Ray’s study relies on a mix of research methods. (The book’s genesis is his Ph.D. dissertation at the State University of New York at Binghamton.) He uses several conventional data sources—a survey of food practices, ethnographic data, secondary literature in anthropology and sociology—along with his own personal experience as an Indian immigrant in the United States. Ray also draws heavily on the fictional and nonfictional work of Bengali Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore and other diasporic Indian literary figures, including V.S. Naipaul and Salman Rushdie. It is rare to find a sociologist who cites philosophical and literary works by Dostoevsky, Nietzsche, and Garcia Marquez. Indeed, it is Ray’s willingness to tread nonconformist waters that makes The Migrant’s Table not only innovative and intellectually stimulating but also a pleasurable read.

His research makes several important contributions. By pairing his recent survey of Bengali-American food consumption with the findings of a 1969–1970 US Agency for International Development survey of food habits in Calcutta, Ray pieces together a rich description of pre- and postmigration food practices. In the end, he concludes assimilation “will eventually happen, but the more interesting thing to study is what happens on the way there” (p. 72). For example, while breakfast and lunch change radically for reasons of convenience, time, and tastes, dinner retains some semblance of the traditional Bengali meal of rice and fish. Yet an intermingling of American and Bengali cuisines is apparent where new ingredients such as turkey are introduced. Ray also observes that many Bengali seasonal and life cycle food rituals are lost upon migration and replaced by new secular rituals such as the North American Bengali Conference. Children further complicate the adaptation process. In short, challenges to a simple assimilation thesis abound.

Relocation and changes in consumption patterns have meanings for ethnic identity. While American food is consumed with glee (albeit with initial trepidation) and Americans are identified with affluence and a cool smartness, a certain disdain for American culture is also manifest. A whiff of conspiracy that seems to permeate articles about the epidemic. These articles make frequent reference to the denial—the natural human reaction to bad news—and the skeptics may be influenced by a combination of finger pointing from others, and disbelief from many. The skeptics may be influenced by a combination of The postmigration food practices. In the end, he concludes assimilation “will eventually happen, but the more interesting thing to study is what happens on the way there” (p. 72). For example, while breakfast and lunch change radically for reasons of convenience, time, and tastes, dinner retains some semblance of the traditional Bengali meal of rice and fish. Yet an intermingling of American and Bengali cuisines is apparent where new ingredients such as turkey are introduced. Ray also observes that many Bengali seasonal and life cycle food rituals are lost upon migration and replaced by new secular rituals such as the North American Bengali Conference. Children further complicate the adaptation process. In short, challenges to a simple assimilation thesis abound.

Relocation and changes in consumption patterns have meanings for ethnic identity. While American food is consumed with glee (albeit with initial trepidation) and Americans are identified with affluence and a cool smartness, a certain disdain for American culture is also manifest. The skeptics may be influenced by a combination of the three Bengali-American households constituting the ethnographic sample, the narrow representativeness and interpretive subjectivity inherent to Ray’s core method is overcome in part by the surveys. Whether his findings based on this select sample can be generalized to other immigrant groups is empirically questionable and open to further testing. Ray’s select group of probashi (expatriates) is mainly West Bengalis who migrated to the United States in the 1970s and 1980s and are affluent middle-class Hindu professionals. Even so, sociologists and food scholars alike will find his work informative. By studying consumption in the private sphere in light of larger global-historical contexts, Ray highlights the intersection of gender, race, ethnicity, class, generations, and globalization—thus enabling an understanding of identity formation and dynamics that does not parcel out neatly in statistical models. Sociologists can learn from his original approach to the social world, while food scholars will definitely find his thick description of food practices intriguing. Gender scholars, too, will benefit from his chapter on the division of household labor in Bengali-American households.

—Samantha Kwan, University of Arizona

Our Overweight Children: What Parents, Schools, and Communities Can Do to Control the Fatness Epidemic
Sharron Dalton
Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004
292 pp. $24.95 (cloth)

In recent years, media of all sorts have brought us the message that vast numbers of American adults and children are obese and that their numbers are soaring. It is an unwelcome message, one that has occasioned hand wringing from some, finger pointing from others, and disbelief from many. The skeptics may be influenced by a combination of denial—the natural human reaction to bad news—and the whiff of conspiracy that seems to permeate articles about the epidemic. These articles make frequent reference to the
government’s definition of obesity and its use of a shadowy new formula known as the body mass index, as if politicians were trying to abridge our Constitutional right to gorge on junk food, when it is actually the public health officials and scientists (in public and private institutions) who are trying to grapple with health hazards affecting millions.

