In Biting the Hand That Starves You, Richard Maisel, David Epston, and Ali Borden present an alternative to the prevailing psychosocial approach to anorexia and bulimia. Based on their years of clinical experience with eating-disordered clients, the authors propose that eating disorders be viewed as an external influence on, rather than an internal condition of, the sufferer. This position is stark contrast to the prevailing psychosocial view of the eating disorder as occurring “within the people it afflicts—something they have or are” (p. 76). In the authors’ appraisal, an individual does not have an eating disorder; they struggle with an eating disorder. The distinction, which may appear small in linguistic terms, amounts to a considerably different philosophy of treatment. The authors worry that the current therapeutic paradigm may actually harm patients by inducing them to identify with—and even seek validation through—their eating disorders. In the words of one client: “[From traditional therapy] I believed I was anorexic that I had to be a better anorexic…” (p. 77).

Maisel, Epston, and Borden encourage clients to regard their eating disorders as an external enemy against which they must engage in metaphorical warfare. A former client explains the value of this exercise: “Before, I had just talked with doctors about anorexia. No one ever taught me that you have to be against her…When I talk against anorexia there’s more of a chance of getting free because I can start hating her and when I do, I can let her go” (p. 80). The authors liken eating disorder sufferers and survivors to the captives of Nazi concentration camps, starved and beaten down by an outside dictator—their eating disorder. To survive, they are empowered to fight back.

What are some of the combat techniques described in Biting the Hand? Clients are trained to distinguish the voice of their eating disorder from their own voice, as though each voice is a separate entity that can be completely disentangled from the other. Anti-eating disorder outrage is promoted as a means of siphoning from the disorder its false moral authority. In a chapter devoted specifically to parents, the authors make clear that they do not hold caregivers morally responsible for eating disorders in young people. Instead, they hold up parents as an important potential ally in an eating-disordered child’s struggle to develop a spirit of resistance to the disorder.

The book closes with a letter written by an eating disorder survivor, Chloe, to a woman named Thalia, who is in danger of dying from anorexia. In part of the letter, Chloe addresses Thalia’s eating disorder directly: “Anorexia, I despise you and what you do to a young woman like Thalia…however hard you may try to infiltrate my words and twist this letter for your evil purposes, you can never succeed in stealing it completely because you can’t take away the fact that it was written with anti-anorexic spirit in total and utter defiance of you… I despise you [anorexia] for trying to take Thalia’s hopes, dreams, and values away from her” (p. 295). This excerpt, in its dramatic and adversarial wording, vividly demonstrates the view of eating disorders taken by the authors and their patients.

While often sensational in style and chaotic in tone, Biting the Hand nevertheless presents a persuasive and inspiring way to think about eating disorders and their treatment. The stories of healing recounted in this book, told in the grandiose language of war, are ultimately stories of resistance and liberation. The authors’ methods remain systematically unproven, however, and scientific study is suggested before they are brought to the mainstream.

—Maria Frisch, University of Minnesota

Bookends

Dinner for Architects: A Collection of Napkin Sketches
Edited by Winfried Nerdinger; Foreword by Philip K. Howard
New York: W.W. Norton, 2003
vi + 58 pp. $19.95 (paper)

Printed on a deliciously creamy, thick paper, Dinner for Architects is a collection of ink sketches by famous architects who were invited to contribute drawings on 16-inch square dinner napkins. Originally published in German as Serviettenskissen für das Architekturmuseum, this book is the catalog for an April 2003 exhibition in celebration of a new gallery at the Pinakothek der Moderne, Munich. The exhibit was conceived as a set of napkin sketches left behind after a dinner party. Each architect’s symbolic “place at the table” is literally represented by the napkin set on a large table in the gallery. Only, in this case, neither the drawings nor the napkins have any of the customary relationship with food, drink, or conversation that compels the designer to draw something on a surface at hand to communicate with her dinner companions.

