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Interview with Robin Lamont

By OUR HEN HOUSE

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*Following is a transcript of an interview with **ROBIN LAMONT** conducted by **JASMIN SINGER** and **MARIANN SULLIVAN** of [Our Hen House](#), for the [Our Hen House podcast](#). The interview aired on Episode 243.*

ALESSANDRA: Author Robin Lamont is the next guest on our TV highlights reel, and I have no doubt that what she has to say about the power of fiction, animal rights, and her stint on Broadway will leave you wanting more. Luckily, she has a whole book for you to read, a murder mystery called *The Chain* in fact, that weaves her passion for animal advocacy into thrilling prose. Find out more about Robin and her writing at [animalsuspense.com](#).

JASMIN: Welcome to Our Hen House, Robin.

ROBIN: Aw, thank you, very nice to be here.

MARIANN: We are so excited to have you.

JASMIN: Yeah. That video, you can't make stuff like that up. Well, I guess you could make stuff like that up and if it was you, you'd probably put a whole mystery on top of it!

ROBIN: I might, and that was sufficient as it was. It was sweet.

MARIANN: The moment when he screamed, oh, my God,

JASMIN: I know.

MARIANN: Poor baby.

JASMIN: I know! And it just, it makes me realize the importance of bringing these animals to light.

MARIANN: Stories, that was a little story.

JASMIN: It was. It was a little story and Robin is definitely a story creator. Let's talk about *The Chain*, Robin, 'cause we have a lot of ground to cover with you, but this is a book that we bring up in our household daily because as we just mentioned there isn't enough fiction that speaks up for animals but you're changing that. Tell us about *The Chain*.

ROBIN: Well, I'm trying to. I am a suspense novelist and I have some background that helped me get to that place. I was an undercover investigator for a while, then I was an assistant DA in Westchester County, and so there were a lot of people and a lot of stories that all kind of came together for me as an author. And my first two books were mystery

books but with a social consciousness. And that was really important for me to hang onto that. And during that time I became aware of what was happening for animals on our planet and my entire consciousness changed about it, I was transformed. And I decided that I was gonna commit to writing a series of suspense novels that for the first time featured an animal rights investigator. And with each book I could bring a world of what's happening for animals and their suffering and how brutally they're treated in many ways and bring that to light through mainstream fiction.

MARIANN: I think it's just the most brilliant concept in the world. I mean, partly because I absolutely love mysteries. I read mysteries all the time. But you're right, I like them to have a little bit more going on than just a story. The idea that they should have some kind of social message just makes the story that much more interesting. And I love that this is going to be a series, it's such a brilliant idea for a series. Now tell us a little bit about Jude, who is a fascinating character. I've only read about her in the one book, I can't wait to read about her again.

ROBIN: Oh, thanks. Well, Jude Brannock is the heroine of the Kinship series. She's an animal rights investigator with an organization called the Kinship, and she's a troubled young woman.

MARIANN: She is. She's not a simple character.

ROBIN: She's not a simple character, but I don't think any really good character is simple, so you've got a lot of pulls in different directions. And it's interesting and fun for me that she's also evolving in this next book --

MARIANN: Can't wait!

ROBIN: -- and hopefully will continue to grow and evolve in terms of her passions and her background.

JASMIN: Well, how does that work just as a writer? Is this something that almost takes off on a life of its own, that the story gets to the point where it's writing itself? I'm just curious because whenever I'm reading a novel I think about it all day. It's in the back of my head, like this other little world that I'm lucky enough to be watching. For you as the writer, how do you come up with the story arcs, especially when it brings in animal rights?

ROBIN: Well, for me, for these books what I've done is to choose a particular area and the story needs to evolve and grow organically out of that. *The Chain* is about a town in the Carolinas, and Jude is pulled down to this town because a whistleblower in the town, where there's a pig meat processing plant, has videotaped the abuses to the workers and the inhumane treatment of the animals that are going through the slaughterhouse.

MARIANN: That's a very timely story. We're seeing those undercover investigations come out in real time with great frequency.

ROBIN: Yes!

MARIANN: And what I love here is that you go deeper into the story than frequently we're able to in reality and you really explore some of the personalities.

