Introduction

Food has always been an essential component of daily life. Today, thinking about food is a much more complicated pursuit than planning the next meal, with food studies scholars devoting their efforts to researching “anything pertaining to food and eating, from how food is grown to when and how it is eaten, to who eats it and with whom, and the nutritional quality” (Duran and MacDonald 234). This is in addition to the work undertaken by an increasingly wide variety of popular culture researchers who explore all aspects of food (Risston and Brien 3); including food advertising, food packaging, food on television, and food in popular fiction.

In creating stories, from those works that quickly disappear from bookstore shelves to those that become entrenched in the literary canon, writers use food to communicate the everyday and to explore a vast range of ideas from cultural background to social standing. Food has provided the setting for many a social novel (Patti-Farnell 80). For example in Oliver Twist (1838) by Charles Dickens, the central character challenges the class system when: “Child as he was, he was desperate with hunger and wreckage with misery. He rose from the table, and advancing basin and spoon in hand, to the master, said, somewhat alarmed at his own temerity—‘Sir, I want some more’” (11).

Scarlett O’Hara in Margaret Mitchell’s Gone with the Wind (1936) makes a similar point, a little more dramatically, when she declares: “As God is my witness, I’m never going to be hungry again” (419). Food can also take us into the depths of another culture: places that many of us will only ever read about. Food is also used to provide insight into a character’s state of mind. In Nora Ephron’s Heartburn (1983) an item as simple as boiled beet tells a reader so much more about Rachel Samstat than her preferred bakery items: “So we got married and I got pregnant and I gave up my New York apartment and moved to Washington. Talk about mistakes […] there I was, trying to hold up my end in a city where you can’t even buy a decent bagel” (34).

There are three ways in which writers can deal with food within their fiction. Firstly, food can literally be totally ignored. This approach is sometimes taken despite food being such a standard feature of storytelling that its absence, be it a lonely meal at home, elegant canapés at an impressively catered cocktail party, or a cheap sandwich collected from a local café, is an obvious omission. Food can also add realism to a story, with many authors putting much effort into conjuring the smell, taste, and texture of food as they do into providing a backstory and a purpose for their characters. In recent years, a third way has emerged with some writers placing such importance upon food in a fiction that the line that divides the cookbook and the novel has become distorted. This article looks at cookbooks and cookery in popular fiction with a particular focus on crime novels.

Recipes: Ingredients and Preparation

Food in fiction has been employed, with great success, to help characters cope with grief; giving them the reassurance that only comes through the familiarity of the kitchen and the concentration required to fulfill routine tasks: to chop and dice, to mix, to sit and roll, to bake, broil, grill, steam, and fry. Such grief can come from the breakdown of a relationship as seen in Nora Ephron’s Heartburn (1983). An autobiography under the guise of fiction, this novel is the first-person story of a book reviewer, who takes a job as a teacher as she feels her work’s “aren’t merely cookbooks” (95). She is, however, grateful as she was not described as “a distraught, rejected, pregnant cookbook author whose husband was in love with a gantlet” (95). As the marriage of the collision described, her favourite recipes are shared: Bacon Hash; Four Minute Eggs; Toasted Almonds; Lime Beans with Pears; Linguine Alla Caccia; Pot Roast; three types of Potatoes; Sorel Soup; desserts including Bread Pudding, Cheesecake, Key Lime Pie and Peach Pie; and a Vinaigrette, all in an effort to reassert her personal skills and thus personal value.

Grief can also result from loss of hope and the realisation that a life long dreamed of will never be realised. Like Water for Chocolate (1989), by Laura Esquivel, is the magical realist tale of Tita De La Garza who, as the youngest daughter, is forbidden to marry as she must take care of her mother, a woman who: “Unquestionably, when it came to dividing, dismantling, dismembering, desolating, departing, destroying or dismantling […] was a pro” (87). Tita’s life lurches from one painful, unjust episode to the next; the only emotional stability she has comes from the kitchen, and from her cooking of a series of dishes; Christmas Rolls; Chablela Wedding Cake; Quail in Rose Petal Sauce; Turkey Mole; Northern-style Chorizos; Oxtail Soup; Champaopando; Chocolate and Three Kings’s Day Bread; Cream Fritters; and Beans with Chilli Tizzacuna-style. This is a series of culinary-based activities that attempts to superimpose normalcy on a life that is far from the everyday.

