

Fred D. White

BIBLIO SYNESTHESIA

Books and Food

Reading a good book has a way (at least for me) of triggering the senses associated with eating, as the clichés suggest: a feast of a novel, a story smorgasbord, a delicious read, brain candy. And it works both ways; dining also enhances the reading experience. This is a good thing, for you will likely eat more slowly and discover delightful interplays of sensory stimuli. A vivid description of the New England coast will enhance the flavor of the lobster bisque you just spooned into your mouth. A romantic soiree might embolden the '09 Cab you're about to sip. The Jeffrey Deaver mystery you've brought to the table will season your filet mignon with more subtlety than steak sauce.

And then there are books *about* food, such as those my wife Terry collects—Ruth Reichl's memoir with recipes, *Tender at the Bone*, or Nigel Slater's *Toast: The Story of a Boy's Hunger*, in which the author describes his years growing up in England in terms of the foods he craves; or novelist Jim Harrison's *The Raw and The Cooked: Adventures of a Roving Gourmand*—who quotes John Wayne on male dieting: "It pushes a man to the wall if he stands there in the buff and looks straight down and can't even see his own weenie" (21); and, of course, books by the queen of food writers, M.F.K. Fisher: a one-volume anthology of her works, *The Art of Eating*. More delectable still are novels in which food plays a significant role: Laura Esquivel's *Like Water for Chocolate* is a good example. The subtitle is wonderful: *A Novel in Monthly Installments with Recipes, Romances and Home Remedies*. Literally born on a kitchen table filled with food—her birth hastened by the violent crying triggered by the onions her mother was chopping—Tita grows up to become a talented chef—but one who is destined, as the youngest daughter, to live a celibate life in the service of her tyrannical mother.

Have you ever feasted on a culinary mystery? There are many: the late Virginia Rich's *The Nantucket Diet Murders*, *The Cooking School Murders*; or the novel that Nancy Pickard wrote based on Rich's story, *The 27-Ingredient Chili Con Carne Murders*. The globe-trotting chef Anthony Bourdain, author of *A Cook's Tour: In Search of the Perfect Meal*, not only introduces us to exotic international cuisine on his *Parts Unknown* TV series, he is also a mystery writer. In *Bone in the Throat: A Novel of Death and Digestion*, the Mob chooses the kitchen of a restaurant in Little Italy to stage a murder. Bourdain captures moments of chef life behind the scenes, as in the following passage in which Tommy, the sous-chef protagonist, is working with his assistants in preparing for the evening:

The chef slipped quietly out of the kitchen. Tommy was relieved. . . . It was a heavy prep day. Ricky had scorched a five-gallon batch of soupe de poisson. Tommy had to put a whole new batch on the fire. Ricky had just started piping seafood mousse into the vol-au-vents; he was no help. Mel was shaving a big block of semisweet chocolate in the walk-in; he'd be lucky if he got through the

shift without cutting his own hand off. Little Mohammed was hip-deep in salad greens, singing quietly in Arabic. (82)

I once chanced upon *The Book Lover's Cookbook: Recipes Inspired by Celebrated Works of Literature and the Passages that Feature Them*, by Shauna Kennedy Wenger and Janet Kay Jensen (one a children's book author, the other a language pathologist), who share a love of creative cooking. "When characters deal with food," the authors write in their Introduction, "whether they're eating, cooking, dreaming, manipulating, or suffering, they step off the page and connect with the reader" (xxv). This is such a delightful book not only to browse through but to prepare meals from: when asked what she would like for her last meal if she knew she were going to die, Maya Angelou replied that she does not like to think that far ahead, but if she were going to Mars tomorrow, she would request "hot chicken, a chilled bottle of wine, and a loaf of good bread" (excerpt from *Even the Stars Look Lonesome*, qtd. in Wenger and Jensen 31). The passage is followed by a recipe for Good Times Roasted Garlic Chicken with Mushroom and Black Olive Stuffing.

In *We Are Still Married*, Garrison Keillor explains how he made, from scratch, the first apple pie of his life, "mixing butter with flour to make a great crust, and loaded it with sour apples and brown sugar and nutmeg [and then] baked it to a T, and of course it was delicious" (208)—which is followed by Wegner and Jensen's recipe for Pure Pleasure Apple Pie.

Gingerbread, anyone? From Willa Cather's *My Ántonia*: "Grandmother hunted up her fancy cake-cutters and baked gingerbread men and roosters, which we decorated with burnt sugar and red cinnamon drops" (288). This is followed by a recipe for gingerbread men.

Dining with books has a distinguished history. Holbrook Jackson in his *Anatomy of Bibliomania* tells us that Samuel Johnson, Lord Byron, Charles Lamb, Percy Shelley, William Hazlitt, Robert Lewis Stevenson, George Bernard Shaw and many others were "all confessed table readers" (258). For example, Charles Lamb preferred reading Milton at supper; William Hazlitt loved to read Jean-Jacques Rousseau's 1761 philosophical epistolary novel, *Julie, or the New Eloise* while sipping sherry and munching on cold chicken (259).* Thomas Campbell insisted on reading Homer during breakfast ("by long habit, necessary to his existence") (259).

