Cooking in the Books: Cookbooks and Cookery in Popular Fiction

Introduction

Food has always been an essential component of daily life. Today, thinking about food is a much more complicated pursuit than planning the next meal, with food studies scholars devoting their efforts to researching “anything pertaining to food and eating, from how food is grown to when and how it is eaten, to who eats it and with whom, and the nutritional quality” (Duran and MacDonald 234). This is in addition to the work undertaken by an increasingly wide variety of popular culture researchers who explore all aspects of food (Risson and Brien 3): including food advertising, food packaging, food on television, and food in popular fiction.

In creating stories, from those works that quickly disappear from bookstore shelves to those that become entrenched in the literary canon, writers use food to communicate the everyday and to explore a vast range of ideas from cultural backgrounds to social standing to provide a sense of a given social context (Patti-Famell 80). For example in Oliver Twist (1838) by Charles Dickens, the central character challenges the class system when: “Child as he was, he was desperate with hunger and reckless with misery. He rose from the table, and advancing basin and spoon in hand, to the master, said, somewhat alarmed at his own temerity– ‘Please, sir, I want some more’” (11).

Scarlett OHara in Margaret Mitchell’s Gone with the Wind (1936) makes a similar point, a little more dramatically, when she declares: “As God is my witness, I’m never going to be hungry again” (419). Food can also take us deep into the details of another culture: places that many of us will only ever read about. Food is also used to provide insight into a character’s state of mind. In Nora Ephron’s Heartburn (1983) an item as simple as a boiled bread tells a reader so much more about Rachel Samstan than her social standing and a stunning, rich addendum to the story, something: “I got pregnant and I gave up my New York apartment and I went to Washington. Talk about mistakes […] there I was, trying to hold up my end in a city where you can’t even buy a decent bagel” (34).

There are three ways in which writers can deal with food within their work. Firstly, food can be totally ignored. This approach is sometimes taken, despite food being such a standard feature of storytelling that its absence, be it a lonely meal at home, elegant canapés at an impressively catered cocktail party, or a cheap sandwich collected from a local café, is an obvious omission. Food can also add realism to a story, with many authors putting as much effort into conjuring the smell, taste, and texture of food as they do into providing a backstory and a purpose for their characters. In recent years, a third way has emerged with some writers placing such importance upon food in fiction that the line that divides the cookbook and the novel has become distorted. This article looks at cookbooks and cookery in popular fiction with a particular focus on crime novels.

Recipes: Ingredients and Preparation

Food in fiction has been employed, with great success, to help characters cope with grief; giving them the reassurance that only comes through the familiarity of the kitchen and the concentration required to fulfill routine tasks: to chop and dice, to mix, to soft and roll, to bake, broil, grill, steam, and fry. Such grief can come from the breakdown of a relationship as seen in Nora Ephron’s Heartburn (1983). An autobiography under the guise of fiction, this novel is the first-person story of a cookbook author and her ex-husband. As she feels her works “aren’t merely cookbooks” (95). She is, however, mistaken; she was not described as a “distracted, rejected, pregnant cookbook author whose husband was in love with a gianits” (95). As the collapse of the marriage is described, her favorite recipes are shared: Bacon Hash; Four Minute Eggs; Toasted Almonds; Lime Beans with Pears; Linguine Alla Cecca; Pot Roast; three types of Potatoes; Sorrel Soup; desserts including Bread Pudding, Cheesecake, Key Lime Pie and Peach Pie; and a Vinaigrette, all in an effort to reassert her personal skills and thus personal value.

Grief can also result from loss of hope and the realisation that a life long dreamed of will never be realised. Like Water for Chocolate (1989), by Laura Esquivel, is the magical realistic tale of Tita De La Garza who, as the youngest daughter, is forbidden to marry as she must take care of her mother, a woman who: “Unquestionably, when it came to dividing, dismantling, dismembering, desecrating, destroying and dominating […] was a pro” (87). Tita’s life lurches from one painful, unjust episode to the next; the only emotional stability she has comes from the kitchen, and from her cooking of a series of dishes: Christmas Rolls; Chabéla Wedding Cake; Quial in Rose Petal Sauce, Turkey Moile; Northern-style Chorizo; Oxal Soup; Champandongo; Chocolate and Three Kings’ Day Bread; Cream Fritters; and Beans with Chiaco taco-style. This is a series of culinary-based activities that attempts to superimpose normalcy on a life that is far from the everyday.

