

We Are What We Eat



Why Am I Reading This?

Food is one of human beings' favorite obsessions. Most people spend a great deal of time physically and mentally preoccupied with food: we organize and prepare meals, we daydream about what's for lunch or dinner; we eat. Beyond simply an enjoyable, necessary human pastime, though, eating has important implications for how we think of ourselves, and how we relate to the larger culture.

"We are What We Eat" theme materials created by Susan Swetnam, Idaho State University, 2007.

Book List

Chocolat, by Joanne Harris

Choice Cuts: A Savory Selection of Food Writing from Around the World and Throughout History, by Mark Kurlansky

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Like Water for Chocolate, by Laura Esquivel

My Year of Meats, by Ruth Ozeki

The American Plate, A Culinary History in 100 Bites, by Libby H. O'Connell

The Dirty Life, A Memoir of Farming, Food, and Love, by Kristin Kimball

The Language of Baklava, by Diana Abu-Jaber

The Mistress of Spices, by Chita Banerjee Divakaruni

We Are What We Ate: 24 Memories of Food, by Mark Winegardner

Book Summaries and Discussion Questions

Chocolat

Can indulgent food be a force for spiritual liberation, or is it inevitably an invitation to self-indulgent corruption? The novel *Chocolat* addresses this question through the story of a free-spirited outsider, a woman with a young daughter who arrives in a straight-laced French village and opens a luxury chocolate shop. The town's priest, a repressed and angry man, immediately conceives of her as a rival for the souls of the townspeople. While many solid citizens align themselves on his side, the town's less conventional residents, including a straight-talking elderly woman, a community of gypsies who live on river barges, and an abused woman who flees her husband, look to Vianne Rocher's shop as a place to share their secrets, fears, and dreams. During Lent, Vianne and the priest find themselves locked in a combat that will reveal long-guarded secrets and force Vianne to examine her own choice of life. *Chocolat* was made into an Oscar-nominated film starring Juliette Binoche and Johnny Depp. In the movie version, the priest Father Reynaud has been changed into the town's mayor. Readers might be interested in seeing the film, discussing whether or not they think that this revision changes the novel significantly (and if the change improves the story or not), and speculating on why the change might have been made. Harris herself has commented that the movie is "less dark" than the book, adding, "but I like milk chocolate, too."

Author Information

Joanne Harris was born in 1964 to an English father and French mother and has lived her whole life in England. Trained as a linguist at Cambridge, she worked as an elementary school teacher for fifteen years, during which time she published three novels. The last of these was *Chocolat*, which catapulted her in 1999 to international fame. She then became a full-time writer and has produced five more novels (several of which also use food motifs, including *Blackberry Wine* and *Five Quarters of the Orange*) and a collection of short stories, and she has collaborated on two cookbooks (*The French Kitchen* and *The French Market*). Her fiction has been termed "gastromance" for the way that it merges exuberant description of food with the conventions of romantic fiction. She lives with her husband and daughter near where she was born and is a musician as well as an award-winning writer.

Discussion Questions for *Chocolat*

1. Why do you think that Vianne sets up her chocolate shop in this town? Why has she chosen chocolate in the first place as a means for expressing herself, since her mother wasn't interested in the craft of cooking? Is luxury chocolate appropriate, given her personality? Her psychic gifts?
2. Why (besides the chocolate's delicious taste) are the townspeople drawn to Vianne's shop? What is Vianne expressing through her chocolate, and why do the townspeople need that?
3. In what ways are Vianne and Father Reynaud moral opposites? Harris has said that there are no real heroes or villains in the work – do you agree? Can you see drawbacks to living with Vianne's values, as well as with Reynaud's? Can you find pity for him, as well as for her?
4. What does the character of Anouk add to the book? How would your sense of Vianne, or of the symbolism of the chocolate itself, be different if she weren't there? Does knowing that Harris based the character on her own young daughter influence your take on the novel? Knowing that the character of Armande was based on Harris' beloved great grandmother, a fine cook and powerful matriarch?
5. The battle over chocolate in Lansquenet takes place during Lent, a time when people traditionally deny themselves things to focus their spiritual energy. Harris seems to be suggesting that such self-denial is inevitably repressive – do you agree? Or, do you think that there is a time and place for such discipline?
6. *Chocolat* has a great deal to say about insiders and outsiders (in both social terms and in terms of institutionalized religion). What do you think that Harris is ultimately suggesting about the costs and benefits of being one or the other?
7. Do you think that the ending (both what happens to Reynaud and what happens to Vianne) is plausible? Why or why not?
8. Harris has suggested that the book demonstrates that “love, not faith, is the key to salvation.” How does this theme play out in *Chocolat*? Why might Harris have chosen chocolate, per se (vs., say, garlic or cheese or lobster) as the central metaphor, given this thematic intention?

