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Featured Books

(Review 8 - by Adriana Oliva, Argentina, South America)

FEATURED BOOK : QUIZ SECTION

AN IMPORTANT BOOK



[Main page] Reviews | [1] [2] [3] [4] [5] [6] [7] [8] [9] [10]

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

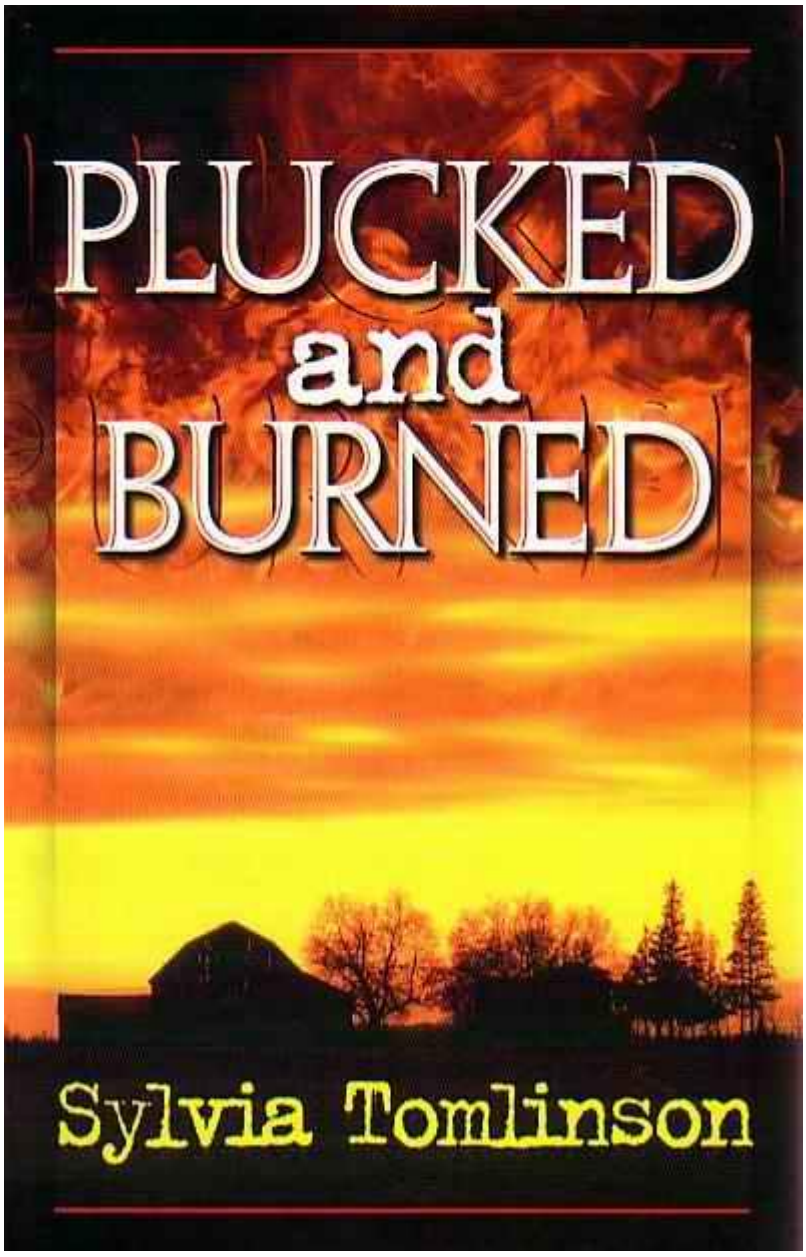
Rating : 8/10
★★★★★★★★
(8/5)

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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A big chicken company uses illegal tactics to cut down costs at the expense of their workers' safety. The subject brought back the XXI International Congress of Entomology (August 2000, Foz do Iguassu, Brazil). Dr Craig Sheppard, of the University of Georgia, was being asked time and again to repeat his fascinating speech on the treatment of chicken manure in factory farms. Having grown himself in an ordinary farm where chickens roamed free, he had a shock when he first entered one of those huge buildings with thousands of birds.

After more than four years I still remember vividly Dr Sheppard telling how one of his helpers had to be pulled out of a particularly succulent patch. I'm afraid I leaned aside to my neighbor (a Brit) and whispered in her ear: "And the Chicken of the Baskervilles howling in the distance!".

Which is more Mystery Story atmosphere than one finds in this novel, in spite of some of the review snippets quoted by the editor. Plucked and Burned is not a mystery story. True, there are several deaths, beginning right on the first page with the electrocution of a fourteen-year-old Mexican boy. This is a testimonial novel, depending largely on pace to sustain the interest until the very end. The narrator is a farmer who produces chickens for Poultry Unlimited Ltd (PU for short). He discovers that the company, besides dodging security rules and children labor laws, is

maneuvering farmers into bankruptcy, and perhaps doing worse things (His neighbor would not commit suicide, would he? Or would he?). While the gradual disclosure of information makes for a satisfying amount of suspense, there is no real investigation of the death. The story is about farmers and plant workers who decide to oppose a company already charged with law offences.

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This is a work of fiction based on fact. I admit that I groaned inwardly when I read that. Such a novel falls into a sort of twilight: one can hardly demand style and psychology when the main purpose is to carry a message across- in this case, to denounce the plight of chicken growers in Oklahoma. On the other hand, the whole point of such works is that the facts should be true. I am old enough to remember a poignant, stark-reality story which won a journalism prize, then turned out to have been invented. This is not the case of Plucked and Burned, as far as one can tell. The afterword offers plenty of references and the authenticity of the events appears well attested.

