in Mexico, Paris, Morocco, and London. If the first part of her life is recounted in too detached a way to fully engage the reader, Hodgson’s writing hits its stride once she moves to New York as a young woman. She ruefully recounts carbonizing the salmon and botching the chocolate mousse served at her first dinner party, but soon enough she is confidently sawing pigs in half to fit in the oven and entertaining poets and artists at a table set with a tablecloth from a Fourteenth Street job lot, adorned with silver Georgian candlesticks. The sixties were fully swinging, and Hodgson lost no time in joining the alluring, smoky parties downtown, making all kinds of luminary friends (Allen Ginsberg took her to W.H. Auden’s East Village apartment, whose bedside table drawer allegedly held a one-pound jar of Vaseline and two pairs of castanets). She broke up with her Chilean ballet-dancing boyfriend for Pulitzer Prize–winning poet William Merwin and traveled the world with him, cooking salmon out of a VW van in Lapland, and country ham in motel rooms on the way to Mexico. When this affair, too, ended, she moved to Marrakech, where her left eye began to bother her. In London she learned that it must be removed. “Did you lose your eye in a Middle East war?” someone later asked at a party. “No, in the Middlesex ward,” she quipped.

Hodgson has certainly lived a full life and lived it well, with love and drama in appropriate proportions. She is rather aloof as she tells her story, with real emotion seeping into the prose only at the death of her father (who, she found out as an adult, was actually a spy for British Intelligence). One of her grandfathers Fletcherized his food, chewing each mouthful exactly thirty-two times before swallowing, while the other died at the dinner table, his arm raised in a toast. One has the impression that Hodgson is a perfect amalgam of both.

—Nathalie Jordi, Shanagarry, Ireland

The Living Shore: Rediscovering a Lost World
Rowan Jacobsen. Illustrations by Mary Elder Jacobsen.
New York: Bloomsbury, 2009
167 pp. $20.00 (cloth)

The Living Shore, Rowan Jacobsen’s lyrical account of seven days aboard a research vessel with scientists hoping to understand the ins and outs of a healthy, thriving Olympia oyster bed—once the reigning oyster along British Columbia’s 16,780-mile coastline—is a slender volume. But it is a slender volume that offers up hefty facts, facts that are capable of changing forever one’s thoughts about the interrelatedness of all animals and ecosystems.

In a discussion of wild salmon, for example, and their recent declines, Jacobsen lets drop that “a third of the nitrogen in BC [British Columbia] valley floors was once salmon, as is 90 percent of the nitrogen in a grizzly bear” (p.35). Even if you appreciated before how nutrients move out of the oceans and onto dry land, here is a number you won’t soon forget. What will happen to grizzly bears as fewer and fewer salmon make their spawning runs each year? What will happen to the rest of us, who also depend on healthy oceans and diverse, multilayered ecosystems?

Another of these hefty facts, and one that sheds lights on the importance of estuaries—where rivers meet oceans—and the shellfish that support them, is that a single eastern oyster, the kind of oyster that used to cover the bottom of the Chesapeake Bay, or estuary (before we ate most of them and buried the rest in sludge), filters fifty gallons of water a day. It removes the algae, dead particles, and toxins from a bathtub full of water every twenty-four hours (p.48).

The smaller Olympia oyster, or Oly, filters less—ten gallons a day—but all oysters, along with the rest of the shellfish that populate a productive estuary, are an estuary’s built-in and totally free filtration plant. We should be paying them, in other words, instead of eating them. At least we should be making sure that their beds are protected from sewage and overharvesting so these animals can go about doing what they do better than any manmade filters.

Though I have quibbles with Jacobsen’s emphasis on the shore-based theory of human evolution—he plays down the fact that omega-3s originate in all photosynthesizers, aquatic and terrestrial—I have no quibbles with his conclusion: that shellfish play an important role in our health and the health of our estuaries. And they deserve much better treatment.

—Susan Allport, author, The Queen of Fats

Good Food
Written and directed by Mark Dworkin and Melissa Young
Bullfrog Films
dvd, 73 minutes

By now it’s old news that there are benefits—to the environment, the economy, and people—to eating local food. After all, the New Oxford American Dictionary named locavore the Word of the Year in 2007, giving credence to the idea that compared to food grown in some faraway, nameless place, produce grown and consumed locally