
Food and Travel

Twin Readers' Advisory Pleasures

Brad Hooper, Guest Columnist

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Sometimes we can get so caught up in the minutia of our daily work that we forget the passion that brought us to the library profession, and to readers' advisory work in particular. In this issue's column, Brad Hooper rekindles some of that passion as he looks at the connections that readers' advisors can make between food writing and travel writing. Reader interest in narrative nonfiction continues to grow, and Hooper offers here some excellent suggestions on how librarians can support and build on that interest. He reminds us that it is okay to be passionate about books and to communicate that passion to our readers.

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Anthropologists have given us the list of the three basic necessities for human survival: food, shelter, and clothing. But these also can be *pleasures*, not just survival necessities. That is, not just food but *good* food, a *nice* dwelling rather than simply a cave to call home, and *stylish* or at least well-presented clothes as opposed to an animal skin.

To the list of good food, comfortable shelter, and stylish clothing, I would like to add travel. Avid travelers would insist that travel is, first, a survival necessity, and second, a primary source of pleasure in life.

At the risk of getting too complicated—but I believe you will soon see the method in my madness—let's now cut our new list of four down to two, leaving only food and travel. My reason is one word: *writing*. People write columns, articles, and even books about clothing—fashion, specifically, but also costume history. And people write columns, articles, and books about shelter, from building a house by yourself to interior decoration. These materials are widely read and appreciated, but generally by a limited, topic-interested audience and not usually by people whose primary interest is enjoying good, evocative writing.

Food and travel, on other hand, tempt a far broader, more extensive, and less specific-focused readership. I believe that food and travel books easily attract all kinds of general readers that are interested only in good writing.

FOOD AND TRAVEL LITERATURE

Why are books about food (food literature, not cookbooks) and books about travel (travel narratives, not travel guides)

so attractive as reading material? It's because both derive from sensual pleasure: the actual experience of consuming good food and of going to new or familiar places are both reacted to by our senses. The sweet taste of new potatoes, the color pattern of a salad composed of fresh-cut lettuce sprinkled with blue cheese and topped with sliced strawberries, and the nose-tingle of brewing coffee or a curried lamb stew cooking: we react to food with all the salivary anticipation of the rest of our mammalian brethren. The sight of the *Duomo* in Florence, the ironically claustrophobic yet comforting feeling of the vast Midwestern prairie, and the swaying palm trees backdropping a Maui beach are some of the indelible pictures by which place registers in our minds.

The two sensory stimulants food and travel are succinctly yet resonantly linked in this famous Ernest Hemingway quote written to a friend: "If you are lucky enough to have lived in Paris as a young man, then wherever you go for the rest of your life, it stays with you, for Paris is a moveable feast."¹

The image of Paris sits so well with the image of a banquet. Paris and food are connected—easily mentioned, as the Hemingway quote indicates, in the same breath—just like travel writing and food writing, together representing twin passions. The passion generated by food and by travel is reflected in the passion found in food *writing* and travel *writing*.

Here is another quote suggesting the close affinity between place and food (as well as exemplifying what I believe is the *inherent* stylishness of food and travel literature), this one by the great British novelist and travel writer Lawrence Durrell, on this occasion writing about the Rhone River region in France: "All roads lead to Lyons, and no wise traveler will complain for this great city is also the axis of good eating—the very midriff of *haute cuisine*, as it were."²

The point of interest in all this for the readers' advisor is being aware that the joy of food and the delight of travel arise from the same impulse: the need to satiate a sensory desire. And then being aware that food and travel books are *read* to feed identical impulses: the appreciation of a writer's passion for food or travel or both and the seemingly automatic articulateness of a writer when writing about food and travel.

