

A CONVERSATION WITH ATINA DIFFLEY

What inspired you to write *Turn Here Sweet Corn*?

I've had opportunities that are no longer common in our food and farming culture. I wanted to share them and the spiritual aspect of our relationship with the land that feeds us. I wanted to capture the realities of farming life without romanticizing it.

What research did you undertake in writing your award-winning book?

For the legal proceeding with the MinnCan pipeline I used court documents and emails from my attorney. The Minnesota Historical Society has archives on organic certification and food co-op history. My mother kept twenty-five years of letters written between her and my grandmother. I interviewed many people who were involved with the food co-ops and organic farming, including my husband, Martin, who has an excellent memory.

How long did it take you to write *Turn Here Sweet Corn*?

Eighteen focused months. I had to learn about writing as I moved through the process and I took classes at The Loft Literary Center. My basic guide was: *What happened? How did I feel then? How do I feel now?*

What do you like most about the book?

I love the kale scenes. Who knew kale could be an active character and a literary metaphor! The accessibility of emotion in the writing allows the reader to feel the characters' experiences and it gives them a jolt. Oh, and hail and clothesline poles and soil and—of course—sweet corn.

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What was your journey to becoming a published author?

Writing *Turn Here Sweet Corn* was a cathartic process of self-discovery. My sub-conscious provided the direction for what stories belonged in the book. My conscious mind was the editor who took care of details like word choice and sentence structure. They made a fantastic team as long as they respected each other and stuck to their roles.

What interesting challenges did you encounter in writing the book?

The first drafts had very little personal story; I thought it was self-indulgent and arrogant to write about myself. Teachers at The Loft told me that readers needed to know how I felt, but I didn't understand that, I thought the book was about the farm. Then I had to figure out how to write about my children and other people in a way that respected their privacy yet told the story. I realized I wasn't telling other people's stories, nor the farm's story, but my own, and I had to write from my perspective and experience as their mother, or wife, or whatever relationship we had.

What are you currently writing and what's an inspiration you have for a future book?

I'm working on a prequel to *Turn Here Sweet Corn* that tells the story of the market-garden community of Eagan/Inver Grove in the 1950s and 1960s and how growing up in the midst of it affected my husband Martin as an early organic farmer. It's also a personal memoir about multi-generational patterns with the narrative arc of my matriarchal lineage—that's the really hard one.

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Turn Here Sweet Corn:
Organic Farming Works

by Atina Diffley

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Turn Here Sweet Corn



SUMMARY

Turn Here Sweet Corn is a master class in organic farming, a lesson in entrepreneurship, a love story, and a legal thriller. In telling her story of working the land, Atina Diffley reminds us that we live in relationships—with the earth, plants and animals, families and communities. A memoir of making these essential relationships work in the face of challenges from weather to corporate politics, this is a firsthand history of getting in at the “ground level” of organic farming.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Tell about a place in nature that you've connected with.
2. Tell about a loss you've experienced, and if reading *Turn Here Sweet Corn* was healing for you.

3. What do you think about Atina's definition of a farm as a synthesis of the land, the people, and the business? How does this definition dictate our human role in the farm synthesis and our responsibilities to the land and the business?
4. What is the difference between a farm family and a family farming? Why does it matter to Atina? Does it matter to you?
5. What did Atina learn from Grandma and Anita? How were they different from each other? Why are role models so important and how do you serve as a model to others?
6. What can you do in your life to improve your food relationship with the land and nature that feeds you?
7. What impact do the Twin Cities natural food co-ops have on the success of the farmers from whom they buy?
8. What does it mean to steal from our future and burn up the past? Why does it matter? What does Atina mean when she says, “That's what present time is, the balancing point between the past and the future.”
9. Do you think organic farms are a valuable natural resource? What eco-system services do they provide beyond the food produced?
10. Has reading *Turn Here Sweet Corn* affected your values, beliefs, or future actions? If so, how?



ABOUT ATINA DIFFLEY

Atina Diffley is an organic farmer, public speaker, and author. From 1985 to 2008, she and her husband Martin ran the Gardens of



Eagan, an urban-edge, organic vegetable farm, which he started in 1973. The Diffley's on-farm projects now include breeding of sweet corn cultivars, mentoring beginning farmers, and transitioning conventional land to organic.

Subscribe to Atina's online blog at www.atinadiffley.com



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