When Terry is out of town on business she brings a book along for every meal. "My dining companion will be a book," she tells the host, who (if he or she is sufficiently experienced) will nod knowingly and seat her at a well-lighted table. Because Terry and her book will take considerably longer dining than most couples, she will leave a generous gratuity, at least 25%, more if the server expresses curiosity over the book she is reading, or encourages her to stay as long as she wishes, never mind that customers have been waiting an hour to get seated. Once at Antoine's in New Orleans a woman who was dining with a companion at an adjoining table said to Terry, "Y'all are so very brave to be eatin' all by your lonesome."

"But I have my book!" Terry exclaimed. That made the woman all the more sympathetic, and she invited her to join them at their table. Terry politely declined, though; her book was too delicious.

Terry and I, books in tow, regularly visit a coffee shop to enjoy a late-morning latte (Terry) or Guatemalan blend (*moi*) and pastry. Certain books go well with certain beverages: a hot

chocolate with whipped cream is a perfect complement to a fast-paced science fiction story; black coffee works well for nonfiction. Coffee shops really ought to promote that sort of thing—a book-coffee-pastry pairing of the week, say.

*A retelling of the medieval story of Héloïse and Abelard. Rousseau's theme is the importance of preserving one's core identity by living a life of authenticity. Why Hazlitt associated this story with sherry and cold chicken is anybody's guess; but happily we do not need logic to form synesthetic experiences



Books and Cats

We must not overlook the literary synesthesia that cats provide. Cats can replenish us just by purring. Reading a book with a cat perched nearby (or on your lap) creates an unexpected symbiotic relationship among four sources of mystical energy: the book's aesthetic energy, the meal's gustatory energy, the cat's primordial energy, and your body's more complexly networked neural energy. Our Cordelia follows a precise ritual when positioning herself atop or alongside Terry (her preference) or me. First she will rub her face against the edge of the book two or three times, then walk blithely alongside or behind us (sometimes over us), nudge our cheek, then knead the bedspread with her front paws—mercifully clawless: Annie Dillard, at the beginning of *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, describes how her tomcat used to bloody her chest when performing that ritual, then settle down, groom her fur for a moment, stretch, and finally curl into herself.

To express our appreciation for our pussycat's contribution to the culinary-literary experience, we turn to Tony Lawson's *The Cat-Lover's Cookbook* (1994). Lawson explains how to prepare gourmet dishes for cats such as boogaloo shrimp, tuna cakes, sardines and rice, meowshi sushi, in order to make them feel more a part of the family. Lawson also includes a feeding guide for cats requiring special diets—allergy diet, delicate intestine, obesity.

An ideal book to read with a cat beside you and a meal before you is one that massages both mind and body. The cat will appreciate this. Something pastoral will do, like Wordsworth's poetry or Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. If you read a humorous book and start laughing, or a horror novel that causes you to shudder, the cat will get testy and have to repeat a portion if not all of her ritual—or dart away in a huff. Books about cats are not a good idea because you'll be tempted to share them with your feline companion. Alas, cats are as profoundly uninterested in books as their presence enhances the reading and home dining experience.

Whenever we visit one of those vanishing shrines of print culture known as a bookstore, we keep an eye out for the resident cat. Some will wander the aisles, some will curl up on a display table, others will sit and, if we're lucky enough to be granted the privilege, permit us to pet them. Terry will strike up a conversation with the cat, wanting to know if he or she enjoys being

surrounded by books, or whether he or she ever absconds with a book and paws through its pages when no one is looking.

Naturally, we collect books about cats; for example, Michael Cader's *Meditations for Cats Who Do Too Much: Learning to Take Things One Life at a Time* (1993). Cader bases the book on his 9-Life recovery program for cats, which includes "admitting that there is too much to be done, that I don't have to be the only cat in the world to do everything" (1); and "accepting the Higher Power (also known as The Owner) as my caretaker" (9). As for catnip dependency (under the fourth life), Cader explains that it "has been swept under the rug (literally) for long enough," and that "used to excess it can . . . produce cravings, mood swings, abnormal outbursts, and a tendency to stare out the window for hours watching an imaginary bird" (33).

A more serious book is *Catlore* (1987), by the polymath Desmond Morris (zoologist and former zoo curator; anthropologist; art historian; surrealist painter), who answers many perplexing questions concerning cats, such as: Why do cats suddenly make mad dashes around the house? Indoor cats do this in order to release their pent-up need to hunt or flee from danger; Why do some cats hate or fear men? Tonality of voice; most vets are men; How do cats purr? Nobody knows for sure, although it might have something to do with air passing through the cat's vestibular folds—known as false vocal cords—not unlike the mechanism behind human snoring. I, however, prefer to think of purring as an auditory-tactile conduit to a feline-dominated alternate reality. A purring cat reassures us that magic exists.