APPEAL FACTORS

Appeal factors remain, of course, the bread and butter of readers' advisory. But readers' advisors might, when it comes to suggesting food and travel books, step away from the appeal-factor system. In other words, don't suggest food literature because it's a "learning experience." Don't go "by the book": the book in this instance being the affixing of some sort of ritualized, codified, reductive labels on books. The same thing applies to travel literature: don't suggest it because of its "fast-paced narrative." You're attempting to share good books here, not selling appliances on the basis of the interchangeability of their parts. Books are your lifeblood. Your *passion*. When suggesting food and travel books, don't speak of ordinary traits. Speak of love and passion. Don't be afraid to say, "I have some books here that were written out of love,

and that love will be the connection between you and those authors and their books."

Occasionally—and food and travel books offer an impeccable occasion—readers' advisors should give free reign to their heart, their passion, to transcend the appeal-factor checklist and define a book for the potential reader in terms of emotion. Don't be afraid to extend both a personal and even vulnerable hand to library patrons by letting them see your emotions rather than your analytical mind.

VICARIOUS RESPONSE

I'm advocating a combined food and travel readers' advisory program. I believe it is a legitimate, authentic, productive, and exciting pairing for both librarian and library patron. People who avidly turn to good books in the first place are willing to let a good storyteller tell a good story, especially when the story is about a good meal or an exciting trip.

Readers' advisors are used to establishing bridges not only between books of the same ilk (books on Civil War history, for example, or good examples of domestic fiction) but also between different types of books altogether (for example, between fiction and nonfiction). Readers' advisors are accustomed to building "reading maps" from one subject area to another.

But here I advise a variation: recommending two books for the reader to take home at the same time, to read one very closely upon finishing the other, or even for "intermingled reading" (reading a chapter or two of one, then a chapter or two of the other, and back in that fashion).

Of course, two books that a reader would enjoy reading so closely together would have to have *much* in common, and I submit food and travel literature for filling such a bill. They can, and should be, recommended in tandem for the reasons I've proposed: both food and travel arise from the same impulse—the need to satiate a sensory desire. And both food and travel books are *read* for the same reason: to share the writer's passion for food or travel.

I present the pairings below as examples of how to construct a food-travel combo. The books I discuss are a mix of classic and contemporary. I offer them for selection purposes as well: each title remains in print.

LET'S READ AND LET'S RECOMMEND

I begin with what I would call a "first-level" partnering of food and travel books: by geographical region and regional cuisine. For this first case I select Italy and Italian food.

The first book in the pairing is widely recognized—at least in its movie version—*Under the Tuscan Sun: At Home in Italy* by Frances Mayes. Mayes is an American creative writing teacher who bought and restored an abandoned villa in a semirural area of the don't-we-all-love-Italian province of Tuscany. Her book is the original I-bought-a-home-in-Tuscany-oh-my-God-what-have-I-done memoir, and it garnered a wide readership. There have been many imitators, as librarians are

well aware. In her delightful book, Mayes discusses the renovation process, of course, but also her acclimatization to her new home as she observes and learns about local architecture, food, customs, and history. Her well-spoken prose reflects her credentials and talent as a writing teacher. Her book received a degree of criticism upon publication for what some readers perceived as condescension toward Italians; I don't see it. Mayes includes recipes in her book, and therein is the segue to the food book I submit as a good pairing with *Tuscan Sun*.

The Lost Ravioli Recipes of Hoboken: A Search for Food and Family is by Laura Schenone, who admits to a former obsession: to find an authentic old family recipe from her family. As obsessions go, this one isn't bad! And for the reader, it's an obsession that makes a charming, engrossing tale. "Over the years," she says, "I have come to see the importance in food, its brightness in human history."³ The old family recipe she settled on was for ravioli, and her pursuit of the recipe's origins led her across the sea to the Ligurian coast of Italy. The overarching story here is the immigrant experience to America.

For my next recommended pairing, I move to another geographical region with a distinctive cuisine and many tourist attractions. I'm speaking of the southeastern and southwestern quarters of France. The obvious pairing of French food and travel literature would be a focus on Paris, home to many Michelin three-star restaurants and world-famous sights, but let's seek a little less obvious matching of a book on French food and one on French travel.

