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 119-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 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
enjoy the swinging prose and pace. Others, accustomed to the depth of research typical of Pollan’s work, might feel slightly surprised at the speed with which they get through the book. It was smart of Pollan to put a book out while the shock waves sent by The Omnivore’s Dilemma were still reverberating, and he is easily forgiven for his haste: if this book is slightly anemic in comparison to his 2006 tour de force, what he has to say is nonetheless timely, pointed, and beautifully written. Pollan has a real gift for tying many strands of the zeitgeist into neat little knots.

Although this book feels short on the deep, original research that steams up from every page of Pollan’s other writings, as well as the characters and places that bring them to life, it does showcase Pollan’s strength as a rhetorician. His unmasking of nutritionism as a dualistic ideology (the foodie “truthiness”) is believable and solidly built. So is his pinpointing of marker moments in history that helped to crystallize nutritionism, such as the 1973 overturning of a 1938 rule requiring that the word imitation appear on any product that was one, opening the floodgates to tinker- ing with foods; or the 1977 Senate committee rewriting of “reduce consumption of meat” in Dietary Goals for the United States to “choose meats, poultry and fish that will reduce saturated fat intake.” These historical minutiae function at once as subtle testament to his skill as an investigatory journalist and shrewdly chosen hooks on which to hang arguments. His critique of conventional farming, which equates nitrogen fertilizer with fast food and demonstrates the inferiority of the plants it generates, is clean, effortless, and convincing. In fact, the book’s whole thesis—trust common sense and tradition—is so bloody simple that one wonders why it seems novel at all until Pollan un masks the unhealthy coziness among food scientists, the industry paying for most of their research, and journalism. Pollan is not anti-science, and in fact he quite frequently cites scientific research to make his points, but he comes down hard on the duplicity of statistics inadequately gathered, whether the fault lies in the method, the funding source, or—as he exposes repeatedly and wrathfully—a combination of the two.

One wonders why Pollan chooses to avoid discussing genetically modified or cloned foods, and why, despite his debunking of nutritionism, he nevertheless endorses Omega-3s with baffling passion—but these are just quibbles. Ultimately, his style—well-paced, with chatty, rollicking argumentation, rapier thrusts of metaphor, cliffhanging rejoinders, and a dash of sarcastic humor—is so winning that it bats down any question of quality. His extraordinary talent for distilling other people’s work, as well as his own, into cogent, catchy phrases makes him the perfect messiah for the “different kind of food” he trumpets. Pollan may think he’s just chronicling the “resurgence of farmers’ markets, the rise of the organic movement, and the renaissance of local agriculture now under way across the country” (p.14), but in a substantive way he’s the pied piper of that movement.

In our age of refrigerated glove compartments, Diabetic Living magazine, and an American national average of two hundred pounds of meat eaten per person per year, Pollan’s book is a clarion call. If devoted readers notice repetition, at least the message hasn’t lost any relevance. We may rejoice the day it does.

— Nathalie Jordi, Shanagarry, Ireland

The Seven Deadly Sins of Obesity: How the Modern World Is Making Us Fat
Edited by Jane Dixon and Dorothy H. Broom
Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2007
228 pp. AUD $39.95 (cloth)

Australians, along with a sizable chunk of the globe, are grappling with an ever more obese population and its attendant health issues. The questions considered by The Seven Deadly Sins of Obesity are universally applicable—why did any given population gain so much weight and how can the process be reversed? The answers regarding just whose responsibility it is to change the status quo vary depending upon which nation’s healthcare system is discussed. It’s not easy to write anything innovative, instructive, or inspirational about the obesity crisis; even the naysayer chorus has been largely silenced (except for that pesky responsibility issue). How, then, to grab the attention of readers whose eyes glaze over at the prospect of yet another treatise on the etiology of a crisis now so ubiquitous it is more akin to a chronic condition?

To Dixon and Broom’s credit, The Seven Deadly Sins offers an eminently readable series of essays in accessible, jargon-free language. Much of the focus is on overweight children. Each contributor examines a facet of Australia’s ailing health culture, leading the editors to collectively pass the parcel of responsibility from individuals to societal culprits, and in so doing, they avoid casting their readers as slothful, greedy, and gluttonous. It is not the sinners but the sins of modern society that have coalesced to form an obesogenic environment so lacking in the virtues necessary for a healthy population to thrive that nothing short of a