Grief is most commonly associated with death. Undertaking the preparation, selection and presentation of food in novels dealing with bereavement is both a functional and symbolic act: life must go on for those left behind but it must go on in a very different way. Thus, novels that use food to deal with loss are particularly important because they can “make non-cooks believe they can cook, and for frequent cooks, affirm what they already know: that cooking heals” (Baltazar online).

In Angelina’s Bachelors (2011) by Brian O’Reilly, Angelina D’Angelo believes “cooking was not just about food. It was about character” (2). By the end of the first chapter the young woman’s husband is dead and she is in the kitchen looking for solace, dealing with bereavement is both a functional and symbolic act: life must go on for those left behind but it must go on in a very different way. Thus, novels that use food to deal with loss are particularly important because they can “make non-cooks believe they can cook, and for frequent cooks, affirm what they already know: that cooking heals” (Baltazar online).

There are, of course, exceptions. In Ntsizhe Shange’s Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo (1982), cooking celebrates, comforts, and seduces (Calla). This story of three sisters from South Africa is told through diary entries, narrative, letters, poetry, songs, and spells. Recipes are also found throughout the text: Turkey; Marmalade; Rice; Spinach; Crabmeat; Fish; Sweetbread; Duck; and Asparagus. Anthony Capell’s The Food of Love (2004), a modern retelling of the classic tale of Cyrano de Bergerac, is about the beautiful Laura, a waiter masquerading as a top chef Tommaso, and the talented Bruno who, “thick-set, heavy, and slightly awkward” (21), covers for Tommaso’s incompetency in the kitchen as he, too, falls for Laura. The novel contains recipes and contains considerable information about food:

Take fusili […] People say this pasta was designed by Leonardo da Vinci himself. The spiral fins carry the biggest amount of sauce relative to the surface area, you see? But it only works with a thick, heavy sauce that can cling to the grooves. Conchiglie, on the other hand, is like a shell, so it holds a thin, liquid sauce inside it perfectly (17).

Recipes: Dishing Up Death

Crime fiction is a genre with a long history of focusing on food; from the theft of food in the novels of the nineteenth century to the utilisation of many different types of food such as chocolate, marmalade, and sweet omelettes to administer poison (Bleakley, Christie, Salinger, and MacDonald 234). In Dorey L mg a Sayers’s Strong Poison (1930). The Judge, in summing up the case, states to the members of the jury: “Four eggs were brought to the table in their shells, and Mr Umphart broke them one by one into a bowl, adding sugar from a stuffer […] then cooked the omelette in a large pan with hot jam” (14). Prior to what Timothy Taylor has described as the “pre-toolkit era” the crime fiction genre was “littered with corpses whose last breaths smelled oddly sweet, or bitter, or of almonds” (online). Of course not all murders are committed in such a subtle manner. In Roald Dahl’s Lamb to the Slaughter (1953), Mary Maloney murders her policeman husband, doubling over the head with a frozen leg of lamb. The murder is so neat and interesting when her husband’s colleagues arrive to investigate his death, the lamb is offered and consumed: the murder weapon now beyond the reach of investigators. Recent years have also seen more and more crime fiction writers present a central protagonist working within the food industry, drawing connections between the skills required for food preparation and those needed to catch a murderer. Working with cooks or crooks, or both, requires planning and people skills in addition to creative thinking, dedication, reliability, stamina, and a willingness to take risks. Kent Carroll insists that “food and mysteries just go together” (2011).
Recipes: Integration and Segregation

