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The American Way Of Eating: Undercover At Walmart, Applebee's, Farm Fields And The Dinner Table



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Customer Reviews

*****The book reads like a novel, this first person account of the author's undercover journey into the world of the working poor in the food industry. The author is a remarkable storyteller, recounting all aspects of her adventure in a way that makes you feel like you are entering into her world and joining her and the other workers at each place she is employed. She covers what it felt like, how it was to live and work under harsh conditions, where she lived, the friends she made, the choices she was faced with by living on such a small amount of money. It is fascinating to be able to feel immersed in a world that perhaps few of us would voluntarily enter into, but that many of us find ourselves. The author spends time harvesting grapes with Hispanic farm workers, harvesting peaches, cutting and gleaning garlic, working at Walmart (including in the produce department), and working at Applebee's. During this time the work is grueling--she gets injured and suffers heatstroke, experiences identity theft, and even is sexually assaulted. She is also taken advantage of repeatedly by her employers in so many creative ways that it's mind-boggling. The reader comes to understand and empathize with workers trapped in low-level jobs and see how hard it becomes to fight back and/or to move beyond a daily existence. But this is not really just a memoir of an undercover adventure. It is another book as well, an important social commentary. It is not just about one woman's journey, but it is about our food supply. How it works, what drives it. How, "It is far easier to eat well in American than in most of the world but we've done little to ensure that fresh and healthy food is available to everyone." (pg 153) This book explores answers to the questions: "What would it take for us all to eat well?" and "What are the realities of food and eating in America,

especially for the working poor?" It answers these important questions literally BY telling the author's story, and helps the reader to see why we all need to care about access to fresh and healthy food--to work for equality in so many areas besides food as well. It shows the reader how many of these social issues are inexorably linked. For those who enjoy details (as I do) the book is painstakingly footnoted--the notes take up almost 40 pages of very small print. This was a good way to organize the book, as those who are interested can read every footnote of supporting information (as I did), whereas those who just want a good story can easily avoid all of the detailed information. If you are interested in this topic at all, you will not regret reading this book. To find out more before buying, you can google the book's title and find the author's book web site; the book also has a Facebook page that you can find by searching for the title on Facebook. Highly recommended. *****

This book is so much better than I could have even hoped for. Sure, it has a fascinating and entertaining story about a journalist embedded in farm fields, produce sections, and restaurant kitchens. This is the stuff that probably brings you to the book. It has a great balance of humor, nuance, and heartbreaking stories of the work behind the food we take for granted. So just for that, you won't be disappointed. But there is a whole unexpected side to this book that will rock your world. Tracie McMillan brings some really thought provoking analysis to add context to what she goes through while in the ranks of the nation's food workers. Some of the stats she uncovers will make your jaw drop. Other times she digs up some history, like the development of supermarkets or the impact of the national highway system on how we get our food, and you will be left with a deep new understanding of things you probably never thought about before. Trust me, there are some mind blowing revelations in store for you. I found that this book really made me think, and changed my understanding of the issue of food - not just what food we eat, but what the production of that food means for people working all along the chain. The approach to talking about poverty and economics made these issues accessible and easy to relate to. I didn't feel talked down to, and I didn't feel lectured at. Reading this book is like talking to someone who respects you enough to level with you and give you the real deal. This is the food book you need to read.

I first read about journalist Tracie McMillan's debut book *The American Way of Eating* in a New York Times review by literary critic and author Dwight Garner on February 20th, 2012. He had opened his review with this: "One of the first things to like about Tracie McMillan, the author of *'The American Way of Eating,'* is her forthrightness. She's a blue-collar girl who grew up eating a lot of