Choice Cuts: A Savory Selection of Food Writing From Around the World And Throughout History

Choice Cuts is a wide-ranging anthology of writing about food, spanning the ancients (Plato is represented here, discussing food as medicine) to the turn of the 21st century (Mimi Sheridan writes about bialys, Jewish onion rolls). Arranged by topic (meat, bugs, salad, fruit, drinks, memorable meals, etc.), this collection includes selections by many well-known food writers (M. F. K. Fisher, James Beard) and by many writers of fiction and poetry (Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings on killing birds, Pablo Neruda on French fries). It also contains fascinating excerpts from philosophers, old cookbooks, and travel memoirs into what Publishers Weekly termed “a banquet of historical and modern writings on food.”

A good way to approach this delightful but extensive collection in a public library discussion would be for the librarian or the scholar to suggest in advance how readers might focus, to insure that everyone is familiar with some of the same sections. Discussion might focus on several chapters about particular types of food that correlate with other books selected for the series (chocolate, meat, spices), or purposefully on new subjects (fat, starch, vegetables). Readers might, alternately, pay special attention to the chapters on national cuisines, for those are full of entertaining cultural speculation, and on the final two chapters, which discuss in an accessible manner theories of food choice. Another option would be to trace the multiple selections that several writers have contributed to the book, coming prepared to characterize each one’s style and attitude and compare and contrast their work.

Author Information

Mark Kurlansky wrote the best-selling books *Cod: A Biography of the Fish That Changes the World*, *Salt: A World History*, and *The Basque History of the World*. He worked as a professional chef and pastry maker in New York and New England and writes a column about food history for the magazine *Food and Wine*. He has won the James Beard Award for Excellence in Food Writing. He has also written for 25 years about international affairs, particularly European and Latin American subjects, and has recently written a collection of short stories and a novel based on his experiences in the Caribbean. He lives in New York with his wife and daughter..

Discussion Questions for Choice Cuts

Specific discussion questions for this book will vary, depending on the approach chosen locally (see suggestions above), but here are some general approaches:

1. How do the approaches and attitudes toward specific foods (chocolate, spices, meat) voiced by writers in this collection compare/contrast to those put forth in other books that you've read in this series?
2. Within any given chapter in this book, you'll see a range of ideas about the properties of a particular food group, the best way to prepare it, and what it symbolizes culturally. Look at some of the writers who voice attitudes less familiar to you. What can you learn about their culture/time period from what they say about food?
3. Many of the writers in this book are extremely opinionated. What is it about food, in particular, that tends to bring out such strong feelings? Choose a few writers for your discussion.
4. Can you identify historical changes overall in the way that people think about food? What are those? Are the more recent writers necessarily more "right" than the earlier ones? Why or why not?
5. Can you identify any constants in the way people think about food that transcend the historical and cultural contrasts chronicled in this book? What are they?
6. Which selections here do you particularly like? Why? Do those writers express attitudes toward food that you share?

Climbing the Mango Tree

Climbing the Mango Tree is a delightful memoir of the author's childhood in mid-twentieth-century Delhi, India. Madhur Jaffrey's wealthy family lived in an extended-family compound, and her life was rich in cousins, aunts, and uncles. It was also rich in food, and this book links specific memories with lovingly-described meals, from street food to picnic snacks to full-course dinners that boggle the imagination. Because Jaffrey's family was of the professional class, their lifestyle blended Hindu traditions (their heritage, to which the family's women gave primary allegiance), Muslim culture (which the men absorbed in their work), and English customs (again from the men, but also from the children, who attended English schools). This blend worked itself seamlessly into their food, dress, and family culture—until the partition of India in the 1940s disrupted their lives. The book provides a fascinating look at a way of life that will be exotic to many Americans, full of memorable characters and delicious recipes.

