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The Literature of Food: An Introduction from 1830 to the Present

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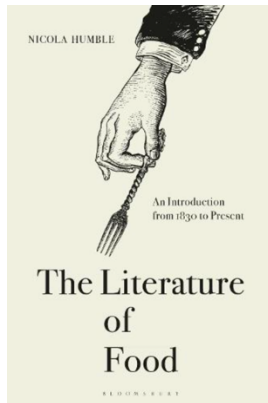
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BOOK REVIEW

The Literature of Food: An Introduction from 1830 to the Present, by Nicola Humble, London: Bloomsbury Academic, Hardback 2020, 368pp., ISBN 978-0-8578-5455-1; Paperback 2020, 288 pp., ISBN 978-0-8578-5456-8.



Nicola Humble's book *The Literature of Food: An Introduction from 1830 to Present* was published by Bloomsbury Academic in 2020, and the scholarly aspirations for the work are evident – unlike her two previous books, this current one features no popular gimmicks such as recipes. To be accurate, the full texts of four recipes are featured, but they are discussed in terms of their writing and textual values rather than addressing themselves to the reader directly. This does not mean that the book is suitable only for serious scholars; on the contrary. Humble's knowledge is as broad as it is deep, but her writing is entirely accessible. She is equally as comfortable and lucid in discussing Joyce and Beckett as she is with children's literature and food memoirs.

Humble is an Emeritus Professor at the University of Roehampton, where she taught English Literature in the School of Humanities and Social Sciences from 1992. This book has grown out of an undergraduate course on the “literature of food,” which was probably the first in the country. This book is her fifth – the first two, about femininity in Victorian literature¹ and the feminine middlebrow novel between the 1920s and 1950s,² grew out of her work in literary studies. In the latter two, however, Humble pursued her interest in cultural history, and particularly the cultural history of food. *Culinary Pleasures: Cookbooks and the Transformation of British Food* was published by Faber in 2005,³ and won a number of accolades, most of them in the realm

¹ Nicola Humble and Kimberley Reynolds, *Victorian Heroines: Representations of Femininity in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Art* (New York University Press, 1996).

² Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel 1920s to 1950s: Class, Domesticity and Bohemianism* (Oxford University Press, 2001).

³ Humble, *Culinary Pleasures: Cookbooks and the Transformation of British Food* (Faber, 2005).

of food writing and food scholarship. *Cake: A Global History* (2010)⁴ forms part of Reaktion Books' "Edibles" series of microhistories, each focused on a single foodstuff or dish. The slim volume combines memoir with historical and literary discussions, and while it did not win as many prizes as the previous publication, it made its author a sought-after contributor to a variety of gastronomic media, among them the acclaimed BBC Radio 4 *Food Programme* as well as the *Great British Bake Off*. Her latest publication then brings together these two strands of interest, literature and food history. It is to be followed up by another study focused on the literature and material culture of domestic craft from 1880 to present.

It is precisely the materiality of food, and how it "disrupts"⁵ literary texts, that the author wishes to investigate and highlight in her latest monograph. While food (or its absence) can serve as an important metaphor or symbol, it has real, powerful impacts on bodies, habitats and relationships. Humble explains that rather than simply an object, food is a "process,"⁶ as it is produced, purchased, prepared and consumed, and the consumption is an entire process in itself, from tasting, chewing and swallowing to digesting. Food is literally a matter of life and death, yet it is also so ordinary and familiar that we often "underestimate its complexity,"⁷ Humble points out.

The author's interest in the "everyday" also shows in another aspect of her work, which is the breadth of the texts under study. Humble declares her contention that also "cookbooks and other practical food writings" ought to be taken "seriously as objects worthy of detailed textual analysis."⁸ Humble's previous publications already indicate this attitude – *Culinary Pleasures* focuses on cookbooks and culinary writings, while *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel*, while looking at prose fiction, investigates a type of literature not often considered in scholarship. "Middlebrow" literature sits halfway between popular genre literature and "philosophically or formally challenging" texts.⁹ In *The Literature of Food*, Humble includes cookbooks, memoirs, journalistic texts and recipes, as well as children's literature, alongside more classic prose fiction from Dickens to Atwood. Having said that, while the cover claims to look at literature "1830 to present," only very few of the many texts in the study were actually published in this millennium.

