



Fateful Harvest: The True Story of a Small Town, a Global Industry, and a Toxic Secret

By Duff Wilson



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I see soil in a new light, and I wonder about my own lawn and garden. What have I sprinkled on my backyard? Is somebody using my home, my food, to recycle toxic waste? It seems unbelievable, outlandish -- but what if it's true?

A riveting exposé, *Fateful Harvest* tells the story of Patty Martin -- the mayor of a small Washington town called Quincy -- who discovers American industries are dumping toxic waste into farmers' fields and home gardens by labeling it "fertilizer." She becomes outraged at the failed crops, sick horses, and rare diseases in her town, as well as the threats to her children's health. Yet, when she blows the whistle on a nationwide problem, Patty Martin is nearly run out of town.

Duff Wilson, whose *Seattle Times* series on this story was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize, provides the definitive account of a new and alarming environmental scandal. *Fateful Harvest* is a gripping study of corruption and courage, of recklessness and reckoning. It is a story that speaks to the greatest fears -- and ultimate hope -- in us all.

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- Sales Rank: #1261731 in Books
- Published on: 2002-10-15
- Released on: 2002-10-15
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 8.00" h x .76" w x 5.31" l,
- Binding: Paperback
- 336 pages



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Editorial Review

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Arsenic, cadmium, lead, beryllium: industrial byproducts so toxic it is illegal to dump them into the air or water. Yet, through a loophole in "the crazy semantics of waste disposal," these same hazardous wastes are being applied to the food we eat. And until a small-town mayor from a farming community in Washington State became suspicious, nobody knew. Mayor Patty Martin is a whistleblower as extraordinary as Karen Silkwood and Erin Brockovich--smart, persistent, courageous, and overwhelmingly dedicated to her cause even when the town that elected her turned against her. Martin's obsession with hazardous waste in fertilizer began when she met Dennis DeYoung, a local farmer whose land was rendered infertile after the Cenex/Land O'Lakes company paid him to spread the residue from their fertilizer rinse pond on his land. But there was more than fertilizer residue there--it was a witches' brew of hazardous metals, cancer-causing chemicals, and even radioactive materials that hadn't been produced by the company itself. DeYoung and Martin wanted to know how they got there and why.

Duff Wilson, an investigative journalist for the *Seattle Times*, was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize for his series "Fear in the Fields--How Hazardous Wastes Become Fertilizer," which formed the basis of this book. While the articles prompted a modicum of action in Washington State and elsewhere, complacency allows the practice to continue even now. Expanded into book form, this impassioned exposé about an alarming trend takes on even more power as Wilson and Martin ask questions the EPA has been unwilling to answer: Why should there be a limit on the amount of lead in paint and dioxin in cement but not in the fertilizer spread over farmlands and gardens? And is there a correlation between the widespread use of toxins in fertilizers and the phenomenal rise in childhood illnesses and cancers since the early 1980s? --Lesley Reed

From Publishers Weekly

In this alarming, real-life version of Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People*, Patty Martin, a housewife, mother of four and mayor of the small farming town of Quincy, Wash., began to notice a pattern of failing crops, infertile topsoil and rare diseases in her community in the early 1990s. When she asked tough questions about the pattern, she received evasions and resistance from some local businesses and farmers, which only made her dig deeper. Martin found that a product manufactured with sludge from a waste pond in town, sold as fertilizer and spread on local farms, stunted crops, destroyed quality topsoil and left high concentrations of such heavy metals as cadmium, chromium and beryllium not usually present in fertilizers. As Martin pursued links between fertilizers, hazardous waste and public health risks, she, like Ibsen's protagonist, became increasingly unpopular in the town she was trying to protect. Growing beyond the conflict in Quincy, Wilson's investigation (which led to a 1997 series of articles that were nominated for Pulitzer Prize consideration) revealed that under prevailing state and federal laws, polluting industries throughout the U.S. saved millions of dollars by sending hazardous waste to fertilizer makers who in turn recycled the toxic chemicals into a product sold to farmers and consumers without disclosing what was in it. In the resulting outcry, Washington State became the first to insist that fertilizer companies provide detailed chemical analyses of their products. Wilson's copious reporting and Patty Wilson's example make a convincing case for a national policy on hazardous materials recycling. Agent, Elizabeth Wales. (Sept. 13) Forecast: This lucid presentation of the facts will stir the passions of readers already concerned about environmental issues, but those accustomed to more gut-wrenching accounts of similar transgressions, like *A Civil Action* and the film *Erin Brockovich*, won't be drawn in as easily.

From Library Journal

Based on a series of articles in the Seattle Times, this is a timely and chilling look at the way corporate polluters evade government toxic-waste laws and how waste from steel mills, power plants, and chemical companies is magically transformed into fertilizer and plant food by the simple act of relabeling. Seattle Times reporter and Pulitzer Prize nominee Wilson describes how toxic waste from a farm chemical store in Quincy, WA, was drained from a waste lagoon and palmed off as fertilizer to a farmer in debt to the store. When crops withered, horses died, and people became sick, the mayor of Quincy led a crusade to expose this repackaging of industrial waste. Wilson documents the collusion of corporations and government officials who allow the land to be despoiled and our food poisoned. This gripping read is highly recommended for all libraries with current events collections. Duncan Stewart, State Historical Society of Iowa Lib., Iowa City

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Users Review

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