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# BOOK REVIEWS

Sally Butcher: *Persepolis*: Pavilion, 2016: 256 pp., hardback, £25.00.
The sub-title is 'Vegetarian recipes from Peckham, Persia and beyond'. In her family's shop in Peckham, selling all things Persian from comics to candy, the indefatigable Sally Butcher has set up a restaurant. Even as I write this notice, friends of my visiting daughter from London have texted her to say they are lunching in Persepolis: a tidy serendipity. The author is not only tireless, but infectiously enthusiastic in presenting her collection of delights like pomegranate and fennel cordial, date and tamarind pickle, red pepper sour orange soup and millet porridge with ginger. In tune with the *zeitgeist* and some. Excellent, do-able, enticing: this notice is short because the daughter is leaving the house, book under arm, ready to cook. Prospect is proud to have been Sally Butcher's launch-pad.

Scott Cutler Shershow: *Bread*: Bloomsbury, 2016: 170 pp., paperback, £9.99.
Joanna Walsh: *Hotel*: Bloomsbury, 2015: 170 pp., paperback, £9.99.
These are two of Bloomsbury's 'Object Lessons' series, edited by the games designer Ian Bogost and cultural studies professor Christopher Schaberg. The intention is to expose 'the hidden lives of ordinary things'. The 'Object Lessons' project encompasses these nicely produced books as well as shorter essays along the same lines in *The Atlantic*. In essence, the editors propose an object and allow the authors (either creative writers, philosophers, or academics in the humanities) to riff as they please on the topic. The result is often rewarding: each volume a little masterpiece of cultural allusion. This may, or may not, assist your understanding of the object in question, but it very likely will provoke sideways thoughts. Both authors here have some practical relation to their theme: Walsh has reviewed hotels (perhaps as a mystery customer), Shershow is an avowed bread-making enthusiast while earning his living as a professor of English. His book deploys his literary expertise to useful effect, producing some nice examples and citations which accumulate towards a pleasing enough essay on the many aspects of bread that intersect with human experience – so many indeed are these aspects that all the well-read author needs do is thrust his hand blindfold into the seething dustbin of history and something is bound to stick to it. In his case, it's bread riots, the adoption of settled agriculture, different sorts of bread and social status, breadlines for the hungry, leaven and literary metaphor, a good dollop of Christianity and scripture, then two more focused discussions of the paleo diet and our strange relationship with gluten (à propos of which, I note that our village store – which would fit inside a broom cupboard – stocks three sorts of gluten-free flour). The hotel book is altogether more difficult. What it reveals of hotels is virtually nil beyond the

banal: a certain anomie perhaps. The structure and design, and the language, is aphoristic, pretentious, irrelevant and self-regarding. There are discussions (though that's stretching its meaning) of Heidegger, Vaneigem, Freud, the Marx Brothers, Garbo and Katherine Mansfield, some of which may take you to considerations of home, homeliness (hotels, the lack of), women's functions, marriage, aphonia and elevators. If you read the collected reviews on Amazon.com you will come away wiping your brow at the ambition and brilliance of it all. For myself, I wished I had spent the afternoon chopping logs.

Charmaine O'Brien: *The Colonial Kitchen: Australia, 1788–1901*: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016: 197 pp., hardback, £49.95.

The title suggests a book in the vein of Helen Leach's *The New Zealand Kitchen in the Twentieth Century* that takes the kitchen as organizing principle in a study of cooking, eating and family and social life. While it discusses the evolution of the kitchen, O'Brien's work is essentially a history of cooking and eating in Australia in the nineteenth century. Yet another Australian culinary history, one might exclaim – but all the more welcome, since each retelling brings forth new arguments, new evidence, new analyses, new perspectives. It is often only by applying a diversity of lenses that culinary history can deal with cultural complexity, the social, demographic, geographic and economic differences in any population.

O'Brien admits that her book is 'a general history of food in colonial Australia' (p. 56), but at the same time she challenges both the stereotype of a 'meat and damper' diet, prevalent though this might have been, and today's popular view of nineteenth-century Australian eating – and, by extension, nineteenth-century English cooking – as unexciting, unvaried, inherently plain and boring. Her vivid portrait of life in the colonies shows otherwise, from the acceptance of indigenous ingredients (some, if not all) to the vast array of fresh fruit available. Nor was it lacking in refinement; Melbourne's sophisticated Café de Paris opened in 1858, cookery classes began in 1875, and *service à la russe* was adopted over the course of the century.

At the same time the book pays due attention to the kitchen, from the campfire cooking of the First Fleet arrivals to the indoor hearth and, by the end of the century, the closed range and gas cooker. It also surveys the cooks who used them, and their skills – or lack thereof, especially if they had the misfortune to be Irish. The beneficiaries of culinary education, however, were respectable middle-class women who might apply the lessons in their own homes but who could also use these skills to earn a living.

Refuting the egalitarian stereotype, the author emphasizes class divisions in colonial Australia, although wealth rather than birth was the determinant. Manners, however, as well as *savoir vivre*, were also markers, as O'Brien illustrates with the example of Marcus Clarke's fictional visit to Nasturtium Villa.