

William and Mary this fall. The middle son, Stuart graduates this spring, and the eldest, Philip is pursuing a master's degree.

Back in the early days, it was hard to find time, peace and quiet to write. Because of kids and career, it took her five years to complete her first novel.

Husband Chris was supportive; "he thought I was going to be John Grisham." She

won't even count that book today. "I look back...that was sooooo bad," she winces.

But it did lead to an agent and talk of a screen play and most importantly, some valuable advice: "You need to write short stories because you'll start picking your words more carefully," she remembers the

agent saying. "You'll use less words." So, she wrote short stories, entered some in contests and started winning.



Photo by Phil Audibert

Sally Honenberger usually writes every day in the dining room of her home near the Town of Orange.

Now she's not only winning, she's teaching and being asked to judge. And she's working on her next big book, entitled "The Lunatic, The Lover and The Poet." It too stems from a true event in Orange County.

Sally has been published

in many literary journals, but that illusive book contract still slips her grasp. She says all writers should take criticism, and she readily admits that she could use some improvement. "You can improve everything," she emphasizes, but she is disillusioned and disappointed with the publish-

ing world.

She tells stories of manuscripts being sent back to her after six months "all crumpled and coffee stained. It's been on the bottom of the pile," she smirks. "And sometimes you get a letter back two days later. They haven't even read your stuff! It's really frustrating, and nowadays it's based on who you know."

She purses her lips. "Look for a traditional publisher until you're fed up and then you self-publish," she advises herself. She notes that Walt Whitman and Charles Dickens were self-published, "not that I'm writing the great American novel because I don't think I am."

Sally has found an outfit that can set up a book for printing for about \$700, plus \$7 a copy. If she can sell 1,500 copies....maybe, just maybe, a publisher might pick up on that. She is setting up a website soon and talks of hiring a publicist.

She talks faster and faster, energized by the new challenge. "I'm going to try it," she says with renewed confidence. "The mother of the baby really wants this story to get out."

## The Oprah Connection

So anyway, Sally's in this book club and the club is reading a book from Oprah's club, and Oprah wants some feedback. So Sally goes on line and discovers what Oprah really wants is to "tell us ten things that every woman should know."

Well, it just so happens that Sally's written "a working woman's manifesto," called Gathering Rosebuds. So, she puts a few of her suggestions together, slaps on a little light humor and e-mails it off to Oprah's website.

You know, the very next day, Oprah's assistant is on the phone to her. "Are you crazy?" Sally remembers shrieking at the law office secretary who fielded the call. But it was indeed for real.

One thing leads to another. A TV crew

comes out and films Sally demonstrating some of her suggestions. And it winds up in a medley of film clips from women all over the country with helpful hints on being female and succeeding in this world. "Then for a year and a half people would come up to me in Charlottesville and say 'I saw you on Oprah,'" roars Sally.

Anyway, here are a few of Sally's suggestions:

- Be able to change into your bathing suit in your car, because you need to be able to go swimming wherever you are.
- Learn how to drive a stick shift in case Richard Gere comes by and needs a ride.
- Don't vacuum, the dirt comes back anyway.
- Learn how to cook with one arm.
- Avoid bridge, crossword puzzles and white wine drinkers; they're a waste of time.
- Write love letters without investing in Hallmark.
- Be able to locate the North Star and Orion.
- Recognize the Moonlight Sonata because you need to be able to slow down.
- Disagree with your father without getting mad.
- Send yourself flowers.



Local author Sally Honenberger may self-publish a book she has written about a true story of an Orange County woman whose infant son suffered brain-damaging seizures as a result of a routine childhood vaccination.

Photo by Phil Audibert

Someone--  
publish this woman!

Sally Honenberger is acting uncharacteristically indecisive. One day she says she will; the next day she says she won't.

"I feel like I'm teetering. Push me over the edge," she pleads.

Last spring she was acting like a giddy school girl. Longstreet Press had picked up her book. They would have it on the shelves by this month! She had talked to the publisher for an hour and a half on the phone, "all these details, like he had really thought it out." And then nothing. Calls went unreturned; letters unanswered. The silent treatment stretched for months.

"I can't figure out what happened," she mutters. "They must have run out of money. I don't want to self-publish it, but I may just do it," she says defiantly. "I'm getting fed up with the whole thing."

A person of lesser mettle would have given up a long time ago.

But Sally's tough. She'll hang in there, and she will be published some day. You can bet on it.

In case you're thinking this local women's activist lawyer is sitting in her boudoir eating bonbons, penning romance novels, think again. This is an accomplished award-winning fiction writer with four literary novels and numerous short stories and essays under her belt. She also teaches creative writing, judges writing contests, and leads seminars. And by the way, she already did the romance novel thing ...when she was 13!

Her latest novel, "Answer Me This," is the important one..."the big book." It's important because it's true. It's big because it's timely.

Although Sally fictionalized some of the details, the story is about an Orange County woman who had a baby who suffered brain-damaging seizures following a routine childhood vaccination.

**Lacy: "Weird isn't it, how a person's brain works? Despite all that panic, I can**

*see the color of George's car. And the slippers I was wearing. Twenty one years later that's what sticks. That yellow car and those red slippers. Like a hand in front of the sun; they keep my mind from the rest of the memory; the feel of Danny's legs dangling against my stomach and the sight of his eyes rolled back in his head."*

The child is 34 years old now... confined to a state hospital. Sally is the attorney who the mother contacted and who eventually won compensation from a federal fund for such cases.