In Heartburn (1980), Rachel acknowledges that presenting a work of fiction and a collection of recipes within a single volume can present challenges: “I haven’t worked to present work to you; I’ve just made it up as I went along” (179). This approach can be found in the Coffeehouse Mystery Series by Cleo Coyle, in the novel On What Grounds (2003). When the central protagonist is being questioned by police, Clare Cost is interrupted by a flashback scene and instructions on how to make Greek coffee:

Three ounces of water and one very heaped teaspoon of dark roast coffee per serving. (I used half Italian roast, and half Maracaco—a lovely Venezuelan coffee, named after the country’s major port, rich in flavour, with delicate vanilla overtones.) / Water and finely ground beans both go into the drip together. The water is then brought to a boil over medium heat (37).

This provides insight into Clare’s character: that, when under pressure, she focusses her mind on what she firmly believes to be true — not the information that she is doubtful of or a situation that she is struggling to understand. A significant sub-genre of the novel in this way—particularly within crime fiction, a genre that is predominantly dependant upon generating tension and building the pacing of the plotting to the climax—is an unusual but ultimately successful style of writing. Inquiry and instruction are comfortable bedfellows; as the central protagonists within these works discover who committed murder as well as a little bit more about one of the world’s most popular beverages, thus highlighting how cookbooks and novels both serve to entertain and to educate.

Many authors will save their recipes, serving them up at the end of a story. This can be seen in Julie Hyzy’s White House Chef Mystery novels, the cover of each volume in the series boasts that it “includes Recipes for a Complete Presidential Menu!” These menus, with detailed ingredients lists, instructions for cooking and options for serving, are segregated from the stories and appear at the end of each work.

Yet other writers will deploy a hybrid approach such as the one seen in Like Water for Chocolate (1989), where the ingredients are listed at the commencement of each chapter and the preparation for the recipes form part of the narrative. This method of integration is also deployed in The Kitchen Daughter (2011), which sees most of the chapters introduced with a recipe card, those chapters then going on to deal with action in the kitchen. Using recipes as chapter breakers is a structure that has, very recently, been adopted by Australian celebrity chef, food writer, and, now fiction author, Ed Halmagyi, in his new work, which is both cookbook and novel, The Food Clock: A Year of Cooking Seasonally (2012).

As people exchange recipes in reality, so too do fictional characters. The Recipe Club (2009), by Andrea Israel and Nancy Gaffinkel, is the story of two friends, Lilly Stone and Valerie Rudman, which is structured as an epistolary novel. As they undertake their travels, they learn to cook through the exchange of recipes and letters. The Kitchen Daughter (2011) offers a hybrid approach, allowing readers to simultaneously access mysteries and recipes.

Conclusion

Cookbooks and many popular fiction novels are reflections of each other in terms of creativity, function, and structure. In some instances the two forms are so closely entwined that a single volume will concurrently share a narrative while providing...
information about, and instruction, on cookery. Indeed, cooking in books is becoming so popular that the line that traditionally separated cookbooks from other types of books, such as romance or crime novels, is becoming increasingly blurred. The separation between food and fiction is further blurred by food tourism and how people strive to experience some of the foods found within fictional works at bars, cafés, and restaurants around the world or, create such experiences in their own homes using fiction-themed recipe books. Food has always been acknowledged as essential for life; books have long been acknowledged as food for thought and food for the soul. Thus food in both the real world and in the imagined world serves to nourish and sustain us in these ways.

References


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“How to Cook Everything” will be one of the more useful cookbooks you’ll owned. Each type of food has a “Basics” section that includes lots of preparation tips. The recipes themselves are detailed enough for beginners, and not so esoteric that you have to make a trip to a specialty grocery store every time you want to cook something. Especially helpful are the suggestions for expanding on each dish. 3. I’m Just Here for the Food: Version 2.0 – Alton Brown. If you like “Good Eats,” you’re bound to love this book.  

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