Author Information

Madhur Jaffrey was born in 1937 into a well-off family in Delhi, India. When she was 19, she went to London to pursue her interest in acting, studying at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts. While there, she missed the food of her youth (she had never done any cooking as a girl), so she wrote to her mother, requesting recipes, and taught herself to cook. After graduating from the RADA, she acted in film, television, and radio productions, marrying an Indian actor. After a move to New York, she began to write food articles, then to host a television program about Indian cooking. She has been the host of three BBC series on Indian food and has published numerous cookbooks. All of her work seeks to put food into the context of regional cultures, educating Westerners about life in India and beyond as she teaches them to cook.

Discussion Questions for Climbing the Mango Tree

1. How does food help Jaffrey's family negotiate their mixing of cultures? Does it help create an independent identity for the family?
2. The family's structure is overtly patriarchal, but the women still seem to inspire strong memories in Jaffrey, and she herself is a strong, independent girl who grows into a distinguished woman. What kind of role models does she see among the women in her family that help her? How do these women function in the family? Does food play a role in their roles?
3. What aspects of the elite Delhi culture that she describes surprise you the most? Which would you find most difficult to negotiate? Why?
4. The family seems to have strong unwritten rules about which foods belong in which settings—what it is appropriate, in other words, to eat at particular times and places. Consider your own unwritten rules about such things, and compare them with others in the group, if you'd like. Why do you think that people develop such customs?
5. Jaffrey seems to have a strong sense of her own family and its identity, even within the extended family living situation. What distinguishes her family, in her mind?
6. How does Jaffrey herself blend cultures into her attitudes and personality?
7. At the book's end, Jaffrey talks about how the "innocent honey" put on her tongue came as she aged to be "mixed with the pungencies of Indian spices." What does she mean by that? Do you have a parallel food metaphor, from your own cultural setting, to describe the progress and growing complexity of your life?

Food: A Love Story

Have you ever finished a meal that tasted horrible but not noticed until the last bit? Eaten in your car so you wouldn't have to share with your children? Gotten hungry while watching a dog food commercial? Does the presence of green vegetables make you angry? If you answered yes to any of these questions, you are pretty pathetic, but you are not alone. Feast along with America's favorite food comedian, best-selling author, and male supermodel Jim Gaffigan as he digs into his specialty: stuffing his face.

Food: A Love Story is an in-depth, thoroughly uninformed look at everything from health food to things that people actually enjoy eating. Jim Gaffigan reveals his most intimate food memories, opinions, and fantasies that will keep you laughing all the way to the refrigerator.

Author Information

Jim Gaffigan is a New York Times bestselling author, comedian, and actor who only wishes he was as thin as the cake-topper groom on the cover of the book. When he is not eating in airports before flying to some city to eat and do stand-up comedy, he overeats in New York City and also lives there with his five young children and much smarter and thinner wife, Jeannie.

Discussion Questions for Food: A Love Story

1.

Like Water for Chocolate

Set in rural Mexico during the era of the Mexican Revolution, Esquivel's novel opens with instructions on how to chop onions. These instructions come from the main character's great niece, who proceeds to narrate the entire novel. The novel constitutes, then, a family legend told by a younger female relative, and fits into the developing literature of matrilineage, a result of feminist interest in telling the lives of our foremothers. The novel deals with tradition and family relationships, personal fulfillment versus family expectations, courage, effrontery, adultery, nurturing, and the role of women in society and in the family. Food is an important symbol since the original purpose of family, according to some anthropologists, was the procuring and preparation of food to insure survival. This is an exciting, innovative novel in its use of recipes, lists of ingredients, and descriptions of food smells, household utensils, and kitchen atmosphere. However, it also deals with a life-long but forbidden love between Tita, the main character, and her brother-in-law Pedro. Though the novel is innovative in many ways, the characters embody traditional roles. The reader is permitted a glimpse of life in another era in which perhaps motivation and psychology were analyzed less, in which people fit themselves into patterns of life already established from time immemorial. A sense of chronological depth is acquired by the author's placement of the novel in the by-gone era of the Mexican Revolution. Esquivel's work fits into a tradition well known in Latin America but usually not dealt with by women novelists.

