

Review: Open Ears

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Open Ears

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***Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal.* By Eric Schlosser. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2001. 288 pages. \$25.00 (cloth). \$13.95 (paper).**

***American Studies.* By Louis Menand. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002. 306 pages. \$25.00 (cloth).**

SOME GUITAR PLAYERS MAKE A POINT of listening to horn players and pianists, rather than exclusively to other guitar players, to imbibe a richer assortment of musical ideas and influences. The point is not to make one's playing sound less guitaristic, it is to develop a more supple, expansive musical intelligence. And guitar players, especially, need to listen across the instrumental disciplines because guitar culture has a near-pathological tendency to turn in upon itself, reproducing licks and fetishizing density of fretboard technique to the exclusion of other elements of musicality.

Scholars, too, should cultivate open ears. Even at its most densely inward-turning, scholarly writing can be forceful and purposeful, even beautiful, but it can also pile rote licks atop stock ideas until the reader cries uncle. Editors at university presses, who care about scholarship but habitually use words like "afflicted" to describe the academy's effect on writing, are almost kidding when they portray themselves as running halfway houses for recovering obscurantists. They are also saying something important to those who will listen. Scholars can make their own writing more supple, more expansive, more persuasive—

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okay, better—by paying attention to the styles and methods of writers operating beyond the ambit of the university or the refereed publication. And those who write about culture, especially contemporary culture, stand to gain the most from opening their ears to a wider set of influences. Many of the usual complaints about scholarly prose—that it is impenetrably self-regarding, self-ghettoizing, hostile to the nonspecialist reader, irrelevant to public conversation—amount to saying that it fails to address or even imagine the reasons why any reader might care about its putative subject matter. This failure registers with special sharpness when scholarly writing drains the life from popular literature, movies, music, food, sport, or some other ripely significant aspect of culture in which a variety of people invest strong feelings and complicated ideas.

Ideally, a scholar comes out of graduate school with something to say and tools to say it. The tools are mostly acquired through study of other scholars. That makes sense; apprentices should study master craftspeople in their trade. But there's a big world of writing-about-culture out there populated by essayists, memoirists, "creative nonfiction" writers, biographers, novelists, poets, policy types, activists, humorists, and especially journalists of all kinds – from fact hounds on deadline to those who do cultural studies without footnotes in magazines. Scholars do often read across this range of nonacademic writing, but they tend to regard it as raw discourse or information that awaits processing by the scholar's critical sensibility into finished product: i.e., rigorous argument.

Why should a scholar buck the profession's prejudices and study journalists or essayists as models? First, and most important, is the matter of craft. Graduate programs in the humanities—especially those in American studies, English, and history—do not usually emphasize interviewing, firsthand observation, and other elements of reporting, for instance, or the uses of storytelling and characters in detailing the lived consequences of an abstract idea. Other sorts of writers have to provide instruction in these methods of reasoned argument, which are potent, in great part, because they allow complex characters to inhabit an analysis and give it human meaning. This point is worth underscoring: listening across generic barriers can make for better scholarly arguments, not just for more accessible prose.

Second is the matter of audience. Writers outside the academy address general readers for a living; scholars in the humanities increas-

ingly do, too, even though they are not trained to. The splitting of the humanities into hyperspecializations has had the ironic effect of turning almost every specialist into a general reader of work in other specializations, and that goes double in interdisciplinary fields like American studies. The general reader, a hydra-headed figure seen indistinctly through a scrim of ambition and wishful thinking, often turns out to be a fellow teacher or student.

Third is the matter of making books, in which craft and audience converge. University presses, which can no longer count on libraries and other traditional customers to subsidize the production of scholarship, have moved closer in outlook and product to commercial presses. This obliges writers who aspire to publish a scholarly book (an aspiration still aggressively fostered by tenure committees) to address readers beyond the immediate circle of colleagues pursuing similar research. It is possible to write a book organized around ideas that satisfies academic specialists and also at least some of the general reader's hydra heads, and it happens semi-frequently, but scholars who write such books almost always have to teach themselves how to. The profession does not expend much institutional energy on encouraging the development of writing styles to match and activate the promising substance dug up by expert research.

