it ultimately represents little more than an ill-fated moment, an evanescent respite within a larger framework of ongoing selfishness and cruelty towards one's fellow beings. As Browner puts it bluntly and sardonically, with Julian "hospitality was back in business, just in time for capitalism, colonialism, gunpowder warfare, and the Renaissance" (p.129). In this respect, it may be useful for Browner to employ a nonchronological structure in his supposed "informal history": in particular, by devoting the first chapter to Hitler's great talents hosting parties at Berchtesgaden and putting guests at ease (even though a vegetarian, Hitler made sure they had meat if they so desired), Browner makes sure that all his accounts of earlier cases are framed by the reminder that humanity doesn't necessarily become morally better and more enlightened as it approaches the modern age.

This cautionary quality in Browner's tale-telling takes on special significance in the last chapter, where he recounts his own family dynamics around the dinner table. Browner's mother, it seems, died pitifully after protracted illness, and Browner realizes the extent to which he withdrew his support from her as she became more and more debilitated. Everything came to a head when Browner and his siblings burst out in uncontrollable laughter at a meal where his mother tried to capture an errant brussels sprout that had fallen off of her fork. Writing from the vantage point of wistful maturity, Browner uses the story of his relationship to his mother to reflect broadly on what he terms "our strangulating covetousness, our cruelties, our pathetic moralities, our identities" (p.189).

It's a delicate matter to be critical of such a heartfelt reflection on a family tragedy, but it might well be that this highly personal and guilt-ridden final chapter creates a problem with the book itself. Despite the way in which Browner used the other tales of his book to critique the culpability of motives that, in his view, suffuses hospitality, those narratives were always mediated by historical distance and by Browner's whimsical way with anecdotal account. Now, however, he becomes overly serious and overly confessional, and the reader may feel that this intimate turn hasn't really been earned (moreover, it might be noted that the story of his mother is only vaguely related to hospitality and the reception of guests).

The Duchess Who Wouldn't Sit Down is a curious work that doesn't seem to settle down to an easy or fixed identity. On the one hand, its claim to be a history is belied by its actual structure—a series of revelatory tales that use whimsy to chart classic cases around hospitality over the ages. On the other hand, its very whimsy is undercut by the autobiographical seriousness of its ending. With an enigmatic title that resembles others such as Oliver Sacks's psychiatric The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat and Jeffrey Steingarten's The Man Who Ate Everything, The Duchess Who Wouldn't Sit Down is probably best viewed as part of a genre of works that offer up montages of anecdotes describing humanity's foibles. These are books meant to be dipped into and out of and not perhaps taken too seriously. It's unfortunate, then, that Browner felt impelled to end his generally amusing concoction on such a note of personal emotionalism.

—Dana Polan, University of Southern California

The Secret Life of Lobsters: How Fishermen and Scientists Are Unraveling the Mysteries of Our Favorite Crustacean
Trevor Corson
289 pp. $24.95 (cloth)

Defying the accepted wisdom that people prefer to know as little as possible about the food they eat, Trevor Corson's captivating (and appetite-whetting) book, The Secret Life of Lobsters, examines in minute detail every level of the Maine lobster trade, from larva to lobster bib. Corson, a Boston native who passed his childhood summers on Little Cranberry Island off the coast of Maine, returned as an adult to spend two years working on a lobster boat belonging to Bruce Fernald, a fifth-generation lobsterman. During that time he came to know intimately not only the lobstermen and their families but also a group of scientists studying the area's lobster population and attempting to unravel the dark undersea mysteries of crustacean life and death. As well as offering a paean to lobsters and lobstermen, The Secret Life of Lobsters has a polemical motivation: to argue against the Maine government's position that the lobster population is being overfished and is in danger of declining in the way the cod population has over the past twenty years.

According to Corson, the conservation techniques regularly employed by the Maine lobstermen, such as v-notching—cutting a V in the tail of a breeding female to mark her as a protected animal for life—effectively sustain lobster population levels. Corson argues that any fluctuations in lobster numbers are natural, owing to the crustacean's dependence on fluctuating natural factors such as water temperature and current. His argument is convincing, despite an obvious bias, but the most juicy and rewarding sections of the book (the tail meat, as it were) are not the overly detailed accounts of clashes between the lobstermen and the government scientists, nor even his loving depictions of life on...
Little Cranberry, but rather the obsessions, beautifully written descriptions of the lobster’s social life. One can easily see where Corson’s heart lies, and the surrounding narrative, despite many charming and occasionally chilling anecdotes about lobstermen and scientists, tends to lack the visceral fascination and energy of the corresponding anecdotes about lobsters.

The book is organized around six different phases of a lobster’s experience: trapping, mating, fighting, surviving, sensing, and brooding. After a prologue describing life on a lobster boat, the first section, “Trapping,” provides a short history of the lobster trade in Maine. This section also introduces some curious facts about lobster growth: for example, lobsters molt regularly, shedding their old shells, eating them for the calcium, then growing a new shell as they expand in size, with each molting cycle gaining them 15 percent in length and 50 percent in size. “Mating,” the following section, outlines a history of research into the lobster sex life, interspersing oddly erotic descriptions of lobster mating practices with a far less graphic retelling of Bruce Fernald’s wooing of his wife, Barb. The third section, “Fighting,” delves into the conflicts between government and lobstermen in Maine, focusing on the government’s concern over the paucity of mature lobsters in the late 1970s and early 1980s. This section is the longest and the hardest to read, exemplifying Corson’s tendency to get bogged down in the details of the back-and-forth exchanges between government scientists, lobstermen, and independent ecologists like Robert Steneck.

Part four, “Surviving,” returns to descriptions of the lobster, namely its early development as a postlarval “super-lobster,” as well as the super-lobster’s particular need for sheltering terrain, an element determining population sizes on the Maine coast. “Sensing” begins with an enthralling description of the remarkable structure of the lobster’s eye and closes with new developments in lobster-mating research as well as in undersea robotics based on lobsters. The final section, “Brooding,” describes a boom and bust in the lobster population, concluding that, despite great advancements in technology, “dichotomy makes Villas’s Green Fairy a gratifying read. If at times a bit pompous—he boasts that he can greet maitre d’s in ten languages—Villas is a well-informed guide, a very good writer, and never less than a sharply opinionated and enthusiastic guide.

The essays that make up this book are about, among other things, meatloaf and steak, okra and pumpkin, champagne and beer, the ethics of tipping, and how best to get a tough table. (“I’ve determined,” Villas writes, “that the most advantageous time to call for a difficult reservation is about thirty minutes after the lunch rush, or between 2:30