Cooking in the Books: Cookbooks and Cookery in Popular Fiction

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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 (Risson 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 bookshop 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 to provide a sense of a given social culture (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 reckless with misery. He rose from the table, and advancing basin and spoon in hand, to the master, said, somewhat alarmed at his own temerity—Please, 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 bread tells a reader so much more about Rachel Samstan than her social standing. She is, however, portrayed as an excellent cook and I got pregnant and I gave up my New York apartment and moved to Washington. Talk about mistakes […] I there was I going 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 work. First, food can 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 as 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 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 stir 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 cookbook author, separated from her partner, and as she feels her works “aren’t merely cookbooks” (95). She is, however, quoted as saying that she was not described as a “distracted, rejected, pregnant cookbook author whose husband was in love with a giantess” (95). As the collapse of the marriage is described, her favourite recipes are shared: Bacon Hash; Four Minute Eggs; Toasted Almonds; Lime Beans with Pears; Linguiça Alla Ceca; Pot Roast; three types of Potatoes; Sorrel 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 and hope of the realization 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 by her father to marry as he feels she must take care of her mother, a woman who: “Unquestionably, when it came to dividing, dismantling, dismembering, destroying, destroying dominating […] 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; Chabeta Wedding Cake; Quixo in Rose Petal Sauce, Turkey Mole; Northern-style Chorizo; Oxal Soup; Champandongo; Chocolate and Three Kings’ Day Bread; Cream Fritters; and Beans with Chilli Tezcucana style. This is a series of culinary-based activities that attempts to superimpose normality on a life that is far from the everyday.

Grief is most commonly associated with death. Undertaking the selection, preparation and presentation of meals 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” (Batatza online).

In Angeline’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, and survival, in cookery. In The Kitchen Daughter (2011) by Jael McHenry, Ginny Selvaggio is struggling to cope with the death of her parents and the friends and relations who crowed her home after the funeral. Like Angelina, Ginny retreats to the kitchen.

There are, of course, exceptions. In Ntozake Shange’s Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo (1982), cooking celebrates, comforts, and seduces (Calta). This story of three sisters from South Carolina is told through diary entries, narrative, letters, poetry, songs, and spells. Recipes are also found throughout the text: Turkey; Marmalade; Rice; Spinach; Crabmeat; Fish; Sweetbreads; Duck; Lamb; and, Asparagus. Anthony Capella’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 incompentence in the kitchen as he, too, falls for Laura. The novel contains recipes and contains considerable information about food.

Take tufti […] 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. Conchiglia, 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 omlettes to administer poison (Berkeley, Christie, Sayers). The latter for arsenic receiving much attention in Harriet Vane’s trial in Dorothy L. 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 Urquhart broke them one by one into a bowl, adding sugar from a sifter […] he then cooked the omlette in a casserole dish over the head with hot jam” (14). Prior to what Timothy Taylor has described as the "pre-toodle 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 fashion. In Roald Dahl’s Lamb to the Slaughter (1953), Mary Maloney murders her policeman husband, clubbing him over the head with a frozen leg of lamb. The meat is roasting nicely when her husband’s colleagues arrive to investigate his death, the lamb is offered and consumed: the murder weapon now beyond the recovery 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".
of the numerous works available that focus on food there are many series that go beyond featuring food and beverages, to present recipes as well as the solving of crimes. These include: the Candy Holliday Murder Mysteries by B. B. Haywood; the Hannah Swensen Mysteries by Joanne Fluke; the Hannah Falls Mysteries by Claudia Bishop; the Memphis BBQ Mysteries by Riley Adams; the Piece of Cake Mysteries by Jacklyn Brady; the Tea Shop Mysteries by Laura Childs; and, the White House Chef Mysteries by Julie Hyzy.

The vast majority of offerings within this female dominated sub-genre that has been labelled “Crime and Dine” (Collins online) are American, both in origin and setting. A significant contribution to this increasingly popular formula is, however, from an Australian author Kerry Greenwood. Food features within her famed Phryne Fisher Series with recipes included in A Question of Death (2007). Recipes also form part of Greenwood’s food-themed collection of short crime stories Recipes for Crime (1995), written with Jenny Pausacker. These nine stories, each one imitating the style of one of crime fiction’s greatest contributors (from Agatha Christie to Raymond Chandler), allow readers to simultaneously access mysteries and recipes. 2004 saw the first publication of Earthly Delights and the introduction of her character, Corinna Chapman. This series follows the adventures of a woman who gave up her career as an accountent to open her own bakery in Melbourne. Corinna also investigates crimes and can be found at the end of each of these books. Recipes can be found in the Corinna Chapman Recipe Book (nd), filled with instructions for baking bread, muffins and tea cakes in addition to recipes for main courses such as risotto, goulash, and “Chicken with Pineapple 1971 Style”, available from the publisher’s website.

Recipes: Integration and Segregation

In Heartburn (1983), Rachel acknowledges that presenting a work of fiction and a collection of recipes within a single volume can present challenges, observing: “I see that I haven’t managed to work in any recipes for a while when you’re moving the plot forward” (99). How Rachel tells her story is, however, a reflection of how she undertakes her work, with her own cookbooks being, she admits, more narration than instruction: “The cookbooks I write do well. They’re very personal and chatty—they’re cookbooks in an almost incidental way. I write chapters about friends or relatives or trips or experiences, and work in the recipes peripherally” (17).