Enter those who work in the nonacademic precincts of the writing-about-culture business, from whose methods a scholar with open ears can reverse-engineer lessons in craft. Eric Schlosser and Louis Menand, crossing in opposite directions between the academy and the national magazine, limn a large and various ground of overlap. Schlosser, an investigative reporter, has found his way into scholarly discourse and onto syllabi. Menand, a university-based literary critic, has achieved prominence as an author of nonfiction literature in magazines and commercially published books. I will not attempt to do justice to the content of *Fast Food Nation* and *American Studies*, which have been widely read, reviewed, and debated.¹ I concern myself here with the two books solely as formal models for writing about culture. I'm not saying that scholars should all try to write just like Schlosser or Menand, and I'm not championing them as deathless prose stylists. I am saying that scholars should listen to the way these two master musicians, and many others like them, play.

* * *

Fast Food Nation might at first seem an unlikely book from which to derive lessons in craft. Reviewers have barely noticed Schlosser's prose. He turns at least one memorable phrase—"There is shit in the meat" (197)—but for the most part his writing does not register on the level of style. Instead, the reader comes away having retained an impressively large proportion of Schlosser's material: his argument, a body of telling facts, and some well-chosen stories and images that serve not only to convey that content but to give it nuance and consequence. Especially when mated to authoritative, resourceful reporting, a near-invisible style can be a significant virtue.

Fast Food Nation does not try to read like a novel. Its structure of chapters follows the logical unfolding of an analysis rather than more conventional crossover templates like the "personal odyssey" or tell-all biography. "This is a book about fast food, the values it embodies, and the world it has made," and Schlosser is "interested in it both as a commodity and as a metaphor" (3). In classical American studies fashion, he sets out to explain the two-way traffic between the signifying and material properties of artifacts ranging in scale from a single french fry to the entire food-producing and -processing landscape. What might others who undertake arguments with similar ambitions take note of in Schlosser's book?

Above all else: legwork. Anybody can close-read a fast-food burger and find whatever meaning he or she is looking for, but Schlosser gets the *producers* of the commodities in question to substantiate his highly critical analysis of them. He puts confidential documents from a McDonald's advertising campaign to effective use and sneaks into a slaughterhouse to contrast management-guided official visits with a shopfloor view of "the most dangerous job in the United States" (172). He hangs out at Little Caesars to observe how the system of franchising and less-than-full-time employment shapes the lives of a franchisee and his young employees. His account of a visit to the thirty-eighth annual Multi-Unit Foodserver Operators Conference peels back layers of talk about family and fun to arrive at the hardboiled point of the proceedings: "I see the possibility of unions" (88), warns one speaker, chilling the audience in much the same way that the kid in *The Sixth Sense* does when he says, "I see dead people."²

One central mission of American studies as a field is to make connections between the flow of meaning in texts or artifacts and the flow of people, capital, resources, and power in the social landscape.

The study of institutions can be crucial to effecting such connections, especially when the artifacts in question are not narrowly literary. Institutions—in *Fast Food Nation*, chiefly business enterprises—present house styles of meaning-making, suitable for interpretation, in the form of the things they produce and in the ways they represent those things. Institutions also have traceable connections to the social landscape: they own property, occupy buildings, collect and disburse money, employ workers, sue and are sued, deal with government, and so on. A chain of argument can link interpretation of form to a historical or sociological account of material life by interpreting an artifact, connecting the artifact to an institution, and connecting the institution to the social landscape. Reading extant scholarship (which Schlosser has done) helps to frame the premises of such an inquiry, and trolling the internet can be useful, but a researcher willing to get off the home-library-computer circuit and do some reporting stands to gain a richer understanding of institutions as three-dimensional junctions between meaning and materiality. That means interviewing owners and workers, observing institutional routines firsthand, letting people show and tell you about product and process. Not every scholarly subject affords opportunities for the kind of legwork done by Schlosser, and not every scholar is in a position to do it, but the academy's disinterest in reporting discourages scholars from doing it even when it can help turn yet another brilliant think-piece critique into something rarer and more useful: a convincing argument about the world in which people live.³

