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Featured Books

(Review 2 - by Dr. V V Pillay, India, Asia)

FEATURED BOOK : QUIZ SECTION

AN INTRIGUING MURDER MYSTERY



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[Interview with Sylvia Tomlinson] [Quiz based on *Plucked and Burned*]

Rating : 9/10
★★★★★★★★★
(9/5)

Plucked and Burned *by* Sylvia Tomlinson. Paperback, 8" x 6".
Redbud Publishing Co., P.O. Box 4402, Victoria, TX 77903-4402, USA. E-mail: info@redbudpublishing.com Publication Date 2003. x + 237 pages. ISBN 0-9720293-2-X. Price $19.95

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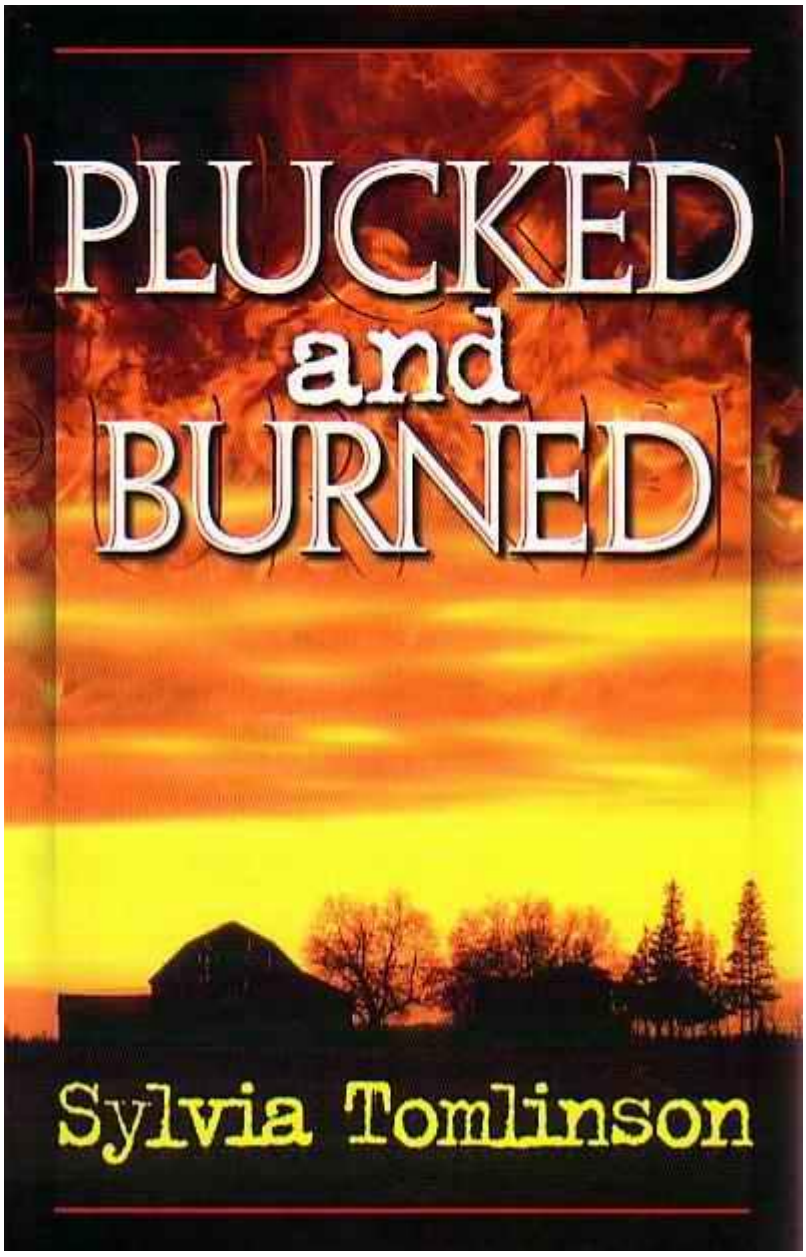

The book opens with graphic descriptions of two deaths: one a young Mexican boy who is electrocuted, and the other a poultry grower found hanging from a rope in his own barn. What more can a forensic pathologist like me ask for when he opens a novel to read on a 4-hour flight? I began without much by way of expectations. After all I had not heard of the author until I received this book from the publisher for review. Normally, I review only books related to my fields of expertise - forensic medicine and toxicology, but I was tempted by the title of this one ("plucked and burned"); it sounded sufficiently gruesome to arouse my interest! And though the book is far from gruesome, I was not disappointed; there was enough by way of murder, suicide, and melodrama to keep me engaged throughout my long flight from the South to the North of India. Fittingly, the novel too begins in the South; only it is the Southern region of America that we are talking about, and not South India. But the heat and sweat described in the beginning pages of the novel are no different from what we experience here, especially in the long summer months.