Grief is most commonly associated with death. Undertaking the selection, preparation and presentation of meals in novels dealing with bereavement is both a functional and symbolic act: life must go on for those left behind but it must go on in a very different way. Thus, novels that use food to deal with loss are particularly important because they can “make non-cooks believe they can cook, and for frequent cooks, affirm what they already know: that cooking heals” (Baltazar online).

In Angelina’s Bachelors (2011) by Brian O’Reily, Angelina D’Angelo believes “cooking was not just about food. It was about character” (2). By the end of the first chapter the young woman’s husband is dead and she is in the kitchen looking for solace, but believe they can cook, and for frequent cooks, affirm what they already know: that cooking heals” (Baltazar online).

In North Carolina, three sisters from South Carolina is told through diary entries, narrative, letters, poetry, songs, and spells. Recipes are also found throughout the text: Turkey Marmalade; Rice; Spinach; Crabmeat; Fish; Sweetbread; Duck; Lamb; and, Asparagus. Anthony Capella’s The Food of Love (2004), a modern retelling of the classic tale of Cyranode Bergerac, is about the beautiful Laura, a waiter masquerading as a top chef Tommaso, and the talented Bruno who, “thick-set, heavy, and slightly awkward” (21), covers for Tommaso’s incompentency in the kitchen as he, too, falls for Laura. The novel contains recipes and contains considerable information about food.

Recipes: Dishing Up Death

Crime fiction is a genre with a long history of focusing on food; from the theft of food in the novels of the nineteenth century to the utilisation of different types of food such as chocolate, marmalade, and sweet omelettes to administer poison (Berkeley, Christie; Sayers), the latter for arsenic receiving much attention in Harriet Vane’s trial in Dorothy L. Sayers’s Strong Poison (1930). The Judge, in summing up the case, states to the members of the jury: “Four eggs were brought to the table in their shells, and Mr Urquhart broke them one by one into a bowl, adding sugar from a sifter [...he then] cooked the omelettes in a chafing dish, filled it with hot jam” (14). Prior to what Timothy Taylor has described as the “pre-foodie era” the Oxtail Soup; Champandongo; Chocolate and Three Kings’s Day Bread; Cream Fritters; and Beans with Chilli Tezcucana-style. This is a series of culinary-based activities that attempts to superimpose normalcy on a life that is far from the everyday.

Take fusilli […] People say this pasta was designed by Leonardo da Vinci himself. The spiral fins carry the biggest amount of sauce relative to the surface area, you see? But it only works with a thick, heavy sauce that can cling to the grooves. Conchiglie, on the other hand, is like a shell, so it holds a thin, liquid sauce inside it perfectly (17).

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Of the numerous works available that focus on food there are many series that go beyond featuring food and beverages, to present recipes as well as the solving of crimes. These include: the Candy Holliday Murder Mysteries by B. L. Haywood; The Cookhouse Mystery by Cleo Coyle; the Hannah Swensen Mysteries by Joanne Fluke; the Hamptons Falls Mysteries by Claudia Bishop; the Memphis BBQ Mysteries by Riley Adams; the Piece of Cake Mysteries by Jaclyn Brady; the Tea Shop Mysteries by Laura Childs; and, the White House Chef Mysteries by Julie Hyzy.

The vast majority of offerings within this female dominated sub-genre that has been labelled “Crime and Dine” (Collins online) are American, both in origin and setting. A significant contribution to this increasingly popular formula is, however, from an Australian author Kerry Greenwood. Food features within her famed Phryne Fisher Series with recipes included in A Question of Death (2007). Recipes also form part of Greenwood’s food-themed collection of short crime stories Recipes for Crime (1995), written with Jenny Pausacker. These nine stories, each one imitating the style of one of crime fiction’s greatest contributors (from Agatha Christie to Raymond Chandler), allow readers to simultaneously access mysteries and recipes. 2004 saw the first publication of Earthly Delights and the introduction of her character, Corinna Chapman. This series follows the adventures of a woman who gave up a career as an accountant to open her own bakery in Melbourne. Corinna also investigates murders that can be found at the end of each of these books, the Corinna Chapman Recipe Book (nd), filled with instructions for baking bread, muffins and tea cakes in addition to recipes for main courses such as risotto, goulash, and “Chicken with Pineapple 1971 Style”, available from the publisher’s website.

