

## BOOK REVIEWS

J. Michelle Coghlan: *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and Food*: Cambridge University Press, 2020: 285 pp., paperback, £20.

Nelly Labère: *Gastrono(r)mie. Naissance de la littérature gastronomique*: Honoré Champion, 2021: 392 pp., €42.

Some twenty years ago, when I wanted to include a component on food and literature in a Master of Arts in Gastronomy, resources were scarce indeed. Anthologies abounded but critical studies were few. As J. Michelle Coghlan notes in her introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and Food*, 'literary studies has been slow to recognize culinary writing as both a literary and cultural text' (p. 2). In sixteen commissioned essays, the *Companion* reminds us of the potential of food, in the widest possible sense, to perform a multiplicity of roles in literature, in this book ranging from medieval romances and cookbooks to children's books and blogs. Inexplicably, it does not specifically discuss recipes as a form of culinary writing.

Collected works have the advantage of being able to present a diversity of viewpoints and each chapter in the *Companion* focuses on a particular time and place, analysing selected texts from a particular theoretical perspective. Denise Gigante expertly demonstrates the development of taste as an aesthetic quality through eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century writing in England, including the essays of Charles Lamb and William Hazlitt; Sarah D. Wald exposes the implicit criticism of industrial farming and food production systems in 'farmworker' literature. Yet as is inevitable in a multi-authored work, quality is uneven, and specialization can become so narrow as to lose touch with the topic; the chapter on blogging concerns itself only with 'dude food' and blogs devoted to it. And in the absence of a linking narrative, each chapter is dissociated from all others. Nevertheless, in drawing attention to less explored areas where food – from its production and consumption to the appetites and disgusts it inspires – and literature intersect, and as a guide to an emerging and significant domain of study, the *Companion* makes a valuable contribution.

In comparison, Nicola Humble's *The Literature of Food*, also published in 2020 (reviewed in *PPC* 118), covers much the same ground and cites many of the same authors, but pursues broad general themes in greater depth with a single authorial voice, though length constraints preclude consideration of areas such as immigration food and queer food. Both this book and the *Companion* offer excellent overviews and analyses, complementary yet serving different purposes. Were I still teaching, I would probably prefer Humble's book as text, supplemented by selected chapters from the *Companion*.

French academics have also recognized the relevance of this field of research. In *Gastrono(r)mie. Naissance de la littérature gastronomique* Nelly Labère again draws attention to the paucity of studies on food and eating in literature in France, even when they occupy such a large place – think of Rabelais, Balzac, Zola. Focussing on the medieval era as marking the birth of both cookbooks and fiction, she examines the texts of this period and specifically the place of women, such as representations of the ‘eating woman’. The result is a patiently argued and finely analysed series of chapters, each centred on a particular dimension of interpretation. For conformity, for example, she examines two texts, both thirteenth-century, specifically addressed to women though each with a masculine counterpart, and concludes that advice to women on behaviour at table was essentially practical and didactic, with an emphasis on submission to protocol, while advice to males was more literary in style. Another chapter on the literature of recipes shows how the long list of foods fondly remembered by the daughter of the Comte d’Anjou, a model subsequently adopted in later medieval fiction, can be seen not simply as an interruption in the text but as having a literary function. In *Gastrono(r)mie* Labère presents a dense but rewarding book, though readers will find it helpful to have some familiarity with medieval literature.

BARBARA SANTICH

Corinna Sargood: *The Village in the Valley: Travels in Mexico and Italy*: Prospect Books, 2021: 288 pp., paperback, £20.00.

Readers are perhaps most familiar with Corinna Sargood’s glorious drawings, and cover painting, for her then-mother-in-law Patience Gray’s book *Honey from a Weed*. Her work has since figured on the covers of several other Prospect Books’ publications. How pleasing, therefore, that we can now savour both writing and drawing from her pen under the imprint of the same publisher.

‘Better Dead Than Late’ reads the company motto on the bus that drops Corinna Sargood at the gates of her new life in Mexico. Having been asked to create a set of illustrations for Angela Carter’s adapted *Fairy Stories*, Sargood and new husband Richard relocate to the *barrio* known as Las Brujas and embark on what can only be described as a feast of experience. Such is the intensity of the imagery that is painted for us here in *The Village in the Valley* one is left almost breathless at times by the kaleidoscope of intermingled reverence and revelry. Mexico, it seems, speaks to Sargood through its earthy detail and other-worldly flavours. Whilst the reader is treated to a wider story of new love developing in an alien culture, there are frequent moments of ethnographic interest. The description of preparing the ‘ubiquitous tortilla’ exemplifies Sargood’s unique ability to weave the historic, the practical and the artistic into an altogether palatable narrative that is neither dense nor lacking in substance. When Sargood’s travels finally lead to Italy we are presented