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## **Meet The Cookbook Author Who Hates Food**

Clay Waters

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Mark Bittman is a food writer who doesn't like food very much—at least not the way it's been produced over the last 12,000 years. *Animal, Vegetable, Junk: A History of Food, from Sustainable to Suicidal* covers the evolution of agriculture from the age of man to modern industrial farming, but it's no sunny tale of human ingenuity.

In his view, human greed sluiced through the capitalist system has created an intolerable modern food system that is poisoning both humans and the planet, breeding poverty, slavery, war, and every other bad thing one could conceive. There's a blurb from Mr. Global Warming himself, former Vice President Al Gore. Inside the jacket flap are quotes from Malcolm X and Naomi Klein; the table is being set for an astringent left-wing repast.

After some brisk chemistry and history lessons (soil needs nitrogen, civilization was a mistake), the reader is deposited at the end of the last Ice Age, when agriculture began to take root. Bittman, a long-time New York Times journalist, insists “no collection of events had a greater impact on early civilization than the development of agriculture”—and those impacts were virtually all bad.

After a lot about “monoculture,” tractors, and wheat prices, the book gets more politically radical and, perversely, more interesting. Bittman's extended excoriation of cheeseburgers is entertainingly puritanical: “many are, in fact, disgusting.” “The Jungle” by Upton Sinclair is blessedly cited only briefly, but the text offers stomach-churning horrors of a different sort, like sentences that begin, “To paraphrase Frantz Fanon...”

Some of the windmill-tilting is bracing. (I never understood why humans drink cow's milk, either.) There's much here a libertarian would like, such as accusations that the U.S. Department of Agriculture is in the pocket of Big Food and that the Small Business Administration is subsidizing fast-food companies. The Cato Institute would call it corporate welfare. Alas, Bittman is not a big fan of consumer freedom of choice, either.

With this author, everything's a problem. “The slippery slope might have started with chips and TV dinners and cake mixes, but it reached its nadir with the family outing to a fast-food

restaurant.” *Nadir?* No concessions are granted to the benefit of quick, cheap, enjoyable meals, or of giving a housewife a break from stovetop drudgery. Back to the kitchen!

As columnist Michael Kinsley wrote of zealous consumer advocate Ralph Nader, “The pleasure of a hot dog means nothing ... He tastes only the nitrites.” It’s hard to believe this is the same man who once voluntarily wrote and published cookbooks. Could this be an atonement phase?

“McDonald’s has become a leading symbol of everything that’s gone wrong with food” is a predictable enough jeremiad, and not without a McNugget of truth. But in this jaundiced view, even hybrid seeds, whose high yields have helped feed the world, have “only quickened the pace at which farms were forced to commercialize and lose their independence.” Whatever advancements are made, he’s sure to find the downside and promote that negative aspect as the only facet worth considering.

In the book’s worst chapter, “The So-Called Green Revolution,” Bittman dumps his special brand of night soil upon an actual hero of humanity, Dr. Norman Borlaug. An agronomist, Borlaug was father of the “Green Revolution,” “the dramatic improvement in agricultural productivity that swept the globe in the 1960s,” especially in The Third World. Those technological improvements included the use of pesticides to fend off crop-destroying insects, nitrogen fertilizer to increase plant growth, and high-yield seeds.

To quote Borlaug: “Modern agriculture saves a lot of land for nature, for wildlife habitat, for flood control, for erosion control, for forest production. Those are values that are important to society.”

Yet Bittman claims increased crop yields “don’t necessarily lead to better lives.” He expanded on his choleric view in a podcast with The New York Times’ Ezra Klein. Under prodding, Bittman petulantly admitted, “Did the total amount of crops grow during the period that we call the Green Revolution...the answer is yes,” but followed up, “Not to be too glib, but it was kind of a form of neocolonialism. It was like if we can get the rest of the world to buy into our system, we make money.”

Hard to please, isn’t he?

In his own grumpy fashion, Bittman is a romantic pining for a bucolic past that probably never existed. It’s a shame he takes everything up to 11, because the “soft” versions of many of his positions are wholly reasonable. Farmers’ markets are indeed great. Chemical pesticides do pose problems to both humans and animals. CAFOs, or concentrated animal feeding operations, do warehouse animals in often horrendous conditions.

So which lever would Bittman pull first to begin setting the world right? Abruptly his confidence abandons him and his suggestions are scattershot: “The answers are nuanced and complex, because it’s all interconnected and every action has consequences.” But they include picketing fast-food chains, boosting student strikes, and, for novelty, a little personal responsibility in the form of “changing our eating habits.”

When he says, “I’d recommend supporting the Green New Deal,” you get the feeling that’s just a starting point. He admits farming is a hard life—and implies the world would be better off if far more people were doing it. There are also buried hints that this reformed world will be using a lot more animal waste as fertilizer. *Bon appetit!*

Bittman wrote some wacky and offensive things during his Times career, so it's no surprise he callously celebrates the "slight suspension of capitalism" caused by the COVID pandemic. Although he's against "cold-blooded reductionist thought" that reduces food to its constituent parts, politically he's guilty of that himself. Still, Bittman is a vigorous writer who has time for another reverse. Maybe his next book will document his valiant attempt to make a go of raising his own crops, perhaps followed by the sequel, "To Heck With This, Let's Go To Outback."