

a beach with gently rolling waves, and we hear the familiar voice of its main character:

It is considered useful, and enlightening, and therapeutic, to think about death for a few minutes a day. What actually happens to my physical remains is of zero interest to me . . . I don't want a party . . . "Reported dead." Unless it could bring some entertainment value—in a subversive way . . . throw me in a woodchipper and spray me into Harrod's in the middle of the rush hour. That would be pretty epic. I wouldn't mind being remembered in that way.

If we accept these words as coming from Bourdain—who was sadly “reported dead” by suicide on June 8, 2018—it's also reasonable to assume that he would *not* like to be remembered as a subject of controversies about misinformation and the scourge of deepfakes that presently dominate our mediascape. But for fans of the chef, television host, and man—as far as his viewers “knew” him—the knowledge that he avoided needing to confront such matters is about as comforting as just seeing him in “person” again.

—*Signe Rousseau, University of Cape Town*

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### *On an Empty Stomach: Two Hundred Years of Hunger Relief*

Tom Scott-Smith

Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2020

288 pp. Illustrations. \$35.00 (hardcover); \$16.99 (eBook)

Those familiar with contemporary famine relief scenes may have chanced upon one of the more ubiquitous products in refugee camps and feeding centers. Plumpy'Nut, a French-manufactured sachet of peanut paste, dried milk, oil, sugar, as well as a number of essential vitamins and minerals, is meant to be kneaded in the packet before being opened and consumed. If reasonably tasty—often described as a more cloying sort of peanut butter—this quality is not its primary draw. Rather, three sachets are “prescribed” each day to children suffering from severe malnutrition in the absence of more varied and fulsome foods.

Less well-known, perhaps, are the many other objects and foods that govern daily life in spaces of hunger, like the relief food “Corn-Soy-Blend,” a bag of protein-fortified maize meal offered to slightly better-fed but still malnourished children.

Aid workers distinguish between children better-suited to Plumpy'Nut or CSB through the use of a bright plastic strip that measures the “mid-upper arm circumference,” a metric designed to assess malnutrition through the wastage of subcutaneous fat. These tools are all governed through manuals like the *Sphere Handbook*, a voluminous text used by four hundred humanitarian agencies to plan emergency relief projects in granular detail.

Tom Scott-Smith, a professor of refugee studies and forced migration, has turned his attention in *On an Empty Stomach* to the materiality and “thinginess” of relief feeding since the onset of reflexively humanitarian projects in the middle of the nineteenth century. At the heart of his anthropologically informed but primarily historical assessment is the disconnect between the aesthetic worlds of food and eating and the contemporary focus on nutrients and nutrition that overdetermine the presence of relief aid. The South Sudanese refugees who might be “prescribed” CSB or Plumpy'Nut might in fact be starving for *kisra*, a fermented, sorghum- or wheat-based flatbread served with okra, goat meat, or lentils. That these desires have no place in the world of relief feeding is, for Scott-Smith, a sign of how hunger has come to be measured in fully nutritional terms in the modern world. But moreover, he reads it as a sign that humanitarian hunger relief “is influenced by prevailing patterns of power, systems of thought, and approaches to governance” (xii), all of which have been radically transformed over the last two centuries.

These transformations, according to Scott-Smith, have been found in four historical currents. A global convergence upon the primacy of bureaucracy and rationalization has rendered hunger relief a project “based on social distance rather than proximity,” manageable through the accumulation of statistics, but at the cost of personal connection and awareness of people's culture, background, and biography (13). An emphasis on equality and universalism has dispensed of nineteenth-century valuations of worth and subjective measurements of value, though once again in a way that sidesteps questions of culture or community. Commerce and capitalism have often turned hunger relief into a parallel project of surplus disposal, offering the poor or dispossessed “foods they have little desire to eat” (13), with starvation rendered a market opportunity. And the progressively increased role of modern science and technology in hunger relief efforts have rendered starvation a fully expert domain, with hunger “often tackled without political engagement” (14). Perhaps most damning, Scott-Smith reminds us, is that many of the new technical foods range, bluntly, from unappealing to “disgusting.”

