

100

Title: **Fast Food Nation**
Author: Eric Schlosser
Place of Publication: New York
Publisher: Perennial (Imprint of Harper Collins Publishers)
Date of Publication: January 17, 2001 (Original); January 8, 2002 (Reprint '02 Paperback) July 5, 2005 (Reprint '05 Paperback)
Edition Statement: With a New Afterword, Reprinted from 2001 Houghton Mifflin Edition
Number of Pages: 400 (Reprint '02)
Special Features: Introduction, Epilogue, Afterword, Notes, Bibliography, Index
Price: \$13.95 (Original and Reprint '02; Paperback); \$14.95 (Reprint '05; Paperback)
ISBN: 0060938455

Eric Schlosser was born on August 17, 1959 and is a native to New York City, spending the majority of his childhood in Manhattan. He graduated from Princeton University with a degree in history, and went on to be a struggling playwright and novelist; eventually finding a steady income with a New York film company. Around the same time, his father Herbert Schlosser made a career change from being a Wall Street lawyer to becoming a broadcaster, and eventually the President of NBC in 1974. He decided to switch to a career in journalism on the advice of friends and family and scored a position at the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1996. Ironically, he had no experience in the field except for a single undergrad class that he took at Princeton taught by the renowned John McPhee. Schlosser later credited McPhee for giving him the "chutzpah" to venture down the path of journalism. Originally an article for the *Rolling Stone's* magazine in 1996, Schlosser expanded his investigation on the effects of the fast food industry and published Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal in 2001. The book became an instant bestseller and considered required assigned reading at universities all across the nation. Although Schlosser rarely makes public appearances, he toured the country speaking about the risks to food supply from bioterrorism, and was even invited to the US Senate and House of

Representatives. He authored Reefer Madness: Sex, Drugs, and Cheap Labor in the American Black Market in 2003, which also became an instant bestseller. His other journalistic works have been featured in Rolling Stone, Vanity Fair, The Nation, and The New Yorker. He was awarded with the National Magazine Award for the piece he wrote about marijuana and the war on drugs. He is currently married to Shauna Redford, daughter of Hollywood-sensation Robert Redford, and is the father of two children. His next book investigates and explores the American prison systems.

↓ Blend these two

The 19th century French novelist Anatole France once said, “A person is never happy except at the price of some ignorance.” That is certainly the philosophy wrapped up inside every Happy Meal that passes into the eager hands of children over the counter at McDonald’s. Eric Schlosser’s muckraking epic Fast Food Nation explores the unforeseen consequences and impact of the fast food industry around the world, and especially America, illustrating the ripple effect it has on every aspect of American life, from morbid obesity to disenfranchised potato farmers in Idaho. As we venture through the book, it is evident that Schlosser’s research is thorough and facts sound, but it is the manner in which he makes clear connections between ^{seemingly} arbitrary ideas, trends, and themes, manifests his charming, reader-friendly style, and synthesizes all the elements into a masterpiece of provocative reasoning and firm logic that makes Fast Food Nation a gem in the realm of journalism.

Schlosser opens his book with a vivid portrait of the Cheyenne Mountains in Colorado, home of the Cheyenne Mountain Air Force Station, described as one of the most technologically sophisticated and secretive places in the world. And yet, the Domino’s deliveryman casually

bypasses the core of the nation's defense systems every evening to drop off the cartload of pizzas stashed in the back of his truck. Schlosser uses this example to illustrate how fast food has truly infiltrated *every* aspect of this nation's ^llivelihood.

Schlosser provides ample research in the pages and pages discussing the cause and effect of the unchecked practices of multinational corporations and its role in shaping the US economy; however, I felt Schlosser's investigation into the social and psychological aspects attributed to the fast food industry to be much more insightful. Schlosser makes a keen observation on an interviewee's home, "The place feels like everything McDonald's is not—lively, unruly, idiosyncratic and organized according to a highly complex scheme that only one human being could understand" (246). McDonald's is notorious for its complete uniformity. Every visit is greeted by a friendly, clean, and *safe* environment. Going to a McDonald's is a *safe* choice because there are no surprises—you get exactly what you expect. Schlosser describes the drive for conformity to be one of McDonald's most critical psychological marketing techniques.