Author Information

Laura Esquivel is a Mexican writer and author. Born on September 30, 1950, in Mexico City, Mexico. Esquivel began writing while working as a kindergarten teacher. She wrote plays for her students and then went on to write children's television programs during the 1970s and 1980s. Her first novel, *Like Water for Chocolate*, became internationally beloved and was made into an award-winning film. Her other titles include *The Law of Love* and *Between the Fires*.

Esquivel often explores the relationship between men and women in Mexico in her work. She is best known for *Like Water for Chocolate* (1990), an imaginative and compelling combination of novel and cookbook. It had been released in Mexico a year earlier. After the release of the film version in 1992, *Like Water for Chocolate* became internationally known and loved. The book has sold more than 4.5 million copies.

Discussion Questions for *Like Water for Chocolate*

1. What type of a character is Pedro? Is he weak or strong? Can the reader respect his decision to marry Rosaura in order to remain near Tita?
2. What point is made by Rosaura's flatulence, bad breath, and digestive troubles which ultimately lead to her death?
3. Is Tita always admirable? Is it morally justifiable for her to make love with her sister's husband just because she was in love with him first? Does she struggle with moral issues? Is she a true heroine in every sense of the word?
4. Are there any redeemable qualities in the character of Mama Elena?
5. What is the function of secondary characters such as Dr. Brown, Nacha, and Chenchu?
6. What literary devices tie the main action of the novel to the de la Garza family's past and to their future?
7. Food and its preparation are linked with every aspect of the story. Each chapter begins with a recipe used by Tita for some family event. What role does this gastronomic element play in the reader's experience of the novel? How does it add to the novel's cultural setting?
8. How would most contemporary daughters deal with a despotic mother? How can we explain Tita's long-suffering submission to Mama Elena? Is it due to cultural reasons? Psychological? Is it comprehensible in the context of the times?
9. Do significant changes occur in any of the characters that indicate their development and maturation throughout the novel? Do characters make choices that influence the course of their lives? If so, what are they?
10. What elements in *Like Water for Chocolate* are distinctly Mexican or Hispanic? Think in terms of action, general atmosphere or "flavor," conclusion, family relationships, and so forth. On the other hand, what elements are universal?
11. If you have seen the film version, compare it with the novel. Which do you prefer and why? Was the novel written with the idea in mind that it would soon be made into a movie?
12. How does each of the female characters relate to men? Think of Tita and Pedro, Tita and Dr. Brown, Rosaura and Pedro, Gertrudis and the men in her life, and Mama Elena's hidden relationship to Jose Trevino as well as her attitude toward her son-in-law Pedro.
13. Does it detract from the novel that the interiority of the characters is not discussed? Is it preferable for an author to reveal the intimate, inner working of the human mind or simply to relate events? There is treatment of

emotions such as love and outrage, but does it satisfy the reader's desire to understand the characters?

14. Overall, what do you like and dislike about this novel? How has it benefitted you to read it?

My Year of Meats

My Year of Meats is a novel which blends boisterous comedy, human drama, sometimes violent action, and unflinching reportage as it reveals the unethical practices of the American meat industry. Its narrator, Jane Tagaki-Little, is a Japanese-American filmmaker hired by a Japanese concern to produce a series of television programs promoting American meat (especially beef) entitled "My American Wife." Sponsored by a beef-importing concern, the show is designed to highlight a different wholesome American family each week, and Jane crosses the country in search of subjects. Along the way, however, she begins to learn frightening things about the use of hormones in meat, along with practices in feedlots and slaughterhouses, and she finds herself increasingly drawn to families whose lives deviate from the stereotypically "American" paradigm that her sponsors demand (a black extended family, a lesbian vegetarian couple). As Jane begins to sabotage the series (and find her own vocation as an independent filmmaker), she enters a correspondence with the abused, childless wife of her brutal Japanese sponsor, and the novel takes up issues of sexual exploitation as well as questions of food safety and ethical practice.

