

Allen, John S. *The Omnivorous Mind*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012.

The food glut of the developed world and our fondness for eating have warranted close examination together for a long time, and John S. Allen obliges with *The Omnivorous Mind*, a book “about the natural history of food, eating and mind” (271). Claiming that the book is “as much about *thinking* food as eating food,” Allen looks at several aspects of eating to give us a comprehensive, multi-faceted understanding about food consumption (262). This book is a must-read for both the general public that loves food, but doesn’t like the accompanying weight gain, and the specialized academic who must know why we love eating yet survive in an environment of feast rather than the famine that our evolutionary biology prepared us for.

Reminding us that eating is more than “ingestion and digestion,” Allen explores food through the lens of cognition. Equating the importance of food to that of language in human cognition, he claims that gathering, preparing and eating food has shaped human behavior so much, that metaphorically “we eat with our brains,” because eating involves “decision making and choice,” that directly affects cognition (5). By looking at the “evolutionary, cultural and neurocognitive underpinnings of the human diet and eating,” he seeks to understand, how the human omnivorous mind eats (6).

Since food consumption is shaped by biology and culture, Allen examines all aspects of the culture of eating, and all aspects of the neurological impact of eating, “to uncover and explore multiple facets of brain function” (6). Divided into eight chapters, the book is a fascinating read, for each chapter deals with an intriguing aspect of eating, such as our desire for crispy food, or the role of memory in eating. Dieters accused of lacking will-power will be encouraged to learn that, “learning a new diet ... [is] like learning a new language” (256) and that “the way ... food shapes ... [our] ... thinking has itself been shaped ... to occur in a certain kind of environment” that is not that of the developed world (257). Additionally, food lovers will be thrilled to know that “food preparation and eating are potential sources of cognitive development” (269).

The introductory chapter and the last chapter go together, for they hypothesize Allen’s theory of food. The middle seven chapters can be read either individually or collectively. The first chapter baits us with an exploration of crispy food, while the second chapter traces, “the biological history of the human diet from its primate origins to its current super omnivorous present” (6). Chapter 3 examines all sense-related aspects of eating, and readers will be surprised to learn that human taste is both physiological and cultural. Chapter 4 examines overeating and deliberate starvation, and Chapter 5 delves into food memories. Chapter 6 explains the human tendency to categorize food as good or bad, as a way of making sense of the environment through organizational and simplification strategies. Chapter 7 discusses human creative expression in preparing food and the contributions of pioneer chefs of the world.

Taking into account several aspects of eating, in the last chapter Allen constructs a “theory of food,” analogous to the “theory of mind,” developed by psychologists David Premack and Guy Woodruff, to explain the cognition of eating. Defining this food theory as “a complex cognitive adaptation” that each of us uses “to organize and engage the food environment,” he creates a bedrock for future dietitians, behavioral psychologists and others to build on (4). Readers will enjoy this rich, readable and multi-faceted book on eating as Allen connects and makes relevant current information on eating to compose a book that is engrossing and stimulating – like good food to be savored.

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