The opening chapter of the book traces the story of the fast food magnates and the circumstances by which they beat the odds and fulfilled the "American dream." This is a significant chapter because Schlosser establishes his key concept of the "ideal America" that the rest of the book is contrasted against; an America that trumpeted free enterprise and fair competition, an America that allowed any man with a vision and a soul to rise to the top, an America that valued the quality of their products and the opinions of their consumer, an America before fast food. In a way, there is ^{great}~~much~~ irony to the fact that these entrepreneurs were able to build these empires on the virtues of opportunity and free enterprise, and now those very same empires are responsible for suppressing and manipulating the system that allowed them to rise to

the top. In comparison with the America of the 40's, Schlosser send a clear message: things are bleak.

The style in which Schlosser hashes together the personal histories of corporate moguls is characteristic of the narrative-style journalism known as the “non-fiction novel,” made famous by Truman Capote in 1966 with the publishing of In Cold Blood, the first of its genre, dovetailing the staunch credibility of journalistic writing with the elements of literary prose. This unique fusion between two styles provides a medium for the reader to connect with facts and events on a human level. This variation of style is interspersed throughout the book and appears at the beginning of every chapter, but there is one in particular that was the most striking to me as a human being, and that was the trifling tale of Iowa-native Kenny Dobbins.

Growing up in Keokuk, Iowa, Dobbins led an extremely difficult childhood with an abusive stepfather. After failing to secure a steady income in his home city, Dobbins ventured to Nebraska where he found employment at a Monfort slaughterhouse. After trying to boldly rescue one of his fellow coworkers, Dobbins' lower back was impaled by the metal rim of a conveyor belt—he went back to work. Subsequent injuries occurred, including the incineration of his lungs from toxic cleaning chemicals—he went back, a broken leg—he went back, a massive heart attack—he went back, and perhaps the most outrageous of all, head-on physical collision with a train...he went back; all injuries occurring while performing tasks for the slaughterhouse. After each injury, Kenny got the “quick fix” by the company doctors (he was denied health benefits to see other doctors) and eagerly went back to work, his loyalty to Monfort unwavering. It was later reported that “Monfort was trying to get rid of Kenny, trying to make his work so unpleasant that he'd quit. Kenny didn't realize it. ‘He still believes in his heart that people are honest and good,’ the former manager said about Kenny. ‘And he's wrong.’” (188). At first, Monfort manipulated

and exploited his injuries, putting him on a pedestal and championing him as the ideal worker. After *two near-death* rescue attempts, his name was “featured” in a company newsletter and he later received a paper certificate of recognition. It was not until Kenny was recovering from his heart attack that Monfort decided to fire him, despite sixteen years of unquestionable loyalty and sacrifice. This story of suffering and affliction for a trivial cause is perhaps the most horrifying and infuriating five-pages I have ever read in my life—and truly the most effective use of the narrative technique in the book.

Although Schlosser subscribes to narration to add a human depth to his book, he rarely inflates or exaggerates his language and diction in order to evoke these emotions. In an interview with Jay MacDonald, Schlosser says he tried his best to “emotional volume turned down” and kept his writing style “deliberately calm and not full of invective.” His subdued language credits him as an objective journalist as opposed to a raving agitator. He lets the facts and evidence speak for themselves, never embellishing or downplaying truths. However, Schlosser never passes an opportunity to throw his reader for a loop with his armada of shocking facts. He masterfully blends these otherwise alarming and out-of-place pieces of information with his narration, enhancing the continuity and fluidity of the book without sacrificing its provocative nature. Nevertheless, his role as the author resides merely in selecting, organizing, and making connections that might otherwise not have been apparent, but leaving the reader to do the interpreting.