Provence, in southeastern France, is a charming region beckoning both tourists and foodies. One delightful capture of the region is *A Pig in Provence: Good Food and Simple Pleasures in the South of France* by Georgeanne Brennan. This completely absorbing account is about the "food life" of an American woman who was, early on, a precocious cook, but "it was the food of Provence, not [my native] California, that shaped my life."⁴ The book's introduction is a beautifully written paean to food, cooking, and Provençal cuisine. Brennan insists she never intended to become an award-winning cookbook writer, but following that path grew out of passion—*there*, that word again!—for Provence and its people and food. With recipes included as appetite-whetting supplement, her book discusses, among other topics, keeping goats to make cheese and her promotion of garlic because "if a single ingredient could be said to be an essential to Provençal cooking, it would be garlic."⁵

Before the library patron's taste buds have a chance to recuperate, place in her or his still-eager hands the travel-book half of the pairing I'm suggesting, which is *Three Rivers of France* by Freda White. Published in 1952, this travelogue was soon recognized as a classic of travel literature. The area of France that falls within White's interest is the southwest corner, which at the time of the book's release, and even to a great extent today, lays relatively remote and unexplored by American tourists. White guides the reader down the courses of three important rivers in the region: the "sister rivers" of the Dordogne, the Lot, and the Tarn. She shares the abundance of

what there is to enjoy along the rivers, including impressive castles, lovely fields and meadows, and enchanted forests. White then presents chapters on native food, architecture, geology, the local prehistoric caves, and even weather and farming conditions. The particular edition currently in print is heavily and beautifully illustrated; if White's evocative prose is not sufficient enticement to develop a taste for travel there, the stunning photographs will seal the deal.

My next pairing focuses on New York City. Here we mix travel not with so much local cuisine as with what NYC boasts strongest in the food arena: world-class restaurants. I recommend handing the library patron a book called *Heat* by Bill Buford. The author is a staff writer at the *New Yorker*, where portions of this book previously appeared. He was long interested in cooking and hoped to move from the level of mere interest to a place of in-depth knowledge. Consequently, he took a leave from the *New Yorker* and volunteered to be a "kitchen slave" under the tutelage of Mario Batali, chef-owner of Babbo, a three-star Italian restaurant in Manhattan. Buford refers to Batali as the "most recognized chef in a city with more chefs than any other city in the world."⁶ Buford worked the various stations in the kitchen, observing the profane genius Batali in glorious stride. What the reader gets out of this is the pleasure of food preparation being keenly felt and shared by the master chef. Anthony Bourdain, a chef we will discuss later, sees Batali as a Falstaffian character, which is exactly the figure we see emerging from these pages.

Jan Morris is one of the foremost travel writers in the English language; her bibliography is vast and wide. I suggest connecting a Morris book to the above Buford book, and in my eyes, the perfect match would be *Manhattan '45*. New York City in 1945 was shedding its World War II gloom, darkness, and deprivation and becoming the most vibrant city in the world, the financial, artistic, and cultural capital of the universe. This vibrancy emanated from the most active borough of the city: Manhattan. Batali's restaurant represents Manhattan in its style and exuberance today; Morris' book witnesses Manhattan in its nascent brilliance. The conceit of the book is to see the city as it was seen by the first major contingent of returning troops from Europe on the great liner *Queen Mary*. Race relations and economic factors enter into this very rich tapestry, and the author's focus on actual personalities as well as places and trends gives this book its magic. Morris loves this city, and every page sings of her passion.

A CHANGE OF TACK

So far I have offered three sets of pairings, the food book and the travel book linked by geographical area and cuisine peculiar to the area. By now you get what I mean with such pairings, and the fun for you now is to come up with your own "couples" based on this most immediate link.