Author Information

Ruth Ozeki is a filmmaker and novelist who was raised in New Haven, Connecticut, daughter of a Japanese mother and American father. She studied English and Asian Studies at Smith College, then received a Japanese Ministry of Education Fellowship to do graduate work on classical Japanese literature in Japan. While in that country, she also taught English, founded a language school, worked as a bar hostess, and studied flower arranging and Noh drama. In 1985, she returned to New York and worked on low-budget horror films. She graduated to television production, where she spent several years directing documentaries for a Japanese company, and then began directing her own films. Her work has won numerous prizes and has been aired on PBS and at prestigious festivals, including the Sundance Film Festival. *My Year of Meats* was her first novel; it was translated into eleven languages and won many awards, including the American Book Award. Her second novel, *All Over Creation*, is set on a family farm in Idaho and also won an American Book Award. Married to an artist, Ozeki lives in New York and in British Columbia.

Discussion Questions for My Year of Meats

1. Quite a few recent books (including *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, on the list of additional readings for this series) have exposed dangerous practices in the American meat industry. Is there an advantage to informing the reading public about these concerns through a work of fiction like this, rather than simply in a nonfiction form?
2. How do you respond to the troubling facts about American meat presented in this novel? What do these practices suggest about contemporary American culture and attitudes? What might be done to change them, and what might be the consequences of such changes?
3. What picture of America do the producers of "My American Wife" want to convey to Japanese viewers through its portrayal of American eating habits? Did this picture ever correspond to real American life, or has it always been a fiction? Why might such an image appeal to an international (or specifically Japanese) audience, even if it is a fiction, in what it suggests about America?
4. Knowing that Ozeki is a filmmaker, can you see evidence of documentary filmmaking techniques in this book? Do they enhance its message?
5. One criticism that might be leveled at this book is that almost all of its women are "good" characters. If not heroic (and many are), they are victims with good intentions who eventually find their own voices. Many male characters, on the other hand, are unethical, oblivious, or even brutal. Do you think that Ozeki is stereotyping?
6. One of the assumptions of "My American Wife" is that eating solid traditional meat-based meals makes a family ideal. What do you believe about the connection between eating patterns and family life? Do families somehow mirror the way they eat in their happiness or unhappiness, stability or instability? If so, what constitutes desirable food practices, or undesirable, in your view?
7. What parallels exist between Jane and Akiko? What does Ozeki seem to be saying through these two women about women in general, and their relationship to food?

The American Plate

Did you know the first graham crackers were designed to reduce sexual desire? Or that Americans have tried fad diets for almost two hundred years? Why do we say things like “buck” for a dollar and “living high on the hog”? How have economics, technology, and social movements changed our tastes? Uncover these and other fascinating aspects of American food traditions in *The American Plate*.

In this mouth-watering book, Dr. Libby H. O’Connell takes readers on a journey through America’s culinary evolution, revealing the astonishing ways that cultures and individuals have shaped our national diet and continue to influence how we cook and eat. Peppered throughout are recipes, photos, and tidbits on dozens of foods, from the surprising origins of Hershey Bars to the strange delicacies our ancestors enjoyed, including roast turtle and grilled beaver tail. Inspiring and intensely satisfying, *The American Plate* shows how we can use the tastes of our shared past to transform our future.

Author Information

Libby H. O’Connell is chief historian for History Channel and senior vice president for corporate social responsibility for A&E Networks, where she has worked since 1993. She develops educational and community-based initiatives for A&E Networks. As a historical adviser for the History programming group, she has appeared as a commentator on History and A&E, as well as on the Today Show, CNN, and other news channels. She produces on-site short films for organizations such as the Smithsonian, the National Park Service, National Archives, and the Library of Congress. Her video blogs on History.com focus on historical stories of place and food. Currently, she serves on the boards of Thomas Jefferson’s Monticello, National History Day, and the Smithsonian National Museum of American History’s “Kitchen Cabinet,” a group dedicated to the study and sharing of food history. Dr. O’Connell’s work in television, historic preservation, and education has received three national Emmy Awards and numerous other honors. She received her Ph.D. in American history from the University of Virginia. She lives outside of New York City.

Discussion Questions for The American Plate

1.

The Dirty Life

When Kristin Kimball left New York City to interview a dynamic young farmer named Mark, her world changed. On an impulse, she shed her city self and started a new farm with him on five hundred acres near Lake Champlain. *The Dirty Life* is the captivating chronicle of the couple's first year on Essex Farm, from the cold North Country winter through their harvest-season wedding in the loft of the barn.