ROBIN: Well, yeah. And here, she's drawn down to this town, and when she gets there to meet with this guy, he has apparently committed suicide and the video they made is gone. So that is what spurs her to continue and try to find out what's happened.

MARIANN: I don't want to reveal what happens in *The Chain* too much 'cause I want everybody to read it 'cause it's so good. But you mentioned that there's another Jude episode in the works which I can't wait for. Can you tell us where that is gonna take place?

ROBIN: Yeah. Well, I'm almost done with the first draft. It takes a lot of editing as any writer knows. You do this. It's called *The Trap* and in this Jude actually goes undercover. So that's a particular interest of mine since I did do some undercover work myself, not in the animal world. And for writing *The Chain* I interviewed a number of undercover investigators --

MARIANN: Oh, you did! That's great.

ROBIN: -- who worked in factory farms and slaughterhouses and I really tried to get a sense from them what it felt like to be undercover. It's a funny kind of place to be.

MARIANN: Totally. I'm fascinated by that, and we've talked to undercover investigators as well. But it's just hard to imagine, and by putting it into fiction I think you get us closer than people are really able to talk about it. What are their stories like?

ROBIN: Well, I think it's layered. The first layer is the kind of backstory you need to create for yourself, which is very, very important because it's like, you need it to be solid so that you can draw on your story of what character you're playing in real life in any situation and often stressful situations. So you need to have that really down. At the same time it's not a lifeline, it's only a tool. I used to feel, when I did some undercover work and I worked in the area of counterfeiting and I worked for a PI firm that went after counterfeiters in New York and this whole area... And I would play a role or I'd come in and offer to buy larger and larger quantities to try to work our way up the chain of sellers and manufacturers. But for me what it felt like was walking a high wire and you've only got this wire in front of you and one false move and you can fall, and there's nothing to grab onto on either side.

MARIANN: You're all alone out there.

ROBIN: You're all alone out there, and even if there's a backup waiting outside in the car, you are alone. And for the undercover investigators who work on factory farms, they have the added burden of having to witness the excruciating suffering of these animals on a daily basis.

JASMIN: Wow, art imitates life imitates art imitates life. Like you were saying, these are very timely issues. Are you going into the wildlife realm? Is this what's happening now?

ROBIN: Yes, I am. In this next book *The Trap*, Jude goes out to a town in the northern Rockies where a Wildlife Services agent has been murdered in his squat, in his own leg hole trap.

MARIANN: Explain a little bit for people what Wildlife Services is 'cause it's one of the craziest names for an agency as if we're serving wildlife. That's not exactly what it's about, is it?

ROBIN: No, it isn't. Well, Wildlife Services is indeed a real agency. It's a branch of the USDA, the Department of Agriculture, and their stated mission is to help humans and wildlife coexist. But what is being revealed in the last several years is that those two things are not aligning with what they are really doing, which is killing animals by the millions. I think in 2013 it was just reported they killed four million animals, and many of them in just horrific ways. They catch pets in their traps, they use terrible traps that even state hunters and trappers cannot use. And so this next one is kind of taking on what is really happening, out west in particular, with Wildlife Services.

MARIANN: But Wildlife Services has even been active right here in New York City with the geese. We had somebody on a few weeks ago talking about that, so they're all over the place killing animals.

JASMIN: Is your mind being blown as you're researching these items that you put in your books? I mean, I was saying about the fawn that you can't make that up, but you really can't make *this* up! I can't even imagine what the research process must be like for you, Robin.

ROBIN: Well, it is a process and one of the amazing things about this series is each book that I'm thinking about really opens me to a new area. I had never heard of Wildlife Services before I started *The Trap*. So I'm learning a lot about what is happening for animals all over, and it's pretty incredible. And yeah, my mind is blown.

JASMIN: I mentioned at the top of the show that fiction is definitely something we don't have enough as animal advocates and that you're really changing that. Let's talk about fiction. I know it's something you're very passionate about. Talk about how you see fiction as a means of creating social change.

ROBIN: Well, I think the most important thing is that they're finding out -- I mean, I write stories because I love to write them, and I love to read fiction. But neurobiologists are finding out every year that people can be changed by fiction, that not only do they step into the protagonists' shoes in a figurative sense, but that it's actually creating biological changes in the brain as well. So what you can do is you can help people create a feeling of empathy through the protagonists' shoes. You can create a lot of feelings that they will then retain in their own lives rather than just this fleeting read of fiction books.

