ANIL AGGRAWAL'S
Internet Journal of Forensic Medicine and Toxicology
The world's first online journal devoted entirely to forensic medicine and toxicology · Published 1 January and 1 July

VOL. 7, NO. 2
Downloaded from www.anilaggrawal.com · ISSN 0972-8074 (Online) · https://www.anilaggrawal.com/ij/vol_007_no_002/others/interview/2/sylvia.html

Interview with Sylvia Tomlinson

Sylvia Tomlinson in a still taken in Atlanta, Georgia in 2004 (Click to enlarge)



S**ylvia Tomlinson**, author, publisher and grandmother to fifteen, began her writing career in grade school when she and her sister wrote a handbook for what they called the "Fun Club". Aside from being fun, Sylvia viewed writing as something natural like breathing.

Born in Detroit , Sylvia has lived in various parts of the United States from Arizona to Texas since leaving her Michigan birthplace where she received a Bachelor of Science Degree from Michigan State University . But the place she ended up calling home for more than a decade was a patch of pine, hardwood, briar and brush that she and husband Steve called 'the ranch'. Located in the foothills of the Ouachita Mountain Range on the banks of Caston Creek, they raised four children,

cattle, goats, laying hens and guardian dogs. She says, "O ver the course of a decade, we raised my four children on the farm and sometimes with only farm income. It was tough." This experience has left her with great compassion for the family farmer and a unique understanding of the challenges these farmers face.

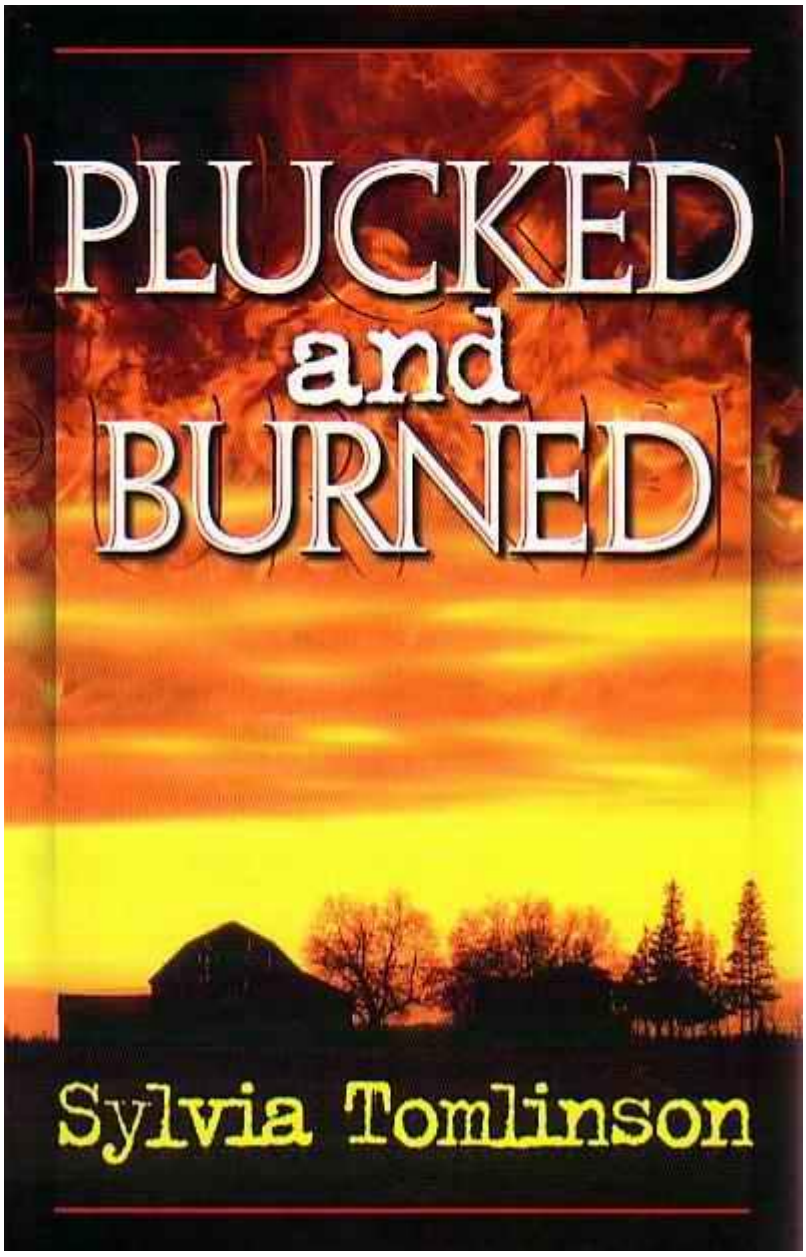
Sylvia's writing career bloomed during this period when she wrote a monthly column for an agricultural journal and was dubbed "the soul of the *Goat Rancher Magazine* ". She also published a breed association newsletter and had freelance articles published in numerous national and international agricultural publications.