Dinner for Architects does not ask us to take a symbolically staged meal terribly seriously, and yet I could not find an ounce of irony in it, either. The curators carefully explain that the projects were produced by mailing a napkin to a design office and requesting that a sketch on the napkin be returned to the museum. The curators are gently amused...
when architects call and ask for directions or for additional napkins because they were dissatisfied with their first efforts. After all, the curators write, a napkin drawing is supposed to be spontaneous.

The nearly mythic status of a “napkin sketch” derives from a generation of modernist architects for whom going out to lunch was as much a part of the design process as smoking a cigarette. Sometimes during a meal with colleagues or clients, a dynamic conversation yielded a surprisingly synthetic image that would survive the meal and hang above drafting tables or computers. Evocative line drawings on scraps of paper appear framed in the homes of architects and clients, as if they were the DNA of great design.

Fanciful doodles and iconographic signatures in Dinner for Architects display the cult of celebrity architects more than an interest in design process or results. Inadvertently, perhaps, the exhibition catalog exposes spontaneous napkin drawings (not found here) as an artifact of another era—an era when architects regularly left the office to meet over food and drink and conversation about whatever was “on the boards.”

—Jamie Horwitz, Iowa State University

Consumption and Identity in Asian American
Coming-of-Age Novels
Jennifer Ann Ho
New York: Routledge, 2005
ix + 202 pp. $75.00 (cloth)

In an analysis of six contemporary Asian American coming-of-age novels, this volume examines how Asian American adolescents challenge and revise their cultural legacies and experiment with alternative ethnic affiliations through their relationship to food. The analysis includes Frank Chin’s Donald Duck, Lois Ann Yamanaka’s Wild Meat and Bully Burgers, Lan Cao’s Monkey Bridge, Nora Okja Keller’s Comfort Woman, Gus Lee’s China Boy, and Gish Jen’s Mona in the Promised Land. The author argues that the instability of adolescence allows for a particularly cogent depiction in these novels of the conflicting identity-shaping forces that confront Asian Americans on a daily basis—the pressures of dominant society on the one hand, their ethnic families on the other. By portraying the consumption patterns of their protagonists, the examined texts provide a more nuanced and complete picture of what it means to be Asian American than do the prevailing stereotypes depicted in the mainstream media. Food helps to elucidate both the complexity of the process of Asian Americanization and the differences in the individual experiences of Chinese, Japanese, Vietnamese, and Korean men and women searching for a new home. By carrying different messages—ethnic pride and the shame of ethnic difference, the trauma of displacement and the desire for acceptance—food functions not merely as a signifier of ethnicity but also as a powerful symbol of the “reinscription of Asians into American history and culture” (p.145).

This volume is testimony to the creative use of food by Asian American authors to express their characters’ struggles to define the boundaries of their multiculturalism, and Jennifer Ann Ho succeeds in giving this creativity a context. However, we will never know how deep is the gap between fiction and reality. Weighing the imagined consumption of the literary world against the genuine experiences of Asian Americans seems to me a much more challenging endeavor. The goal of this volume is, in the author’s own words, “to lay the groundwork for future studies of foodways and Asian American literature” (p.15). I sincerely hope that she will not limit herself to literature and that we can expect work of a wider focus in the future.

—Katarzyna Cwiertka, Leiden University

Paper or Plastic: Searching for Solutions to an Overpackaged World
Daniel Imhoff
San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 2005
viii + 168 pp. Illustrations. $16.95 (paper)

Contrary to what its title implies, Paper or Plastic is not primarily about personal responsibility in packaging choices. Instead, it covers the entire gamut of packaging problems and solutions, from the fact that wooden forklift pallets are generally treated as disposable and use 40 percent of all American hardwood cut annually, to innovations in biodegradable food packaging. We learn that nearly 60 percent of all packaging is made for food and beverages and that half the volume of America’s municipal solid-waste stream is packaging. Thus, how we package our food is a critical issue. Some level of packaging is required to keep our food safe and avoid waste. However, recent increases in food and water packaging are independent of safety concerns, such as the bottled water phenomenon, which generates an appalling 1.5 million tons of plastic waste per year. Twenty-five percent of bottled water is actually tap water. A 1999 study by the Natural Resources Defense Council found that 33 percent of brands sampled contained contaminants,