The narration is very simple in structure, unadventurous in language. The characters are rather two-dimensional, even a few that, we are told, exist in actual life! Maybe the author had them very clear in her mind, but readers are not telepaths. For instance, when a woman is driven to suicide, the narrator's wife mourns "She was a beautiful person", and as far as we know, they have only met twice. Did they see each other on the sly from the reader? I am shown a woman who is distressed, frightened, in need of help; I am willing to believe she was a beautiful person, but I have not seen it.

...This book makes one thinks of a successful commercial motion picture. A lively pace, suspense, pleasant views of country life interspersed with a few "shock" scenes, rather blurred (I don't like to think what Emile Zola would have made of the "fried" Mexican boy)...

My impression was of blurred faces and figures together with undue detail of clothing. When I say "undue", I mean that the descriptions hold up the narration. A farmer receives a phone call from his neighbor's wife, motors over, finds her "leaning against the support post" of the porch, and... he takes in what she is wearing, beginning with her footgear. Would a man (repeat: a man) pay attention to such a detail at such a moment? He might notice the cool, clean white garments contrasting with the tousled hair and mascara streaked face. Or in the shock of learning the Awful News, he might glance down and remark how frail her sandalled feet look. Detailed descriptions of dress make sense when dress gives indication of social status (or clues to a sleuth!), or when a man is dazzled by a fashionable woman (and being fashionable is part of her charm). Or perhaps in a childhood reminiscence or a stream of consciousness passage, when surprisingly clear images might surface from unconscious memory.

This book makes one thinks of a successful commercial motion picture. A lively pace, suspense, pleasant views of country life interspersed with a few "shock" scenes, rather blurred (I don't like to think what Emile Zola would have made of the "fried" Mexican boy). Add to this the funeral which now seems obligatory in "drama" movies, an honest priest to counterbalance the Bible-waving hypocrite who got rich on his own neighbors' lives, a nice cameo role for a child actress, with a little scene bound to steal camera and hearts, a "trap-baiting" for the villain that no sane person should attempt, giving Man's Best Friend a chance for saving the day - a nice cameo role for a dog actor -, and finally, a hopeful, rather than blatantly happy, end, with a nice cameo role for a brace of twin newborn baby actors. They do break them in young nowadays.

Not overtaxing to the mind, but serious enough to make the public feel like responsible citizens, perhaps to foster some discussion of the subject. Indeed, some faults in the book might be

considered positive from a film maker's point of view. Descriptions of characters, as I remarked before, are rather vague, those of dress too detailed; these passages read just like instructions to the Wardrobe team. I dare say that fifty years ago, they would have read like tips for the illustrator.

...This book is of obvious interest to the American reader. In practically any other country there are stories to cap this one. However, I think it is prudent to learn what happens in the rest of the world. In particular, I think the matter of how Americans can be ruined in America by Americans deserves more than a passing glance...

No sex scenes in this book, but explicit cooking. I must admit I rather enjoyed the scenes of Americans stuffing their faces as if they never had heard the word "cholesterol". Interestingly, they appear to eat hamburgers, veal, kid, turkey, various sausages, bacon, eggs, but never chicken (although chicken broth is mentioned in one instance).

This book is of obvious interest to the American reader. In practically any other country there are stories to cap this one. However, I think it is prudent to learn what happens in the rest of the world. In particular, I think the matter of how Americans can be ruined in America by Americans deserves more than a passing glance. For of course it is done legally, or rather, "not illegally". There is a Spanish proverb: "When you see your neighbor having his beard shaven, put your own to soak." You don't need American businessmen to spot loopholes in the law, to step into areas of production for which no legislation has been made. The offenses against law come at the end, when "not-illegal" maneuvering has been accepted. You need no chicken farm, you don't need to be paid in dollars to find yourself in such a plight as the characters in Plucked and Burned.

One could review such a book from several angles. One might make a case for bankruptcy as a punishment to the farmers' greed. After all, senator Paul Muegge (a real person, we are told in the afterword), tells the narrator: "You have to go back to the days when the integrators painted you that perfect picture of growing chickens. (...) All anyone, including growers, could see were dollar signs." Or one might stress the individualism and stubborn pride which stops people from asking for help, drives them to suicide. They want to be their own bosses, they sign up as independent contractors and the big company bosses them as they would not dare boss an employee. (American, of course. There are several dark passages on immigrant labor in inhuman conditions.) Senator Muegge again: "...until a court of law rules that growers are legally employees and not independent growers, nothing will change." And an old chicken producer from Wisconsin, where they are shown to have a good system (proving it can be done): "None of that fake competition for some imaginary piece of pie they got you guys scrambling for".

...For me, the real point of this book is that no segment of society should be allowed power over another segment- because they'll use it, all right. Everybody, from president downwards, should be under some type of control, preferably several. It's a shame that human beings cannot live without laws, but since such is the case, laws must be as complete as possible...

Then again one could just blame the Capitalistic system, which is sure to please some. Or point out how stupid it is to sink one's retirement money into a venture in a field of which one has no knowledge; or even to use any pest spray without gloves and mask. However, cases of self-defense aside, a crime is no less a crime because of any failing of the victim.

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under some type of control, preferably several. It's a shame that human beings cannot live without laws, but since such is the case, laws must be as complete as possible.

It is different when there is no money at stake. Or even when you work with something most people wouldn't even touch. By the way, did I say which was Dr Sheppard's solution for manure? Larvae of soldier flies (Stratiomyidae), that consume manure, keep at bay undesirables like domestic flies, and can made into chicken, fish or pig feed. With insects, you know just where you are.

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Adriana Oliva is a senior editor associated with this journal since its inception. For more information about her, please the linked page (assi eds 1.html#oliva). She can be contacted at aoliva@macn.gov.ar

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