In response to many letters and phone calls from goat ranchers, she wrote the book ***"The Meat Goats of Caston Creek",*** an anthology of stories and hands on advice for raising meat goats. Carried in many caprine and sheep catalogs and magazine bookshelves, a new revised edition was released this fall (October 2006).

Sylvia and her husband pursued their agrarian dreams even after the kids were grown and until her husband's health retired him from ranching. Their plan to continue on a smaller scale was shortstopped by a devastating fire that destroyed their home and possessions along with a lifetime of memorabilia.

But memories are stored in the heart and Sylvia's love for the land and country life come through loud and clear in ***"Maddie",*** written after the fire, the first in a farm series for children (ages 9-12 years) released by Redbud Publishing.

Plucked and Burned, the bestselling book by Tomlinson (Click to read its review done in this journal)



After cutting her teeth on the two goat books, Sylvia wrote ***"Plucked and Burned",*** a novel about one community's travail suffered at the hands of a fiendish poultry integrator. She witnessed first-hand the mistreatment of her friends and neighbors and after hearing numerous stories of terminations, intimidation and death within the poultry industry, Sylvia Tomlinson decided enough was enough. Tomlinson devoted herself to revealing the injustices caused by the poultry industry. Having met many people who have been "plucked and burned", she hoped the book would bring about change stating that she would like to see legislative reform and awareness among the American public of how their food is produced. Sylvia is particularly concerned with the use of arsenic in the poultry feeds and the subsequent exposure to dangerous degraded arsenicals.

Along with the ranching career, Tomlinson and her husband worked in the oil patch performing petroleum land work to help finance their agrarian dreams and later a small press called Redbud Publishing. Today Sylvia lives, writes and publishes from the town of Victoria on the Texas Gulf Coast.

We at the "*Anil Aggrawal's Internet Journal of Forensic Medicine and Toxicology*" became interested in his work mainly because of her exciting and influential work on the powerful American poultry

lobby (***Plucked and Burned***). We approached her for an online interview and she graciously agreed. The interview was conducted by the editor-in-chief Dr. Anil Aggrawal for well over two months. Some excerpts....)

Q. How did you come to write the novel PLUCKED AND BURNED?

A. My husband and I tried our hand at farming and ranching when we moved to his family farm in 1986. At that time one of our neighbors tried to interest us in the chicken business. They had recently built expensive new houses and were full of hope that they could make a good living at farming. We decided against poultry farming for basically two reasons. One, another neighbor with old barns told us how badly he had been treated by the local poultry company. And, secondly, we saw that the grower had no real control over the inputs. Agriculture is risky enough with weather factors and market fluctuations without further handicap. But mostly we were just lucky that we chose not to do it. For many years after that, I saw families ruined, farms lost and people humiliated and demoralized by the local poultry business. I thought it was just a maverick, crooked, small town business operation that got away with treating people poorly because there weren't many other employment options. I never dreamed that it could happen somewhere else as well. Eventually one of the ranchers who I respected joined a lawsuit against this local company. I had been thinking it was such an amazing story that it would make a good fiction novel. After all, who could believe such a thing as indentured servitude could happen in America - the land of the free?!