Schlosser does not let his argument smother the stories and characters he introduces to roadmark its stages and explore its human consequences. That's a second lesson to learn from *Fast Food Nation*. If a reader comes away convinced of the pervasiveness of fast food's effect on people's lives, that conviction is stronger because the lives portrayed support the thesis pretty well *without* being beaten perfectly flat to fit and because the reader himself, guided but not browbeaten, has helped link up the details to the thesis. The book's many narrative bits and pieces—portraits in action, capsule biographies, resonant episodes—add up to an overarching narrative in which the fast food industry rises from the primordial soup of American capitalism and culture, evolving into an increasingly dominant industrial complex that reflexively transforms the nation and then the world beyond. Schlosser makes a big argument, but he limits his large claims in applying them, resisting the temptation to overread every detail for the reader and

explain away any mystery or contradiction. Instead, he nests anecdotes within the thesis and lets them speak mostly for themselves and to one another, trusting to the structuring force of his argument to make their resonances intelligible.

Schlosser seeks complexity in his villains as well as his heroes, an elementary virtue that may seem like nothing special until you consider how sorely you miss it at the ASA's annual conference. When he visits Plauen, a depressed town in what used to be East Germany, he discovers that the McDonald's in the central market square is "the nicest, cleanest, brightest place" (250) in town, staffed by cheerful longtime employees and packed with people of all ages having a good time. How will this apparent utopia under the arches fit into his argument? He has already made clear that as more American-style fast food franchises open up in Germany and around the world, the industry's impulse toward standardization and economies of scale will transform life, mostly for the worse. And in the next chapter, his epilogue, he will propose a program for controlling and rolling back this seemingly ineluctable process. So we know what he thinks of fast food. But he also recognizes that the McDonald's in Plauen can signify enterprise and progress and even freedom—especially to characters like the "Vogtland Cowboys," a local subculture of pickup-truck-driving line dancers in Western wear who hang out at a nightclub called The Ranch. Schlosser deploys the Vogtland Cowboys with a sure hand. Germany is still in the early stages of becoming a fast food nation, but he has already demonstrated that the version of the American West they celebrate has been rendered obsolete by, among other things, the fast food industry's more advanced effect on ranching, agriculture, and land use in the western United States. Instead of launching into an extended critique of the Vogtland Cowboys as hegemonized dupes, Schlosser steps back and lets the Plauen episode's ironies resonate with the elements of his argument he places directly before it (an account of fast food corporations' attempts to crush local opponents in England and France) and after (organic ranching in the western U.S. as a backlash against fast food).

Fast Food Nation does not explicitly instruct the reader to juxtapose the Vogtland Cowboys with the story of Hank, a Colorado cattleman who committed suicide. The reader, well trained by the book, makes the connection for herself. "It would be wrong," asserts Schlosser, hedging his claim as he advances it, "to say that Hank's death was

caused by the consolidating and homogenizing influence of fast food chains, by monopoly power in the meatpacking industry, by depressed prices in the cattle market, by the economic forces bankrupting independent ranchers, by the tax laws that favor wealthy ranchers, by the unrelenting push of Colorado's real estate developers. But it would not be entirely wrong" (146). Schlosser has already detailed at length the pressures these factors exert on independent ranchers and farmers (whose high suicide rate he notes), so he doesn't need to place Ronald McDonald at the scene of the crime. Having framed the story of Hank and his land within the larger account of an encroaching order that fast food both exemplifies and helps bring into being, Schlosser can let him take at least some of his reasons for killing himself to the grave as mysteries.

