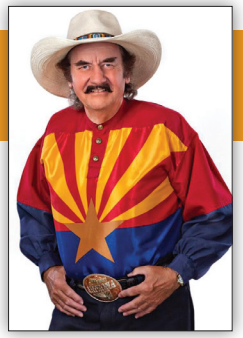
Sylvia Nobel's Arizona Mysteries



PART 1

By Bob Roloff, "The Arizona Duuude"
You can follow Bob Roloff on Facebook.

The goals of Arizona mystery writer Sylvia Nobel are to entertain her readers, keep them riveted to the page and showcase the majestic beauty of Arizona. She maintains a legion of loyal fans that have been following the adventures of her feisty female reporter, Kendall O'Dell, since the publication of her first novel in 1998. Her current novel *Benevolent Evil* has just recently been published and her fans along with new readers are now consuming the carefully researched, thrill-packed adventure based on true events.

That first book *Deadly Sanctuary* won the Arizona Book Publishing Association's Best Mystery of 1999 and was made into a movie starring Dean Cain and Eric Roberts (Julia's brother). I happened to be Eric's stand-in in the movie.

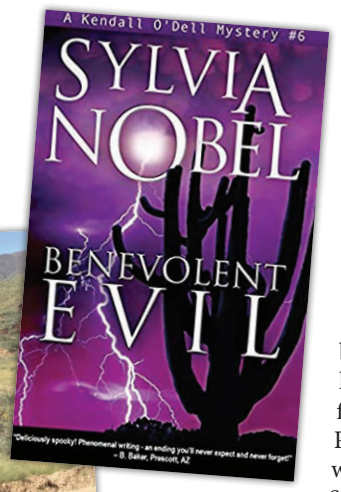
As a member of the Mystery Writers of America, Sylvia is a frequent speaker at book clubs, conventions, and women's groups. Her talk on the "Fascination of Whodunit" is always a hit with audiences everywhere.

Born in Uniontown, Pennsylvania, her journey to Arizona occurred around the age of seven. According to Sylvia, "When I first came here, I have to be honest I didn't love it. I came here with my family. I was a kid. One of my brothers had asthma pretty bad. There were eight of us children, somebody was always sick with something. So my mother kind of talked my dad into going to Arizona. She had terrible arthritis. My mother had lived here in the early 1930s. She always told us about this magical place in Arizona where she had lived. She recalled how they would attempt to get cool because this was a time that was pre-air conditioning. They would wet down their sheets at night and put them in their "icebox." Then right before they went to sleep, they would put their "crispy cold" sheets out and lay down on those to go to sleep." All houses had a screen porch to sleep outside at night because it was so hot."

When the family arrived here the first time, they ended up in Tempe but then ventured north looking for houses. As they drove on old Scottsdale Road, she recalled her mom saying, "This is the Arizona I remember, the Saguaros and open desert." That's how they ended up in Cave Creek. That was in 1961 and it was very tiny then with a population of maybe four hundred people. Sylvia noted that her first summer was very uncomfortable but she learned to love the place.

Sylvia started writing when she was seven and noted, "I always knew that was what I was going to do. So many years went by and many things happened but I finally got my chance to sit down and get my writing career started later in life. I thought about where I wanted to set my stories. I knew I wanted to write mysteries because I had loved them from the time I was a kid. I wanted to showcase the state of Arizona. So I started looking for a town that would be the hub, the base for my female lead, Kendall O'Dell. I had always wanted to be a journalist but life got in the way and I didn't get a chance to follow that career path. So, I lived vicariously through this character. I found that with fiction you have a license to do things like fictionalizing a town so I had the freedom to create new places. Otherwise, you have to be historically correct or readers will find something wrong. For instance, I changed the name of Wickenburg to Castle Valley.

I found that one of the most fascinating parts of Sylvia's writing process is the research she does for each of her books. She told me, "Each time I learn so much about the state and the people. It usually takes more than six months to put it all together. That's one of the things I like about rural Arizona. The diversity of the people that live there and the stories they have to tell. It is an intriguing part of being out on the road. I have written it into my character Kendall. Her favorite thing is to get out of the newspaper office, and go out on another story or assignment."



Sylvia recalled, "When we did the film from the first book, *Deadly Sanctuary*, another fun thing was location scouting. That puts me out there and brings it all alive in my mind. Nancy Criss, who directed it, told me that nobody knew the book better than I did so I would be the best one to find the location. So I was trying to find a ranch not too far from Phoenix, where we could film what would inevitably be the Starfire Ranch from the book.

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I went through days and days of research, trying to find that ranch because most of them were gone. There used to be so many ranches around the Phoenix area. I remembered visiting Bumble Bee Ranch a couple of years before when I was researching my book *Forbidden Entry*. I thought that it would work, and it was not too far from Black Canyon City.

I asked Sylvia if it was difficult to find material for a story. She replied, "No, because I write mystery novels, I look for something that intrigues me and I never run out of material. I can't write anything any weirder than what's already in the paper or what's on the news. Truth is stranger than fiction but when I get it all going, I usually have eight to ten articles that are included. The challenge is to put them together into one story. Usually, I make one of the stories the main theme and then I weave or wrap around the other articles. I have to create a cast of characters. That's a thought-provoking part because initially, they are strangers and just names on paper. The best thing about characterization is that the characters do change and mature throughout the books. The continuing characters, of course, I know very well. They're my friends."

The books revolve around the main core of characters. Kendall O'Dell, the people working at the newspaper, her editor, the receptionist Ginger, and of course, her love interest Cally, the rancher, they are engaged now. In the very first book *Deadly Sanctuary*, they meet at atop Yarnell Hill after she arrives from Pennsylvania. That's where their relationship begins and it matures throughout the books. Now in book six, *Benevolent Evil* they are planning their wedding.

Sylvia states, "So now in *Benevolent Evil* I take Kendall, twenty-five miles southwest of Wickenburg to the not well known town of Aguila. Aguila means "eagle" in Spanish. I got fascinated with the private airpark there. It got my mind working. There's a lot of air traffic at night. One of the things I did was put a lot of pictures from my research in this book, so you can see the places I went to. Then I incorporated the town of Bagdad. I have a fictional ranch I created in between Castle Valley and Aguila. It's a captivating story. Early reviews from the readers of advanced copies have all said they are just blown away by the ending. The actual release is in October. I don't even know if Barnes & Noble will be open because of COVID 19. They canceled my entire book tour, so I missed the whole spring and summer. I usually have my fall signings, but now I just don't know. It all comes down from corporate." ★

It just amazes me to see all the work and travel Sylvia puts into each new mystery. That's why I opted to do a second part of this article in the October issue of Arizona Real Country *Magazine. There are just so many interesting factors about Sylvia's writing technique that still need to be discovered.*

Books in the Kendall O'Dell mystery series are:
Benevolent Evil, 2020; *Forbidden Entry*, 2015; *Seeds of Vengence*, 2006; *Dark Moon Crossing*, 2002; *The Devil's Cradle*, 2000; *Deadly Sanctuary*, 1998.