...After our friend joined the lawsuit, I told him that I guess I'd better do a little research on how birds are raised so that my novel would be technically correct. He suggested that I monitor a broiler chat group and gave me names of several people around the country. I thought I was only going to learn how barns were constructed and what type of feed regime was used...

Q. How did you learn about the use of arsenic in the poultry industry?

A. After our friend joined the lawsuit, I told him that I guess I'd better do a little research on how birds are raised so that my novel would be technically correct. He suggested that I monitor a broiler chat group and gave me names of several people around the country. I thought I was only going to learn how barns were constructed and what type of feed regime was used. Instead, the word got out among growers all across the United States that I was researching for a book. They called and e-mailed me to tell me what had happened to them. During this process, I met a school teacher named Susan Nugent whose family had been poisoned by the arsenicals in chicken litter that was spread on adjoining lands and from airborne emissions from the local feed mill that produced poultry feed. Additionally, when it rained, a couple head of cattle would die. It turned out that the highly unstable arsenic degraded into arsine gas and being heavier than air, would roll down the hill into the pasture where her cows grazed. Since arsine gas is something like 2000 times more toxic than carbon monoxide, it didn't take too many molecules to drop a big animal. Susan had been in litigation against Pilgrim's Pride for numerous years and engaged Dr. Rod O'Connor to assay her homestead for arsenic. (Please the linked page (rod) for Dr. O'Connor's Interview).

Q. But isn't the arsenic used for chicken feed "organic"?

A. Yes, it's called roxarsone or organic arsenic, which is a misleading label. Some people think if something is organic, it's healthy. Organic arsenic is used to promote growth by controlling coccidiosis. One of the main problems is that it passes through the chicken into the chicken manure where it degrades, creating problems for both human health and the environment.

Sylvia Tomlinson with her three daughters and young grandson Lucas (youngest daughter's firstborn) in Cancun Mexico. Tomlinsons had "Girls Weekend" there this year. (Click to enlarge)



Q. Why do farmers get into this if it's such a bad deal?

A. I think the most direct answer for that is that they are scammed. It's a very smooth seduction and many of the farmers are used to doing business on a handshake the way their fathers did. It is not within their small town mindset that a well-known company would deliberately cheat them. They really have no idea that they are entering into a competition with other growers in which they have no control over any of the inputs that they are given to work with. The company brings the farmer chickens and feed that remains the property of the company. The farmer only owns the bird if it dies. That way any environmental liability will transfer to the farmer.

Typically the poultry companies approach the farmer with promises of being their partner. By building expensive, single use barns, the farmers within a complex put up over 50% of the capital required to produce a marketable chicken and then they see almost none of the profit, maybe 1-2% while the poultry company posts 20-30% profits. Once the farmer has signed the mortgage, he's trapped and the company knows it. Dr. C. Robert Taylor, Alfa Eminent Scholar and Professor in agricultural and public policy at Auburn University, has done extensive work on the financials in the poultry business and has served as expert witness in many trials for poultry growers trying to obtain justice. Taylor is a proponent for competitive markets and the bane of the likes of Tyson.

Click here to solve an interesting quiz based on the bestselling book by Tomlinson.

Q. Are the farmers making any gains?

A. I don't see it happening. Of those who try to settle scores in court, many get old, die, give up and move away. The companies are big, rich and powerful and they are patient. They retaliate against growers and that sends a strong message to the other growers. If they can't bluff, lie and stall until the plaintiff drops the effort, declares bankruptcy, dies or fades away, then they'll try to negotiate an out of court settlement. Ultimately, unless the poultry integrator can pressure the court, they prefer to pay a settlement with a non-disclosure clause than to see any precedent setting litigation occur. And regardless of fines, litigation or legislative changes, they can always somehow change how the game is played so that they remain in absolute, tyrannical control.