At worst, the emphasis of self-conscious crossover books on narrative and character resembles wrapping a piece of baloney around a pill before feeding it to a dog. This conventional reasoning separates narrative and character from argument so that the tasty wrapper competes for precious page space with the stuff that's good for you. The finest examples of argument-by-description in the nonfiction literature teach otherwise. Think of William Finnegan's *Cold New World* or Anne Fadiman's *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*, books that fully develop an analysis of culture-in-social order with a minimum of assertion and a maximum of complex humane detail. They tell stories that make an argument come alive by showing how people negotiate often contradictory meanings in the streets, in their homes, in their bodies, in their inner lives. *Fast Food Nation's* prose may not be in these books' class, but in its most resonant anecdotal moments it moves in their illustrious company.

In addition to having earned a Pulitzer Prize and a reputation as one of the foremost writers about ideas in American public life, Louis Menand has a regular gig at the *New Yorker*. He is also a professor of English at Harvard. He originally wrote the essays in *American Studies* for magazines, but it's worth pausing to appreciate just how professorial a book it is.⁴ Acquisitions editors, even at university presses, do not watch the mails for collections of loosely interrelated, prepublished review essays that go deep into critiques of critiques. Menand has a strong commitment to dispassion and an unapologetic taste for abstraction. Just as there are fishy fish, there are Englishy English professors, and he's pretty Englishy. You'd think he would drive readers away;

instead, his spare, cool prose draws all kinds of readers into the kind of arguments one might expect to interest only academic specialists. That's an achievement worth considering. So what might scholarly writers learn from *American Studies*?

Before getting to the nuts and bolts of the formal example set by Menand, it is worth noting that *American Studies* offers its own version of how academics like him are pushed and pulled into a wider world of writing. The pertinent intellectual and material forces include the growth and contraction of the science-fixated cold war university (the subject of an essay in the book on James B. Conant), which created the conditions for a crisis in the humanities that Menand has elsewhere called "the demise of disciplinary authority." Partially adrift from academic literary criticism, "a paradigm inhabiting a structure" in flux, Menand found purchase in a very different sort of institutional structure provided by the national magazine.⁵ His analyses of the mutually constitutive relationships between the market niches and house styles of the *New Yorker* and *Rolling Stone*, among the book's strongest examples of American studies-style argument, are also sketches of the homes such institutions offer to writers like him. If the general reader often turns out to have at least one foot in the academy, so does the general writer.

Menand's implicit account of his own trajectory is a self-referential subtext in a book that confidently covers ground with great leaps. *American Studies* begins by assessing others' attempts to pin down William James's and Oliver Wendell Holmes's philosophies. It ends with Menand's own attempts to figure out Al Gore and Maya Lin. In between, it makes stops to examine literature, music, higher education, TV, magazines, and criticism. Various logics emerge from this meandering passage through twentieth-century American culture. Some are historical, like baby boomers' movement to cultural center stage. Some are thematic, like the defense of middlebrow culture against high-low snobs. Some are methodological, like Menand's interest in stripping away conventional readings imposed on particular ideas and texts in retrospect, "putting things back in their contexts to see whether that makes a difference to the way we understand them" (x). If he has an overarching impulse, it may well be to resist resorting to the Big Idea when trying to make sense of a messy world populated by messy people and messy texts: "The great mistake in trying to make sense of Eliot is the assumption that he had a very consistent idea of what he

was doing” (70); “the ‘great books’ don’t, taken together, express anything like a coherent worldview. They don’t even express a set of coherent individual worldviews. Skepticism about such coherence is precisely one of the things in which, in many cases, their greatness consists” (107). And he sticks up for the perverse criticism of Pauline Kael because she refused to judge a movie against a theoretical essence, a Big Idea, of filmic art. Emphasizing contingency and inconsistency, *American Studies* treats culture as a dynamic synthesis thrown together by inspired individuals using materials ready to hand at a particular historical moment.

