

by Fred J. Eckert

"White Lies" by Sarah Collins Honenberger; Cedar Creek Publishing; 283 pages; \$23.

The odds are stacked heavily against it - it's a first novel; the author is an unknown; its publisher is a small company unable to mount much of a promotional campaign; plus this work by a small-town attorney isn't a thriller, isn't about sex or violence and is in a much different league from any light entertainment beach read.

'WHITE LIES' - 'White Lies' may well become a source of pride for those of us who will one day be able to say that we discovered Sarah Collins Honenberger before her second and later novels made her famous. CNS Photo. But if word gets around, this novel may well become a source of pride for those of us who will one day be able to say that we discovered Sarah Collins Honenberger before her second and later novels made her famous.

"White Lies" is a brilliant debut by a fine new novelist, a rare gem - a superbly written tale that deals with the sorts of things that matter most in life - such as love and family - and also with such great and timeless themes as tragedy and triumph; character strengths and failings; duty, honor and integrity; and courage in the face of adversity.

Jane Driscoll is a well-educated small-town attorney living a pleasant, comfortable life that she shares with her near-perfect husband and three healthy, good children while handling small cases in a small practice. Until one day a former client whose no-fault divorce she had handled years earlier reveals to her a secret that has long haunted her: she has a severely retarded baby which before the two even first met she had to give up caring for and institutionalize.

Lacy Stonington - from a poor and unpleasant background, little educated, a blue-collar working woman struggling to make ends meet - has recently seen a television program that makes her wonder if perhaps her baby's terrible affliction was caused by a government mandated vaccination. She has to know. Not because of any possible court award that could ease her financial burdens, but mainly to erase her haunting sense of guilt that somehow she may bear some responsibility for the tragedy that ruined her baby Danny's future.

Lacy's quest becomes Jane's cause, along the way taking a toll on her own family and creating a sense of guilt about the sacrifices she imposes upon her husband and children for the greater cause of seeking justice for her deserving client.

Because this work is inspired by a true story and bears a sub-title identifying it as "A Tale of Babies, Vaccines, and Deception," some may, as others already have, mistakenly see this as some sort of veiled crusading expose. The certain but rare side effects of mass childhood vaccinations are well covered and this, as well as the good and the bad behavior of persons dealing with that matter, is very well portrayed in an intelligent and balanced fashion. (Note: There are currently several works out with "White Lies" being all or part of the title). This one is first-rate start to finish.

The novel's rotations between point-of-views of its two main characters seem natural and flow smoothly. Both these characters, so different yet in some ways so alike, are well developed, as are all other characters, including Jane's wise and patient husband; Lacy's first husband who ran out on her and her baby, and the second husband who stands by her now; and the slick trial lawyer who belittles both women but whom Jane picks to take the lead in their suit because it is best for her client/friend.

While both the novelist and the main character may be small-town attorneys, the portrayal of scenes in the big court in the big city are riveting - great courtroom drama. And the author makes fine distinctions of law, and even procedural matters, easy to follow and understand.

"White Lies" is a novel of exceptional fine quality - modern literature, not mere pop fiction. Sarah Collins Honenberger is a gifted storyteller, a master of nuance who knows how to move you deeply; how to lift your heart; how to grab your attention and hold it; making you, however paradoxical it seems, simultaneously anxious to discover the ending yet wishing this great read did not have to end.

- Fred J. Eckert, a frequent contributor to Copley News Service, is a novelist and author of works of non-fiction. © Copley News Service

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