

Writer does balancing act

By SANDRA KREISWIRTH
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Elizabeth Forsythe Hailey is the best-selling author of *A Woman of Independent Means* and *Life Sentence*. And she doesn't even have her own word processor. Or typewriter. Or desk.

"I just spread my work out on the kitchen table and write in longhand. We both do," she says, referring to herself and her husband, playwright Oliver Hailey.

"I write in longhand because I like the thinking and the writing connected through the arm to me. I like to be able to cross it out and circle it like sculpture. That's just for the first draft. Then it immediately takes on another look when you type it. And you tend to be more critical."

Hailey, a wife, mother and author, calls living in a household where both husband and wife work at home as a balancing act. "It's very difficult, but I continue to live it every day."

As for not having her own desk, Hailey laughs it off: "I have a writer friend who had to make do for years and years. Now he's got a gorgeous study and nothing to say."

Although Hailey's novel-writing career began only recently, years ago she had a brief career as a reporter on the *Dallas Morning News*.

"I actually met my husband there. I was only working during the summer when I came home from college. But I did love being in the city room, where, by the way, I did compose on a typewriter. I loved it because it was a way out into the world and words were the ticket. And I've always loved to write, but I didn't feel that I had that much to say. But I loved asking questions."

Her stint at the Dallas paper ended when she left Texas and went to New Haven, Conn., where Oliver was starting Yale Drama School. "We were married, we were going off to New Haven. I wasn't that specific about a career. I wanted to get out in the world, and his life sounded more interesting. And I didn't know anything about theater."

But those were the old days — 1960. "It was part of the transition, and there's been an incredible change," says Hailey. "I think it's a challenge and that's what I'm writing about in my third novel — the terms have changed — and so the relationships have changed within marriage."

Hailey says she wasn't totally into the feminine mystique. "I imagined I



ELIZABETH FORSYTHE HAILY
...author who avoids typewriters

would do something in my life, but I wasn't that clear about it. It's not marriage. It's society. It places you in a whole category once you become married.

"My specific demands of marriage were wide open compared to my parents. I was the oldest child in a family of girls so I really hadn't experienced any sense of discrimination growing up. I just assumed I would be anything I wanted to, be although my parents didn't encourage a career. But when I got married, I felt I was suddenly put into a subcategory."

"I had to fight my way out to a certain extent. Very gradually. My husband always included me unofficially. So I went to rehearsals when he was writing for television, and he encouraged me to help him draft some scenes. But there's a huge gulf between fact and fiction. I loved to read novels. But I never in my wildest imagination expected to write one of my own. It took me quite a while to get over fear of fiction."

"The first book, *A Woman of Independent Means*, was based on the life of my grandmother so it was a wonderful bridge. I started out to use the facts of her life, but I had the freedom of fiction and I could rely on a lot of facts."

"With *Life Sentences*, I was a novelist for the first time inventing situations and characters although you never really invent anything."

Hailey also translated *A Woman of Independent Means* to the stage,

where it is now firmly ensconced at the Back Alley Theater in Van Nuys starring Barbara Rush.

"It was very curious," Hailey recalls. "It was not exactly like writing a play because I had the novel to draw from. So it wasn't like sitting down with a blank page and writing a play. I'd never have the courage to do that. It's so economical, so compressed. In this case, I had a whole book to draw from with the structure already laid out. So I could be very selective — to almost like editing with an eye to what would play and what would be dramatic."

Hailey got the idea for the "Woman" play from "Belle of Amherst," the one-woman show, even though it was based on a fictional character described through a series of letters. "So I actually began doing it without Barbara."

Then, at the same time, she began looking for something to do on her own.

The Haileys knew Rush from another show — Oliver Hailey's "Father's Day." "She not only starred it and produced it," Hailey says, "but she gave it a whole second life. It started out successfully in Los Angeles at the Mark Taper Forum's New Theater for Now. And 10 producers bid on it. So it went to New York — and closed overnight."

"The *New York Times* didn't like it," she said. "It was a terrible shock, and it came at a time in our lives when we expected things to change our lives. We're older and wiser now. We write the things that matter and feel the marketplace is such a gamble. You can't count on anything once it leaves your head. The joy is in the process."

Being the mother of two daughters also brings joy to Hailey. She says she uses fewer guidelines raising them than her mother gave her. "But more with a sense of anything is possible. And they have the power to do anything. There's no hurry to find a pattern."

"That was the most exciting thing to come out of the '60s revolution. To know that your life is not as ordered as you thought. For both men and women."

And Hailey feels especially lucky to be able to merge work and family — something that is essential to her.

"I feel very blessed to be doing the work I most want to be doing and also work that accommodates a family. I am not consumed by ambition."