The other type of link I suggest is by theme, which is a less obvious connection than geography. The late Graham Greene continues to rank as a major British writer of fiction and travel. One of Greene's classic travel books is *The*

Lawless Road, a report on religious persecution in Mexico. He undertook the trip in 1938, and the book appeared a year later (the material he gathered subsequently providing the foundation for one of his most celebrated novels, *The Power and the Glory*, published in 1940). Green spent five weeks in Mexico, and his descriptions of Mexico City, the states of Chiapas and Tabasco, and the tropical city of Veracruz bring the Mexico he observed to vivid life. Readers should be forewarned that Greene proves a grumpy and critical narrator, his view consistently Anglo-centric (his intent to visit rural areas somehow didn't include a preliminary plan to learn Spanish!), and he soon developed a loathing for the country. So, why read the book? Because despite these drawbacks, it remains an indelible capture of time and place rendered in beautifully metaphoric writing. No rule exists that says travel writing has to be sweet and benign, that it can't function as an exposé of unsavory conditions. No one says that the passion behind observations and attitudes when traveling has to be "gosh and golly, isn't this wonderful."

Anyone who has watched Chef Anthony Bourdain's Travel Channel series *No Reservations* knows he is unafraid of speaking his mind. In his book *Kitchen Confidential: Adventures in the Culinary Underbelly*, Bourdain has in common with Graham Greene a rash, tell-it-like-he-sees-it attitude and tone. *Kitchen Confidential* is, also in common with Greene, an exposé: in this instance, of the restaurant business. These are tales told out of school about what goes on in the kitchens of restaurants during and after hours. Bourdain knows of what he speaks; he is executive chef at Brasserie Les Halles in New York City. He's funny, iconoclastic, courageous, and always up for good food and fun. His true confessions about his untamed early life (involving drugs and alcohol but yet a degree from the Culinary Institute of America), and his brutal honesty about what goes on behind closed restaurant doors, is nevertheless underscored by a genuine love of good food, a passion that began during a childhood trip to France. By the way, if a library patron enjoys *Gordon Ramsay's Kitchen Nightmares* on BBC America, chances are she or he will also love Anthony Bourdain!

Unless your library patron has been living on Mars, he or she has heard of at least the movie version of Julie Powell's book *Julie & Julia*. Powell had a boring secretarial job in New York City and was in need of a project, a goal to add meaning to her day-to-day life. She was in the same boat as Julia Child when Child was living in France with her diplomat husband: too much time on her hands. Child's solution had been not only discovering French cooking but also composing her seminal cookbook, *Mastering the Art of French Cooking*. Understandably, Powell couldn't quit her day job, but she did

something better. She cooked her way through Child's masterpiece, preparing all 524 recipes in one year. Further, she wrote about her journey through the cookbook in a blog, which she began in 2002 (when, of course, the concept of blogging was new). Her funny, frank, saucy (pun intended), yet inspiring book is the tale of the whole experience, which she admits "risked her marriage and her sanity and her cat's welfare."

A stimulating partnership with Powell's book—keeping with a theme connection rather than a geographical one—would be *A Winter in Arabia: A Journey through Yemen*, written by the classic British travel writer Freya Stark and published in 1940. The link between this book and Powell's much more contemporary one is that both Powell and Stark set out on a difficult journey to fulfill a personal need. Powell was one of the first Western women to travel through the Arabian Peninsula (this is the 1930s). Specializing in Middle East travel writing, in 1934 she went to what is now Yemen. Her riveting account of her experiences witnesses a world long gone—but not so long gone in terms of attitudes toward women.

CONCLUSION

You are now on your own! I've led you to water, now drink!

As stated above, food and travel books are customarily well written and full of passion. But readers' advisors, in coming up with their own books to pair, should read them first and determine whether you believe the passion is indeed there.

These pairings will provoke great book discussions: between you and the reader to whom you have recommended the pairing, both beforehand and after the reader has enjoyed (hopefully!) the books and between the reader's reading friends. So it nearly goes without saying that one of these pairings, or a full set of them, are natural material for book clubs. And there *you* have it: your near-obligation to suggest them as such!

The future is yours! The wonderful world of food and travel combinations awaits you.

References

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5. *Ibid.*, 151.
6. Bill Buford, *Heat* (New York: Vintage, 2006): 5.