That also describes Menand’s prose, a dynamic synthesis of scholarly and magazine styles, which leads to the most important practical lesson a scholarly writer might draw from *American Studies*: write for magazines. Put aside for a moment most of the good reasons to do that: magazines pay; they usually reach more readers than journals do, including academic readers and editors at university presses; they can give access to people and places that might not be accessible via academic credentials (Menand’s *New Yorker* interview with Al Gore would be an extreme example); they assign work, and sometimes an assignment that’s a bit of a stretch can prove to be exactly what a scholar needs (almost all the essays in *American Studies* began as assignments); and, although there are still some academics who say that writing for magazines isn’t “serious,” the academy increasingly rewards scholars in the humanities for publishing in magazines as well as refereed journals.⁶ Even if you put aside those reasons and think narrowly of writing for magazines just as crosstraining for scholarly writing, it’s still worth doing. For one thing, magazine editors edit. Working with editors, a crucial writing skill, is not taught much in graduate school, and the profession offers little chance to develop that skill later on. University presses may be the principal force pushing for strong, clear scholarly writing, but they and academic journals can usually provide only big-picture refereeing and some sort of copyediting. If you want to be edited in the wide stretch between those two stages, try writing for magazines (bearing in mind, of course, that there’s a great range of possibilities, some of them nightmarish beyond telling).

Encountering the house styles of different magazines, each with its own virtues and vices, gives a writer opportunities to work out his or her own style. Menand makes an excellent case in point. *American Studies* bears the marks of scholarly training and encounters with the

house styles of the *New Yorker*, the *New York Review of Books*, *Artforum*, and the *New Republic*, among others, and it subsumes all those influences in concisely expressive prose over which Menand exercises superb control. *New Yorker* style registers prominently in this mix, perhaps because Menand's writing temperament already comes so close to it. He puts a premium on clarity and a deceptively brisk pace, he doesn't talk down to the reader or the subject at hand, and he doesn't inflate the importance of assertions and conclusions (except for comic effect, as in a deftly auto-parodic critical essay—not included in *American Studies*—that describes *The Cat in the Hat Comes Back*, as “the *Grammatology* of Dr. Seuss,” in which “the spreading stain of semiosis” can only be contained by ““that which is not a sign,” the Voom.)⁷

Most important, magazines teach concision. Menand strips down his sentences, rather than building them up, to arrive at the point. The priorities of scholarship, on the other hand, tend to produce ramifying sentences that try to anticipate every counterargument in advance, sprouting comma-phrase tentacles in the struggle to wrap up their squirming subjects like a committee of octopi trying to drown a cat in a bathtub under conditions of late capitalism. Menand enjoys spinning out a fancy sentence as much as the next essayist, but his topic sentences and especially his end-of-paragraph kickers tend to be tight declarative statements. Here's the topic sentence of a paragraph about Al Gore's efforts to play up the stylistic contrast between himself and Bill Clinton in 1998: “Gore is more sophisticated about the media than his public style suggests.” Here's the darkly prophetic kicker: “After Elvis came the Beatles. (Also, it's true, the Monkees.)” (262–263). Essayists like Menand argue by accruing sharp-edged sentences that produce complexity and authority in the aggregate and by juxtaposition, rather than by individually foreseeing objections and sending out tangles of syntactic pseudopods to intercept them. Menand can be breezily overbold in asserting more than he can prove, but he never takes refuge in dense obscurity, which is what scholarly writers usually do when they lose their nerve.

Let's not forget that scholarly writing in the humanities, even at its most monographic, is a subgenre of nonfiction literature. It is a formally elaborate craft, if not an art, but it's not usually taught or evaluated that way. So scholars mostly have to improvise their self-educations as writers, which should inspire them to seek lessons across

the full range of analytical writing about culture. Even if they do not depart in their writing from the formulas of their native subgenre, it pays to do so in their reading. There is much to learn from writers like Schlosser and Menand. It also pays to be aware that they, like all writers, reckon with the liabilities of the subgenres in which they work. Schlosser is a reporter first and a writer second. At times *Fast Food Nation's* language and structure fail to capture the complexity of his immense subject. Menand, for his part, is an essayist first and last in *American Studies*. When he strays from the researched or reported particularities of text, fact, or character to generalize about cultural moments or generations, he sometimes takes to winging it in the old *New Yorker* style. But even Schlosser at his most pedestrian and Menand at his breeziest offer an open-eared scholarly writer something useful to apply to his or her own craft.