In her Introduction, Humble declares that she combined textual analysis with historical enquiry in this book. While both are present throughout the book, the eight thematic chapters are evenly divided into prioritising one or the other. The first four

⁴ Humble, *Cake: A Global History* (Reaktion, 2010).

⁵ Humble, *Literature of Food: An Introduction from 1830 to Present* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), 2.

⁶ Humble, *Literature of Food*, 3.

⁷ Humble, *Literature of Food*, 3.

⁸ Humble, *Literature of Food*, 2.

⁹ Humble, *Feminine Middlebrow*, 11.

chapters emphasise gastronomic cultural history, while the latter four focus more on formal, literary aspects.

Chapter 1 focuses on hunger, specifically in two periods, the 1840s/50s, and the 1930s/40s, when the experience of hunger was widespread in Britain and Europe and a strong motif in contemporary literature. Humble explains that she looks at hunger not primarily in a metaphorical sense, but in the specific material context of its time when it was a fact of life for many. She shows that in the nineteenth century, hunger was shown as “happening to others”;¹⁰ in the twentieth century, after the modernist inward turn, literature made a much stronger claim for the reader’s sympathies and urged them to imagine themselves experiencing it. From the experience of want, the next chapter turns to the experience of plenty, the dinner party in Victorian and Modernist literature. Dinners are a rich trope in literature, as they are performances of politics, values and social relationships, embodied in foods, dishes, menus, table settings, rituals and manners. The third chapter traces the “Coming and Going of the British Servant,” and how the identity of the British middle class is shaped by their relationship to domestic staff, while the fourth explores other more or less explicit roles around food, such as chefs, gourmets, mothers and “edible women.”

The following four chapters then move from cultural history to more explicitly literary concerns with form. Chapter 5 looks at food in Modernist literature, and how the modernist principle of “making it new” shaped or was shaped by food-related narratives. Children’s literature is often replete with food imagery, and in Chapter 6, Humble explains three major functions that food plays in literature for children: being a fantasy object, an opportunity for play, and embodying the thrill of considering one’s own being food. Chapter 7, then, considers recipes *as* writing, while also looking at food memoirs, and memory. It is not the first time that recipes are being studied as texts, but often, it is in terms of their contextual values – what they tell about food culture or gender, for example. Not so in this chapter, which firmly applies textual criticism throughout and shows that indeed, “the form has its own voice, its own grammar.”¹¹ Lastly, Chapter 8 looks at disgust in literature. It begins by looking at several theories of disgust that can help to decode textual disgust, namely Mary Douglas’ concept of purity and pollution, Julia Kristeva’s “abject” and Mikhail Bakhtin’s classic concepts of the carnivalesque and the grotesque. In this, the chapter shows the fruitful blending of theories from both food and literary studies.

The brief concluding chapter can be read as a kind of a case study, using the very narrow focus of a single foodstuff – eggs – to bring the topics of the eight thematic chapters together once more. This makes for a highly interesting chapter that showcases how a new focus can bring out original insights even into well-known texts – from *David Copperfield* (1849) to Escoffier’s *Guide to Modern Cookery* (1907), from

¹⁰ Humble, *Literature of Food*, 44.

¹¹ Humble, *Literature of Food*, 195.

M.F.K. Fisher to Virginia Woolf, from Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited* (1945) to Atwood's *Edible Woman* (1990).

