

# ARTS-ENTERTAIN

## Author turns short story into first novel

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DAYTON — After only being on the book shelves for a few weeks, Cincinnati native Shari Goldhagen's debut novel "Family and Other Accidents" already is vibrating a palpable buzz in literary circles.

The former National Enquirer reporter is no longer covering the hype of pop culture — as she was once given an unapologetic middle finger from Britney Spears on the red carpet — but instead is the center of attention herself, as critically lauded reviews of her novel have appeared in People, Entertainment Weekly and even The New York Times Book Review.

The Daily Standard recently caught up with the novelist during her stop at Dayton's Books & Co. to talk about the craft of fiction, getting published and the impact of pop culture within her own writing.

In the novel, Jack and Connor Reed are protagonist brothers from the Cleveland suburbs who each must navigate through relationships in love, illicit sexual romps and commitments to both jobs and people. Their parents have both died before the novel begins.

Employing a semi-minimalist prose, Goldhagen guides the reader through various points of view of the brothers, as well as girlfriends and children. Her modernist form is reminiscent of John Updike, as she primarily focuses on individual characters — particularly their interactions and idiosyncratic stream of consciousness — without necessarily commenting on a particular politics or framework of the world.

She writes: "Apart from the years Jack was at Penn and those Connor was in school in Boulder, Connor has lived in the same house with Jack since he was born, easily the person Jack should know the most about, but he finds himself wondering what he does know about his brother. That Connor lost both parents by the age of 15, that he once broke his shoulder, is allergic to strawberries, likes to jump out of airplanes ... might wear contacts?"

When asked about her deceptively simple prose, Goldhagen said she wrote her novel for normal fiction readers. She admits it is not the kind of literary novel to make the New York Times Best Seller list, but says her audience won't need a doctorate in literary theory to enjoy and understand it.

"I feel like I ... have some things to say on a personal human level," she told The Daily Standard. "The human interstices of relationships. If I can say something about human wisdom ... I recognize that this is not a giant political statement."

Goldhagen is proud that each chapter in the book — which spans two decades of the Reed brothers' lives — can be read as a self-contained short story within the totality of the novel. In fact, a short story



William Kincaid/The Daily Standard

Ohio Native Shari Goldhagen was described by Pulitzer Prize winning author Richard Ford as "already, at a young age ... a fully self-possessed novelist, in command of large figurations, shrewd intelligence and wit, and a fine eye for the world and the American sentence."

from her undergraduate days at Northwestern became the catalyst for the novel. After writing "In the Middle of Nowhere, Dying of Salmonella," which became chapter six, she wondered why Jack and his girlfriend Mona were having such relationship trouble and expanded the situation to a novel.

"Those two characters were having such a hard time on their trip," she said. "(I wanted to know if they had) a greater hand in their own destiny."

Surprisingly, Goldhagen chose her first novel's protagonist to be men. When asked how she became confident enough to write about them — instead of perhaps someone like herself — she said she wrote exhaustively about women her age in college until she got them "out of my system."

"It's always harder to write across genders," she said. Also, she said it was very liberating to explore men and broad assumptions that come with them.

Goldhagen sold her novel and signed a book contract with Doubleday in October 2004. The

book was not released until recently and was simultaneously published in paperback and hardback — a new literary corporate strategic trend. During that time, when the publisher edited and searched for methods of marketability, she said not much of her novel was changed.

"It's pretty much the same book," she said.

However, she said she was disappointed when Doubleday required that the novel's title be changed from "The Next Generation of Dead Kenedeys" to "Family and Other Accidents." Perhaps, she said, it would have been too alienating on the market, as a certain subculture may recognize The Dead Kenedeys as the underground hardcore punk outfit. Once the design came out, she said she was excited.

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