Of course, cats figure prominently in literature, and there are several books that cover this topic: Clare Boylan's *The Literary Companion to Cats* (1994), Roberta Altman's *The Quintessential Cat: A Connoisseur's Guide to the Cat in History, Art, Literature and Legend* (1994). Then there's *The New Yorker Book of Cat Cartoons* (1991)—enough said.

One more tidbit about books and cats: if you've never had the pleasure of reading T.S. Eliot's *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats* (first published in 1939), pick up an inexpensive paperback and share these delightfully whimsical and sometimes funny-sad verses with your children—"The Naming of Cats"; "The Old Gumbie Cat"; "Mongojerrie and Rumpelteazer" and so on—especially if you're planning to take them to a revival of Andrew Lloyd Webber's 1982 Broadway musical *Cats*, in which several of these poems are transformed into unforgettable songs. What's sadly lacking from Eliot's *Cats*, though, is a poem about a book loving cat. With your indulgence (exceedingly generous indulgence, I daresay), permit me to share with you my own little ditty composed for our bibliophilic kitty:

ODE TO CORDELIA LOUISE

Cordelia Louise is our book-loving cat;
She unspools her twine near Mark Twain;
Conducts her toilette near Colette;
Leaps onto Melville, sleuths near McBain.
Hawthorne and Waugh are her places to groom.
She chases a fly past Fitzgerald and Kinsey;
Demands, with Ms. Woolf, her very own room,
Then curls up for a nap beneath Sayers' Lord Wimsey.



Books and the World

Terry, unlike me, can read just about anywhere: on a commuter train, inside a coffee shop, waiting in line, sitting in a dentist's chair waiting for the Novocain to take effect. Background noise doesn't faze her, nor does someone gawking over her shoulder to see what she's reading ("that doesn't happen as much these days"); in fact, she enjoys the intrusion and will start a conversation about the book, its author, his or her previous books, the history of the genre in which he or she principally works—"and what sorts of books do *you* read?"

As for me, I prefer to read apart from others, in silence, or if the noise is minimal enough to be considered "white noise"—e.g., nature sounds, like wind and rushing water; traffic sounds, our Cordelia's meowing for attention, the chugging of the washing machine—but no TV sounds, no cell phone jabber.

Books and people, books and the bustling world, books and the natural world (the sounds of water and wind, birdsong)—books embody what it means to be in tune with life-flow—contrary to those who disparage readers as somehow cut off from the world with "their noses in books." Books stimulate our sensory lives. What a shame it would be—what a diminishment of our humanity—if physical books, with all their sense-arousing capabilities were to lose their appeal.

The next time you plan an interval for peace and quiet (not necessarily a "vacation" as we typically experience it!), be sure a body of water is nearby. For Thoreau, writing his masterpiece on Walden's shores, there was no greater society than the wild. "I am no more lonely than the loon in the pond that laughs so loud, or than Walden Pond itself," he proclaims in Chapter 5 (206, Bantam Classics ed.). Anthropologist Loren Eiseley rhapsodizes in "The Flow of the River," one of his most sublime essays from *The Immense Journey*, "If there is magic on this planet, it is contained in water" (15). Rivers are indeed carriers of magic, but for me the greatest magic emanates from the sea. How I love its grand ensemble of sounds, from the whimsical hissing of surf to bestial roaring to wild crashing against rocks and Olympian thunder-drumming.

Terry and I once stayed at the Keauhou Beach Resort Hotel a few miles south of Kailua Kona on Hawaii's Big Island, and spent four days reading with the ocean thrashing in our ears. What is it about the flow of water and the flow of words in the pages of a book? I believe I've partially answered my own question by invoking their commonality: *flow*. Language, like the sea, communicates through osmosis, through its rhythms, which correspond to the rhythms of our bodies.

One of our favorite vacation retreats is Glendeven Inn, near the sleepy coastal village of Mendocino, 150 miles north of San Francisco. It is close enough to the ocean for us to hear its hollow breathing late at night. We select the books we bring along with the ocean in mind, not necessarily books about the sea (although they're wonderful to read in such places—Conrad and Melville; Homer's *Odyssey*)—but also books that would enhance the feel of the ocean—and vice versa: magic realism like Yann Martel's *Life of Pi*. If you read for extended periods in a

place where primal forces stir your soul, you will feel your soul being replenished. Read in a place where, between readings (or, if you're like Terry, during readings), you can enjoy gourmet meals at fine nearby restaurants. Good books, the sounds and rhythms of nature, and good food, intertwine in mysterious ways to produce a heightened sense of being alive. If, as Thoreau tells us in Chapter 2 of *Walden*, "to be awake is to be alive" (172, Bantam Classics ed.), then reading books represents the essence of being awake in all of its multi-sensory possibilities.