

FICTION



Shari Goldhagen's new novel is a soap opera for smart people.

Two brothers live lives that are made for movies

By CHARITY VOGEL

NEWS BOOK REVIEWER

So help me, I tried. But I could not stop picturing Matt Damon and Ben Affleck in the lead roles of this very movie-ish debut novel.

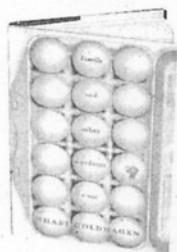
Especially after the story left Cleveland and Chicago and jumped to Boston — ah, boy did I feel validated then. I knew it would be Boston in the end. Only problem was, I had been imagining Affleck in the Jack role, and Damon in the role of the younger brother, Connor — the one who goes to Harvard, marries well, lives in Massachusetts, and gets cancer.

Other than that, though, I was right on.

But to say that Shari Goldhagen's new novel, her first, is "movie-ish" is not a slam on it — at least, it's not meant to be. Here, that's a compliment. The writing in "Family and Other Accidents" goes down like rich cream, it's so simple and forward-moving and smooth. Did you ever notice how difficult that kind of writing is to actually do? Goldhagen's novel is the kind of book that makes novel-writing look easy. And that is a compliment.

The plot of "Family" is good and simple, too, and strong, built around the lovely archetype of the "Story of Two Brothers Who Went Out in the World," although it's got a somewhat soapy aftertaste. If this novel is a little soapy, though, it's soap for smart people who like being pulled into their novels for 300 absorbing pages. And, done right, no doubt about it, a brotherhood saga can hit you in the gut like nothing else.

As Goldhagen's does. Here, she



Family and Other Accidents

By Shari Goldhagen

Doubleday, 288 pages, \$24

relates the tale of Jack and Connor Reed over 25 years, as they struggle to be family to one another in the aftermath of the — separate and early — deaths of their parents.

As the story begins, Jack Reed, a young lawyer, good-looking and well off, has returned to Cleveland to take care of his teenage brother, "the only living person in the entire world required to love him." Not exactly orphaned waifs, with their budding educations and careers and their big suburban house, the Reed boys — especially Connor — nevertheless have no idea how to live, particularly in relation to one another.

Jack joins his father's law firm, works around the clock, and hooks up with young staff women at the office. Connor casts about for who he is; he knows he isn't Jack, but isn't sure of much else. (In a lovely touch, Connor likes to talk to the poster of Jack Kennedy hanging in

his brother's old bedroom, in snippets of conversation — one side real, one side imagined — that ring surprisingly true, and not cutesy.)

The Reed brothers' lives spill out over the years, and their lives hit bumps and pinnacles that feel like real life. Connor's first sexual experience is awful and unmemorable, not magic. Jack screws up again and again and becomes thicker, coarser, someone we don't like all that much. When one of the character's wives gets pregnant she "knew he would never think the time was right. . . . It was easier she figured, to ask for forgiveness than permission." Starting each new chapter — some of which vault you four or five years forward — you quickly learn not to make assumptions about where Goldhagen will take her characters, who will have like real people, not like reality-TV clones or plasticky toys.

Want Connor's marriage to last forever? Want Jack to realize before it's too late that he should have a child with long-suffering girlfriend/wife Mona? Want Laine, Connor's wife, to loosen up a bit, for their sick dog to live, for the affair of one of the brothers with the 20-something woman to be quick and unimportant and painless, for the Reed brothers to finally — really, deeply — connect? Before it's too late?

Don't wish for too much, here. Goldhagen's people live and breathe on the page. And not only is that not easy to do, it's also unpredictable.

Charity Vogel is a features writer and book critic for *The Buffalo News*.

e-mail: cvogel@buffnews.com