



Book Review

The Eating Instinct: Food Culture, Body Image, and Guilt in America

Virginia Sole-Smith

Henry Holt and Company, 2018, 304 pages

Review by Meredith Bessey

It is hard to go anywhere these days without hearing refrains of “I’m so bad for eating this”, or “I can’t, I’m being good today.” While dieting for weight loss has become passé in recent times, with companies like Weight Watchers re-branding to focus on wellness instead of weight loss, we are still, as a culture, obsessed with what we eat and with our weight (Chiu, 2018). Virginia Sole-Smith’s recent book *The Eating Instinct* explores this issue through personal stories and research. While the book was inspired by her own daughter’s struggles with eating, Sole-Smith interviews other parents, scientists, health care providers, and food activists, to explore the question of why it is so difficult for us to feel good about eating.

Each of the book’s seven chapters explores a different facet of the North American relationship with food. The first and last chapters address Sole-Smith’s daughter Violet’s pathological relationship with food that began when she had a feeding tube inserted due to medical issues. The remaining five chapters examine “clean eating”, feeding children, picky eating (including avoidant-restrictive food intake disorder), food and poverty, and gastric bypass surgery. Sole-Smith is a reporter by trade and her writing is clear and concise, warm and compassionate, both when telling deeply personal stories and when reporting on statistics and the academic literature. While the issues she describes in the book may seem disparate at first glance, Sole-Smith is adept at drawing connections and tying these various issues back to our broader problematic food culture.

Of particular interest here is the connection that Sole-Smith draws between the alternative food movement and common problematic relationships with food. Chapter two, *Chasing Clean* features Christy Harrison, a dietitian in Brooklyn, New York who hosts the popular podcast *Food Psych* and teaches online courses focused on intuitive eating (Food Psych Programs Inc.,

2017). Harrison was a food writer before studying to become a dietitian, and is described as “really struggling with food” (p. 35). She relates how learning about the alternative food movement described through books like *Fast Food Nation* and *The Omnivore’s Dilemma* enabled her to connect her food anxieties to a larger trend. Harrison says it made her feel that she “wasn’t just this vain, selfish person trying to lose weight” (p. 38), but that a social justice framework had been added to her desire to eat optimally. Sole-Smith also discusses her own experience with the eco-food movement as a food writer: “So I embraced the eco-food movement, because—on the surface, at least—it wasn’t about calorie counting or crash diets” (p. 37). Yet she makes an astute observation, namely that the expression “you are what you eat”, common within the alternative food movement, further entrenches the idea that if you eat bad foods, you’re a bad person (p. 41).

Chapter five, *Eating While Black*, explores the experiences of low-income people of colour, while also problematizing and critiquing the alternative food movement. Diet culture has evolved from the calorie-counting of yesteryear to an obsession with clean eating and whole foods, driven in part by food writers like Michael Pollan and Mark Bittman. Sole-Smith discusses the alternative food movement’s focus on low-income, mostly black, urban neighbourhoods and the resulting impact on these communities. She interviews two women, Sherita and Tianna, who discuss the increased pressure they feel to shop at Whole Foods, buy fancy bread, and make seitan. She asks “whether absorbing the alternative-food movement’s brand of clean, whole eating has actually helped women like Sherita and Tianna—or whether it has introduced them to a new set of unattainable standards, driven by diet culture, now wearing organic farmer’s overalls” (p. 143). These two chapters in particular lead to questions about how messaging by the food industry, the food system, and “whole foods” continuously embed the polarizing concepts of good and bad foods. Are these messages helping, or making people feel worse? What is the alternative food movement’s role in disordered eating and obsession with eating “right”? Little academic literature has been published on this topic, but some scholars have critiqued the healthism and nutritionism that is rife within much of the alternative food movement (Brady, Gingras, & Lebesco, 2019; Hite, Parker, & Brady, forthcoming). This book underscores the need for more academic inquiry into this area to help the alternative food movement avoid healthist and classist arguments for food system reform.

This book is well suited to a general audience that has an interest in food culture and that wants to explore troubled relationships with food, but also to academics and health professionals. The author provides an extensive list of sources, both academic and popular press, for readers who want to explore these topics in more depth. Sole-Smith notably gives no advice on what to eat or not eat, and ends the book by simply stating “the only way to learn to eat is by eating” (p. 239)—which is perhaps easier said than done.

Overall, *The Eating Instinct* is well-written and satisfying to read but is not without shortcomings. Although Sole-Smith does problematize the so-called obesity epidemic, particularly when discussing the Health at Every Size™ movement in chapter six, she does discuss obesity non-problematically at various points. For example, she states that some experts “argue that that

the preservation of the ability to self-regulate is at the crux of solving both childhood obesity and pediatric feeding disorders” (p. 20). Fat acceptance advocates would argue that pathologizing obesity undermines work done to prevent and treat eating disorders (Adams, 2017). The book would have benefited from a more in-depth and critical appraisal of the obesity discourse (Brady & Beausoleil, 2017).

The Eating Instinct is touching and thought-provoking, while also highlighting how complicated eating has become in our current culture. It left me asking, how can we, as food scholars and activists, help to uncomplicate these messages?

Meredith Bessey is a MScAHN Candidate, Department of Applied Human Nutrition, Mount Saint Vincent University. Meredith.bessey@msvu.ca

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