

'Lust for Life' more than book title for author Stone

By Hillary Hauser
News-Press Staff Writer

He was broke and desperate, had no job and no future, and he had just spent three years trying to peddle a book manuscript that had been rejected 17 times.

Finally, the book sold, and novelist Irving Stone recalled that when he and his wife, Jean, went to a Manhattan pub to get the New York Times book review in which it would appear, they opened it up the paper "with trembling fingers."

What they found was a two-page glowing review of "Lust for Life" — Stone's novel about the artist Vincent Van Gogh, now considered a classic.

That book was hard to sell, Stone said, because Van Gogh was relatively unknown at the time. "Lust for Life" was published in 1934.

In Santa Barbara for a talk Monday afternoon before the Channel City Club and Women's Forum at the Sheraton, Stone said during an interview that his book helped Van Gogh become more widely recognized.

He recalled writing a newspaper article about an exhibit of the artist's work that was about to open in New York, and it pleased him that his article brought people "four by four" to the show.

The 82-year-old author's latest book, "Depths of Glory," is about the artist Camille Pissarro, a 19th century painter who became known

as the father of French Impressionism.

Stone said even though Pissarro was lesser known than his friends Cezanne, Monet, Degas or Renoir, he chose to write about him because "he was the quietest, he expressed eternal qualities of grace and joy."

"I wanted to make him known," Stone said. "He has the most superb message to give."

He described Pissarro's paintings as almost always having "a trail or road" with a young couple walking down them ("you know them, you were at a picnic last week with them, a wedding or a marriage"). The viewer, he said, cannot stand outside such paintings.

"You are drawn into them," Stone said. "The people become your friends, they become your life. This is Pissarro's great philosophy."

Pissarro was "beaten half to death by critics," Stone explained. "He and Claude Monet sold nothing, were ridiculed, and as a reaction, all Impressionists said: 'No group shows, let's go our own way.'"

However, Pissarro encouraged the artists to stick together, to avoid becoming fragmented, Stone said.

"Some people would know Degas, others Cezanne," he explained. "It was Pissarro who said, 'We'll be known as the Impressionists' — he held them together."

At the Sheraton, Stone auto-

graphed dozens of books for enthusiastic fans, while his wife of 52 years, Jean, helped him. Jean is well known as Stone's editor, and on the dedication page in "Depths of Glory," Stone thanks her for "the several years of her devoted righting of this manuscript."

Jean said that when Stone asked her to edit "Lust for Life," she told him: "It's a little long for my taste." He asked her to put parentheses around the parts that could go. "I did," she said. "It sold, and I became indispensable."

Raising two children — Paula, 40, a parole officer "who writes case histories," and Ken, 38, "equally lyrical, and it comes out as lithographs" — Jean Stone continued as her husband's editor.

She edited "The Agony and the Ecstasy" (about Michelangelo), "Love is Eternal (Abraham and Mary Todd Lincoln)," "The Passions of the Mind (Sigmund Freud)," and "The Origin" (Charles Darwin) — among many others.

She said that after she started editing, she found she was "very good at it."

"But then, I've never faced a blank page," she said. "An author is the one who does that."

Stone, who writes in longhand, gives her the fourth or fifth draft — "which is as good as he can make it at the time," she said. She figured that her editing shortens the pro-

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Irving Stone
A lust for success

Stone never lost faith in his rejected classic

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duction of a book by half.

Stone, who was to speak today at Westmont College, said a previous Westmont reception was the largest and longest reception he had ever had for any of his books.

Students, friends and community members turned out by the hundreds and kept him autographing copies of "The Origin" for up to five hours, he said — "until we ran out of books."

Both Stones said books are the salvation of mankind, and that television watching is destructive to the imagination.

"If people sit in front of the television, their brains won't grow one iota," Stone said. "Read one good book, and you have a new evaluation of life itself. Books are the greatest inventions — greater than cement or running water."

He said over 40 percent of today's

children are illiterate — "that's the destruction of democracy, if our children can't make decisions based on reading and writing."

"We have to get young people to read, and read good books," he said.

Stone said he did not have a favorite among the biographical novels he has become so well known for. However, "Lust for Life" has a special place in his heart, he said.

"It was published, and suddenly I had a living, a place in the sun," he said. "Van Gogh is my father. I never had one. Why wouldn't I be grateful?"

He had one word for aspiring writers: Write.

"Start to write, continue to write, write all your life," Stone said. "You'll get good and you'll get honest if you continue. You can't do it by quitting and starting up later. Don't quit. Stay with the job and do it."