Some authors integrate detailed recipes into their narratives through description and dialogue. An excellent example of this approach can be found in the Coffeehouse Mystery Series by Cleo Coley, in the novel On What Grounds (2003). When the central protagonist is being questioned by police, Clare Costi’s answers are 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 Maracacao—a lovely Venezuelan coffee, named after the country’s major port, rich in flavour, with delicate wine
water is then brought to a boil over medium heat (37).

This provides insight into Clare’s character: that, when under pressure, she focuses 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. Writing crime fiction within a 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, the readers 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 share 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 breaks 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 Gafrinkel, is the story of two friends, Lilly Stone and Valerie Rudman, which is structured as an epistolary novel. As they exchange feelings, ideas and news in their correspondence, they also exchange recipes: over eighty of them throughout the novel in e-mails and letters. In The Food of Love (2004), written messages between two of the main characters are also used to share recipes. In addition, readers are able to post their own recipes, inspired by this book and other works by Anthony Capella, on the author’s website.

From Page to Plate

Some readers are contributing to the burgeoning food tourism market by seeking out the meals from the pages of their favourite fictional novels in bars, cafés, and restaurants around the world, expanding the idea of “map as menu” (Spang 79). In Shannon McKenna Schmidt’s and Joni Rendon’s guide to literary tourism, Novel Destinations (2009), there is an entire section, “Eat Your Words: Literary Places to Sip and Sup”, dedicated to beverages and food.

The listings include details for John’s Grill, in San Francisco, which still has on the menu Sam Spade’s Lamb Chops, served with baked potato and sliced tomatoes: a meal enjoyed by author Dashiell Hammett and subsequently consumed by his well-known protagonist in The Maltese Falcon (193), and the Café de la Paix, in Paris, frequented by Ian Fleming’s James Bond because “the food was good enough and it amused him to watch the people” (197). Those readers who follow in the footsteps of writers can go to Harry’s Bar, in Venice, where the likes of Marcel Proust, Sinclair Lewis, Somerset Maugham, Ernest Hemingway, and Truman Capote have all enjoyed a drink (195) or The Eagle and Child, in Oxford, which hosted the regular meetings of the linkings—a group which included C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien—in the wood-panelled Rabbit Room (203).

A number of eateries have developed their own literary themes such as the Peacocks Tearooms, in Cambridgeshire, which blends their own tea. Readers who are also tea drinkers can include The Sherlock Holmes (Earl Grey with Lapsang Souchong) and the Doctor Watson (Keemum and Darjeeling with Lapsang Souchong). Alternatively, readers may prefer to side with the criminal mind and indulge in the Moriarty (Black Chai with Star Anise, Pepper, Cinnamon, and Fennel) (Peacocks). The Meat Bar and Café, in Melbourne, situated in the basement of the State Library of Victoria, caters “to the whimsy and fantasy of the fiction house above it” and even runs a book exchange program (The Meat). For those who like to grab and go, or unwrapping, to travel the globe in search of such succour and sweet treats there is a wide variety of locally-based literary lunches and other meals, that bring together popular authors and wonderful food, routinely organised by book sellers, literature societies, and publishing houses.

There are also many cookbooks now easily obtainable that make it possible to re-create fictional food at home. One of the many examples available is The Book Lover’s Cookbook (2003) by Shaunda Kennedy Wenger and Janet Kay Jensen, a work containing over three hundred pages of: Breakfasts; Main & Side Dishes; Soups; Salads; Appetizers, Breads & Other Finger Foods; Desserts; and Cookies & Other Sweets based on the pages of children’s books, literary classics, popular fiction, plays, poetry, and proverbs. If crime fiction is your preferred genre then you can turn to Jean Evans’s The Crime Lover’s Cookbook (2007), which features short stories in between the pages of recipes. There is also Estèrelle Payany’s Recipe for Murder (2010) a beautifully illustrated volume that presents detailed instructions for Pigs in a Blanket based on the Big Bad Wolf’s appearance in The Three Little Pigs and Roast Beef in The Three Little Pigs (44–7), and Roast Beef with Truffle Gravy and Sautéed Potatoes, which acknowledges Patrick Bateman’s fondness for fine dining in Bret Easton Ellis’s American Psycho (124–7).

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

The Joy of Cooking (Hardcover) by. This book is too big. It’s the heaviest book in my collection. But for all its sins of weight, it has a very clever balance between information and inspiration. So, for instance, if I turn to ‘peaches’ or ‘pork’, it gives enough background for me to know what I’m doing before I start on the recipes. It’s not a heavy read. Stephanie is obviously a very experienced cook: She’s been cooking in restaurants for pretty much all of her life. But she wears that knowledge and experience quite lightly, she doesn’t hit you over the head with it.

Now on to Marcella Hazan, Essentials of Classic Italian Cooking, which is hugely popular in the US. She was Italian, but married an American and learned to cook after moving to New York. I like this book for exactly the opposite reasons that I like Elizabeth David. Humble cookbooks have become highly desirable in the book collecting world. The American cookbook genre truly began in the 1700s with two titles that can claim to be America’s first cookbook – The Compleat Housewife by William Parks (1742) and American Cookery by Amelia Simmons (1796). The Compleat Housewife was derived from an English book, while American Cookery - which is still in print today - features recipes using solely American produce. Prized for highly original recipes, these books often support an ethnic style of cooking, perhaps Polish or Norwegian cuisine, even though the readers were far from their ancestral homeland. Collectible cookbooks can range from high camp, Liberace Cooks!