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enhanced its scholarship. Instead such players are kept at a distance, in the past and present, in their historical roles, as contemporary sources and as potential readers. Perhaps the greatest danger of rising food-linked moral sensibility in public life, it is also one of the least widely commented, and would in itself make a good topic for a volume of this kind.

(The introduction, conclusion, and two chapters of this book are available in PDF format as Open Access, under a Creative Commons Attribution – Non Commercial – No Derivatives 4.0 license, on the product page at www.routledge.com.)

Vicky Hayward

Nicola Humble: *The Literature of Food*: Bloomsbury Academic 2020: 288 pp., hardback, £70.00; paperback, £22.99.

I approached *The Literature of Food* by Nicola Humble a little apprehensively and fiddled about a bit before finally settling to read – after all a selection of essays combining insights about food studies and literary analysis is not to be treated lightly. I'm not an academic and the first riffle through pointed to a scholarly dissertation examining why so many literary texts are preoccupied with portrayals of food and the relationship between food that is imagined and food that is real. Well outside of my usual remit I thought but it sounded interesting so I took a deep breath and plunged in.

Her definition of 'literary texts' extends the boundary beyond the usual novels, poems and essays to include cookbooks, food memoirs and food journalism. She contends that the 'literature of food' should not be simply confined to books about food but can encompass any texts where food has power. Thus cookbooks and other practical food writings should be taken equally seriously as worthy of study. This is an intriguing departure from the usual view and makes interesting reading for the food writer.

Nicola Humble is Professor of English at the University of Roehampton and her book is, essentially, an introductory course book for students of this somewhat (to me) idiosyncratic branch of Eng.Lit. Its range is broad and the subjects chosen for discussion eclectic. It examines the inclusion of food in texts from the 1830s to the present, focusing mainly on British and American writing, and aims to explore the multifarious ways that food both works and plays within her definition of 'literature'. Rather than a straightforward plod through food found in literary texts from the early nineteenth century onwards, Humble creatively applies a number of different approaches aimed at showing the many different ways that food is depicted in narrative form and the variety of functions it serves. The book divides into two sections: in the first four chapters she examines, from an historical perspective, some of the themes that occur in food literature and in a further four, considers form and genre.

She contends that food is 'ordinary' – an everyday experience and that the 'ordinary', by definition, is the class of things at which we do not look. She takes her lead from the words of writer Margaret Visser, who says, 'the extent to which we take everyday objects for granted is the precise extent to which they govern our lives'. And we do largely take food for granted, both in its availability and constancy. This book asks us to dispense with the idea of its ordinariness and, instead, pay it close attention – looking at it in a variety of ways.

The question of hunger rarely arises in our everyday lives. In *The Literature of Food* Professor Humble considers two specific hungers which befell the population of the British Isles: the 'Hungry Forties' in the 1930s and '40s and the Irish Famine of 1845–52. She explores the different ways in which hunger is understood and constructed in specific historical circumstances. Her interest is in the interpretation of hunger and the response to it in texts ranging from the novel to journalism and cookery books. I found this chapter hugely absorbing. Equally engrossing were those covering her exploration of the concept of plenty through the ritual of dinner in Victorian times; the dynamics at the heart of relations between servants and their employers; and the role of gender as a key component that occurs in many forms of food writing.

In the second part of the book we are treated to the way in which food is represented in modernist literature. We also take a look at the disproportionate way that food figures in children's literature. Of particular interest to the food writer is the chapter devoted to recipes: the ways in which they are written, and read, and their relationship to the texts within which they are placed. She finishes with a chapter on disgust.

While the contents may seem somewhat esoteric and aimed specifically at the rarified world of the Eng.Lit. student it has much to interest any lover of food writing. I quickly became conscious of my own abysmal ignorance and vowed to read again those several literary classics Humble examines where food plays such a significant part in their structure.

As an enthusiastic amateur I was particularly drawn to the chapter on reading recipes. I loved the way she traces the trends in recipe writing from the imperious instructions of the nineteenth century where the dictatorial tone of the recipe establishes the relationship between expert and hapless reader. The conveying of precise instructions is a perennial problem; Delia Smith's way of marking the steps in her recipes is likened to the use of a metronome by a piano teacher forcing the pupil to keep time!

Amongst the many points she makes in this chapter is how, when recipes are part of a food writer's memoir, they create a paradox; that as part of a specific memory in time and place they can never be exactly reproduced at some later moment. She contends that such texts are memorials rather than memoirs and that reminiscences with recipes are, in effect, saying to the reader

– 'you can't have this, it has already been eaten'. She forces one to examine both the writing and reading of recipes in rather more depth than would usually be afforded. I can't pretend that I have completely understood all of the points that she is making and it will take further reading before I, for one, could contribute to any debate. However, the nub of the matter for me is that her premises and reasoning are sufficiently compelling to make one want to try.

