

Writer Goldhagen liberated by release of debut novel

By CHARITY VOGEL

NEWS STAFF REPORTER

Shari Goldhagen didn't warm up her skills for novel-writing in the typical ways.

Far from it. While other budding authors were busy attending workshops and plodding through writing exercises, Goldhagen was taking notes on Hollywood stars, keeping an eye on Bill Clinton and studying the twists and turns of the Scott Peterson trial.

Goldhagen paid the bills, see, as a freelance writer for the National Enquirer – yes, that infamous supermarket tabloid full of dishy celebrity gossip and, ahem, “news.”

(A sample headline from one of Goldhagen's stories at the Enquirer: “Clinton Vows to Stop Cheating After Terrifying Visions During Surgery.” She also wrote about Chelsea Clinton's neighbor, who apparently walked around their apartment building semi-naked.)

“It's funny, I only started working at

the Enquirer because I thought it would be interesting, that there would be a lot of material,” said Goldhagen, 30, by phone from her home in New York. “It was a little bit disappointing.”

“But,” she added, “I liked that it was completely different.”

Anyway, the “celebrity stalking” gig, as Goldhagen wryly puts it, paid the utility bills and allowed her to keep working on her novel, “Family and Other Accidents” – a terrific literary read which also seems tailor-made for the movies – that arrives in book-

stores in early April.

The book mentions Buffalo, too, in a scene in which the central characters – two brothers named Jack and Connor Reed – are traveling by car from Cleveland to Boston. In Buffalo, they stop to eat at the “CattleHand Steak House,” a place full of “dark wood and brown leather, with bad Western artwork and heavy metal horse-related objects mounted on the wall” – and get violent

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Shari Goldhagen was a freelance writer for the National Enquirer.



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SHARI GOLDHAGEN: *"I find that if a character's all good ... I'll instantly start hating them."*

Book weaves references to Kennedys throughout

GOLDHAGEN • from GI

food poisoning.

Goldhagen, a graduate of Northwestern University in Chicago where she studied under Richard Ford, began the novel at 22 and worked on it all through her 20s, publishing bits and pieces of it in literary magazines including *Indiana Review* and *Prism International*. She said the toughest part was breaking into the little literary magazines; after her work appeared in *Indiana Review*, an agent contacted her and things began happening quickly. Her finished novel was successfully sold at auction in late 2004.

"It was significantly harder to publish my first short story than to sell the novel," said Goldhagen, looking back on the process.

In "Family," Goldhagen spins out a tale of 25 years' duration. The story follows the lives of Jack and Connor, who are left to take care of each other after the deaths of their parents. Jack and Connor are privileged in one sense – their parents made a lot of money and provided well for them – but near-bankrupt in another, that is, emotionally, especially in the ways they relate to each other.

Kennedyesque, yes, and the book weaves references to the Kennedy brothers into its varied storylines, some of which take place in Boston. (The author's preferred title for the book, in fact, was "The Next Generation of Dead Kennedys" – but the publisher changed it.)

"This culture is obsessed with the Kennedys," said Goldhagen, who had a poster of Jack



Shari Goldhagen's book "Family and Other Accidents" follows the lives of brothers Jack and Connor Reed.

Kennedy over her desk as a teen, just like one of the brothers. "There's no one now like that."

Over the course of the long, loosely woven plot, Jack and Connor find girlfriends, marry, reject the idea of children, have

children, fight serious illness, make money, work too much, and make both foolish and wise choices. All the while, they perform a dance of both acceptance and rejection of each other.

And, in the end, things are not neatly resolved.

"I find that if a character's all good, in something I'm reading or watching, I'll instantly start hating them," said Goldhagen, who earned a master's degree from Ohio State University. "Things just don't tie up super-easily in life. I think it's just too easy if they do."

For Goldhagen, who has a younger sister, it came as a challenge to write a story about a pair of brothers – digging into their psyches, finding their voices – rather than a pair of sisters, which might have been the more obvious choice.

"It opened up the potential to unlock and explore new areas. It became more about imagination," she said. "I found it very liberating."

Goldhagen said that, for now she's waiting to see how well her first novel does before making any major decisions about her career. Still, she's working on a shapeless, open-ended piece of writing that could become her next novel.

And, in the meantime, she's keeping a hand in on the celebrity beat, as a writer for *Celebrity Living Weekly*.

"I can write with all kinds of alliteration now about shoes a couple of days a week," she said with a laugh. "But then I can write something that's a little more substantial, too."

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