NOTES

My thanks to Tina Klein, David McBride, Sean McCann, Monica McCormick, Jennifer Price, and Kelefa Sanneh.

1. It is a measure of these books' clarity and reach that even people who violently oppose what they say feel obliged to do it in print. The damage-control press release about *Fast Food Nation* issued by the National Restaurant Association and the *fatwa* apparently declared against Louis Menand by the *New Republic* are worth studying in their own right for what they imply about their targets' virtues.

2. What producers say about their product is even more central to Keith Bradsher's *High and Mighty: SUVs—The World's Most Dangerous Vehicles and How They Got That Way* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2002), which does to the Ford Explorer what *Fast Food Nation* does to the Happy Meal. Well-placed people in the auto industry, not Bradsher, frame the argument that SUV owners are frightened, selfish, and willing to sacrifice other drivers' safety to feel safer themselves. Those auto industry sources make it plain to Bradsher that they design SUVs to amplify and exploit fear, endangering drivers with the very design features that give an impression of greater safety. That's very convincing. However, Bradsher's book is less convincing than Schlosser's because Bradsher's conventional notions about lively writing limit the subtlety of the argument with which he delivers his terrific reporting. In *High and Mighty*, ads are unmasked as shockingly "cynical"; manhood reduces to "in your face" aggression, epitomized by "an executive who defined machismo even in a very macho industry" (43); the complex inner lives of SUV owners reduce to "self-centered lifestyles"; and so on. (Newspapers and magazines produce rote licks, too; the academy is not alone in this.) Bradsher's systematic reliance on cliché tends to squeeze his reporting into a too-narrow container of language in which some of the complexity suggested by his evidence—especially the fullness of the triangular meaning-making relationship among producer, artifact, and consumer—cannot be made to fit.

3. I do not feel any need to validate this claim by turning to a theorist (other than Bruce Lee, of course, whose exemplary fashioning of the syncretic *jeet kune do* style from an assortment of martial traditions provides a fine example of navigating through the endlessness of methods and approaches). But those who do feel that need might note that Raymond Williams made a similar point a long time ago. In *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1977), for instance, he calls for a "Sociology of Culture": "what is really required . . . is restoration of the whole social material process, and specifically of cultural production as social and material." He wants to extend "analysis of institutions" to embrace "the active formation of readerships and audiences, and of characteristic social relations, including economic relations, within which particular forms of cultural activity are in practice carried out" (138). He's asking for a study of culture that follows a principled argumentary path from reading of forms all the way to political and economic structures. Reportorial legwork provides one way to get there.

4. Some in the field have voiced a worry that Menand's title expresses some nefarious intent to "take over" American studies. It doesn't; the pond is secure. Now, if he had entitled his book "*The New Futures of American Studies*," or something like that . . .

5. Menand's discussion of the university in *American Studies* (91–111) is part of a larger argument he has developed in other essays: for example see Menand, "The Demise of Disciplinary Authority," in *What's Happened to the Humanities*, ed. Alvin Kernan (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1997), 201–219, and "The Marketplace of Ideas," American Council of Learned Societies Occasional Paper No. 49 (2001).

6. The only people who are saying that Menand isn't serious, as far as I can tell, seem to be those who have trouble concealing their conviction that he's occupying their rightful spot at the apex of the criticism business, where it obtrudes into the culture at large.

7. Louis Menand, "Cat People," *New Yorker*, Dec. 23 and 30, 2002, p. 153–54.