

Devouring Food Narratives:
The Prodigious Reader's Dilemma
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Devouring Food Narratives: The Prodigious Reader's Dilemma

— Marcia B. Littenberg

In the tradition of nature writing often credited to Thoreau, because of his attempt to live in terms of his beliefs, a recent crop of food narratives, combining personal experience with politically self-conscious environmental advocacy, have risen to the Best Seller lists in the past few years. It is hard to ignore the impact of Michael Pollan's recent texts, *The Omnivore's Dilemma* (2006), named by the *NY Times* as one of the 10 best books of that year as well as a finalist for the 2007 Orion Book Award, or his subsequent work, *The Omnivore's Solution: An Eater's Manifesto* (2007), or Alisa Smith and J.B. MacKinnon's *Plenty* (2007), or Barbara Kingsolver's most recent non-fiction venture, *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: a Year of Food Life* (2007). These texts, in which the writer inserts him or herself into the narrative, becoming the readers' guide as well as the hero of his or her story, raise questions not only about "what's for dinner?" but where this food comes from and, most importantly, its impact on the environment and the economy.

The personal and familiar narrative style of these food narratives invite readers to explore their own thoughts and emotions about the moral ramifications of their own eating habits as well as the carbon footprint their eating habits leave. They appear to have changed the eating and marketing practices of many communities and have even become marketing tools for gourmet restaurants and college food plans, as well as giving rise to a growing number of web sites that deliver seasonal products from nearby farms to the doorsteps of customers — including Greenling.com in Texas, Naturaldirect.com in Illinois, Organicstoyou.org in Oregon, and Mypersonalfarmers.com in New York State.¹ This visibility suggests that concern with where our food comes from, how it affects us, and the environmental impact of current growing,

¹ *NY Times*, Thurs. June 5, 2008, G2

marketing and distribution practices has reached a larger, more vocal, and more economically powerful audience and has found its place as a literary genre somewhere between personal adventure narratives, nutritional and diet books, and studies of the relationship between human practices and the environment.

As the growing number of CSA memberships and web links to local food sources suggest, these texts have raised public awareness and changed the eating and consumer behavior of so many Americans that a new term for a new movement has emerged: “locavorism”; that is, the effort to eat only locally grown, sustainable food and thereby to protect the health of our bodies and the environment. The personal is political in these texts that deliberately challenge the agri-business practices of world food markets and make readers aware of the long-term environmental impact of genetically engineered, chemically ripened and preserved foods that we have been mindlessly putting into our mouths and onto our plaque-ridden arteries. By taking on the powerful lobbies of agri-business and challenging the political clout of World Trade practices and such food conglomerates as McDonald’s, these narratives draw attention to the dangerous short-sightedness and rush for profits that have dominated food production and distribution at the expense of the small farmer and the nation’s health. In a conference dedicated to Rachel Carson, I suggest that these narratives continue her fight for morally responsible practices that have widespread impact on the environment and the individual. My interest in this genre is partly literary: I want to examine the relation between the narrative form and style of these texts and their affect on readers. I am also curious whether readers of food narratives change their eating and purchasing practices because of the persuasive arguments of the texts, or whether readers are choosing to buy and read these texts because they have already been persuaded that there is a connection between what they eat and their impact on the environment? [I admit that this is probably a chicken and egg question.]

In a review of *The Omnivore's Dilemma* in *The Wall Street Journal*, a reviewer noted that Pollan wants us to be aware of the choices we make about what we are eating, where it came from, and how it got to our tables, and he wants us to take responsibility for these choices. It has led — all puns intended — to a “grass-roots” food movement that has begun to challenge our dependence on the industrialization of our food sources from synthetic corn-based fertilizers to our desire for out-of-season delicacies. In his introductory chapter, Pollan argues that “the way we eat represents our most profound engagement with the natural world.”² “Daily, our eating turns nature into culture, transforming the body of the world into our bodies and minds.” “Eating puts us in touch with all that we share with other animals, and all that sets us apart. It defines us.” What he finds most troubling about our eating habits in a post-agricultural, industrial economy is “how thoroughly it obscures all these relationships and connections” to other species and to the environment. Eating is therefore not only an agricultural act (as Wendell Berry noted) but an ecological and political act as well.³ The industrial food chain, to use Pollan’s term, obscures the relationships and connections that we have with the natural world. That McDonald’s Happy Meal is a far remove from the corn that fueled that tractor, that fertilized the field, that fed the cow that went into the hamburger that Jack ate.

