

In review

"Enchanted Night," by Steven Millhauser, Crown, 109 pages, \$17.

By MICHAEL GILTZ

When Steven Millhauser won the Pulitzer Prize in 1996 for "Martin Dressler," it was one of those rare instances of the Pulitzer going to the right author for the right book at the right time.

Millhauser has been considered one of America's most distinctive writers since the 1972 publication of "Edwin Mullhouse," a scathing satire of literary biography. But it was his novel "Martin Dressler" that brought him acclaim, that made glorious use of the

writer's penchant for magic realism.

Millhauser returns with this slim, engaging tale about a nearly full moon that pulls the people of a small town out of their beds. Brief chapters, rarely more than two pages long, tell a series of stories, both romantic and sad: A young girl slips out to lie naked in the woods; a middle-aged man, who lives with his mother, works fruitlessly on a novel; two lovers meet in a backyard; dolls and other toys slowly awaken; and little kids are drawn away by the music of Pan.

There are also vignettes about the workman who shyly loves the aloof mannequin in a store window,

the mannequin herself, who longs to stir from her position, and many more drifters and dreamers.

Millhauser will intoxicate you with language: The lover describes her boyfriend as a

"spellbreaker, kissbringer, heartwinger," and a chorus of night voices sing "Come out, come out, wherever you are, you dreamers and drowners, you loafers and losers, you shadow-seekers and orphans of the sun."

But as fanciful as his prose might be, Millhauser's piercing insights are remarkably grounded in reality. Take, for example, the teenage Danny, who has never kissed a girl, but "if any girl sat next to him on a couch and let him touch her body he knows exactly what he would feel: a gratitude so deep that it would be deeper than love."

Too soon, the tales end, the night is over and dawn approaches. Read this book slowly — you'll want to delay that bittersweet feeling as long as possible.