Kristin and Mark's plan to grow everything needed to feed a community was an ambitious idea, and a bit romantic. It worked. Every Friday evening, all year round, over a hundred people travel to Essex Farm to pick up their weekly share of the "whole diet"—beef, pork, chicken, milk, eggs, maple syrup, grains, flours, dried beans, herbs, fruits, and forty different vegetables—produced by the farm. In *The Dirty Life*, Kristin discovers the wrenching pleasures of physical work, learns that good food is at the center of a good life, falls deeply in love, and finally finds the engagement and commitment she craved in the form of a man, a small town, and a beautiful piece of land.

Author Information

Kristin Kimball is a farmer and a writer living in northern New York. Prior to farming, Kimball worked as a freelance writer, writing teacher, and as an assistant to a literary agent in New York City. A graduate of Harvard University, she and her husband Mark have run Essex Farm since 2003, where they live with their daughter, Jane.

Discussion Questions for The Dirty Life

1. Kristin was a freelance writer in New York City, which gave her the opportunity to travel around the world. When she first met Mark on his farm, she felt like a foreigner. In what ways do you think this feeling comforted her? Were you surprised when the situation flipped and Kristin felt foreign to the life she used to lead in the city?
2. In what ways did Kimball's yearning for a home sway her decision to leave the city and start a new life with Mark? If you were put in a similar situation, do you think you would have made the same decision? Why or why not? What is your own personal definition of "home"?
3. Mark and Kristin start a farm that aims to provide a whole diet for their year-round members. If a farm in your area did the same thing, would you become a member? How would it change the way you cook and eat?
4. The first year on Essex Farm was full of trial and error. Kristin had never farmed before and much of her knowledge came from her neighbors and from books. In what ways did all of the mishaps shape Kristin and change her perspective?
5. One of the biggest adjustments Kristin has to make when moving to Essex Farm is learning to live with the absence of instant gratification. She finds that a farmer must continuously put forth effort in order to reap benefits. How does Kristin respond to this new kind of work? How does her definition of "satisfaction" change? Would you be able to accommodate a similar change?
6. *The Dirty Life* is segmented into seasons. What are the underlying issues that take place within each season and how do they relate to the year in full?
7. Have your views on sustainable farming changed after reading about the trials and triumphs of Essex Farm? Have your views on farm-fresh food versus supermarket food changed?
8. Kristin repeatedly finds that her prior assumptions about farming and farmers are false. Do you think her stereotypes were the same as those of most Americans or just people who live in urban areas?
9. As a new farmer, Kristin struggles with where she fits in the socioeconomic spectrum. It bothers her when a neighbor brings over some kitchen things because she thinks Kristin is needy. Later, Kristin

writes that farming makes her feel rich even though she's not. What makes people feel poor or rich? How much is the feeling related to money?

10. Why do you think Kristin goes from being a vegetarian to an omnivore after helping Mark slaughter a pig?

11. Kristin writes that there are two types of marriages: the comfortable kind and the fiery kind. Do you agree?

The Language of Baklava

The Language of Baklava is a memoir with recipes—a delightful testament to the deep connections between food, identity, and memory. In a series of narrative vignettes, Abu-Jaber chronicles a childhood shaped by both Arab (Iranian and Jordanian) cultures and American culture as she traces her history as a young woman trying to find her place within the pull of various traditions. The book contains a large, colorful cast of characters—eccentric aunts and uncles and other relatives, sisters, a compassionate, level-headed American mother—but it is the narrator’s father, a jovial, impractical man impassioned about reminding his children of their roots, who dominates this book. Some of the stories chronicle warm family episodes (shish kabob cookouts in upstate New York); others portray the anxieties of being between cultures; some are set during temporary relocations back to the Middle East, where the narrator is strongly attracted to the life of city streets and Bedouin tents. Though the narrator rebels at times, the story ultimately glows with love and the celebration of family, and the recipes are delicious.

Author Information

Diana Abu-Jaber was born in Syracuse, New York, in 1960, to a Jordanian father and an American (Irish-German) mother. Her family moved to Jordan Abu-Jaber when she was seven, spending two years there, and she has often returned. She holds a Ph.D. in English literature from the State University of New York at Binghamton. She has taught literature and creative writing at the University of Michigan, the University of Oregon, and UCLA, and is at this writing Writer-in-Residence at Portland State University. Her first novel (with autobiographical elements), *Arabian Jazz* (1993) won the Oregon Book Award and was a finalist for the PEN/Hemingway award. She won a National Endowment for the Arts award to support a second novel, *Memories of Birth*, and she has received a Fulbright Research Award for travel to Jordan to interview Palestinian and Jordanian women for her third novel. She calls *The Language of Baklava*, published in 2005, a “food memoir.”

