Like her well-known memoir, *The Language of Baklava* (2005), Diana Abu-Jaber’s latest novel centers on food, family, and community—this time on a fractured family in an admirably workaday Miami. At one point, a passing character remarks of the city, “This isn’t a place where people really live” (p. 240). One of the most appealing things about *Birds of Paradise* is how it counters popular Spring Break–inspired visions of Miami.

*Birds of Paradise* follows the members of the Muir family as they live—and work—through protracted crisis. Five years before the book opens, the Muirs’ teenage daughter, Felice, inexplicably ran away from home.

What I find most compelling about this novel is Abu-Jaber’s commitment to depicting her characters at work. It is strange how few fictions, contemporary or historical, imagine work in any sustained way. The members of the Muir family inhabit their professional lives: Avis is a successful self-employed baker; her husband, Brian, is the conflicted consigliere for a real-estate development firm that is busily chewing up the last remnants of neighborhood fabric in pre-crash Miami; and Stanley, the Muirs’ twenty-something son, is an organic food visionary who owns a popular grocery store. Even Felice, a skateboarding street kid, works from time to time as a model.

Unfortunately, these characters’ plotlines prove too cookie-cutter to be entirely believed. Estranged from each other after Felice’s disappearance, each of the Muirs begins a new relationship in *Birds of Paradise*: Felice finds a sensitive

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*Birds of Paradise: A Novel*
Diana Abu-Jaber
New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2011
362 pp. $25.95 (cloth)

Flavors enjoyed in the Mediterranean during this period, drawing persuasive comparisons to certain East Asian cuisines. The supplementary maps are very helpful, and the illustrations, while they vary somewhat in quality, depict interesting vases, fish plates, coins, and cooking devices. But after reading the introduction, one is struck by just how enigmatic the *Hedypatheia* is. There is an inherent discrepancy between the *Life of Luxury*’s form and its function. It is instructive, but not straightforward instruction. It is parodic, but not exactly parody. While Wilkins and Hill admit that they are primarily interested in the content of the poem, it would have been useful to see them tease out the incongruities between the text’s serious and comedic strains a little more.

In the end, the *Life of Luxury* is not so much a cookbook as a guide to eating, but Wilkins and Hill do salvage two recipes from the fragments and include them in an appendix. Both sets of instructions attest to Archestratus’s preference for simplicity: in the first recipe, dogfish is baked with a little oregano, cumin, and olive oil; in the second, mackerel is marinated in a fermented fish sauce and grilled before being served on a bed of bitter greens. Although the flavors have an undeniable piquancy, Archestratus demands that good food speak for itself, rejecting the elaborate sauces and seasonings often found in later Roman cookery.

In many ways Wilkins and Hill’s study is similar to the *Life of Luxury* itself. Both works provide a unique perspective on ancient food and culture, with more to mull over than their small packages would suggest. Some topics are exciting, some are peculiar, some seem banal, and some are so dense that they require a slow reading and careful consideration. By balancing a scholarly and popular approach, the authors offer a remarkable and welcome study of Archestratus’s fragmentary poem, shedding light on rarely glimpsed elements of ancient Greek dining.

—Carl A. Shaw, New College of Florida
tough guy; Stanley has an appealingly prickly pregnant girlfriend, Nieves; Brian flirts with a younger Cuban woman in PR at his firm. Brian, at least, knows he’s a cliché. Avis does not. She cultivates an imbalanced friendship with her mysterious new neighbor, Solange. Solange turns out to be a Haitian refugee who knows all about gardening, plants, and “bush medicine,” and she unlocks something in Anglo Avis through enigmatic conversation and a ritual involving a simple cake (p.226). Really? The arc of this subplot is not just unbelievable; it is also unsettling. The dynamic between Avis and Solange would work more effectively as a point of critique; instead, Abu-Jaber seems to want to inject the novel with political consciousness by way of Solange’s tragic story and impromptu critique of the sugar out of which Avis spins her living. (“Sugar is like a compass,” Solange observes, “it points to trouble” [p.230].)

Abu-Jaber’s best writing in Birds of Paradise shows us her characters at work, and especially at work with food. If baking scenes are typically described as “mouth-watering,” “appetizing,” and, in a South Beach Diet–obsessed U.S. culture, dangerously so, then Abu-Jaber’s set-pieces of a baker in action are so clinical as to challenge any conventional sense of deliciousness. It’s a brave move. Consider the opening scene, when we meet Avis as she completes gisembre en cristal: “This morning’s pastry poses challenges,” and “Avis must execute” the required steps with “ritualistic” precision (p.11). Abu-Jaber lists scrumptious ingredients (“disks of chocolate flake and candied ginger”), but here, as throughout the book, the baking scene derives its force from imperative, unemotional syntax, rather than from either sentiment or sugar (p.11).

I wish Birds of Paradise followed through on its inversion of standard associations with a mother in the kitchen baking cookies. It’s not giving too much away to say that the story tends toward the Muirs’ reconciliation. That resolution itself is welcome, but must it be signaled in part by Avis baking plain old cookies? After the arduous baking she does for her clients throughout the novel, I did find it something of a relief to watch Avis and Brian bake simple cookies in bulk to share with their unknown neighbors after Katrina hits. But the aftertaste of this gesture is bitter. You come to realize that Avis is baking more like a stereotypical mother than as a skilled professional, and that in the logic of Birds of Paradise, it is precisely this style of baking that precipitates her family’s repair.

The book’s heart seems to be with Stanley, but it spends too little time with him, and too late. This earnest slow-food-in-a-food-desert crusader would be fodder for satire in another novel. I hope Abu-Jaber will return to principled Stanley and prickly Nieves in another Miami novel. In her capable hands, the story of their trendy but not quite profitable organic grocery store—its clientele, its work force, its suppliers—would make a fascinating and timely read.

—Claire Bowen, Dickinson College

Embodied Food Politics
Michael S. Carolan
180 pp. $89.95 (cloth)

It seems fair to assume that many people who participate in heritage seed banks, raise urban chickens, or support CSAs would like to believe that their actions are transformative, not only in enabling direct relationships to food and its production but also in contributing to a local community and culture of food. If we take seriously the knowledge obtained through repeated rituals, community conversations, and trial-and-error experiments, Michael Carolan argues, food studies scholars must recognize that these small sea changes in food practices represent larger cognitive shifts and, potentially, a rising tide of changed politics. In Embodied Food Politics Carolan explores “the lived world of meaning generation...[a] shift in analytic focus [for the sociology of food systems that] reveals the transformational potential that lies at the site of the fork” (p.3).

The modest dimension of this claim that personal actions offer a platform for mindset transformation seems both incontrovertible and valuable. Carolan documents individual examples of this gradual perceptual change inspired by altered food practices. He interviews small populations comprised, with some exceptions, of local food devotees. Carolan makes a strong case for the importance of repetition, learning, and taste within the political movement hoping to localize and thus transform our food system: “If we recognize that it took work to make bodies tuned to fast food (and industrial food more generally), then we must recognize that the reverse is also true—that there must be, if you will, a ‘re-tuning’ towards alternative foods and food systems if we want those alternatives to be sustained over the long run” (p.6).

After two chapters establishing this conceptual framework as well as the historical effects of what he terms “Global Food,” Carolan devotes subsequent chapters to specific case studies: CSA subscribers, heritage seed swappers, urban chicken farmers, and CSA growers respectively. Carolan points out that “the aesthetic of Global Food relies heavily on sight,” while the CSA members he interviewed have “nurtured an aesthetic that was more sensual than that.