping News. I could not buy the book in Australia and received it by mail from in a few days.

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