Discussion Questions for The Language of Baklava

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Discussion Questions for The Language of Baklava

1. In the memoir, Abu-Jaber's father Bud constantly uses food to reassure himself that his connection to his origins and family are not lost, and to attempt to connect his children to that heritage. Why, do you believe, does food hold power to forge such connections? What foods remind you of such connections?
2. Some immigrant children reject their ethnic foodways (at least temporarily) in an effort to become Americanized. Despite Diana Abu-Jaber's temporary rebellions, she never does. Why might that be so, given her larger feelings about her father and her family?
3. One important theme in this book is finding one's place as a person between cultures. Do you believe that such accommodation happens for Diana? If so, how does she accomplish it? Or does she end up identifying herself more one way than another?
4. Do you like the fact that recipes are included in this book? Why or why not?
5. Although the themes of *The Language of Baklava* are serious, the book is full of humor. What does the humor add? Do humor and food go together, in some ways, for you?
6. More than ten years before she wrote this memoir, Abu-Jaber explored her childhood (or childhoods like hers) in novels. Why might she have written about those experiences as "fiction" before she turned to memoir? Do you think that there is a difference in writer's mind-set between the two genres?
7. The book deals with the issues of having a "split" identity. There are ways in which every culture, in their attempt to assimilate, goes through this, often finding themselves without any firm identity. Do the characters in this book find their way or do they remain "unmoored" as she suggests on page 318?
8. This is a work of "nonfiction." How do you feel about the idea that the stories have been "honed or altered" as Abu-Jaber states in the forward?
9. Does food allow for stronger connections between cultures? Does it work that way for you in your own life?
10. How do the recipes work for you as a reader? Does it depend on the way you see food working in your own life?

The Mistress of Spices

The Mistress of Spices is a lyric novel, written in a mixture of prose and poetry, in the style that has been called “magic realism”: while primarily set in this world (specifically, a run-down part of Oakland, California), it includes features which defy natural laws and give it an air of mysticism. The heroine, Tilo, comes to Oakland after she has been trained on a remote, magical island by the priestess-like Old Mistress of Spices for a vocation of ministering to others. Assuming a crone’s body and forbidden to leave her shop, Tilo shares the magic of her spices and her own psychic powers with a variety of Indian immigrants who are alienated, lonely, and/or in danger in their new homeland. Soon, however, her own independent, intense nature leads her to disobey her instructions (and the voices of her spices, which take on animate qualities). She ventures outside the shop; she falls in love with a non-Indian. In the end, Tilo must decide whether she will remain true to her calling or choose an ordinary life of mortal love, knowing that her choice will bring potentially dire effects.

Author Information

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni was born in India (Bengal) and lived there until 1976, when she emigrated to the United States to study. She holds a Ph.D. from the University of California, Berkeley. During her education, her website biography notes, she worked at “many odd jobs, including babysitting, selling merchandise in an Indian boutique, slicing bread in a bakery, and washing instruments in a science lab.” She has published in many anthologies and magazines (including the New Yorker and the Atlantic Monthly) and has won awards for her poetry (a Pushcart Prize, and Alan Ginsberg Award) and for her prose (Arranged Marriage won a National Book Award in 1996). The Mistress of Spices was named to several best-books lists, including the San Francisco Chronicle’s “100 Best Books of the 20th Century” list.

Divakaruni teaches creative writing at the University of Houston and has judged the National Book Award and the PEN Faulkner Award. She has continued to be active in social justice concerns, working with organizations that help South Asian and South Asian American women who are victims of domestic violence, and with a group that helps educate urban slum children in India. She lives in Houston with her husband and two sons. Her website (www.chitradivakaruni.com) includes biographical details, information on her books and awards, links to interviews, and a page about her writing practice.

Discussion Questions for *The Mistress of Spices*

1. The book shares a great deal of information about the alleged powers of individual spices. Do you believe that spices (or other food) can indeed change people's ways of thinking? Ways of behaving? Fates?