In my pediatric practice, I have noticed a sizable increase in the proportion of my patients who are overweight. During the past ten years, I have watched slender parents and their kids put on excessive weight. Despite the near-universal wish to be a little thinner, many of these people are shocked when I try to point out gently that their children’s weight has gotten out of balance with their height. They literally do not see the problem. Other parents are concerned about their child’s weight. Some of them can identify a culprit, such as drinking too much soda, but feel powerless to alter it. Another group is concerned but mystified, because in their eyes their kids “do eat healthy.” Parents feel lost, and I know from speaking with my colleagues, attending conferences, and reading medical journals that pediatricians feel at a loss to help them.

For those seeking an understanding of the obesity situation, Sharron Dalton’s Our Overweight Children provides a useful guide, at once readable and detailed. Despite the prescriptive subtitle, the book’s strength lies in its clear and evenhanded presentation of the evidence. A professor of nutrition at New York University, Dalton reviews the multiple causes of obesity and generally succeeds in her stated aim of offering “optimal guidelines for weight reduction and management” (p.6), with “an appeal for prevention” (p.7). Throughout the book, she manages to present a profusion of research and statistics in a manner accessible to the general reader. She provides abundant citations in endnotes, so the flow of reading is uninterrupted, but interested readers can easily pursue specific topics in greater depth. Her tone is authoritative yet sympathetic. The technical discussion is enlivened with references to one-named celebrities such as Oprah and Plato, numerous teen novels, and the occasional poem.

Beginning with a definition of terms and a review of the health risks of obesity, Dalton goes on to discuss why its prevalence is rising in children. She devotes equal attention to the multiple factors producing the obesity epidemic—food quantity and quality, exercise, innate genetic tendencies, family attitudes and routines, and societal contributors. Each chapter contains a clear statement of its agenda, proceeds in an orderly fashion, and ends with a concise summary. Boxes highlight useful specific information such as the food guide pyramid, school lunch menus, and comparisons of typical portions to recommended serving sizes for children.

The book’s final section contains recommendations for prevention and improvement of obesity, including diet and exercise suggestions for children, tips on making changes in families, and a call for action at the community and governmental levels. In addition to her own moderate and moderation-based recommendations, Dalton gives nuanced descriptions of popular diets and fitness programs, like the Atkins diet. She reviews their pros and cons, distinguishes between what has been claimed and what’s been proven, and supplies appropriate cautions about what is unknown about their suitability for children. Although parents seeking help for their own families will find suggestions for new tactics and some specific meal and portion guidance, they may find this book a starting point for change rather than a detailed self-help manual.

This final section also contains an intriguing detour from the practical thrust of the book, a chapter on the stigmatization of the overweight. In the course of a thoughtful discussion of attitudes toward, discrimination against, and bullying of overweight children, Dalton makes copious reference to children’s fiction, examining the characters of fat children in Lord of the Flies and the Harry Potter series. This chapter could stand alone as a passionate essay on the portrayal of overweight children in literature and the salutary effects of families reading together.

Dalton is at her best when distilling data from a variety of sources, translating jargon, and balancing the multifactorial causes of obesity. Her arguments are strongest, not surprisingly, where the evidence is strongest. She is less convincing when arguing positions with less evidence, such as cultural influences on the development of obesity (pp.78–79). A couple of medical assertions are off base, namely that all “seriously overweight” children should be tested by a specialist for a few rare genetic disorders (p.51) and that overweight women are “likely” to have notably heavy babies (p.67). (It is more accurate to say that they are more likely to than nonoverweight women.) Despite these minor criticisms, this well-written book will be both useful and interesting to parents seeking a deeper understanding than a newspaper article can provide, as well as to nurses, teachers, coaches, day care providers, students of medicine and nutrition, and general readers who have noted the increased attention to obesity in the media yet still can’t quite believe it is an epidemic.

—Benjamin Scheindlin, MD, Burlington Pediatrics, Burlington, MA