However, the power to *select*—and naturally, to censor—information appearing in a book must not be belittled. There are instances where Schlosser trespasses over the border between fact and opinion. One such instance might have cost him his credibility with a sizable proportion of American citizens. Targeting meatpacking industries and agricultural monopolies is all fair-

game because it is specific enough to where it is only associated with a small minority, but when Schlosser attacks the moral values and integrity of *the* Republican Party, he is risking alienation of over half of the American population. “The first two years of the Clinton administration, OSHA seems like a revitalized agency... The election of 1994, however, marked a turning point. The Republican majority in Congress that rose to power that year not only impeded the adoption of ergonomic standards but also raised the questions about the future of OSHA... House Republicans have worked hard to limit OSHA’s authority... the Reagan and Bush administration cut spending on public health measures and staffed the U.S. Department of Agriculture with officials far more interested in government deregulation than food safety,” (Schlosser, 185, 206). Schlosser should have been more sensitive to political insinuations in order to package his argument in a more tactful way. However, he does address this issue in his afterword (which was not included in the first edition) claiming “it is a sad but undeniable fact that for the past two decades the right wing of the Republican Party has worked closely with the fast food industry and meatpacking industry to oppose food safety laws, worker safety laws, and increases in the minimum wage,” (227). Schlosser remains convicted and adamant on his position, for better or for worse.

“A savage servility slides by on grease,” writes two-time Pulitzer Prize winner Robert Lowell in his 1964 piece “For the Union Dead,” a poem detailing the gross consequences of heavy urbanization and industrialization, as observed in his hometown of Boston. And such are the opening words to Schlosser’s book. However, it was not until the very end of the book—after all the unfathomable horrors and injustices had been laid bare—that Schlosser reveals his central thesis to the audience: that the responsibility for change lies in our hands. In the closing paragraphs of his epilogue, he states “The executives who run the fast food industry are not bad

men. They are businessmen...They will sell whatever sells at a profit. The usefulness of the market, its effectiveness as a tool, cut both ways. The real power of the American consumer has not yet been unleashed” (269). The potato farmers and ranchers answer to the agricultural and meatpacking companies, the agricultural and meatpacking companies to the fast food industry, and the fast food industry to the demands made by their customers. It is a significant connection that Schlosser labors to bring to the attention of the reader throughout the entire book and the definitive example of his clarity of reasoning and ability to make connections. It is only at the end that we can appreciate the wholesome truth provided by the quote at the beginning, crying out against ignorance in our enslavement to fast food.

Schlosser’s book is a journalistic masterpiece complete with mind-boggling facts and eye-opening revelations; its narrative-style allowing for a rigid construct of arguments to flow seamlessly like a novel with clarity and precision. Fast Food Nation is a book that will forever live on in my memory, especially when I’m tempted to make a stop at the golden arches. As Schlosser put it, “think about where the food came from, about how and where it was made...then place your order. Or turn and walk out the door. It’s not too late. Even in this fast food nation, you can still have it your way,” (270).

OUTLINE

I. Book Information

II. Biographical Sketch

III. Introduction

A. Cheyenne Mountains

1. Cheyenne Mountain Air Force Station

IV. Body

A. Social and Psychological Aspects

1. Uniformity of Quality
2. "Safe" Choice

B. Opening Chapters

1. Tales of the Fast Food Magnates
2. The "Ideal America"

C. Style

1. Truman Capote's "non-fiction novel"

D. Kenny Dobbins

E. Language and Diction

1. Subdued and Calm
2. Letting the facts "speak for themselves"

F. Power of Selection and Censorship

1. Crossing the Objective/Subjective Border
 - a) Alienation of Republicans

G. Schlosser's Central Thesis

V. Conclusion

A. "Have it Your Way"

NOTES

“A savage servility slides by on grease”- Robert Lowell

From the poem “For the Union Dead”

The closing lines from Lowell’s poem, “For the Union Dead,” involving the consequences of urbanization as observed in Boston, the subject of the poem. In the context of the poem, “grease” is referring to oil that fuels cars. However, taken out of context, it can be viewed as metaphor for the economic and social mire that the fast food industry

Full name: Robert Traill Spence Lowell IV
Two-time Pulitzer Prize Winner
National Book Award

Central Thesis: We are in control of this situation. Fast food industries only provide what the consumer wants. All a chain of cause and effect, and consumers at the beginning of that chain.

