

**Sceats, Sarah.**

***Food, Consumption and the Body in Contemporary Women's Fiction.***

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Topics as universal as food and eating, as might be expected, have preoccupied literary writers in various ways throughout the centuries. It is surprising, therefore, that literary criticism hasn't concerned itself more with the subject, particularly recently, in light of poststructuralism's interest in the way cultural practices are produced within changing discursive environments. Eating, like bodies, presents for a culture a crucial point of self-understanding—of its shifts, its obsessions, and its boundaries. Bodily functions like eating might appear to invoke "nature" at every turn. In so doing, however, they call up the most intricate of cultural assumptions, and raise questions which lie at the heart of the relationship of individuals to the world around them.

Sarah Sceats' book, like many other body-centered books in the last couple of decades, needs to be read within the context of a post-Romantic rebellion against rationality, where the body functions as a locus of resistance to the various forms of colonization that press in upon it. Topics treated such as mothering, consumer commodification, and models of femininity have witnessed major upheavals, via food, in recent years. Whereas twenty years ago you were liable to find anorexia nervosa and bulimia at the center of middle-class anxiety about its neuroses, for example, nowadays, you are more likely to find obesity as the cover story of *Time* magazine. One topic that you will *not* see mentioned in this book, however, is hunger or starvation in a literal sense. "The major significances of eating," we are told in the Introduction, "are not biological but symbolic"—a comment, we might demur, more meaningful for academic scholars than a starving Somalian.

But the book does have things to teach us about (mainly) white, Western constructions of food as a social signifier, about appetites regulated as desire for comfort, possession, escape, connection or transgression. Above all, and this is where women come into the picture, it is about power or powerlessness, controlling or being controlled, in ways that enmesh intricately with changing gender roles in postmodern culture. Like many other body-centered studies such as those of Thomas Laqueur or Roy Porter, this book adopts a Foucauldian position on how power produces reality and is inseparable from knowledge. All three of the major fiction writers treated—Lessing, Carter and Atwood—are concerned with what Sceats calls a "politics of appetite" (94), whereby food and eating are represented as rooted in the various social realities of their time and place.

The time is mainly that of the 1970s-80s, although several of Lessing's most important works are products of the '50s and '60s, and Atwood's *Robber Bride*

(1993) is treated in some detail. This period, which we can now survey from a certain distance, was one of both radical emancipation (in the wake of the feminist movement) and political reaction (at least in Thatcher's Britain). Sceats is particularly persuasive on the ways in which a "politics of refusal" became a dominant feminine strategy, with food as its medium. Much recent psychoanalytic analysis, which Sceats in fact has little time for, would endorse the view that eating (or the refusal to eat) is intimately related to the need to block off "entries" from the outside, beginning with parental projections from the earliest months.

This book has an '80s feel to it as well in its repeated expressions of anxiety about the culture-nature argument. In spite of the references to Freud, psychoanalysis is frequently denounced as "essentialist," an assertion post-Freudians might find puzzling, given Freud's founding refusal to dichotomize instinct and nurturing. Sceats also shies away from a rigorous psychological or anthropological theorization of cannibalism. This is a pity, given its centrality to her argument, particularly in relation to the vivid analysis of Carter's "cannibalistic, vampiric and sexual eaters" (179) as well as of characters like Zenia in Atwood's *Robber Bride* who, Sceats demonstrates, represents the rampant appetites of the novel's other women characters on whom she preys.

This is a book that will interest students of Lessing, Carter and Atwood (as well as of Alice Thomas Ellis and Michèle Roberts) in particular, as it analyzes their preoccupation with culinary themes in evocative detail, reproducing the experience of eating in all its polyvalent suggestiveness, from the abstract to the sensual. This is what it has to say about the egg, that most prototypical of feminine images:

the egg represents rebirth, new life, the containment of future possibilities. In its very essence embryonic, its unbroken state none the less suggests completion and wholeness. It is as discrete an item of food as you could hope to find, yet, at the same time, one of the most versatile [...] Out of their shells, raw eggs are slippery, slimy, semi-liquid but lumpy, suggestive of all that is antithetical to the cool shape of the unbroken whole. (127-28)

From slimy to lumpy, from rebirth to wholeness, food here is restored to its position of centrality in our emotional and symbolic structures, whetting the appetite for more.

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