MARIANN: It makes sense.

JASMIN: Well, it's safe. It's because you're kind of guarded behind this character so you almost don't have to confront these pieces of yourself that you would have to confront if you're reading like a book about psychology or just even a book about like education.

MARIANN: And like we were saying before about having -- I mean, like, you can go into so much, or you manage to go into so much that actual people have done this work really can't convey because they're not necessarily that good at that piece of it, of conveying it, and also it's themselves. It's harder to talk about yourself than to work on a character. And people have been making up and listening to stories since the beginning of time. That's obviously one of the ways that humans communicate with each other.

JASMIN: That's the power of the arts, and that's one of the reasons why we wanted you to come onto the show. And I know that you have a rich history in the arts.

MARIANN: That is an understatement.

JASMIN: You mentioned that you were an undercover investigator. But before you were an undercover investigator --

MARIANN: You have like, you've had eight lives.

JASMIN: -- you were starring on Broadway, a few times in fact. So let's talk about what you're best known for Broadway wise.

ROBIN: Sure.

JASMIN: Which is *Godspell*.

ROBIN: Yes.

JASMIN: And you sang what song?

ROBIN: I sang a song called "Day by Day."

JASMIN: You were the one who sang "Day by Day," on Broadway *and* in the movie. We actually have some footage of this I'd love to show.

ROBIN: Oh, goodness gracious.

[Music]

JASMIN: Robin! You're that chick!

MARIANN: I've heard your voice about 10 million times in my life.

JASMIN: Unbelievable. And you also were starring as Sandy in *Grease* on Broadway as well?

ROBIN: I did, I did.

JASMIN: So cool. It's just amazing how you brought this background into what you do now because even though one might think that's a hugely different background than being a novelist, it's not so different.

MARIANN: It's telling stories.

JASMIN: It's all characterization, it's all the arts, and it's all telling stories. Wouldn't you say that there's a correlation between the two?

ROBIN: Absolutely. I think the best actors -- and I'm not one of them, but the best actors would tell you that they create incredible backstories for themselves that the audience never sees or knows about, but it gives them a foundation. And indeed that's what brought me into private investigations.

MARIANN: Of course.

JASMIN: You need to have those kind of skills, and you spoke of a foundation. Well, your foundation is right here in Brooklyn, New York, isn't that true?

ROBIN: Yes, it is, and I'm so glad you brought that up because I love Brooklyn. I grew up on Remsen Street, I went to school on Joralemon Street, and Brooklyn is really my home.

JASMIN: Yeah. Well, Brooklyn is our home here at Our Hen House and it's just so great to have you here with us today, Robin.

MARIANN: But I really want to get back to something that you mentioned earlier in the interview, and that's when you woke up about animals. And I really want to hear what your story is 'cause you articulate these things so well, and I think it's something that's happened to so many of us, this life changing, world changing realization. And how was it for you? It wasn't even that long ago, was it?

ROBIN: It wasn't. It was only a few years ago, and for me it started with my husband who's always been a vegetarian, and he began to read about factory farms and would slip me the material. And over a period of time I kind of opened up to it. It wasn't until I read Gail Eisnitz's book *Slaughterhouse* that it really, it hit me right here... so it got the mic.

JASMIN: It hit me right in the microphone.

ROBIN: Right in the microphone. And it became very real for me about what was happening. And food, for many people, it's so present in your lives, it's there every day. Some of the things that I'm learning about animals and wildlife, it's a little removed from us sometimes, but food is there every day. And to kind of accept that you just can't keep on doing the same thing, or that I couldn't...

JASMIN: Yeah. I mean, food is there every day, but so is the arts. And I'm really excited when both food and the arts are pro-animal and are creating change. And that is exactly what you're doing and I'm sure that our viewers are gonna go out and get *The Chain* because how could you not? It's a book that you're gonna want to read.

MARIANN: It's so good!

JASMIN: It's the summertime, perfect time to curl up with a book. And thank you so much for joining us today on Our Hen House, Robin. We are such fans of what you are doing to change the world.

ROBIN: Thank you for having me.

JASMIN: Yeah, absolutely.