**Jean: The vision of a dead baby in Lacy's arms--with her same shock of black hair and crayola cheeks--sprang full-blown in my head. Time scrolled forward and I imagined her kneeling in a rainy graveyard and flinging herself on the matted grass by a miniature tombstone. A lone red tulip shuddered in the wind. It had been a long day."**

"My imagination is pretty strong," confirms Sally, adding that she is happiest when sitting at her dining room table, writing. "My favorite days are creating characters," she smiles...and not dealing with bored agents and flaky publishers.

Sally isn't practicing much law these days. She handles a few real estate closings and administers two trusts, one benefiting this "DPT" baby. She admits that the "disillusioned attorney" in this book is autobiographical and based on experience.

But what about this cowboy?

A little background might be helpful.

Sally wrote a short novel entitled "Waltzing Cowboys." It's about an old cowboy in Montana who quite literally rides off into the sunset on a wild Mustang mare. He wakes up in the hospital and walks out despite the fact that his leg is in a cast. He goes back to his place, packs his clothes, cashes in his bank account, and buys a one-way train ticket to New York City to try to find his son, whom he has never met.

It's a great yarn, told in a rollicking western sort of way. The first few chapters were reworked into a short story that won the Charlottesville weekly, *The Hook's* short story writing contest last year.

"Everybody asks me 'So when were you out west?'" This makes her laugh because Sally is blue-blood born and raised in New England, a graduate of Smith and William and Mary and has only been out west for a vacation! Sally Honenberger knows as much about cowboys and horses as the man in the moon!

"It's a trick," she says of her convincing cowboy banter. "You just take the standard clichés and write it a different way." Then she turns serious. "The more you read the more you know about stuff you don't experience yourself... the more you understand how different people think and live."

Like the story "Feeding Old Man Watson," the characters of which were gleaned from her first experiences as a lawyer dealing with rural poverty, domestic issues, "families on the bottom...a different life from what I



Contributed photo

**Newlyweds, Chris and Sally Honenberger.**



Contributed photo

**Sally Honenberger as a young mother with her first son, Philip.**

knew." That story won the 1999 Literary Contest in the *Antietam Review*.

It took place in the mid 1970s...exciting times for Sally and Chris Honenberger, tennis partners, then life-time partners, both fresh out of William and Mary Law School; they had come to Orange to hang out their shingle.

"When we first moved to Orange I had a client call whose daughter wanted to play softball," she recalls. There was no Recreation Department then. The Orange Boosters offered sports to boys only, "and they wouldn't let girls play," she says in measured tones.

She made quite a stir, ruffled some good ol' boy feathers, but adds, "It was time for it to change...moving into this small town and kind of railing about how they were so far behind the rest of the world. And I LIKED the

small town; I WANTED to be in the small town, but I didn't want them to diminish their girls."

Sally has been a lifelong champion for women's rights. And so, after bearing two sons, she was ecstatic to bring a daughter into this world to continue the fight. "She's so wonderful," beams the proud Mom. "She's not at all like me. She's well-grounded and deliberate and careful and generous...all the qualities I wish I had." Allison just entered

# The "DPT" Baby

DPT stands for Diphtheria, Pertussis (Whooping Cough), and Tetanus. Vaccinations for these diseases are given five times to every American child by age five. It used to be that the Whooping Cough part of the vaccination was administered by "live" vaccine. Those children vaccinated with "live" vaccine had a one in 100,000 chance of suffering brain-damaging seizures.

So, a statute was written setting up what's called the Vaccine Compensation Fund. It gets its money from the parents of every child vaccinated in this country since 1988...a \$4.50 per child per vaccination "tax." The fund is now worth billions, but only 20 percent of the claims have been paid. "The whole idea of the statute was to help these families take care of these kids who can't do anything," says Sally, shaking her head in disbelief.

In 1969, an Orange County woman we'll call Lacy watched in horror as her infant son, Danny, locked up with a massive seizure. She rushed him to the hospital...

*...so quiet it was like a funeral home. And on the floor there was a line of evil black tile in the middle of a great wide ocean of white. Winter everywhere. Not a real color, just cold, cold enough to drown in. It was July in Virginia for God's sake and I was freezing. Over and over I mixed that stupid oatmeal and heard that sound when he stopped breathing. But I couldn't step across that damn line.*

Lacy lived a life in purgatory, where her baby never really died, but he never really lived either. Eventually, Danny was taken from her and placed in a state hospital, where at age 34, he languishes to this day.

Years later, Lacy was watching early morning TV. A news story came on about the Vaccine Compensation Fund. She went



**A sample of just a few of the literary journals that have published Sally Honenberger's work.**

to a burned out lady lawyer, named Jean (Sally) and said, "I think this happened to my baby."

*Staring into the darkness under the old oak desk, I rolled my eyes where she couldn't see me do it. Crazy people called television talk shows. Crazy people thought lawyers could perform miracles. She was not headed anywhere I wanted to go. There was a good reason why they advise you never to ride with your clients when they offer to drive.*

There has been no risk with the vaccine since 1998, because "live" vaccine is no longer used. But this happened in 1969. The story is particularly timely today because of an as-yet unproven allegation that childhood vaccines may cause autism.

Sally says "I made it into a story about this very disillusioned attorney and this very up-beat mother who had this awful life and this terrible thing happen to her, and they are fighting together to fix an old wrong."

"Answer Me This," by Sally Collins (her maiden name), may come out as early as this January.