Creating a sense of connection and highlighting “intertwinings” between texts and topics is a stated intention of the author – Humble explains that rather than a chronological structure or separate case studies, the book is structured by a “rhizomatic logic.”¹² This concept, predominantly associated with philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari,¹³ but also with cultural studies scholar Elspeth Probyn,¹⁴ describes structures with no single point of origin, growing and extending horizontally rather than vertically and hierarchically, and allowing for manifold points of entry. In the case of this book, Humble takes it to mean that “certain issues, authors and texts reappear in different places and contexts throughout the book” as “nodal points in a web of interconnections.”¹⁵ However, it is a shortcoming that the conclusion offered in the final chapter remains somewhat implicit – merely a “sense of [the] many and various purposes”¹⁶ of food in literature, rather than a firm conclusion.

A book's back matter such as notes, bibliography and index may seem only a technical feature, but they are valuable for serious scholarship, and it is particularly commendable when thought is expended on them. In *The Literature of Food*, the bibliography is separated from the endnotes, and it features the thoughtful touch of rendering primary sources in bold, with secondary sources kept plain. This makes it immediately easier to distinguish them. Not least, the bibliography proves the deep familiarity of the author with works in food studies as well as literary and cultural studies.

This book is probably the most extensive British monograph on food and literature to date. Humble references a recent US American monograph in her introductory chapter, Tigner and Carruth's *Literature and Food Studies*,¹⁷ asserting the difference between the two being that Tigner and Carruth's book is more episodic, similar to Shahani's edited volume *Food and Literature*.¹⁸ This is where I will disagree with Professor Humble – while Tigner and Carruth refer generally to different works of literature in each of their thematic chapters, the book still reads as a coherent whole that addresses major topic areas in literary food studies. In any case, both books are seminal works in that field, along with Shahani's and a more recent edited volume by

¹² Humble, *Literature of Food*, 2.

¹³ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1980; transl. Brian Massumi, London and New York: Continuum, 2013).

¹⁴ Elspeth Probyn, *Carnal Appetites: FoodSexIdentities* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000).

¹⁵ Humble, *Literature of Food*, 2.

¹⁶ Humble, *Literature of Food*, 260.

¹⁷ Amy Tigner and Alison Carruth, *Literature and Food Studies* (London and New York: Routledge, 2019).

¹⁸ Gitanjali Shahani, ed., *Food and Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

Coghlan.¹⁹ Humble also references Sandra M. Gilbert's *The Culinary Imagination*²⁰ in her introduction. Unlike Gilbert's book, though, and despite occasional personal notes such as a fond memory of a food scene in a book remembered from childhood, Humble avoids coming across as precious, offering as she does clearly argued analysis rather than somewhat rambling "meditations."

Noting the British roots of this author and book is not incidental; while the choice of primary sources is not exclusively British or European, authors from Britain and Ireland dominate. There are also few works from non-English-speaking traditions included. This has certainly had consequences, for example in the choice of topics discussed, which include servants and Victorian table manners, but not race or immigration. The author acknowledges in the introductory chapter that by no means all topics related to food were discussed. Additionally, the explicit aim was not to include a comprehensive overview of all literature of food – as if that was ever possible – but to explore previously overlooked "points of connection between different authors, genres, themes or forms."²¹ So I do not necessarily consider it amiss to operate within a certain scope and a British/European perspective.

What is less clear is perhaps why the book is called "An Introduction," as this seems to imply a more structured meta-discussion of approach and method. Oddly lacking is any discussion about the disciplinary field or fields where this work may belong – variously called literary food studies, gastrocriticism or gastropoetics. The lack is curious as this is an explicit feature of the other monographs and edited volumes mentioned, and since this monograph follows such an obvious interdisciplinary approach.

The Literature of Food is an engaging read. For the food scholar, the book offers deep insights into how the food culture of an era is refracted in its literature. For the literary scholar, it showcases new ways of thinking about literary texts, proving once more that food is not just a contextual item, but an entry point of asking more questions about texts, characters, contexts and authors. Not least, the book advances literary food studies by highlighting the connective nodes of theories, thoughts and texts in this interdisciplinary field.

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¹⁹ J. Michelle Coghlan, ed., *The Cambridge Companion of Literature and Food Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

²⁰ Sandra M. Gilbert, *The Culinary Imagination: From Myth to Modernity* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2014).

²¹ Humble, *Literature of Food*, 2