Lack of strict government regulation leads to blatant corruption. Businesses will go on their natural discourse of trying to raise profits. It is up to the government to lay down the law and force these companies to follow proper guidelines

Stylistic Interpretation

- ❖ Narrative format made famous by Truman Capote
- ❖ Connects the book with reality and real-life situations and people that are being affected by the “epidemic”
- ❖ This was most potent in the account of Iowa-native Kenny Dobbins
- ❖ The language used is commonplace and subdued; nothing is too inflated or out of proportion; Schlosser lets the facts speak for themselves
- ❖ Makes arguments through sound reasoning and any appeal made to the audience is made through evidence; only place where he sidesteps this is in his epilogue, where he summarizes his arguments and makes a final appeal to his reader
- ❖ Rigid organization to offset reasoning and logic but flows seamlessly like a novel
- ❖ Language is subdued even though the evidence itself is shocking as it is provocative
- ❖ Only place where he violates complete objectivity is when he speaks of the Republican Party and their role in the rise of the fast food industry; addressed in afterword
- ❖ At times, it seems as if Schlosser has ventured out too far out of the scope of his thesis, losing the reader amidst a sea of facts that are connected arbitrarily to fast food; especially when he writes about the working conditions in meatpacking factories or the potato and chicken farmers, forcing the reader to make arbitrary connections; but he eventually brings it back and locks it down to his thesis; however, it seems as if the horizon is wide. No matter how far Schlosser goes, it almost always has some connection with the fast food industry;
- ❖ At times, the plight regarding the chicken and potato farmers seems to be an emotional appeal to the audience that is not necessary to understand the grand scheme of fast

food takeover. However, it is effective in that it shows how fast food's influence starts big at the top and eventually trickles down to the nations poor and impoverished

Explores the psychological effects of fast food
The "meaning" of fast food

Social consequences
Advertisement in schools
Workforce mentality

Economic consequences
Corporation takeover
Unfair competition

Political consequences
Government subsidization
Government inadequacies

Entire book revolves around "unseen consequences" that lurk in the shadows
Fast food is fake and surreal. Made to be a façade. All corporations have a tendency to put on a façade to gain the profits

Paints a picture of the ideal "rural" America; antagonizes

Contrasts American ideals and values from the time before fast food and the time after
Does not state that the perspective changed as a result of fast food, but it is definitely representative of the shift

It is evident that Schlosser's research is thorough and facts sound, but it is the manner in which he makes clear connections between arbitrary ideas, manifests his charming, reader-friendly style, and synthesizes all the elements into a masterpiece of provocative reasoning and firm logic that makes Fast Food Nation a gem in the realm of journalism.

THEMES:

Supporters of "Free Enterprise" are in fact manipulating the system for gain

DIALECTICAL JOURNALS

- “The insects are collect, dried, and ground into pigment. It takes about 70,000 of them to produce one pound of carmine, which is used to make processed foods look pink, red, or purple,” (129)

How many Americans honestly know that the packaged foods on the shelves of the grocery stores are colored by crushed insects? This seems like something that would come from a lame Hollywood picture. But in retrospect, how many Americans would actually stop eating packaged foods after learning about this? One, it almost seems too surreal to be true, and two, it is unavoidable. What else is there to eat?

- “Supervisors have been known to sell crank to their workers or to supply it free in return for certain favors, such as working a second shift,” (177)

Another example of his subdued and impersonal tone while consciously writing outrageous and alarming facts. As a reviewer put it, Schlosser is “alarming without being alarmist.” It is one of the key elements that allows for his book to be so credible and such a success. A reader would get bogged down if he should choose to flounder them with his input and opinion. He constructs his argument by simply letting the evidence speak.

- “The first two years of the Clinton administration, OSHA seems like a revitalized agency... The election of 1994, however, marked a turning point. The Republican majority in Congress that rose to power that year not only impeded the adoption of ergonomic standards but also raised the questions about the future of OSHA... House Republicans have worked hard to limit OSHA’s authority... the Reagan and Bush administration cut spending on public health measures and staffed the U.S. Department of Agriculture with officials far more interested in government deregulation than food safety,” (185, 206)

Schlosser goes borderline biased when he puts the blame on Republican Party officials for the failure of food safety laws. He mentions in his afterword that he could have been kinder, but facts are facts, and what he was saying was the “blatant truth.” Nevertheless, he risks potentially alienating a large majority of people.

