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SUNDAY BOOK REVIEW

Bee Wilson's 'First Bite: How We Learn to Eat'

By JENNY ROSENSTRACH DEC. 4, 2015

For a long time, the British food journalist Bee Wilson automatically craved something indulgent before boarding a train. In "First Bite: How We Learn to Eat," she traces this instinct to a ritual she had with her father when she was a teenager. Her parents had just split up, and whenever her dad would send Wilson on a train back to her mother's house, he'd buy her a magazine and a box of chocolate-coated malted milk balls, something that, before her parents' divorce, would have been deemed a special-occasion treat. She felt powerless to refuse the candy, even as she was struggling with a disconcerting weight gain. It took Wilson years to realize that her father's gesture was as much about making him feel like "the generous provider" as it was to reward her with a happy sugar high. She writes: "To give a child the things she loves to eat bestows a heroic glow. It feels almost as wonderful as eating."

Although "First Bite" moves through various cultures around the world and cites numerous experts to make the argument that eating is a learned behavior, Wilson arranges her findings thematically, in chapters called "Likes and Dislikes," "Hunger," "Disorder" and so on. The story about her father takes place in the chapter devoted to "Feeding," and it's one of many moments parents may find resonant, if slightly frightening. Maybe we aren't all addressing our self-perceived failures through sweets, but who hasn't sought a heroic glow by treating the kids to Rocky Road after

the game, or by rewarding the A+ with a slice of pie or, in Wilson's words, by "doling out hugs and pain au chocolat" at the school gates?

The wrong instinct at this point in reading the book would be to bow our heads in shame, wondering how else we are confusing food and love, and misguiding our children in the process. Likewise, hearing Wilson point to study after study that proves humans are not physiologically predisposed to dread leafy greens may be a hard sell for parents defending a child who subsists on a diet of spaghetti and ketchup. "Genes are never the final reason for why you like the particular range of foods you do," she writes. "When a boy likes nothing but cornflakes, it says less about him than it does about the world he lives in."

Don't panic. Wilson isn't in the business of finger-wagging. For starters, as her exhaustively researched book tells us, she knows that making people feel bad about habits (food or otherwise) is the surest way to invite their entrenchment. But mostly, the central premise of "First Bite" is one that we'd all be wise to see as liberating, generous and ultimately optimistic: If we learned what and how to eat as babies, we can unlearn and relearn and actually change what Wilson sees as our collectively chaotic relationships with food — even if those relationships are tangled up in powerful childhood memories or crippling guilt; even if our children are deceived into craving Fruit Loops while watching SpongeBob; even if we make our way through a supersized world where "there are countless triggers messing with the off-button for eating." It's possible for anyone to change, Wilson promises. That means the whole lot of us: stubborn toddlers, compulsive overeaters, the obese, the anorexic and other people with severe eating disorders, even entire nations.

Take Japan. Believe it or not, Wilson writes in one of the more fascinating chapters on the psychology of change, the country's cuisine hasn't always been fresh fish, flavorful soups and elegant, umami-loaded offerings that look pretty in bento boxes. For centuries the diet was unrefined and carb-heavy — a typical meal consisted of grains with shredded yam leaves, radishes and pickles. After World War II, though, when the country experienced an economic boom, newfound affluence allowed for more refrigerators (therefore more protein) and more variety. Gradually, as borders opened and palates expanded, the Japanese were introduced to the idea of eating for pleasure, and Japanese cuisine as we now know it was formed.

Though Wilson is wary of tidy prescriptions (her epilogue, detailing various insights she has picked up along the way, is subtitled "This Is Not Advice"), eating for pleasure frequently comes up as an effective strategy for change. A study following obese patients found that those whose diets included foods they enjoyed were more likely to maintain weight loss than those whose diets included foods they didn't like, resulting in feelings of constant deprivation. By changing their habits, and by removing barriers to change (not an easy task, Wilson stresses), the "maintainers" were able to get to a point where "delicious food and healthy food were one and the same."

Wilson herself got to this point, too. In the first sentence of her book, she alludes to overcoming her own unhealthy relationship with overeating. "Some find the whole matter of eating easy, while others find it hard," she writes. "I used to be on the wrong side of this great divide and somehow, to my own surprise and relief, leaped over to the other side." Now, for Wilson, "dinner is just dinner: nothing more nor less."

"First Bite" is, first and foremost, an anthropological category killer on the topic of how we learn to eat (in that way, it's similar to Wilson's previous book, "Consider the Fork," which studied the history of tools and techniques and their effect on eating habits). But with that kind of setup, the self-help reader in all of us can't help greedily turning the pages in search of the details — "actionable details," to steal a popular lifestyle magazine term — for how the author got there herself.

In the end, though, apart from a few personal anecdotes to bolster the findings from her fleet of scholars — ranging from psychologists and neuroscientists to the world's leading authorities on disgust and pleasure — Wilson's own story is never told. That, of course, is part of her message. "No amount of urging from me to eat this or that food will make you eat it," she writes in that "not advice" epilogue. "I don't know what's in your fridge or what your views are on cheese or whether gluten agrees with you . . . or whether your mother gave you sweets when you cried." The only one-size-fits-all advice for learning how to eat better is this: It's not easy. But it's possible.

FIRST BITE

How We Learn to Eat

By Bee Wilson

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Jenny Rosenstrach is the author of "Dinner: A Love Story," a book inspired by her blog of the same name.

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