But their story is brought out with candor and compassion, making it by far the most absorbing story of the quintet, certainly much more satisfying than the rote recital of accomplishments found in other chapters. Perhaps the “Too Hot Tamales” were more open than their male counterparts; maybe the interviewer/interviewee chemistry was better; or possibly the writer was more interested in this story. Whatever the reason, this section is the highlight of the book.

Super Chefs may have accomplished what the author intended: to give a glimpse of the business empires of the super chefs. But the profiles often feel strangely incomplete. I know this book was not intended as a serious ethnography or case study, but the author (and the reader) would have benefited from some of the rigor of either of these approaches. What makes a profile of a person interesting is an examination of the details that allow the reader to reach conclusions based on the behaviors, pronouncements, dissonances, contradictions, etc. that are part of the human condition. The profiles in this book are too broadly painted and not examined through a critical lens, leaving us with unsatisfying and incomplete portraits of the super chefs. The few episodes in the book that are played out in depth are interesting and allow the reader to see how the personalities of these chefs shaped the endeavors bearing their names. But these moments are few. Instead, too often we are whisked from one accomplishment to the next and not given enough understanding of how all the complexities of personality, place, partnership, media, and money came together to make the final product. While Super Chefs has some interesting insights, a deeper look at its subjects would have rendered a better book.

—Jeffrey Miller, Colorado State University

Bookends

Toast: The Story of a Boy’s Hunger
Nigel Slater
New York: Penguin, Gotham Books, 2004
xiii + 238 pp. $25.00 (cloth)

Laden with desire, frustration, and longing, Toast recounts the intimate, and often painful, details of Nigel Slater’s youth. Using his growing hunger for food and sex as the grounding metaphor, Slater strikes a humorous tone that never feels affected, all the while steering brilliantly clear of self-indulgence or self-pity. His refusal to romanticize the past or to parse the pain from the pleasure makes Toast a poignant and refreshingly honest coming-of-age story.

As a child, Slater had a peckish appetite—eggs and milk made him vomit, a fact only his mother treated with respect. After her death, Slater’s father force-fed him scrambled eggs to transform him from “a nine-year old Nancy boy [his phrase] into a strapping son-to-be-proud-of” (p.98). The end result: a mixture of “tears and egg and snot and vomit” (p.100). Alongside memories of abjection, Slater juxtaposes moments of erotic bliss, such as eating a “warm, soft, and creamy” potato dish that tasted like “pure sex” (p.231) or (because sucking on a Mars bar was strictly disallowed by his father) performing “culinary cunnilingus” on a Walnut Whipple (p.160).

Slater’s unadorned prose underscores the stylistic errors that manage to creep into the first few pages of the book; the most notable (largely for its Oedipal implications) occurs in the section “Jam Tarts,” where Slater twice omits a needed reference to his father’s mouth. In the first omission, Slater recalls: “My father loved a jam tart and would put one in [his mouth, presumably] whole and swallow it like a snake devouring a bird’s egg” (p.15). In addition to the correction of such oversights, Toast might also benefit from a few extra signposts to clarify the chronology of events.

Such glitches aside, Slater’s memoir provides an engaging story of the boy who would eventually become a chef, cookbook author, and food columnist for the London Observer. For those who have read his cookbooks, Toast sketches a touching portrait of the childhood hunger that drove Slater to write such deliciously memorable works. For those not yet familiar with his books, Toast provides a compelling introduction to one of England’s most popular contemporary food writers.

—Alice McLean, Davis, CA

Candyfreak: A Journey through the Chocolate Underbelly of America
Steve Almond
Chapel Hill, nc: Algonquin Books, 2004
262 pp. $21.95 (cloth)

This is the kind of book that makes one wonder, Why can’t I get a job like that? What could be more fun than traveling around the country mulling over the demise of small, regional candy factories and interviewing the owners and managers of the few that remain while they ply you with free samples of their wares? On his journey writer Steve Almond explores his own deeply neurotic but charming obsession with candy (by his own admission, he keeps more
candy in his house on a daily basis than most of us give away at Halloween); discusses the rise and fall and conglomeration of the American confectionary industry; segues briefly into the history of chocolate itself; and offers up humorous servings of social commentary.

This book is best read if you have some sort of affectionate relationship to candy and a tolerance for Almond’s delirious descriptions of his favorite confections (“Oh, that inimitable combination of textures! That symphony of flavors! And how they offered themselves to the heat and wetness of the mouth—the sensation of the crisped rice drenched in melted chocolate, chomped by the molars into the creamy swirl of the caramel. Oh, woe and pity unto thee who never tasted this bar!” [p. 40]—this in reference to the now defunct Caravelle bar). One can also agree or disagree with his dismissive contempt of candy that he considers an affront to humanity (he’s absolutely right about Twizzlers, marshmallow peeps, and Boston baked beans, but how can he not like Mounds bars?).

Almond’s lively, engaging style carries the reader through a history of the American candy industry, now divided into the three gigantic companies that dominate the world market (Nestlé, Hershey’s, and Mars) and what the author calls “all the other little freaks”—the regional companies that produce small batches of goodies available only in limited geographical distribution. Between the world wars, according to one of his sources, there were six thousand candy companies in the United States. Now there are fewer than two hundred, a number that continues to dwindle.

Intertwined against the backdrop of the harsh reality of candy manufacturing are the stories of these small companies. In factories around the country, Almond meets other candy freaks who are dedicated to continuing a family tradition or to producing a unique product with care and attention. His vivid and detailed descriptions of the candy-making process are fascinating, and his determination to eat as much as possible of the goodies offered is hilarious. The chapter involving the Goo Goo Cluster, a popular southern treat, is particularly delicious.

A third strand of the book is Almond’s own relationship to candy, which he claims to have eaten every single day of his life. He readily admits that his addiction is serious and somewhat insane and then proceeds to demonstrate “that every one of you has some form of the Freak within you, has sought the succor of sweets in a moment of trauma, has attached some sacred set of memories to the small, attainable pleasures of candy” (p. 41). I’m certainly not going to deny it. And I recommend that you read this book only if you have a stash of your favorite candy at your side.

—Lisa Hiley, Williamstown, MA