Recipes: Integration and Segregation

In Heartburn (1983), Rachel acknowledges that presenting a work of fiction and a collection of recipes within a single volume can present challenges, observing: “I have haven’t managed to work in any recipes for a while. I think that I haven’t worked in recipes when you’re moving the plot forward” (99). How Rachel tells her story is, however, a reflection of how she undertakes her work, with her own cookbooks being, she admits, more narration than instruction: “The cookbooks I write do well. They’re very personal and chatty—they’re cookbooks in an almost incidental way. I write chapters about friends or relatives or trips or experiences, and work in the recipes peripherally” (17).

Some authors integrate detailed recipes into their narratives through description and dialogue. An excellent example of this approach can be found in the Cookhouse Mystery Series by Cleo Coyle, in the novel On What Grounds (2003). When the central protagonist is being questioned by police, Clare Costi’s answers are interrupted by a flashback scene and instructions on how to make Greek coffee:

Three ounces of water and one very heaped teaspoon of dark roast coffee per serving. (I used half Italian roast, and half Maracaco—a lovely Venezuelan coffee, named after the country’s major port, rich in flavour!) with delicate notes of overtones.) Water and finely ground beans both go into the drink together. The water is then brought to a boil over medium heat (37).

This provides insight into Clare’s character: that, when under pressure, she focuses her mind on what she firmly believes to be true—not the information that she is doubtful of or a situation that she is struggling to understand. Recipes can be found within a novel in this way—particularly within crime fiction, a genre that is predominantly dependent upon generating tension and building the pacing of the plotting to the climax—is an unusual but ultimately successful style of writing. Inquiry and instruction are comfortable bedfellows; as the central protagonists within these works discover, the readers discover who committed murder as well as a little bit more about one of the world’s most popular beverages, thus highlighting how cookbooks and novels both serve to entertain and to educate.

Many authors will share their recipes, serving them up at the end of a story. This can be seen in Julie Hyzy’s White House Chef Mystery novels, the cover of each volume in the series boasts that it “includes Recipes for a Complete Presidential Menu!” These menus, with detailed ingredient lists, instructions for cooking and options for serving, are segregated from the stories and appear at the end of each work.

Yet other writers will deploy a hybrid approach such as the one seen in Like Water for Chocolate (1989), where the ingredients are listed at the commencement of each chapter and the preparation for the recipes form part of the narrative. This method of integration is also deployed in The Kitchen Daughter (2011), which sees most of the chapters introduced with a recipe card, those chapters then going on to deal with action in the kitchen. Using recipes as chapter breaks is a structure that has, very recently, been adopted by Australian celebrity chef, food writer, and, now fiction author, Ed Halmagyi, in his new work, which is both cookbook and novel, The Fool Clock: A Year of Cooking Seasonally (2012).

As people exchange recipes in reality, so too do fictional characters. The Recipe Club (2009), by Andrea Israel and Nancy Gaffrhek, is the story of two friends, Lilly Stone and Valerie Rudman, which is structured as an epistolary novel. As they exchange feelings, ideas and news in their correspondence, they also exchange recipes: over eighty of them throughout the novel in e-mails and letters. In The Food of Love (2004), written messages between two of the main characters are also used to share recipes. In addition, readers are able to post their own recipes, inspired by this book and other works by Anthony Capella, on the author’s website.

From Page to Plate

Some readers are contributing to the burgeoning food tourism market by seeking out the meals from the pages of their favorite novels in bars, cafés, and restaurants around the world, expanding the idea of “map as menu” (Spang 79). In Shannon McKenna Schmidt’s and Joni Rendón’s guide to literary tourism, Novel Destinations (2009), there is an entire section, “Eat Your Words: Literary Places to Sip and Sup”: dedicated to beverages and food.

