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Eat It: Sex, Food and Women's Writing [Book Review]

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***Eat It: Sex, Food and Women's Writing.* Edited by
Nicole Baute and Brianna Goldberg. Feathertale Press.
ISBN: 978-0-9878090-2-5. CDN/US \$15.00 / review by
Marc Ouellette**

<1> Simply put, *Eat It: Sex, Food and Women's Writing* surpasses its rather immodest claims. This is no mean feat, for the editors allow that they have collected short stories, non-fiction shorts and poetry that, as the back claims offers, hinge "on the carnal." More than that, the gathered works purportedly address the ways in which experiencing food entails nothing short of "power, biology, social obligation, experimentation, nourishment, pain and pleasure." The authors treat the topics, ranging from the politics of potatoes to tricks for field dressing deer, with a blend of seriousness and humour befitting the material. What becomes clear in reading the nearly three-dozen pieces is that the editors' claim to merely "cook up a conversation with some seriously smart ladies [. . .] on the most relevant aspects of control and consumption and croissants and cookery culture" understates while mirroring the ambition of the collections and its constituent parts (8). Although the book is divided into sections that map onto public and private functions and encounters with food, the real success of the book comes in conveying the critical commonplaces—especially women's alienation from their bodies—through unexpected means.

<2> In calling the sections "recipe for," the editors develop not only a kind of a quest but also a sort of algorithm. They call attention to the ways relationships with food require an iterative process involving both prescribed and proscribed behaviours. In this regard, several pieces delve into the very intersection of these oppositions to question and to elucidate the cultural dictates on food and on women. For example, "Penis on a plate," one woman's account of eating collagen rich foods including the eponymous member—whether dog, donkey, or otherwise—finds the author balancing Western norms with local Chinese customs, beliefs and practices (21). What remains constant, though, is the fetishization of food. The cultural boundaries that encompass the fetishization are entirely up for grabs. Similarly, "The Smell of Blood Still" describes the author's shift from an urban lifestyle, where food grows on Styrofoam, to the reality of subsistence living in Northern Alberta, where deer is transformed into venison, "from animal to meat" (98). Here, the author demythologizes the seeming immanence of meat in a most visceral way. However, it is the "Ode to Mo," a granddaughter's unconventional remembrance of an unconventional grandmother, that really highlights the arbitrary nature of the rules surrounding food. The author apologizes not only for learning to cook but also for "kind of enjoying it" (71). This seems a kind of betrayal to her post-war foremother, who eschewed cooking, food, and the "fifties lifestyle," in general (71). Ultimately, food becomes wrapped, as it were, in a discursive regime. The simultaneous and inclusions and exclusions serve as reminders of cultural dictates, both implicit and explicit. Moreover, the notion of the return-to home, to nature, to cooking—provides ample evidence that the rules about food, like the culture that produces them, can and will change. Thus, the question is whether food accompanies being single, having a family, finding romance, hosting a gathering, living happily ever after, or if these situations accompany food.

<3> Admittedly, introducing the notion of rules and regimes requires a series of gatekeepers. It is in this regard that the promised humour appears. Most frequently, the collected essays, poems and prose shorts take umbrage with those who take themselves, or a subject surrounding food, too seriously. Here, the editors remind us that humour also has its own kind of duality. There is almost always a grain (or more) of truth in the humour, but that grain of truth leads to the very serious business of humour. However, the humour never dips into the realm of meanness or spite and seems to hover most frequently in the territory of (honest) self-deprecation. Indeed, that tone was the source of enjoyment in reading about Mo and most of the other characters in the book. Still, several of the pieces adopt a humorous mode to drive home their points directly. For example, "A Sexy Yom Kippur Slim-Down," provides "easy steps to a slimmer, trimmer, sexier atonement" (69). The easy part, it seems, is that religion and fashion really become the same exercise, reinforced through ritual and public performance. This is the very core of the dark satire of the "Recipe for a Vegetarian," with its not-so-subtle invocation of *Lord of the Flies*, and the equally dark "Let the Family Cull its Own," a parody of *A Modest Proposal*. In the former, the author shows how the steps that led to her to become a vegetarian mirror the stages in her life, in her family and in a recipe. Each step of atonement becomes a site or location for measuring, for evaluation of what?.

