them slaughtered, and then promenaded the raw meat on carts through the avenues of Manhattan, while bands played and flags waved. As Frederick Kaufman describes it in his discursive and very entertaining new book, A Short History of the American Stomach, “The flies buzzed, the blood dripped over the mud and cobblestones, and the enraptured multitude stood mesmerized by the spectacle” (p.110). Nor was Gibbons a lone freak: New York’s Canal Celebration of 1825, according to a contemporary observer, included hundreds of butchers on horses escorting two floats of cattle (one living, one dead) under a banner with the Wordsworthian motto: “We preserve by destroying” (p.111).

Even beyond the alarming public-health implications of these so-called “fat parades” (p.111)—i.e., did the parade-goers stick around for hamburgers afterward?—questions abound. What would convince someone to put perfectly good food to such a use? And, more interestingly, how on earth did Americans become the kind of people who would applaud a cart piled high with presumably rotting dead meat? Kaufman—also a writer for The New Yorker, Harper’s, and Gastronomica—has spent years, it seems, plumbing the depths of America’s various food-related neuroses, and has come up with a fascinating, if occasionally nauseating, book all about the tortured history of eating in, as he puts it, “one of the most gut-centric and gut-phobic societies in the history of human civilization” (p.11).

The journey begins with an adaptation of a Harper’s article in which Kaufman wrote about the similarities between food TV and pornography. As with many of the broad theories in A Short History, the analogy between gastroporn and sex porn is perhaps more fun than it is convincing: “As a slave descends into the S&M dungeon to undergo strange transformations,” Kaufman writes, “so the squid, through extreme mediation, would eventually find itself squid risotto” (p.21). Kaufman tends to skip away from serious analysis, keeping tongue firmly in cheek and the food puns flowing while he leaps from Rachael Ray’s thighs to a long discussion of feasting and fasting among the Puritans. One star of A Short History is über-Puritan Cotton Mather, who liked to call his soul “the Main Digester” (p.46). Mather had some peculiar ideas about health, including the prescription of urine for jaundice and consumption and a preoccupation with vomiting as the cure for all ills: “In the case of cough, a gentle vomit,” Kaufman sums it up, “In the case of distemper, seasonal vomits. In the case of asthma, vomit. In the case of dropsy, a vomit may not be amiss” (p.51). Again, Kaufman makes an attempt to sweep all this puke and pee into a grand theory (in this case: vomiting as moral purification, exorcising the devil in our gut) that ends up paling in comparison to his enthralling and bizarre source material.

A chapter on the raw-milk black market allows Kaufman to roam through the history of “moral” eating, including a fascinating exploration of the history of kosher food in America, the best detail of which is Crisco’s advertising slogan from 1912: the “Hebrew race has been waiting 4,000 years” for this non-meat-based cooking fat (p.74). From there, Kaufman jumps to the connection between food and Manifest Destiny, organized on the twin poles of competitive eating and American Wild West gigantism: “Add to the fastings and pukes of our Puritan ancestors the sheer abundance of the new continent and the geographical opportunities for expansion, and the result was an obsession with physical control and consumption on a scale the world had never before seen…. Call it imperialist eating” (p.89). This conceit also seems a trifle overblown, although Kaufman’s litany of evidence (Paul Bunyan eating raw moose, Melville’s description of the American propensity to “bolt down all events, all creeds, and beliefs, and persuasions” [p.105], the early American preoccupation with cannibalism) does form an interesting mesh of ideas.

Kaufman closes, appropriately, with the end of the American stomach: the extinction of our native foods, in this case East Coast oysters, and their replacement with test-tube born clones: “The American stomach had once been traumatized by the abundance of the water and the land, but now it was the other way around” (p.181). The force of American innovation pitted against the American capacity for consumption: as Kaufman recognizes, and as this charming book elucidates, it’s an old, old tale.

—Britt Peterson, Washington, D.C.

