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



## Synopsis

bestselling work of undercover journalism offers "a compelling and cogent argument that eating healthily ought to be easier" (> Cleveland Plain Dealer). >When award-winning (and working-class) journalist Tracie McMillan saw foodies swooning over \$9 organic tomatoes, she couldn't help but wonder: What about the rest of us? Why do working Americans eat the way we do? And what can we do to change it? To find out, McMillan went undercover in three jobs that feed America, living and eating off her wages in each. Reporting from California fields, a Walmart produce aisle outside of Detroit, and the kitchen of a New York City Applebee's, McMillan examines the reality of our country's food industry in this "clear and essential" (The Boston Globe) work of reportage. Chronicling her own experience and that of the Mexican garlic crews, Midwestern produce managers, and Caribbean line cooks with whom she works, McMillan goes beyond the food on her plate to explore the national priorities that put it there. Fearlessly reported and beautifully written, *The American Way of Eating* goes beyond statistics and culture wars to deliver a book that is fiercely honest, strikingly intelligent, and compulsively readable. In making the simple case that "city or country, rich or poor" everyone wants good food, McMillan guarantees that talking about dinner will never be the same again.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"The book Ms. McMillan's most resembles is Barbara Ehrenreich's bestseller *Nickel and Dimed*.

Like Ms. Ehrenreich, Ms. McMillan goes undercover amid this country's working poor...This is a voice the food world needs."-- Dwight Garner, The New York Times "This book is vital. McMillan has the writing skills to bear witness, the research background to provide context, and the courage to take on the challenging task."--A Los Angeles Times "The genius, genius Tracie McMillan went from growing up eating a lot of processed foods to cultivating an interest in fancier, local cuisine, to even writing for high-end culinary publications including *Saveur* mag. Her personal journey led her to write this must read, which investigates our food system and what's exactly keeping Americans from eating well, and what we can do to fix it. (Did I mention genius?)"

-glamour.com "Valiant...McMillan's undercover work for *The American Way of Eating* takes readers on an educational journey." • San Francisco Chronicle

The New York Times: A Before the Food Arrives on Your Plate, So Much Goes on Behind the Scenes By A DWIGHT GARNER Published: February 20, 2012 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 A Tuna Helper A 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." Expensive food that took time to prepare "wasn't for people like us," she writes. "It was for the people my grandmother described, with equal parts envy and derision, as A fancy; my father's word was A snob. And I wasn't about to be like that." This is a voice the food world needs. Ms. McMillan, like a lot of us, has grown to take an interest in fresh, well-prepared food. She's written for *Saveur* A magazine, a pretty fancy journal, and she knows her way around a kitchen. But her central concern, in her journalism and in this provocative book, is food and class. She stares at America's bounty, noting that so few seem able to share in it fully, and she asks: "What would it take for us all to eat well?" The title of Ms. McMillan's book pays fealty to Jessica Mitford's classic of English nonfiction prose, "The American Way of Death" (1963). Ms. McMillan's sentences don't have Mitford's high style -- they're a pile of leeks, not shallots -- but both books traffic in dark humor. Standing in a Walmart, where she has taken a minimum-wage job, Ms. McMillan observes that its "produce section is nothing less than an expansive life-support system." Most days, when it comes to vegetables, she's putting lipstick on corpses. The book Ms. McMillan's most resembles is Barbara Ehrenreich's best seller "Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America" (2001). Like Ms. Ehrenreich, Ms. McMillan goes undercover amid this country's working poor. She takes jobs picking grapes, peaches and garlic in California; stocking produce in a Walmart in Detroit; and working in a busy Applebee's in the Flatbush