Even if one did not wish to engage at that level, just reading the various chapters was a treat in itself. There are almost too many examples of the parts that made me pause and think: her observation that it is often a fictional, rather than factual, account of hunger that conveys in a truly visceral way the real act of starvation, was well taken. I found the juxtaposition of the descriptions of extreme hunger amongst the working-class poor with depictions of Victorian dinner parties over-laden with ritual, social pressures and culinary complexities, both fascinating and disturbing.

Another chapter looks at children's literature and forces one to wonder why its authors do dwell quite so much upon the subject of food. Humble posits that it is because such descriptions awake a physical appetite for pleasure in the child rather as descriptions of sex do in books for adults. They engage the reader, taking him away from the written word and into the desires of his own body. Strong stuff this, though on a topical note the TV series *The Great British Menu* has as its theme this year 'Food in Children's Literature'. Here, the food based upon favourite stories chosen by the chefs taking part is recreated, indeed is actually created. The written word is lifted from the inanimate page and transformed into a dynamic entity which has form and substance; it becomes something that can actually be eaten. No doubt much will be written about the programme itself and the chef's recipes, creative interpretations of the original story, given due prominence. The whole concept, from written word to an actual dish of food which is then turned back into the written word, begins to take on the air of an endless Escher staircase but will surely provide ever more grist for Humble's mill.

The loathing of certain foods is possibly the most elemental and archaic form of rejection. In the final chapter we travel through the various forms of revulsion portrayed in food literature until one becomes quite nauseous just reading it. Most off-putting for me is her deconstruction of chef Nigel Slater's memoir 'Toast', dwelling lingeringly upon the many moments of aversion he felt in connection to food when he was growing up. I was left wondering why, after such a catalogue of repulsions, he had ever entered into the realms of chefdom.

Professor Humble finishes where she began – with a consideration of the egg. Symbolically, the egg has meaning in many cultures; it is ubiquitous in cooking and multivalent in meaning. She describes the elements of her book as rather like discarded bits of egg shell. The egg itself is to be found in each

of her chapters. Perhaps this is a 'trope' too far, (a word which occurs often, unsurprisingly, throughout the book), but, she says, as with the egg, to read the literature of food in general 'opens up for us a profound sense of its many and various purposes, its disturbing plenitude. It is hard to stop reading and writing about food'.

Di Murrell

David Castro Hussong and Jay Porter: *The Baja California Cookbook. Exploring the Good Life in Mexico*: Ten Speed Press, 2020: 272 pp., hardback, £22.50.
Upon opening *The Baja California Cookbook* we are immediately offered up a satisfying palette of reds, ochres and sharp greens that tells us a great deal about the tastes held in store. Chef David Castro Hussong proceeds to take us on a tour through his homeland from the vantage point of his award-winning restaurant Fauna where simplicity is key. In these sumptuous recipes that range all the way from the earthiness of the ranch (Grilled Rabbit with pasilla chile marinade) to the free and easy perfection of steaming over beach-fires (Mussels 'Playitas' with chorizo) we are introduced to the bare beauty of Baja cuisine. Despite the emphasis on creating dishes that are easy to execute in the kitchen Hussong points out early on that a mainstay of the Mexican diet, the flour tortilla can 'take some time and practice for the uninitiated to master.' Clearly there is much to learn here. This being said Hussong concedes that attempts to replicate Mexican food outside of the region might not produce results that are precisely authentic but 'it will taste good. And that's most important after all.' Presented in four unfussy sections each with fantastic photographs of the region *The Baja California Cookbook* brings an unpretentious warmth to any kitchen.

Matt Lord

Troy Bickham, *Eating the Empire. Food and Society in Eighteenth-century Britain*. Reaktion Books, 2020; 285 pp., hardback, 89 illustrations, £20.00.
[I wrote this review for the Asian Affairs Journal *but thought it useful not to let it languish there.]*
Professor Bickham presents here an account of the four major 'ingestibles' (only one of them a food) – tobacco, tea, coffee and sugar – that were the economic foundations of the trade underpinning the first British empire in the long eighteenth century. It is remarkable to see how they can be portrayed as underpinning the public social intercourse of their consumers in the same period. There were other new(ish) ingestibles at the time – chocolate, port wine, potatoes, tomatoes, opium – but perhaps none of these counted quite so much as imperial entities, nor had the social penetration of Professor Bickham's quartet which he uses 'to better understand Britons' relationships with the empire and its influence on their lives.'