

Christina's World

A brooding novel set in Waukesha becomes a ticket to "Oprah" for a Delafield native.

BY ROBERT MCGUIRE

Christina Schwarz's meteoric rise from restless teacher to best-selling author is Wisconsin's latest example of the kind of local-girl-makes-good story that gives heart to former English majors.

She's made the kind of good that garnered favorable reviews for her first novel, *Drowning Ruth*, in *The New York Times*, *Time* magazine and a dozen other publications. The kind of good where publishers wage a bidding war to sign her and Mirimax buys the movie rights. The kind of good where Oprah telephones one day and swears this isn't a prank call and she wants her to be in her book club.

Schwarz's story, inspired by Pewaukee Lake, where she grew up, is the latest in a string of suspenseful "Wisconsin gothic" tales hinting at violent mayhem that have become Oprah magnets. After all, in 36 selections since the reigning TV talk queen started the book club four years ago, Oprah has already bestowed instant celebrity on three other Wisconsin writers: Jacquelyn Mitchard, A. Manette Ansay and Jane Hamilton.

But for the 38-year-old Schwarz, success has come only after years of circling around her true calling, uncertain how to pursue it. After graduating from Arrowhead High School, she left Delafield and earned undergraduate and graduate degrees at Yale. She married and worked as an English teacher as her husband's jobs took her to Washington, D.C., England, Yale again and Los Angeles, where she taught at "a fancy private girls' school."

"I had always secretly wanted to write," she says. "But I guess it wasn't such a secret, because my husband said to me, 'Instead of complaining all the time about how you never have time to write, why don't you go ahead and do it?'"

So she quit work and sat down to write.

With only one published short story and a couple of shared magazine bylines with her husband, it took four years just to teach herself how to do it. She had finished only half of *Drowning Ruth* in that time but completed the second half in the next year.

"I really hoped it would be published," she



Author Christina Schwarz

JERRY BAUER

says. "And I hoped I would get paid enough that I could say this was a real career."

Schwarz set her story about two sisters, one who drowns, in a fictionalized version of her hometown. The icy Lake Nagawaukee, where the mystery unfolds, is a little bit Schwarz's memories of her childhood, a little scouting locations when she was home for visits, a little imagination and a lot of remembering old stories told of her relatives.

The consequence is an ominous, moody story of the Waukesha County countryside before it was part of metro Milwaukee — of pitch-black nights and hunker-down winters in isolated farmhouses, of easily recognized details like St. John's Military Academy, Holy Hill and Prospect Avenue in Milwaukee. "I don't think it was really a decision," she says of the Waukesha County setting. "Whenever I thought about what I wanted to say, that's just where it was."

The original story idea was about a cranky neighbor Schwarz remembers from growing up on Pewaukee Lake. The reclusive woman was reputed to drive children away from her waterfront property with a b.b. gun. A romantic image of that old woman's solitude stuck with Schwarz, and as she wrote the book, a more likable heroine named Amanda developed. After fleeing in disgrace from her job nursing Milwaukee's wounded World War I soldiers, Amanda now tends her parents' farm and fiercely protects her niece, orphaned by her mother's drowning. But she is oddly tight-lipped about her sister's mysterious demise below the ice of Lake Nagawaukee one winter night. An air of menace about Amanda and her motherly instincts keeps things suspenseful to the end.

Never say Schwarz can't keep a secret. While she was home in September taking a victory lap after the publication and the favorable reviews, she was under strict orders

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not to breathe a word of the book's selection by Oprah. She didn't say anything to her sister Eliza Audley, a costume designer who lives in Waukesha, her brother Nick, a Madison surgeon, or her parents Anthony and Donna Meyer, even as they bragged about their daughter at the supermarket and at Milwaukee Psychiatric Hospital, where her father is medical director.

"I didn't want to blow it," she says. "I was afraid they would change their minds if news leaked out."

Speaking from her new home in Boston, where her husband became a senior editor at *The Atlantic Monthly*, she is awed by the direction her life has taken.

"Clearly, this has taught me that I can't predict anything. The whole thing that I was wishing for was just to make writing my career. That so many people will now read the book is just amazing. They will be reading about this world that I know so well."