

BOOK REVIEWS

Adam Federman: *Fasting and Feasting. The Life of Visionary Food Writer Patience Gray*: Chelsea Green Publishing, White River Junction, Vermont, 2017: 400 pp., hardback, £20.00.

Reading the obituary of a successful public servant, one is sometimes struck by how long columns devoted to honest achievement are completed by the shortest of paragraphs: 'He married xx in 19... and they had three children, who survive him.' The conventions of the form have left out half the life, perhaps more than half, compressed into a dozen words. Not so this welcome biography of Patience Gray, Prospect Books' most celebrated author – whose *Honey from a Weed* has sold more copies than any other PB (except perhaps, *sotto voce*, *Building a Wood-Fired Oven for Bread and Pizza*) – by the American writer Adam Federman. It is to be published in Britain in the first week of July. Anyone who reads the often allusive *HFAW* – where her lover, and later husband, Norman Mommens is always referred to as 'the Sculptor' – and the definitely disturbing *Ringdoves and Snakes*, a much more autobiographical account of their stay on the Greek island of Naxos, would want to know more of her life (and damn those who refuse to connect the life and the work). Curiosity might be somewhat assuaged by *Work Adventures Childhood Dreams*, but the reader has to go slowly, excavating by brush and trowel not shovel, to winkle out the facts to supply an answer here and there. So all praise to the assiduity of Mr Federman, whose list of acknowledgements in search of the truth is long, and whose success in discovering the most unlikely connection is often demonstrated by a knock-out quotation or memory. This is not the place to rehearse the course of Patience's life save to observe certain features that make it of great interest to anyone who values her works, and which in some way anticipate our own entanglements with the realities of the early twenty-first century. She might stand as an exemplar of the independent woman (although the tenor of some of her relationships might speak otherwise); she successfully combined bringing up children with a career in journalism, design and authorship (although these parallel paths sometimes threw up their own anomalies); she followed her heart; she was a part of a wider European republic of letters (I often think this is the most impressive part of her life-story); she lived with the consequences of her conclusions (although there may be some who would question the inevitability of her arrangements for life: whether it was actually necessary to punish the flesh in pursuit of her goals). Adam Federman's account of all these aspects is long and detailed – occasionally, for a non-botanically inclined reader, almost too detailed – and he deals frankly with some of the difficulties that people will have in their encounter with Patience today. Her answers to various personal dilemmas were not always what our own

might have been, but he allows us to attempt a measured judgement without displaying prejudice on his own part. There are but a few occasions when I lost the narrative thread: I was not entirely clear about the commencement of the relationship with Norman Mommens, for example, but in general the details are laid out for all to follow, laying to rest any questions we might have had about the identity of Mr Gray, the father of her children; her relationship with her own family, her mother in particular; her role on the *Observer* newspaper; and how she and Norman finally settled on making their home in Puglia. He is excellent on the composition, acceptance and editing of *HFAW*: how a much longer and inchoate draft was finally taken on by Alan Davidson at Prospect Books and how he and she eventually produced the object we read today. The book is universally agreed to be a good one although Mr Federman does not touch more than fleetingly on the banalities of success in publishing terms. In other words, he has little on actual sales figures. My contention would be that sales of *HFAW* have been minuscule in comparison to any even moderately successful cookery book of the modern era. Does this mean it is less influential than they are? Or do we assess its value by quite different criteria? What view should we take that it has never been translated into any modern European language? It is not as though its sensibility is so utterly English as to be incomprehensible beyond these shores: look at its acclaim in America. Indeed, most of Mr Federman's witnesses for the defence of its virtues are American (and East Coast at that), perhaps because that is his own country of origin. I recommend you read this book. The life is fascinating; the style is easy; you will debate for hours the rights and wrongs of some of the situations; and you will turn to *HFAW* (or *Plats du Jour*) with redoubled enthusiasm. I did want to know more about Fiona MacCarthy's review of Patience's book in the *Sunday Times* where she called her a snob and dished out plenty of sideswipes even as she recognized its potential as a classic, particularly as the book was launched in David Mellor and Fiona MacCarthy's Sloane Street shop. I was also interested in its references to Elizabeth David and her part in Patience's writing life. ED seemed to have been entirely constructive and honourable in her dealings with Patience, so I was surprised to find a comment in Jonathan Meades's own memoir when he tells of the accessions to his mother's cookery library in the 1950s: 'Her copy of Elizabeth David's *A Book of Mediterranean Food* was the first reprint of the first Penguin edition, 1956. That author's *French Country Cooking*, a 1959 edition. *Plats du Jour* by Patience Gray (a woman whom Mrs David detested even more than she detested Peter Mayle) and Primrose Boyd of 1957. The latter looks as though it was rarely used.' One might imagine they would not have got on too swimmingly: both were strong spirits, and Patience always appeared to take a very dim view of David's *Italian Food*. My nights have occasionally been disturbed by dreams of the postman arriving in the morn with a yellow envelope inscribed in Patience's unmistakable hand.

I always feared a misdemeanour discovered, a promise unfulfilled. In fact, her letters were more often a joy, replete with opinion, assertion and lines of new thought. She had the capacity to inspire – charmingly captured in Adam Federman’s account of the close group of young local admirers that gathered round Patience and Norman at Spigolizzi. I feel sure, however, that Patience would have been irritated by the publisher’s decision to quote her words with American spelling.

Peter Brears: *Traditional Food in Cumbria*: Bookcase, Carlisle, 2017: 412 pp., hardback, £20.00.

Just Lancashire to go and Peter Brears will have filled his quiver of studies of the cookery of our northern counties. He has already waggled his toe southwards in his work on Shropshire, and who is to say that he will not start reeling off the repertoires of foreign shires (foreign to his present abode at least, although his professional career in museums did begin in Hampshire). This *Cumbria* is arranged along the same lines as *Yorkshire* and *Northumbria*. There is, therefore, a liberal allowance of architectural and material culture to balance the recipes, the folklore and the social history, all of course illustrated by Brears’ own fair hand. Legion are the dishes explained: porridge, crowdy, spiced beef, oatcakes and bannocks, charr – potted or otherwise, a portfolio of puddings, and all manner of celebration foods. The folkloric chapters on groanings (confinement), weddings, funerals, calendar customs and Christmas to name but a few are especially rewarding. The importance of Peter Brears’ work cannot be overestimated: this is the first time that English cookery has been subjected to such close inspection. My dream, when doing Prospect Books, had always been to mastermind a county by county account of the entire realm, as Pevsner and his buildings. It was not to be, but still might be achieved. Give thanks in the meantime for Peter Brears.

Jonathan Meades: *The Plagiarist in the Kitchen. A Lifetime’s Culinary Thefts*: Unbound, 2017: 176 pp., hardback, £20.

A high point of last year’s holiday reading was this author’s *An Encyclopaedia of Myself* (Fourth Estate, 2014, £18.99). We readers sat open mouthed (but dictionary to hand) before the spate of words: clever words, sometimes ugly sounding, often needing third-party confirmation. A Meades sentence can be recognized a long way off. We enjoyed the eloquent loathing of God, faiths and their advocates, Tony Blair, Sir Stafford Cripps and Edward Heath, the astounding and apparently inevitable mortality of his childhood acquaintances, and his near-perfect recall of surroundings and personalities way back to a summer holiday in Dartmouth when five years old. Bracing and invigorating, and full of informed opinion. His new cookery book is put out by Unbound, the crowd-funding enterprise mentioned in the last