*Empty Stomach* is in large measure an intervention into the growing body of literature on global humanitarianism, much of it rooted in the particular contexts of the late British Empire. Here, Scott-Smith writes against whiggish narratives of progress that — if rather deprecated in contemporary historiography — hold sway strongly in international aid circles, filtered through the language of service delivery and improvement. These debates will be more of interest to the historian of development. Scholars of food, famine, and nutrition, however, will find in *Empty Stomach* a rich account of the changing technologies and paradigms of hunger relief projects. If subject to the same Anglo-American geographical limitations that characterize much related work, this book achieves something very new in its textured attention to the technologies, idioms, and practices of modern hunger relief projects.

In ten chapters, Scott-Smith moves from the Elizabethan soup kitchen and its upscaling into more modern forms of relief in the middle of the nineteenth century. He shows how new idioms of modern nutritional science were deployed in new institutions like workhouses, schools, and canteens, and how “dietary determinism” emerged as a way of assessing races, nations, and communities. These logics were repurposed in international institutions and adapted to the age of modern warfare, and they conditioned twentieth-century, “high modernist” approaches to new foods, from the fantasies of alchemized waste remade as an end to world hunger to the commercially viable if equally unpalatable products aimed at ameliorating malnutrition, such as Plumpy’Nut and CSB.

Along the way, we are introduced to a staggering range of new inventions. Some of these, like Liebig’s Extract of Meat, are more familiar, though the well-recounted debates over gelatin and osmazome that led to its invention and popularization represent a new and fascinating account of early nutrition and gastronomy and their dialectical origins. Other hunger relief technologies, including supplements, cookers, and foods, will be entirely new to most. These include Maltavena, a Second World War-era decoction of powdered malt and oats strained as a vitamin-rich milk substitute; the “Aladdin Oven,” a kerosene cooker invented by a Gilded Age Boston soup kitchen and designed to make cheap cuts of meat more palatable; a chlorella food grown on sewage and funded by the Carnegie Institution, eventually transformed into a “foodlike” substance for Venezuelan lepers and into noodles in Japan; and “Sprinkles,” a 1990s-era micronutrient supplement designed to be scattered onto starchy foods. (This catalog of mostly abortive projects, from the inane to the repulsive, forms a curious counterpoint to the long list of successful innovations in everything from cooking to packaging to the remaking of basic foodstuffs offered to a consuming

public in the same period. A pervasive inability to successfully “innovate” for the poor underscores Scott-Smith’s doubts about the values of increasingly modern hunger relief.)

The historian reading this text might quibble over certain points of scale and coverage. The two hundred years of hunger relief discussed here represent primarily Anglo-American efforts. Modern regimes — from Mao’s China to Ataturk’s Turkey, from revolutionary Mexico to fascist Italy — have all advanced different schemes to relieve hunger, famine, and malnutrition. Certain concepts in modern foodways — not least, Gyorgy Scrinis’s notion of “nutritionism” — also hang over this text but remain broadly undiscussed. But the exceptional range of material treated in this modern history, alongside Scott-Smith’s unfailingly sharp analytical lens, render this an essential primer on efforts to feed the hungry in the modern world, and of assured interest to a wide range of food scholars.

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### *Animal, Vegetable, Junk: A History of Food, from Sustainable to Suicidal*

Mark Bittman

Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2021  
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In critical food systems scholarship, Mark Bittman has found fertile ground for reform. Rooted in the history of fields and pursuit of nation building, *Animal, Vegetable, Junk: A History of Food, from Sustainable to Suicidal* provides a counterweight to the framing of food systems as a collection of stagnant, guaranteed, or technocratic tools and policies. The author argues instead that our current food environment is the result of calculated, concentrated power — from colonial control to corporations — directing what we grow and how we eat, in a system that demands “of agriculture not food for people, but goods for market” (54).

By focusing on the historical examples of food processing (section 8), nutritional guidance (section 10), and pesticide use (section 13), Bittman highlights the promotion of dissected facts devoid of their contextual housing. The author discusses how science has been manipulated over time to distance consumers from food and privilege larger agri-food enterprises in their path to profits. As scholar Rebecca Tsosie (2012) writes in *Indigenous Peoples and Epistemic Injustice: Science, Ethics and Human Rights*, “In a public policy sense, science becomes a tool to effectuate a particular set of interests” (1141). *Animal, Vegetable, Junk* outlines how researchers,