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### Award-winning author Judy Blunt publishes memoir

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## **NEWS RELEASE**

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March 6, 2002

**Contact:** Judy Blunt, adjunct assistant professor, Department of English, (406) 243-6976.

**Note:** A photograph of Judy Blunt is available. Call 243-4890 or email [patia@selway.umt.edu](mailto:patia@selway.umt.edu).

### **AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR JUDY BLUNT PUBLISHES MEMOIR**

#### **MISSOULA--**

After winning two prestigious awards for works in progress, Judy Blunt's new memoir, "Breaking Clean," has arrived in bookstores amid a flurry of favorable reviews and news of a second printing.

The book, published by Knopf, was called "powerful" by The New York Times Book Review and "profound, and profoundly moving," by Kirkus Reviews. It earned a 1997 PEN/Jerard Fund Award of \$4,000 and a 2001 Whiting Writers' Award of \$35,000.

With vivid detail and unflinching language, "Breaking Clean" chronicles the first 30 years of Blunt's life on isolated ranches near Malta, and her subsequent move across the Continental Divide to Missoula. A single mother of three small children when she arrived at The University of Montana in 1986, Blunt found the two communities a world apart. But it wasn't until a classroom assignment that she realized she had a story to tell.

A literature professor had asked the students to "write your Montana experience" in four pages or less. A few weeks after turning her paper in, the professor singled it out and, with Blunt's reluctant permission, read it to the class.

"What happened next changed my life," Blunt said in a recent interview. "He read 'Breaking Clean' to an auditorium full of students who didn't know who I was, and for 15

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minutes I watched their faces as they absorbed my story, my words. My life.

“I listened as his voice paused, then broke, at the ending line, and he turned his back on his class to compose himself. For the first time, I felt the power of the written word from the other side, from the writer’s side. I spent the night awake, rethinking the epiphany and the uncertainty of that moment in Professor Bevis’ class. The next day I added an English/creative writing major to my journalism major.”

That first essay, which Blunt initially titled “Clean Break” but changed after realizing that transition is an ongoing process, became the germ of her new book. Written in 10 years of stolen moments between mothering, studying and working, “Breaking Clean” is a series of 13 linked essays that explore the rewards and challenges of her former life.

Born into a third generation of Montana homesteaders, Blunt grew up on a ranch some 50 miles south of Malta in the rural community of Regina, Montana. She married at age 18 to a man 12 years her senior and, as she matured, struggled to define herself as a woman in a man’s world.

Author and UM Professor Emeritus William Kittredge described “Breaking Clean” as “a classical American memoir.

“Judy Blunt lived in a beloved country among beloved people,” Kittredge said. “She grew up knowing blizzards and good horses, working cattle all day and then getting dinner on the table, impassable roads to town and babies with raging fevers -- a resolute country girl who became a ranch wife on the shortgrass plains of Montana. And she tells of leaving, the price of insisting on her right to fashion her own life.”

Blunt, now an adjunct assistant professor in UM’s English department, says her parents, Clarence and Shirley Blunt, are solidly behind her.

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“In spite of the difficulty of having a writer in the family, they’ve been very generous in their support of me as a writer,” she said. She points out that her mother, too, is an author, having recently published an essay in “Leaning Into the Wind,” a collection by Linda Hasselstrom. “The book hit print before mine did, which I thought was marvelous. The apple doesn’t fall far from the tree.”

As for others who might bridle at her candid writing, Blunt acknowledges that perspective is everything in nonfiction.

“My experience is a singular one. I am always careful to stress that my story does not generalize to other farming and ranching communities, or even to other women within my community. ... All I can say is how it feels to me.”

**Excerpt from “Breaking Clean” by Judy Blunt**

It has taken me thirty years to recognize the infinite patience of the land we lived on, how a way of life can consume people from the inside out. Always we waited for next year, hope whispered on the east wind, snatched away by the west, trusting as blood turned to dust that the rains would come. And they did. Sometimes too late, when the wheat stood like straw, other times in a wide swath that buried crops in a mire of roots and mud. But always they came, just enough to stir the imagination of more.

For more than a century, the people living this marginal lifestyle have warmed to their own mythology and basked in the admiration of the world. We are ranchers, cowboys -- a special breed. We are feeding the world in the face of all hardship: *The latchstring is always out*. Our investment in this image of independence and generosity is visceral. The truth is more complex, however, and

not nearly as popular. Farming and ranching is a business, and people living in the wide-open West are just as concerned with turning a profit, making a living and raising their kids as any other group is. It's always been that way. Where the romantic idea of cowboy life paid off was the point at which it set us apart from other businesses: We didn't have to make a profit to be doing a good job -- we were in it for deeper, more soul-sustaining reasons, like freedom and autonomy.

When public opinion turned, it seemed to happen overnight. Third- and fourth-generation ranch kids like me received no introduction to the land and the forces that govern it. The land was simply there, a network of place names we came to know like the names of the people around our dinner table. In the daily talk of work and range planning, my parents did not speak differently of the deeded land they owned outright and the public lands they leased. But by the seventies, stories began to surface of hunters and streamside anglers who stood their ground and argued their right to access. Terms such as "multiple use" and "environmental impact" became common. As the pressure grew, families who had tended those acres since the turn of the century and before began to bristle at the invasion. These are lands passed down in families. These are leases that sell just like deeded land; the new owners pay the same amount per acre of leased land as they do per acre of deeded, and when the lease is transferred, they continue to pay the annual fee. Asking a third-generation rancher what of this land is his and what is merely leased is like asking the parent of a blended family which children are adopted, which are his own. The correct answer, stated with dignity, is, "We don't remember."

America's love affair with the mythical West has held strong for more than a hundred years. We need to believe in it, for if a frontier exists just over the horizon, those of us asleep behind bolted doors in cities are not trapped. We can imagine that somewhere a community of our own awaits us, a life on the land under the big sky. Since the 1980s, tens of thousands of families have relocated to

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the inland west, searching for the promised land and changing it irrevocably as they go. Like the first pioneers, more than half pack up their disillusionment and leave after a couple of years. They move to small towns and find them staggering under increasing burdens of unemployment and poverty, crime and alcoholism. They're dismayed when the modern-day Shane drives through town with a lip full of chew, a rifle rack in the back window of his pickup and a bumper sticker that reads: This land is MY Land -- (Yours Is in California)." They go to court to stop the Cartwright boys from running cattle on Forest Service land or leasing their mineral rights to an international conglomerate that wants to punch a gold mine or a gas well in the North Forty. They discover that the cowboy hero will shoot any wolf, coyote, bear or bison that threatens his livelihood, as he always has, and some that don't as well. *A varmint's a varmint.* But now he posts the land against human trespassers as well, and spends as much time defending his business as he used to spend running it. The latchstring is no longer out. There are two dreams being destroyed here, and on both sides the outrage is palpable.

As the new century begins, I am fortunate to still have my family on the land where I grew up. I can drink coffee in the kitchen where I learned to bake bread, bathe in the same shallow cast-iron tub of sulfur and salts, visit the lopsided outbuildings where I once fed chickens, scouted new litters of kittens and roped milk pen calves. I can ride through a herd of cattle descended from cattle my grandfather knew. When I'm done, I get in my car and drive back to Missoula, secure in my sense that the landscape of my childhood remains intact, in place. For fifty years my parents have held the line, grubbing a marginal existence from marginal land, preserving the heart of ranching tradition even as the lights of the community winked out around them. They've paid dearly for my privilege.

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Local, state dailies and weeklies (except Kaimin and Phillips County News)

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