- “Monfort was trying to get rid of Kenny, trying to make his work so unpleasant that he’d quit. Kenny didn’t realize it. ‘He still believes in his heart that people are honest and good,’ the former manager said about Kenny. ‘And he’s wrong.’” (188).

This was by the far the most heart-wrenching part of the book. It is enough to move anyone with a conscience. Even after a being hit by a train, Dobbins still goes back because he believes in the inherent goodness of human nature. Monfort stops at nothing to strip him of his dignity and life when he sees that Dobbins’ injuries are becoming a liability. Monfort makes him into his puppet, a public display of company loyalty—all the while having malicious intentions to cut him loose. Monfort eventually fires him in the end. Dobbins returns home with a shattered life and no purpose.

- “...compared sanitary conditions in a modern feedlot to those in a crowded European city during the Middle Ages, when people dumped their chamber pots out the window, raw sewage ran in the streets, and epidemics raged,” (201)

It is rare for Schlosser to make a reference to a time period that is out of the range of the fast food chronology. Normally, he strictly focuses on the modern and post-modern era because fast food itself is a moderately recent byproduct of an industrializing world. Of course, when necessary, and for effect, Schlosser pulls parallels from the vast tomes of history.

- “In the years since the Jack in the Box outbreak, David Theno has emerged as a fast food maverick, applauded by consumer groups and considered ‘the Antichrist,’ he says, by many in the meatpacking industry,” (208)

Schlosser uses a bit of humor here to illustrate the ridiculous arguments made by corporate officials. He shows the seriousness of the meatpackers when he includes “Antichrist” in the descriptions of food safety officials.

- “ ‘We can fine circuses for mistreating elephants,’ Secretary of Agriculture Dan Glickman complained in 1997, ‘but we can’t fine companies that violating food safety standards’ ” (214)

Schlosser exemplifies how ridiculous the food-safety situation has become. The US government has enacted legislation that has proved ineffective and incomprehensive time and time again, letting companies find ways around the new laws or failing to enforce them efficiently.

- “...discovered far more fecal bacteria in the average American kitchen sink than on the average American toilet” (221)

Simply another demonstration of the armada of “shocking” facts that Schlosser enlists to awe and disgust the audience into seeing his point. These examples also serve to point out the blatant ignorance of the American people in what occurs in their own homes. These revelations are some of the most notable elements of this book, as it shows the thoroughness of Schlosser’s research.

- “At a primary school in Beijing, Yunxiang Yan found that all of the children recognized an image of Ronald McDonald. The children told Yan they liked “Uncle McDonald” because “funny, gentle, kind, and... he understood children’s hearts.’ Coca-Cola is now the favorite drink among Chinese children, and McDonald’s serves their favorite food. Simply eating at a McDonald’s in Beijing seems to elevate a person’s social status” (231)

The globalization of McDonald’s now proves more profitable than the domestic enterprise. McDonald’s appeal is derived from its symbolic representation of Western culture, a sign of industrialization and urbanization, and ultimately, progress and a higher standard of living. That is why so many foreign countries embrace and welcome McDonald’s with open arms. However, this unchallenged welcome leads to unchallenged influence on youth. There is no preexisting opposition to McDonald’s in foreign countries like there is in America, allowing the corporation free access to influence the tastes of young minds.

- “Gorbachev sounded like a politician from a distant era, from a time before sound bites. He was serious, long-winded, and sometimes difficult to follow. His mere presence at the Mirage was far more important to this crowd than anything he said” (239)

This moment was dubbed by Schlosser as “an epiphany [revealing] the strange power of fast food in the new world order” for good reason. It sums up the American mindset in a single situation. Gorbachev was considered “a relic of past” because of his belief in thoroughness and completeness. Americans today have a mindset of rapid consumption and regurgitation, maximizing time and profit. Gorbachev stood for everything Americans weren’t: deliberate, focused, purposeful. His philosophy stood for what works *best*. Americans stood for what works *fastest* and *cheapest*.

