

Omnivore's Dilemma Book Review.docx

by Jennifer Cook

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Book: Omnivore's Dilemma by: Michael Pollan

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Book Review

² *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, by Michael Pollan, is a non-fiction book about American dietary traditions and the food quandary American's encounter in today's society. It has a colorful and intriguing cover, and the book itself is broken into three main sections making it easier to follow. Using teaching, sometimes combative, and philosophical tones in various parts of the book, Pollan presents various theoretical points to entice his readers to question their current eating habits. *The Omnivore's Dilemma* is brilliantly written and draws the reader into an insightful journey about how and where food comes from. Further, Pollan attempts ² to help readers determine the resolution to the long-standing question: "What will I fix for dinner?" By exploring the diverse food routes available to modern-day man and by dissecting those paths to reveal the best for well-being, solidity, and sustainability, Pollan allows the reader to find answers to this simple yet complex question.

Pollan initiates the book by examining the dilemma of the omnivore, a beast with infinite options for eating. Pollan chooses to help ascertain the origins of the dilemma by studying the three elemental chains of food within the omnivore plan. The elemental chains of food include the industrialized ² food chain, the unprocessed (organic) food chain, and the hunter-gathering food chain. "Some philosophers have argued that the very open-endedness of human appetite is responsible for both our savagery and civility, since a creature that could conceive of eating anything (including, notably, other humans) stands in particular need of ethical rules, manners,

and rituals. We are not only what we eat, but how we eat it too” (Pollan, p. 6). He begins by investigating the industrialized food industry, by tracking both corn and beef through the industrial development. His work in the corn pastures of George Naylor educates him that the industrial approach has made corn the number one produce in nearly all items in a supermarket. His purchase of a steer permits him to see portions of the industrialized monoculture of beef production, showing him that even here, volume production has pioneered a host of environmental, health, ethical, and moral impasses. Following his expedition, Pollan and his family eat a McDonald’s meal, and Pollan recognizes he is one of the few who truly comprehends how such a meal is crafted.

In the second section, Pollan explores the organic food segment, by observing it from its earliest roots to its present-day state at farms such as Polyface Farm. Polyface is owned and maintained by Joel Salatin, a man who has faith that a return to nature through organic agriculture is the only rational choice for viability. Salatin asked, “Don’t you find it odd that people will put more work into choosing their mechanic or house contractor than they will into choosing the person who grows their food” (Pollan, p. 240)? Polyface Farm is nearly entirely self-sufficing. Pollan’s meal, made from the un-processed (organic) chicken, fresh eggs, and sweet corn of the farm amalgamated with other locally produced foods, is an aide-mémoire to him about the abundance of nature’s flavors and the intensity of un-processed food. In the last section, Pollan goes out to hunt and forage. Trusting the help from resident hunters, Pollan discovers how to hunt and eventually shoots a feral hog. “Half the dogs in America will receive Christmas presents this year, yet few of us ever pause to consider the life of the pig—an animal easily as intelligent as a dog—that becomes the Christmas ham” (Pollan, p. 306).. Additionally, Pollan discovers how to forage for mushrooms, native wild yeast, and native fruits. Pollan’s final

meal, created virtually exclusively from his own effort and abundance of nature, demonstrate to him that while such meals are, immeasurably, the most gratifying in terms of a connection to food, they are not viable.

Pollan's book sanctions the everyday reader to amble along a voyage of food that not only imparts some treasured lessons, but also helps clarify how and why the American food commerce is the way it is. Pollan's writing is buoyant, often comical, but also jam-packed with profound philosophical queries about why we opt to eat the foods we do. Although Pollan appears to be biased toward the organic method of agriculture, he writes in a way that allows the reader to decide for themselves, after proper detailed explanations, which food production process is the healthier choice.

According to Michael Pollan's personal website:

The author, Michael Pollan, was named to the 2010 *TIME* 100, the magazine's annual list of the world's 100 most influential people. In 2009, he was named by *Newsweek* as one of the top 10 "New Thought Leaders." In 2003, Pollan was appointed the John S. and James L. Knight Professor of Journalism at UC Berkeley's Graduate School of Journalism, and the director of the Knight Program in Science and Environmental Journalism. In addition to teaching, he lectures widely on food, agriculture, health and the environment. He is the author of *Cooked: A Natural History of Transformation* (2013) and of four New York Times bestsellers: *Food Rules: An Eater's Manual* (2010); *In Defense of Food: An Eater's Manifesto* (2008); *The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals* (2006) and *The Botany of Desire: A Plant's-Eye View of the World* (2001). *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, first published in 2006, was named one of the ten best books of 2006 by both the New York Times and the Washington Post. It also

won the California Book Award, the Northern California Book Award, the James Beard Award, and was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award. (Pollan)

In the end, this book has given me prodigious diverse ideas about the choices I will make or not make in my eating habits in the future. Reasonably priced, the paperback version of the book costs \$9.88 on the Barnes and Noble website. There are also hardcover, NOOK, and audiobook versions available at different prices. If one wants to learn where certain foods come from, how they are processed, and which methods of eating are healthier, then this book is a must read. Although I have known some of the things presented in this book were healthier for me, I did not realize just how much. "Putting a great dish on the table is our way of celebrating the wonders of form we humans can create from this matter – this quantity of sacrificed life – just before the body takes its first destructive bite" (Pollan, p. 405).

References

Pollan, M. (2006). *The omnivore's dilemma: A natural history of four meals*. New York: Penguin Press.

Pollan, M. (n.d.). About Michael Pollan. Retrieved from <http://michaelpollan.com/press-kit/>

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