

# Rules of engagement

What to do when a lover is paralyzed?

By MICHAEL GILTZ

It's a gut-wrenching dilemma.

In author Ann Packer's first novel, a young woman realizes she is falling out of love with her fiancé when he suffers a terrible accident and becomes a quadriplegic.

"The Dive From Clausen's Pier," a best seller since being chosen as a book club pick by "Good Morning, America," begins with a terrible question: Should you do what's expected of you, or be true to your own desire to break away from a doomed relationship?

This isn't just the stuff of melodrama. Packer experienced a family tragedy in her own life as a 10-year-old when her father suffered a stroke and became paralyzed on his right side.

Except in her situation, Packer said, "my father ended up committing suicide." (The author declined to discuss the experience further.)

Still, this event helped shape the moral conundrum at the heart of "Clausen's Pier," which is the main reason for its success, Packer says.

"[The book] really hit a nerve," the 43-year-old author said. "Everyone has to make a choice about being true to yourself. It's something people do in a small way on a daily basis, and in a big way once or twice in a lifetime.

In the novel, Carrie arrives in New York City,



Ann Packer, whose "Dive" got a TV plug, was inspired by her dad's paralysis.

thanks to a friend who dangles the temptation of free rent in an all-but-abandoned brownstone. For Carrie, it's the first time she's faced the world on her own. Packer, however, got an earlier jump on her literary career. Her father put Philip Roth's racy "Portnoy's Complaint" on a summer reading list for his daughter when she was 12.

She was an avid reader, but with a mother and a brother who wrote, Packer was determined not to become an author.

"It was a pretty active resistance," said Packer, who lives in San Carlos, Calif.

Until, that is, a friend in college asked her to take a writing class. "It must have been what I needed

to do," she said, "because I didn't resist very much."

Packer quickly fell in love with writing. She started right at the top—studying at the famed Iowa Writer's Workshop and quietly submitting stories on her own to *The New Yorker*.

"Mostly I got back these very nice handwritten notes rejecting my stuff."

One day, however, the usual rejection note was replaced by 1½ pages of typewritten comments. Her latest story hadn't been accepted, but things were looking up.

"They said they really, really liked it but had some questions, and sometimes revisions didn't work out, but if I happened to want to revise it they would have a look."

Naturally, Packer was more than happy to revise it, and made her first sale. Other short stories in *The New Yorker*, *Ploughshares* and elsewhere followed.

Then came an idea that wasn't meant to be a short story, and Packer knew it. She pushed ahead anyway, never imagining it would be 10 years before she'd finish "Clausen's Pier."

"It was a very long writing process," said Packer. "I had months, maybe years, where I thought of stopping. So when I sold it, that was it. And then the book started getting



Knopf  
384 pages, \$24

these really nice reviews. It was beyond a dream come true, because the dream was publica-

tion."

Is there a movie deal? Not yet, but it's likely, she says. It's also likely her next book won't take quite as long to finish.

"I hope against hope it won't be 10 years," laughed Packer. "I was on a radio program, and the host mentioned a woman who had written a book of stories in six days and then sold it! So I think it'll be somewhere between six days and 10 years."

New York Post, Sunday, July 28, 2002