2. Tilo is clearly an independent, rebellious young woman from her earliest years. Why does she choose to become a Mistress?

3. In writing about her own work on her website, the author says that women's problems—especially the problems of immigrant women—are among her foremost concerns (she also reveals that she worked at a battered woman's shelter in Berkeley). Does this novel have things to say about why immigrant women (or any women) suffer? Does it hold out any hope for relief? Are the spices a kind of metaphor in this equation?

4. "I write to unite people . . . to dissolve boundaries," Divakaruni has said. What kinds of boundaries are being dissolved in this novel, and how? Does food play a role in this dissolution?

5. A *New York Times* Book Review article called *Mistress of Spices*' ending (in which Tilo chooses her lover over her vocation) "predictable"; a more harsh phrase that might be used is "a sell-out to romantic conventions." How do you respond to Tilo's choice? Is the author ultimately compromising the theme of women's power by having her main character deny her vocation?

6. How do you respond to the earthquake at the book's end?

7. Divakaruni's poetry has won many prizes, as the biographical sketch above suggests. In what ways is this book "poetic?" Do those components make it a better book? Do poetry and spices go together, somehow? How

We Are What We Ate: 24 Memories of Food

We Are What We Ate presents a smorgasbord of personal essays in which well-known writers share their memories of eating. Funny, touching, nostalgic, irreverent, these pieces are delightful reading in and of themselves, but they also introduce readers to larger questions about food-related behavior. Some of the writers speak of how food bound their families together and reinforced ethnic, regional, or class identity (Bobbie Ann Mason writes lovingly of her mother's down-home cooking); others chronicle how their parents adapted quirky foodways (one black writer extols her father's Chinese spareribs); others even admit to changing their eating practices as a rebellion against their parents (Robert Girardi on adding sauce to his English mother's unadorned pasta). One admits to being a junk-food junkie. Other essays describe the writers' encounters with the food of other nations, other classes, commenting directly or indirectly on food as a cultural marker. A few speak explicitly about hunger, and a few others touch on the politics of recent food trends – the gourmet revolution, the eat-locally movement. As a whole, they present a provocative range of experiences, all of which testify to the symbolic, as well as the nutritional, importance of eating. This book was published to benefit Share Our Strength, an organization that has donated more than \$50 million to fighting hunger since 1984.

Author Information

Mark Winegardner (website: www.markwinegardner.com) is a literary novelist and creative writing professor at Florida State University. A native Ohioan, he reports in *We Are What We Ate* that he grew up in a house that never had an onion in it. After graduating from Miami University, Ohio, he completed his MFA at George Mason University, publishing his first book while still in graduate school. He is the author of four novels (including *The Godfather Returns*) and two works of nonfiction, and he has edited three collections. His short fiction has appeared in magazines ranging from *Family Circle* to *Playboy* to *TriQuarterly*, and his novels have been chosen as among the best books of the year by publications including the *New York Times Book Review*, the *Chicago Sun-Times*, and *USA Today*.

Discussion Questions for We Are What We Ate

1. “All artists, I think, suffer from a mild form of synesthesia, that metaphoric condition where a taste or smell can call up the immediate image of something utterly different.” Writes Robert Girardi. What kinds of “utterly different” things do food memories recall for the writers in this collection? Do you see patterns of memory? Thinking about your own life, do particular foods call up images for you of things beyond the food itself?
2. In what ways are food and family bound for these writers? What particular foods remind you of your family? If you rebelled at all, did you use food as a way to dramatize your difference?
3. Some of these writers admit that their mothers weren’t very good cooks. Can even poor food symbolize something about a family that makes affectionate memories?
4. Some of these writers discuss how tasting new foods in new places opened their eyes to whole new ways of perceiving the world and themselves. Do you identify with any of these? Why? Have new foods, and new food experiences, broadened your perspectives in any ways? What have they taught you about different cultures, and about yourself?
5. Several of these essays (and Winegardner’s introduction) chronicle the bland food served in ordinary middle-class American families in the past. What do the choices such families made suggest about that culture?
6. Several of these essays discuss hunger and eating in extremity. What do they teach you about human nature?
7. A number of these essays talk about how the food of a particular family or culture has changed over time. Why do you think that such changes took place? What do they suggest about the people who made the changes?