...actually they (the poultry industry) are quite aware of it (my book). Several company executives have ordered the book directly from the publisher and an attorney for one of the largest two poultry companies in the nation called me at home trying to pick my brain. Richard Lobb with the National Chicken Council (mouthpiece for the industry) has his pat sound bite for journalists who inquire about the book...

Q. Is it true chicken farmers are afraid to talk about what is happening to them?

A. Absolutely, retaliation one grower told me, "is very real." Another said that even worse than having their contract terminated (a retaliatory measure which would result in bankruptcy and losing the farm) is getting bad feed or sick birds (two retaliatory measures used against growers who complain). Bad feed and sick birds over and over is like a slow death. When I first started interviewing growers, I thought they were all just paranoid. But after repeatedly hearing the same stories all across the country, it was as if a critical mass was reached within my psyche and I realized that I was hearing about trends, about the way business is done within the poultry industry.

Q. Has the poultry industry reacted to your book?

A. Yes, actually they are quite aware of it. Several company executives have ordered the book directly from the publisher and an attorney for one of the largest two poultry companies in the nation called me at home trying to pick my brain. Richard Lobb with the National Chicken Council (mouthpiece for the industry) has his pat sound bite for journalists who inquire about the book. He tells them that "it's fiction and they don't do fiction." I have responded by saying that Mr. Lobb is correct - they don't do fiction, they do the harsh reality version of plucking and burning anyone who gets in the way of their bottom line. People are a disposable commodity for them in their pursuit of cheap chicken and big profits.

Q. What untold story would you like the public to know about?

A. There are several huge issues in "*Plucked and Burned*".

First and foremost in most readers minds should be a concern with the use of arsenic to raise poultry and how that affects not only eaters of chicken but all people living within an area of high poultry concentration. Dr. O'Connor has effectively shown us how much at risk we are. The elevated cancer levels in these areas should be seriously noted. Small, organic family farms that serve their local communities are a viable answer to this problem.

Secondly, I want the reader to know that not all terrorism is what we see on the evening news. We in America have processing plant workers and small family farms where people live daily in fear of corporate terrorism. I will never forget the sound of a lady's voice in Alabama who had grown chicken for twenty years and told me "all the growers are so afraid." Some farmers were afraid to talk to me on the phone, preferring to meet in person, embarrassed to admit that they were afraid their phone might be tapped. The situation is so oppressive that it breeds paranoia.

Third, I want to create an awareness in the public about how our food is raised. In the US less than 1% of the population lives on family farms but 98% of us eat chicken. We need to know the cost in human life by mega agriculture that grows rich while their so-called partner lives in poverty and despair.

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Last, I want to give the people who have been hurt a voice. I was able to look into the faces of men, women and children who were the victims of a heartless industry that is blind to everything but the bottom line. They were wounded in different ways but all were generous and brave to share their stories with me. Giving them my best effort is the very least that I can do.

Q. What do you hope to accomplish with Plucked and Burned?

A. When I first wrote *Plucked and Burned*, I was overwhelmed by the number of personal tragedies recounted. These were stories told to me by farmers about their dealings with Big Chicken (as some call the poultry moguls). However, I soon learned that as repugnant as the reality of indentured servitude and corporate corruption was, it did not bring a public outcry for reform. Upon reflection, it occurred to me that modern life is so demanding that most people are not looking for more causes to champion. There has to be something in it for them. So, I hope that by informing the public of their exposure to carcinogenic arsenic and pointing out the antibiotic resistance issues that the poultry industry raises, it will also raise other moral issues and bring those concerns within the scope of public notice.



Sylvia Tomlinson can be approached via E-mail at sylvia@redbudpublishing.com.



Buy Sylvia's *Plucked and Burned* by clicking here.

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Interviews in our sister publication : Collective Index

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