Tuna Helper and Ortega Taco Dinners because her mother was gravely ill for a decade, and her father, who sold lawn equipment, had little time to cook. About these box meals, she says, 'I liked them.'"This interested me, as I've been following articles about food and its sources for some time, so it was worth a closer look. I had read and enjoyed Garner's witty and informative 2009 book *Read Me*, so when he closed his review with this comment, I was further intrigued: "By the end of 'The American Way of Eating,' the author ties so many strands of argument together that you'll begin to agree with one of the cooks at Applebee's, who declares about her in awe: 'You see that white girl work? Damn, she can work.'"Author McMillan's book begins with a few paragraphs explaining that her book is "a work of journalism," and that she had gone undercover to write it, choosing to work side by side with the people involved in various aspects of what we look at as the food industry in America today. Her introduction begins with this somewhat jolting statement, and it's one that made this reader sit up and take notice, wondering if her book was going to be some vegan manifesto against anything that had to do with meat: "The first Brooklyn supermarket I ever walked into had a cockroach in the deli. Not one of those stealthy critters stealing along the crevices in the floor, or hanging out backstage in dry storage. No, this was a proud-to-be-here New York City roach, crawling openly up the wall's white tile before dropping, unceremoniously, onto the meat slicer below. I decided to skip the lunchmeat and headed for the produce aisle."My initial suspicions were quickly alleviated, as this book is an actual first-hand exploration, one that took the author to jobs such as picking grapes and peaches in the California fields, then moving on to cutting and gleaning garlic, working right beside the other farmworkers, most of whom she converses with in Spanish, the only gringa, and one making well under minimum wage. This is for nine hours of grueling and physically exhausting work. And in all of this, she's working with the people that she encounters, not standing aside with public relations people and repeating the media hype that is seen in advertisements. She lives with these people, discussing their kids, doctor visits, food... in short all of the things that regular people discuss with their coworkers in almost any field of work in America. From those California fields, author McMillan moves on in Part II to Michigan for a stint working at Wal-Mart, which it turns out, has become the "largest grocer in both the U.S. and the world." Her in-depth observations are both fascinating and revealing, especially since Wal-Mart, founded in 1962, didn't really get into food until the 1980s. While she's describing her experiences working side by side with other employees there, she interleaves the paragraphs with hard facts about how large Wal-Mart is in our American food chain, and she backs it up with extensive footnotes. Part III takes us to the cooking of food, and here she starts as a kitchen novice at Applebee's in Brooklyn, NY. There are over twenty Applebee's restaurants in New York City, and

McMillan was trying to get a kitchen job in food preparation with the chain. This was one of the more fascinating sections of the book, though there's an unsettling part, which results in the author being assaulted (and not by a work colleague) after the get-together following her last night at Applebee's, a place that she had openly enjoyed the work. Each of the book sections starts by listing how much she earned picking, producing or handling food and how much was spent on what she ate, both percentagewise and in terms of annualized salary. Some of these numbers can be quite sobering in terms of comparative living in this country today, and wondering where we may be headed. It's all too easy to compare this book with cultural critic Barbara Ehrenreich's bestselling *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America*, and in that comparison, both Ehrenreich and McMillan have gone undercover among the working people of America. Having read both, this reader found more depth in Ms. McMillan offering, but perhaps that's due to the difference in the fact that self-proclaimed "myth buster" Ehrenreich seems to dwell on class struggles. McMillan's working family background offers a more three-dimensional feel to the people and the situations that she encountered. But there were times that she seemed to be reluctant to get too close or reveal what she was feeling about those with whom she was involved during her work. That may be a subjective observation on this reader's point, but there were times that I found myself waiting for the author to indeed open up with the emotions that she was surely feeling just below the surface, yet so often it went 80% there... and stopped. It should be noted that Ms. McMillan's extensive footnotes sprinkled throughout this book are surprising in both their depth and their accuracy. This reader spent quite a few hours bouncing between the Kindle and the computer looking at some of the sources that she had listed, and it became clear that she had really done her homework. Her appendix entitled "Cheap Food?" is intriguing, and worth the time to read, and her wide-ranging bibliography could make food reading into quite a project for those so interested. This reader has already bookmarked a number of her sources for more in-depth reading. There are some holes here and there in this book, but without making excuses on behalf of the author, that's to be expected in any journalistic work such as this. All questions and answers cannot possibly be put into a book such as this without either making it completely boring or dull, and in this author McMillan has succeeded quite well. What stands out is that this is a good read, and often moving on much like a novel, with dialogue that makes one wonder what's coming next. As a debut offering, this reader is impressed with the depth that Tracie McMillan has gone into with this book. If you're at all interested in food, where it comes from and how it's handled, this book is a solidly recommended 4-star read, and a worthwhile look at the actual politics involved in food policy in America today. I'll be looking forward to what she comes up with next. 3/11/2012

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