- “This McDonald’s was in Dachau, but it could have been anywhere—anywhere in the United States, anywhere in the world. Millions of other people at that very moment were standing at the same counter, order the same food, from the same menu food that tasted everywhere the same” (234)
- “The place feels like everything McDonald’s is not—lively, unruly, idiosyncratic and organized according to a highly complex scheme that only one human being could understand” (246)

Although on the verge of violating the objectivity that makes this book credible, Schlosser makes a significant observation that provides insight into the psychological aspect of McDonald’s. The order and cleanliness of the restaurants provide a refuge for the hectic outside world. Perhaps the most notable achievement in McDonald’s psychological campaign is the strict uniformity of its restaurants and menu options. Customers can expect the same thing every time they visit a McDonald’s wherever they are in the world. It provides a *safe* choice of food, where there are no surprises. This, according to Schlosser, works against the “individuality” of the human psyche.

- “The profits of the fast food chain have been made possible by losses imposed on the rest of society. The annual cost of obesity alone is now twice as large as the fast food industry’s total revenues”

Schlosser outlines how the medical costs of the fast food industry are unreasonable because they exceed the revenues of the fast food industry twofold. Obesity issues are only mentioned briefly because they fall under the umbrella of health issues, which are thoroughly discussed in the chapters about the meatpacking industries. I would not blame Schlosser for not diving into the subject too much. There is not enough concrete evidence that can connect fast food with obesity because ultimately, it is the customer’s choice as to what he eats.

- “ ‘but again, we have never made any vegetarian claims about our french fries—never [McDonald’s correspondence to Harish Bharti, a Jainist attorney who sued McDonald’s after discovering that McDonald’s fries contain traces of meat in them] ‘... We presently serve several items that vegetarians can enjoy at McDonald’s—garden salads, French fries, and hash browns (cooked in 100 percent vegetable oil)...’ [Letter forwarded to Bharti; McDonald’s Customer Satisfaction Department” (280)

This is one of many instances in which Schlosser exhibits the blatant lies that McDonald’s tells its costumers. Of course, this particular instance could maybe have been a miscommunication. An instance in which the customer service agent imparted false information. However, in the context of things, it is more likely that it was another one of McDonald’s marketing schemes to give the impression that their food is healthy.

- “Small increases in the cost of beef, chicken and potatoes would raise fast food menu prices by a few pennies, if at all” (268)

This coincides with Schlosser’s thesis that economics are not the issue, but *motivation* for change. The fast food industry sees no reason to overhaul their current system and go through the trouble of rewriting policies and enforcing them if the consumer market sees no fault in them. Schlosser beckons consumers to stand-up for our food safety and the preservation of healthy free-market capitalism.

- “The executives who run the fast food industry are not bad men. They are businessmen... They will sell whatever sells at a profit. The usefulness of the market, its effectiveness as a tool, cut both ways. The real power of the American consumer has not yet been unleashed” (269)
- “The American Meat Institute, which routinely fought against any mandatory food safety measures proposed by the federal government, made no complaint about these new rules. ‘If McDonald’s is requiring something of their suppliers, it has a pretty profound effect,’ said an AMI spokeswoman. What the FDA had failed to achieve—after nearly five years of industry consultation and halfhearted regulation—the McDonald’s Corporation accomplished in a matter of weeks” (275)

This demonstrates the unquestionable power of the McDonald’s Corporation over their suppliers. FDA regulations are often ignored because they do not bolster the interests of the suppliers but of the consumers. The suppliers do not deal directly with the costumers and therefore see no need for change because it doesn’t *directly* affect profit and production rates. But who they *do* directly deal with is the McDonald’s Corporation, who in turn deal with the consumers. Schlosser’s thesis revolves around this relationship in which the consumers have the ultimate power in changing the attitudes and policies of the fast food industry and all industries affected by it. He also offers his opinion that the responsibility only partially lies with the fast food executives. The rest lies with us.

- “Tyson Foods takes leftover chicken meat and skin and intestines from its poultry slaughterhouses, ships the to Tyson feed plants, adds them to chicken feed, and then provides the feed to Tyson growers so that baby chicks can eat their ancestors” (287)

Schlosser not only utilizes his typical “shock” method, but also words the statement in a way that might come off as biased and partial. The phrase “baby chicks can eat their ancestors” is overtly suggestive to the point where it can be deemed subjective. Some might argue that Schlosser was merely trying to prove his thesis in an effective way, but throughout the book, he often leans over the boundary towards slander and opinion.