Pollan divides *The Omnivore's Dilemma* into three sections, each of which represents the three principal food chains: the industrial, the organic and the hunter-gatherer, and he follows that food chain from beginning to end, a meal he consumes based on that food chain. As you might expect, the corn based industrial food chain concludes with a McDonald’s take-out that contained not only 4,510 largely empty calories, but also “at least ten times as many calories of

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fossil energy, the equivalent of 1.3 gallons of oil.”⁴ Pollan’s ironic role as *flaneur*, or roving observer and commentator, also takes readers through the aisles of his local Whole Foods supermarket where elaborate descriptions, what Pollan calls “storied food” (eggs “from cage-free vegetarian hens”, milk from cows that live “free from unnecessary fear and disease”⁵) justify higher prices as well as make unsubstantiated, largely narrative claims for the food’s purity and wholesomeness. In fact, local Whole Foods markets get their food from large warehouses, just as Safeway, or King Kullen, or your neighborhood IGA does. What has emerged therefore is a hybrid: the industrial organic, which while nutritionally better than a Happy Meal, still relies more on fiction than fact to market its wares and still leaves a rather large carbon footprint.

Pollan’s last meal is a Thoreauvian exercise in hunting-gathering (Pollan even quotes Thoreau’s comment: “We cannot but pity the boy who has never fired a gun.”⁶) and admits to readers that he is that boy. After discussing the pros and cons of being an omnivore, a lacto-ovo vegetarian or a vegan, adding a section on animal suffering, Pollan has an Aldo Leopold or Jack London moment – pick your role model – and shoots a wild pig which he will serve with wild chanaterelle mushrooms and greens, every part of that meal hunted, gathered and grown, everything in season. Pollan’s point is not to turn his readers into gun-toting hunter-gatherers but to make us aware of the cost of our eating habits to the world that sustains us, and, finally, to give us greater understanding of the choices we make in feeding ourselves.

Barbara Kingsolver’s latest book *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: A Year of Food Life* (2007), closer to autobiographical fiction than Pollan’s journalism, tells the story of how her family was changed by one year of deliberately eating food grown or raised on their family farm or purchased at local markets. At the heart

⁴ 117

⁵ 135

⁶ *Walden* cited 281

of Kingsolver's non-fiction venture into the relation between what we eat and the social, ethical, and environmental impact of our eating habits is her belief that "a genuine food culture [confirms] the affinity between people and the land that feeds them."⁷ In this, Kingsolver voices an agrarian ethic that combines the traditional Jeffersonian belief that "those who labor on the earth are the chosen people of God. . . endowed with substantial and genuine virtue"⁸ with more contemporary eco-critical arguments against agribusiness, engineered food, the use of pesticides and chemical fertilizers, and the environmental impact of transporting food over immense distances: arguments that deliberately challenge Americans' complacency about what they consume, where their food comes from, and the cost of their conspicuous consumption on the environment, the economy, and their own health. As a recent article in ISLE (Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and the Environment, Summer, 2007) contends, this newer, environmentalist agrarianism reconfigures traditional ideals, like the connection between the rural community and nature, emphasizing the radical potential of its moral orientation and economic practices — that people everywhere are part of a land community — with its potential ability to challenge a political and social order that is environmentally unsustainable.⁹ Kingsolver's narrative thus embeds her personal "down on the farm" story within a more radical, political, social and environmentalist vision.

In her characteristic sincere, modest, yet witty and at times lyrical prose style, Kingsolver's text combines first-hand accounts of her family's journey from Tucson to their family's hillside farm in Virginia (after first filling up on gas, snacks, and bottled water at a quick-stop convenience store). She describes her experiences planting vegetables, raising chickens, planning meals around

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⁸ *Notes on the State of Virginia*

⁹ Cf. William Major, "The Agrarian Vision and Ecocriticism," ISLE (Summer 2007) and Eric Freyfogle, ed. *The New Agrarianism: Land, Culture and the Community of Life* (Washington: Island, 2001)

seasonal crops, celebrating the taste of homemade breads and cheeses, and sharing family values with friends and neighbors. Along the way she engages readers in discussions of the history of small farms, the effect of agribusiness on American food production and consumption, on the effect of biologically altered foods for transport on their taste and nutritional value, on the socio-history of convenience food and its effect on Americans life and health, on the values of organically grown fruits and vegetables, and on the difference between eating ethically and sensibly and the sentimental claims of naïve animal advocates who regard meat and egg consumers as heartless violators of nature. These portions of her text , covering the same ground as Pollan's, broaden the concerns of her personal narrative, placing her Thoreauvian experiment in living simply and deliberately within the context of our 21st century concern with what Pollan calls our "National eating disorder". Along with informational "sidebars" by her husband Steven Hopp, a professor of environmental studies, that support her text with brief academic essays, and delightful recipes and nutritional information by her eldest daughter Camille, Kingsolver situates her personal narrative within the larger ecological arguments that have become familiar to omnivorous readers of these food narratives.

