



UNL ENGLISH PROFESSOR MARLY SWICK'S new novel, "Evening News," examines the stress a family goes through after a son accidentally shoots and kills his stepsister. Swick will leave Lincoln in March for an 11-city book tour. MATT MILLER/DN

Success stories

'News' flash:
UNL professor's
novel earns praise

BY DIANE BRODERICK
Staff writer

The evening news often highlights modern tragedies: guns accidentally firing, children getting shot, people dying.

But the stories behind the stories — those of individual family members dealing with tragedy — are often lost as stories pile upon stories, and newer news becomes the new focus.

University of Nebraska-Lincoln English Professor Marly Swick explores the conflicts that get lost in the shuffle in her newest novel, "Evening News."

"I'm drawn into these really emotionally complex situations where you sort of ask yourself, 'How does somebody get through something like that?' It's interesting to try and imagine," Swick said.

"Evening News" explores one family tragedy in which a woman's 9-year-old son — her current husband's stepson — gets hold of a gun and accidentally fires it, killing his 2-year-old stepsister.

The emotional difficulties in handling such a situation as a parent, a stepparent and a surviving child were what fascinated her.

The complexities it spawned involve grief, guilt and anger, coupled with the struggle to love and forgive.

The novel was embraced by New York publishing house Little, Brown and Company, which officially releases it Monday. Already "News" has amassed much critical acclaim, including praise from the New York Times Book Review and Newsday.

And from March 2 to 17, Swick will go on a national book tour — her largest to date — that includes Chicago, San Francisco, Los Angeles and Seattle.

The novel is her second; her first, "Paper Wings," was published in 1996 by HarperCollins.

This kind of success could send some authors' egos sky-high, but a UNL colleague says the opposite is true of Swick.

"Marly's received the kind of success that happens to very few

people in the arts, and she's managed to maintain a kind of eerie levelheadedness throughout all of this," said Associate English Professor Gerry Shapiro.

"What's amazing is that as she becomes more and more successful, she becomes more and more humble. It's just not the way people normally respond to success," he said.

Swick, 49, has been living and teaching in Lincoln for almost 11 years, and she has been writing since childhood. Her choice to go into professional writing was the only one she had, she said.

"It wasn't really a decision," Swick said. "I really don't think I ever, for five minutes, debated what I was going to major in."

"I don't even think it occurred to me I could do anything different."

Her education included receiving a bachelor's degree in creative writing from Stanford.

She later got her master's and doctorate degrees, and then headed to Iowa City, Iowa, for the renowned Iowa Writers' Workshop, which has been led by such authors as Kurt Vonnegut Jr. and Raymond Carver (who also graduated from the program).

The program is quite challenging, Swick confirmed, and she said it's not for everyone because of its competitive edge.

"I tell my students that if you're looking for a nurturing place to go — forget it. That's not what it's about," Swick said.

But there was a thrill to being in a community where everyone was interested in what she was, Swick said, and that helped her writing immensely.

The workshop accelerated her progress because the other participants' capacity to write well forced her to push herself to do better.

She spent three years at the University of Iowa, a year longer than normal for the program, because of a grant she received to stay an extra year.

"But it just seems like no time at all before you're back in the cold, cruel world," Swick said.

But now, it seems the harsh realities of starting out in the writ-



ing profession are fading, as Swick continues to discover more and more success.

She is privileged enough to hold a job she enjoys, she works with her love of writing and she happily handles such practical necessities as editors and agents. Swick has the enviable position of being where she wants to be in life.

And, apparently, Lincoln is that place. Having lived in several locations since she was born, the author had never lived anywhere for more than four or five years until she came to Lincoln. She is content here. And she has no plans to permanently leave town anytime soon.

Lincoln even found its way into Swick's writing in "News." Her protagonist is a Nebraska native who attended UNL.

Swick, however, was born in Indianapolis — even though she stayed there only a few weeks.

Her use of Lincoln as a setting in the novel isn't exactly autobiographical — she didn't move here until she was in her 30s.

She used Lincoln because of its familiarity, so she wouldn't have to fly out and research a brand-new location, and because its wholesomeness was perfect for the plot's progression.

The only actual autobiographical aspects to the novel are that she attended school in California, as the protagonist does, and that she has a stepson. The rest is pure imagination.

As Swick scans the goals that she has left to fulfill in life, only one comes to mind: to publish a story in the famous literary magazine the New Yorker.

The author has published in magazines before, including Redbook, where her first story appeared in print, and Playgirl, where three of her works were published over about three years.

There was an excellent fiction editor at Playgirl who published serious literary fiction, Swick said, and that's how her stories ended up there.

"It was sort of a drag, in a way, because nobody I knew read that magazine, and it's kind of an embarrassing magazine," Swick said.

But as she prepares to embark on her book tour, it is easy to realize that Swick's latest publishing endeavor is anything but a burden.

She says she's ready to enjoy the fancy hotels — the kind of hotels she'd never stay at on her own.

But her greater pleasure will lie in her return home, getting back in the classroom and, of course, resuming work on her next novel.