<4> However, the reader is never certain as to the identity of those doing the evaluation. In the second instance, the author sends up the determinism of women's biological role *qua* social role through a portrait of motherly culls of unwanted or superfluous offspring. Hardly unassailable or immutable, biology becomes a discourse of convenience in the production of gender. Hence, "Notions of Nipple" offers a daemonic take on the human reproductive cycle and its cultural necessity and its role as an ultimate proof of womanhood. It is not surprising that the author compares nipples to a paring knife "that can also be used as a dildo" in considering the opposition of nourishment and pleasure (115). Of course, pleasure is nourishing and the vice is versa. Anything else is a cultural proscription or prescription. Throughout these stories, poems and accounts, the humour also serves as a reminder of the ways in which certain people are authorized to speak. Never was this reminder more cleverly or aptly illustrated than through the tongue-in-cheek innuendo of "Don't Even Ask About the Tenderloin," a self-described feminist's slightly guilty admission of the sexual tension she feels and enjoys when visiting her local butcher. Clearly, then, the cultural authorization also extends to the subject of that speech.

<5> The indeterminacy of the authorization or even the ownership of the discourse speaks to food as a source of endless deferral and instability. Obviously, this is the contingency of the proverbial "cake and eat it too" rejoinder, but neither editors nor authors ever invoke that particular trite truism. Instead, they offer an interplay between past and present because food is very much a thing of the moment. Simply put, tastes change and vary, as the author of "Albertty Crocker" discovers when moving from the city to a very small, very rural, very western town. Instead of the idyllic homemakers she presumes, she finds the local ladies' lunch club making chicken nuggets, breakfast for lunch, and hot dog octopi. Despite having a "modern husband," she feels the need to banish him from the kitchen and compete. Similarly the line-up in "So That's What Feminists Eat," shows food as a shifting sign of sustenance, opulence, petulance and performance. Here, the menu for an "Eco-Mom's Stitch 'n Bitch" offers a pointed peak at the importance of being seen doing what is perceived to be the right thing, as opposed to actually doing the right thing (87). Of course, this presumes that such a thing exists at all. In "Best Before," the deferral takes a different but related form. The occasion of a coupon-for a "fine" French restaurant-becomes a talisman of recognition that the pleasure is in the anticipation and/or the memory but not of the event. This also invokes the underlying duelling impulses of attraction and repulsion that accompany and encompass food, especially its production. Food is civilized and yet visceral, safe and yet risky. Moreover, it bears the weight of civilization and all that this means-in terms of regimes and regimes of truth.

<6> Ultimately, what becomes most clear is that running through each of the texts are reminders that food becomes both a rationale and an outcome, not only for discourses of gender but for other structures of power as well. In this regard, every one of the stories, poems and recollections in *Eat It* contributes to the book's strong, sustained statement regarding the distantiation of consumers from sources of production and modes of distribution. This theme, long under-examined in favour of a focus on consumption, is especially important in practice. It compliments the themes of globalization, late capital and consumer that run throughout the book. More than anything, as in "Roots" and "Sous Chef," the distantiation between producer and consumer occurs within the home, within the family but often between generations. This applies both to food and to gender. Despite its offering up the structure of a meal and a recipe as a metaphor for the book, *Eat It* becomes a consideration not just through the categories of the categories of consumption. Its focus on women's writing should make it a worthy companion text for any course on that topic. Yet, its attention to detail ensures that this text will not be out of place, in whole or in part, on a syllabus for the culture of the body or traditional gender studies. While it purports to convene a conversation, it carefully and cogently contributes to many and suggests that these should continue. Thus, it reminds me that hunger is not such a bad thing.

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