All of these best-selling, popular books tap into the conscious eater's ethical concern with finding alternatives to America's super-sized, tasteless, nutritionally compromised diet. All advocate eating deliberately and locally, growing one's own food if possible, and supporting farmer's markets and CSA's (Community Sponsored Agriculture). All of these texts address the effect of processed foods, chemicals, fertilizers and herbicides on our nation's health, and provide detailed analysis of the cost to the consumer and the environment of transporting out-of-season, out-of-region foods to supermarkets. All, finally, serve as polemics, warning Americans to change the way they eat and think about food. Most of us who buy and read these books have already been

converted. Reading them simply reinforces what we already believe and practice. They are evidence of a Great Awakening among those who can afford to think about the quality of the food they put on their tables, but, as even the authors admit, they are up against formidable foes: the giant food companies, government agencies, chemical companies, transport unions, and very real economic factors that make it difficult for some Americans to afford even the most basic essentials. They must also convert readers for whom eating is often synonymous with fast food, and for whom speed and convenience are hallmarks of contemporary experience (as in internet shopping, web-based research, and even personal relationships via Facebook/cyber-dating). This reader's dilemma therefore focuses on the ways writing about food can resist charges of elitism on the one hand and nostalgia on the other and instead take a more central role in the public debate about environmental policy, health and society. In short, I want a book that will stimulate as much public debate as Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*!

A great deal of the success of *Silent Spring*, most of us here will agree, has to do with the skill and brilliance of the writing and the passion and drive of Carson herself. That the arguments continue to be attacked and defended with passionate intensity is evidence of their continued relevance to discussion about the political and economic relationship between science, government policy, industrial practices, and the reading (eating, and breathing) public. One of the issues I want to raise in this paper, therefore, is how we as readers and critics might make this debate about what we eat and where we get our food more central to the larger arguments about the environment and the economy. For, although books adjuring Americans to eat more consciously and responsibly abound, and continue to hold their place on the *NY Times* best seller lists, they have yet to significantly raise wide-spread public consciousness or affect public policy. Or have they?

Surely there is an increasing demand for better tasting, more nutritional food that has not been affected by pesticides or genetically engineered for the world market. Surely there is an increasing demand for community sponsored agriculture, the return of local farmer's markets, and the emergence of restaurants that serve local products in imaginative and tasteful ways. There is an increasing if still small and elite number of conscious consumers. However, in the face of a political and economic culture that favors the global and homogenous at the expense of the small and diverse, that seeks instant gratification not only through drive-through eating experiences but in consumer behavior shaped by e-commerce, stories like Kingsolver's seem marginal or even quaint and Pollan's arguments, while earnest and persuasive, still address consumers who can afford to make the conscious choices he advocates.

What is needed is a change of consciousness on a national level that brings together the arguments for local food production and healthy eating behavior with advocacy for environmental justice. Why should those who require food stamps to supplement their family income have to suffer doubly by being able to purchase only post-dated processed foods (as an article in the Metro Section of the *NY Times*, Sunday, June 22, notes) particularly when the actual price of these canned and processed foods largely reflects their production cost? According to the *NY Times*, "the most recent census data showed that from 2003 to 2006 an average of 1.3 million New Yorkers identified themselves as 'food insecure', meaning that they were worried about being able to buy enough food to keep their families adequately fed. City officials are concerned that the food price increase has caused that number to increase significantly".¹⁰ Food pantries are also increasingly reporting that they are tapped out, even in communities surrounded by farmland, as in my own section of eastern Long

¹⁰ *NY Times*, June 22, 2008, 24

Island. What then can be done to address the human inequities of our nutritional dilemma?

Some efforts to revitalize community gardens, particularly in urban areas, to encourage more local farmer's markets, to create food consortiums of growers, markets, and consumers, and to instruct students in public schools how to plant a garden and to prepare nutritious meals from local produce exist, funded by progressive activist organizations, but more efforts are needed at a local, state, and even national level. Those who fall below the average income, particularly those in urban areas, should also have healthy, fresh, local food products available to them. If the sales of these food narratives are any indication, the message about the true cost of the American diet on our health and on the environment is getting through, if only to those who have the means to practice what these food narratives preach. Perhaps the cumulative effect of these narratives will change the public's awareness and there will be pressure to provide support for small local farmers, to provide subsidies for community markets, and to remind people what real food tastes like when it is prepared simply at home. Thoreau began *Walden* with a chapter on Economy. Our labors, he argues, should provide us with the necessities of life: food, shelter, clothing, and fuel. That is as fine an argument now as it was a century and a half ago, although it now has greater urgency and a bitter poignancy. How then can we best sustain ourselves? It is an old question in a new context, with as radical a potential as when Thoreau first uttered it.