The listings include details for John’s Grill, in San Francisco, which still has on the menu Sam Spade’s Lamb Chops, served with baked potato and sliced tomatoes: a meal enjoyed by author Dashiell Hammett and subsequently consumed by his well-known protagonist in The Maltese Falcon (193), and the Café de la Paix, in Paris, frequented by Ian Fleming’s James Bond because “the food was good enough and it amused him to watch the people” (197). Those readers who want to follow in the footsteps of writers can go to Harry’s Bar, in Venice, where the likes of Marcel Proust, Sinclair Lewis, Somerset Maugham, Ernest Hemingway, and Truman Capote have all enjoyed a drink (195) or The Eagle and Child, in Oxford, which hosted the regular meetings of the linkings—a group which included C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien—in the wood-panelled Rabbit Room (203).

A number of eateries have developed their own literary-themed spaces such as the Peacocks Tearooms, in Cambridgeshire, which blends with its own tea. Readers who are also tea drinkers can indulge in the Sherlock Holmes (Earl Grey with Lapsang Souchong) and the Doctor Watson (Keemun and Darjeeling with Lapsang Souchong). Alternatively, readers may prefer to side with the criminal mind and indulge in the Moriarty (Black Chai with Star Anise, Pepper, Cinnamon, and Fennel) (Peacocks). The Mead Bar and Café, in Melbourne, situated in the basement of the State Library of Victoria, caters “to the whimsy and fantasy of the fiction house above” and even runs a book of change program (The Mead). Food, drink and recipes can provide a grapple for or unlavelling, to travel the globe in search of such savoury and sweet treats there is a wide variety of locally-based literary lunches and other meals, that bring together popular authors and wonderful food, routinely organised by book sellers, literature societies, and publishing houses.

There are also many cookbooks now easily obtainable that make it possible to re-create fictional food at home. One of the many examples available is The Book Lover’s Cookbook (2003) by Shaundra Kennedy Wengler and Janet Kay Jensen, a work containing over three hundred pages of: Breakfasts; Main & Side Dishes; Soups; Salads; Appetizers, Breads & Other Finger Foods; Desserts; and Cookies & Other Sweets based on the pages of children’s books, literary classics, popular fiction, plays, poetry, and proverbs. If crime fiction is your preferred genre then you can turn to Joan Evan’s The Crime Lover’s Cookbook (2007), which features short stories in between the pages of recipes. There is also Estelleire Payany’s Recipe for Murder (2010) a beautifully illustrated volume that presents detailed instructions for Pigs in a Blanket based on the Big Bad Wolf’s adventures in The Three Little Pigs (44–7), and Roast Beef with Truffled Mashed Potatoes, which acknowledges Patrick Bateman’s fondness for fine dining in Bret Easton Ellis’s American Psycho (124–7).

Conclusion

Cookbooks and many popular fiction novels are reflections of each other in terms of creativity, function, and structure. In some instances the two forms are so closely entwined that a single volume will concurrently share a narrative while providing
information about, and instruction, on cookery. Indeed, cooking in books is becoming so popular that the line that traditionally separated cookbooks from other types of books, such as romance or crime novels, is becoming increasingly distorted. The separation between food and fiction is further blurred by food tourism and how people strive to experience some of the foods found within fictional works at bars, cafes, and restaurants around the world or, create such experiences in their own homes using fiction-themed recipe books. Food has always been acknowledged as essential for life; books have long been acknowledged as food for thought and food for the soul. Thus food in both the real world and in the imagined world serves to nourish and sustain us in these ways.

References


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Cookery books are usually written by famous chefs. These books are full of dishes telling you how to cook different recipes. They are usually tell you what ingredients you need first. These might be raw meat, vegetables or dairy products like milk and butter. Cookery Books. Cookery books are usually written by famous chefs. These books are full of dishes telling you how to cook different recipes. They are usually tell you what ingredients you need first. These might be raw meat, vegetables or dairy products like milk and butter.

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