"Plucked and Burned" is a novel that is written in white heat. It is a story told in barely controlled fury, and that is in fact its basic strength. When an author writes a story that is close to his or her heart, the intensity comes through, and the emotions experienced by the actors in the drama get

imbued by that extra edge of realism that distinguishes a novel of this sort from one that is written in a more casual fashion. In a sense I was reminded of Leon Uris' searing masterpiece "Exodus" which too has that almost unbearable intensity, only it is much more extreme there than in this relatively straightforward story of subjugation of poultry farmers. Never did I imagine during all those innumerable occasions when I dug into some chicken delicacy, that apart from the cruelty that the animal itself may have been subjected to by way of slaughter, even the chicken farmer could himself be a victim of gross abuse. If the situation is so bad in a country such as the USA, where one expects human rights of the general populace to be well protected, the situation in a Third World country like India can be well imagined. Henceforth, I don't think I can ever sit down to a meal of chicken or meat without suffering a twinge of guilt. After all this novel asks the question directly "Where the hell do you think this chicken dinner came from?" and goes on to expose the horrific truths behind the dealings of huge corporations that run the poultry industry in America.

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...Both an intriguing murder mystery, and a fascinating documentary of an industry embroiled in moral and ethical corruption, "Plucked and Burned" is a book that will grip you from the start and take you on a relentless, poignant journey that will stay in your mind long after you have put it down...

The story related by Sylvia Tomlinson is a "factional" (fact and fiction) account of Doug Blackwelder, a poultry farmer and his wife Dena who quit teaching to grow chickens with her husband, both of them expecting (and initially enjoying) an easy life without the hassles of city jobs. But very soon they realize that everything is not hunky dory, and as the days pass, incidents of unfair treatment and harassment at the hands of the corporation they are working for (Poultry Unlimited or PU) begin to take hold. The book describes the abuse of a good concept: a kind of vertical integration in which poultry growers take care of housing, equipment, utilities, and labor, while poultry companies provide the birds, feed, and medication, as well as a technician who acts as a liaison agent between the two. The abuse of this concept starts from the very beginning of the whole process - growers are made to sign contracts which are totally one-sided, and then made to toil day in and day out for a pittance, while the corporation reaps huge profits. It is the company that controls the contract, the kind of equipment used in the poultry houses, the quality and quantity of feed delivered, the placement of the birds, the number of birds within the houses, and even the selection of growers who are then pitted against one another for competitive pay each week. In other words there is a total lack of grower control over the final product, while it is he who takes the risk of unexpected or inadvertent calamities.

As the tragic events unfold one by one in the novel in the form of a Greek tragedy beginning with the deaths of the Mexican boy and the poultry grower who (apparently) hanged himself, a sense of urgency sets in, and the book races towards a satisfying climax, during the course of which there are instances of physical assault, shooting, poisoning, and even a hint of sexual misdemeanor, all of which mix well into an engrossing tale that has all the makings of a classic. The major protagonists in the story have been fleshed out well, and the reader genuinely empathizes with them in their travails, while the negative characters such as the Bible-hugging owner of PU whose eyes exude "the cold fire of evil masquerading behind a cloak of religiosity" bring to mind our own Bollywood villains at their malevolent best. When you come to the end of the novel you find yourself almost

standing and cheering Blackwelder as he finally takes on the heartless corporate giant in a decisive fight to the finish.

Both an intriguing murder mystery, and a fascinating documentary of an industry embroiled in moral and ethical corruption, "Plucked and Burned" is a book that will grip you from the start and take you on a relentless, poignant journey that will stay in your mind long after you have put it down.



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Dr.V.V.Pillay has been in the vanguard of the movement among medical professionals in India to develop the neglected field of Toxicology. He has published extensively in both the scientific and lay press on matters relating to Toxicology, as well as his chosen discipline - Forensic Medicine. Dr.Pillay has authored 6 books on Forensic Medicine and Toxicology, and has received an award for one of them (Modern Medical Toxicology), generally considered to be a trend setter among books on the subject in India. He has reviewed several books on Toxicology for the Internet Journal of Forensic Medicine and Toxicology. Dr.Pillay received a scroll of honour in appreciation of work done in the field of Toxicology from the Medicolegal Society, All India Institute of Medical Sciences, New Delhi. He has established a state-of-the-art Poison Control Centre, recognized by the World Health Organization at the institute where he is currently employed (AIMS, Cochin). Among his most sought-after publications is a 700 page reference work on Toxicology.

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