Dough, A Memoir
Mort Zachter
University of Georgia Press, 2007
173 pp. $24.95 (cloth)

“Mort, what’s with the umbrellas?”
“When it rained, customers would sometimes forget their umbrellas in the Store. You are looking at the final resting place of seventy years’ worth of leftover umbrellas. My uncles never threw anything away.” (p.123)

Umbrellas are just one image of what seventy years of hoarding and saving will do to a family. The other, more relevant, image in Mort Zachter’s memoir, Dough, is several million dollars in stocks and bonds. At the age of
thirty-six, at a time when his Uncle Harry is deep in the pits of dementia, Mort Zachter found out just how much “dough” his uncles had accumulated. After seventy years of working 120-hour weeks in their bakery (or The Store, as Zachter’s family calls it), spending nothing, and not paying Zachter’s mother for any of her labors, Zachter’s two uncles managed to amass a small fortune. Though Zachter’s parents were aware of the money, they received not a penny of it while Zachter was growing up, and they faced plenty of financial challenges. But with a single phone call from his uncle’s stockbroker, Zachter—a man who had grown up in a one-bedroom apartment, who had to sleep in the dinette with his head next to the refrigerator—was now worth millions. This windfall led to Zachter’s journey of questioning and second-guessing. The money would not only have made his life easier, it would also have lessened the hardship experienced by his mother and father.

Dough is organized like a game of generational ping-pong. One chapter unfolds the events of the present day as Zachter tries to understand his newfound wealth. The following chapter will then describe the days of the bakery during the 1960s when Zachter’s uncles ran the Store, helped by the unpaid labor of his mother and, sometimes, himself. The uncles were not bakers and nothing was ever baked on the premises; day-old bread and cake from wholesale bakeries was sold over the counter in the Store or to restaurants in Manhattan. Dates and titles precede each chapter to help locate the reader in the right era.

The chapters exploring the 1960s bakery are the most relevant and engaging sections of the memoir. A great use of details and powerful tone give us a strong sense of New York’s East Village Jewish community. We also get a sense of the Zachter family’s work ethic, as the running of the bakery consumes most of the young Zachter’s memories. Whether delivering bread in snowstorms or selling day-old bread to the Catholic missions, the uncles saw profit first, and family second. Some passages exquisitely capture the atmosphere and vibe of a family-run business:

In the Store, Mom pressed the slicing machine’s handle down with her right palm to expedite the slicing. Prongs of razor-sharp stainless steel tore through the rye. When the slicer stopped, the momentary silence was shattered again as she snapped open a white bag with her left hand, waving it back and forth in the air in one quick motion. Holding the bag open with the thumb and forefinger of her left hand, she used her left pinky to tilt up the left side of the now-sliced rye. With her right hand, she balanced the bread upright on its end for a split second before sliding into the open bag. She was as good as any juggler I’d ever seen on The Ed Sullivan Show. (pp. 41–42)

Nostalgia abounds in these sections, and readers are transported back to a time when “family-run business” meant the whole family—nuclear, extended, and beyond.

The present-day chapters bring the two plot lines together—the 1960s when the money was made, and the 1990s when the secret was out. Though solidly written, these sections have neither the emotional appeal nor the depth of the chapters set in the past. I found them, at times, too expository and plot-oriented to carry much emotional appeal. And I wanted more bakery scenes, with their wonderful descriptions of the community and of the baked goods.

Dough is a memoir of moderate appeal and success for a food audience. The ping-pong effect gets a bit tiresome as it progresses, and I was more than a little resentful of the uncles for not sharing any of their wealth with their family. Often it was hard to get past the miserly brothers to experience Zachter’s journey. The reason for their frugality was, no doubt, a Depression-era mindset—waste not, want not. But still, a little “dough” for a nephew’s education or a two-bedroom apartment would have made the uncles considerably more sympathetic characters. In the end, Zachter comes to terms with his newfound wealth, breaks the familial cycle of workaholism, and takes the time to explore and, eventually, understand the frugality of his uncles. Kudos to Zachter for completing a journey toward understanding his uncles’ miserly behavior. Yet, given the limitations of this memoir, I’m not sure all readers will feel as generous.

—Lisa Stowe, University of Calgary

In Defense of Food: An Eater’s Manifesto
Michael Pollan
244 pp. $21.95 (cloth)

It’s hard to follow an act like The Omnivore’s Dilemma, the book that gets much of the credit for the current riptide of change in American thinking about food. Michael Pollan may not have been the first evangelist on duty—a fact to which he readily cops, citing Marion Nestle, Joan Gussow, and Wendell Berry as heroes and colleagues—but his cogent, stirring, and accessible manner has produced the most converts.

In Defense of Food, Pollan’s shorter, more pragmatic sequel to The Omnivore’s Dilemma, shows the velocity with which it was written. Some readers might appreciate this, as they are less apt to get bogged down in details and can