neighborhood of Brooklyn. She tries, and often fails, to live on only the money she earns. The news Ms. McMillan brings about life on the front lines is mostly grim. In the California fields, where she is the only gringa, she makes far less than minimum wage, sometimes as little as \$26 for nine hours of back-breaking work. She lives in cockroach-filled houses, all she can afford, with more than a dozen other people. She delivers a brutal takedown of corporations that, in her view, pretend on their sunny Web sites to treat workers well but in practice use labor contractors that often cheat them. She names names. Here's looking at you, the Garlic Company in Bakersfield, Calif. She charts the toll this work takes on people's health. "My thighs look as though they've been attacked by an enraged but weaponless toddler," she writes after a day of garlic picking. "My hands, swollen and inundated with blisters the first few days, have acclimatized, but there's a worrisome pain shooting up my right arm." She develops a sprain, which forces her to miss work and ultimately quit. Other workers, she notes, would not have that option. Among this book's central points is that food workers are, in terms of money and time, among the least able to eat well in America. Most are too exhausted to cook. "By the time I finish my stint at Applebee's," Ms. McMillan says, "I'll have learned how to spot the other members of my tribe on the subway: heavy-lidded eyes, blank stares, black pants specked with grease, hard-soled black shoes." Ms. McMillan's chapters about Walmart and Applebee's are the book's best. She is not a slash-and-burn critic of either company: both provide needed jobs and treat their employees at least moderately well. But you will steer clear of both places after reading about her travails. The produce sold at the Walmart where she works is second-rate, often slimy, mushy or merely bland. "Walmart doesn't always have the freshest stuff," one manager says to her. "That's how we keep th --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

\*\*\*\*\*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 America 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.\*\*\*\*\*

Imagine you're a woman interested in food practices in the United States so you go undercover living on what you earn in three sectors: a) working as a migrant worker in California; b) working at Walmart in Michigan; and c) working at an Applebees in New York City. In a nutshell, this is Tracie McMillan's story of these experiences. She stated her interest as: "how food works in our lives, how priorities around health and convenience and cost shift when resources are tight, and what we won't compromise on even when they are" (p. 12). The thing is - everyone eats. No culture, people group, community, or person is exempt from this fact. McMillan's first hand experiences illuminate and gives voice to the lived experiences of people living at or near minimum wage. She touches on so many interesting topics: \* The historical enculturation of food as 'fast' and the subsequent impact on the way we approach eating, cooking, and nutrition \* The cultural belief that 'foodies' are upper class enlightened souls versus the notion that working classes aren't interested in food. Her personal examples and the way food was used as a part of community and relationships blasted the prior

view. The reality is that everyone is interested in food.\* Emphasis on food supply as a distribution problem has created and exacerbated food freshness, food costs, and food availability.\* Issues of access and cost have created a food divide where working class people do not have access and/or cannot afford the food that is provided. She used the term food desert to describe those areas where affordable fresh, health, affordable food is difficult to find.\* Educational practices around meal planning, nutrition, and eating. Realistically some simply do not know how to plan meals, shop, and cook. If you grew up solely on hamburger helper - this may be the only way you know to 'cook'\*\* Class, gender, and ethnic aspects of food workThe book is well cited with a bibliography so that you can read more. My only critique is that I read this book alone on a plane. I wanted/want to spend time discussing this book with others - food related issues are simply some of the more critical issues facing us particularly obesity and healthcare. More importantly though, perhaps the most important thing is my underlying belief that food practices contribute a great deal to community, the deep sense of community that we share with one another. In the book, even when there was insufficient money to 'make it' - people shared food, they made sure McMillan had sufficient food to eat. Food is a great source of communion and community. I know of no topic as vital, no topic with the capacity to help us transcend difference, no topic that can so quickly connect us with positive memories (e.g., wedding cake, communion, picnics, family dinners, etc.). When we disconnect food from people and community - it may easily become a product to be distributed...to the detriment of us all. These are the thoughts that bubble up for me as I reflect on this book (smile).

This book is worth it just for the anecdote about the Detroit hipster trying to explain why his being "really into food" is different from your average resourceful Mexican-American mom. McMillan gives a powerful reality check to precious foodie culture--not saying that \$9 tomatoes are inherently terrible, but simply telling the story of how regular food gets to your plate. And, more important: the stories of the people who get it there. They may not be "foodies," but, as McMillan so clearly shows, they care just as much about food as anyone else in America--and have just as much of a right to it. The book mixes McMillan's personal experience working at the bottom end of the food industry with extremely well-written reportage, for general context. Nearly every personal story she tells is backed up with research that shows it's not an anomaly. The stats are there, but it's McMillan's stories that will stick with me. The woman who considers a fresh orange a "treat" because it's so expensive? That's how wrong things are. This is a powerful book, very much in the style of Barbara Ehrenreich's "Nickel and Dimed." Like Ehrenreich's book, it's a bit overwhelming to see just how grim the economic situation really is in America--and to consider what it would take to change

it. McMillan has some ideas, and perhaps the most powerful one is that the food production system should be treated more like a public utility than a private corporate tool. It's a pretty radical concept, but when you get to the end of this book, you'll see how it makes sense.

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