Fast Food Nation Study Guide

Fast Food Nation by Eric Schlosser

Contents

Plot Summary

Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal, is a thought-provoking, research-based account of the rise of the fast food industry and the resulting consequences of the drive for low-cost, rapidly prepared meals. Schlosser clearly demonstrates that this industry alone has been responsible for a revolution in the ways by which beef and poultry are grown, fattened, slaughtered, processed and packaged. Corporate greed and profit-driven executives have been responsible for the destruction of the meat cutters and packers union, the demise of the large urban meat-packers who employed those union workers, the destruction of formerly lovely western towns by the placement of huge feedlots and slaughterhouses with waste lagoons that pollute the air, the wholesale exploitation of poor, uneducated, non-English speaking workers, and the demise of the independent rancher who cannot compete with corporate-controlled ranches and feedlots and who is the victim of secret pricing by the four top meat processors. Further, these corporate giants, through sheer political power and lobbying, have been able to systematically dismantle any attempts to effectively police the meat processing industry, leaving the consumer vulnerable to a host of infectious diseases rampant in slaughterhouses across the country and the workers without proper health care and workmen's compensation.

The fast food industry itself is no stranger to greed and profit margins. With no concern for society's health, it advertises to the nation's young, using marketing techniques devised by psychological consultants and kids' focus groups. It fills consumers' stomachs with high fat, low-nutrition foods and sodas that sport 8-10 teaspoons of sugar each. It employs teenagers and uneducated adults with a minimum of training in proper food handling and cleanliness. It is responsible for the current epidemic of obesity in this country and the growing obesity in countries around the world that have embraced fast food as an American cultural ideal. Further, its lack of care for the appropriate handling of food, particularly meat, has resulted in a series of outbreaks of pathogen-caused illnesses and death.

To Schlosser, this industry is simply one example of large corporations run amuck, that is, setting themselves above the "rules" of responsible business practices and "buying" the political power to do so. He blames a series of Republican administrations for the wholesale indifference to the welfare of society in favor of campaign funding and for the perpetuation of a clearly right-wing belief that government should continue a "hands-off" policy toward business, sacrificing the health and safety of the public along with it.

The Founding Fathers

The Founding Fathers Summary and Analysis

The earliest pioneer of the fast food industry was Carl Karcher, who began in Southern California, the cities of which were to become the model for all other U.S. cities in the post-World War II era. California realized huge growth, particularly after the war, and a large part of that growth was attributed to the automobile, a travel innovation that was to change American life in countless ways.

Karcher came to California from Ohio, where he was a member of an itinerant farming family. He began work in his uncle's feed store, became a bakery truck driver, married, and, with good foresight, spent $326.00 to purchase a hot dog stand which stood across the street from the Goodyear factory, in 1941. He sold hot dogs, tamales and chili dogs for ten cents, soda for five cents. During the war, the Goodyear factory expanded, and so did Carl's business. And, as often occurs in history, seemingly unrelated occurrences merge to impact society in profound ways. In this case, it was the infant fast food phenomenon and the American infatuation with the car. By 1940, there were a million cars in Los Angeles alone.

Certainly, the automobile offered an independence not available via trains and trolleys, which ran on schedules and packed strangers into small places. As well, the first of a lengthy and still prevalent collaboration among the oil tire and car industries began to wield political power, achieving government responsibility for road building. Railroads and trolley companies had been responsible for the expense of laying their own track without tax dollars. At the same time, General Motors began to secretly purchase trolley systems in major cities and dismantle them entirely, at the same time that new roads were built. Trolley routes became bus routes, and the automobile manufacturers made the buses. When the collusion reached a level of anti-trust violation, executives found guilty were fined $1 each.

The car is attributed with spawning the motel, the drive-up bank, and, eventually, the drive-in restaurant, and Southern California was a natural birthplace with year-round temperate weather—now to attract the customers. With cars moving at solid speeds down new roads, the real estate along those roadways became truly valuable for retail operations and advertising. The new drive-in restaurants had to secure that property and attract customers with huge neon signs. Other attractors included cute, young, "leggy" carhops who took orders, carried trays and relied almost solely on tips and small sales commissions for income. Drive-ins at this point attracted, obviously, large numbers of teenage boys.

Carl Karcher owned four hot dog carts in 1944, when he bought Street-Side Restaurant in Los Angeles and turned it into a drive-in barbecue. It was small, and he did all of the cooking, simmering his special sauce at home on Sundays. The business boomed, certainly aided by the huge population growth of the Los Angeles area. Where once were huge citrus groves, airplane factories, steel mills and military bases now stood. Add to that the impressive growth of Hollywood and the decision by Walt Disney to build Disneyland just a few miles away, and Carl had a gold mine. Atop his tiled roof was placed a neon star, and the barbecued hamburgers sold for the very reasonable price of thirty-five cents. In the midst of his success, he got word of another hamburger spot, a good sixty miles away, selling hamburgers for only fifteen cents.

Richard and Maurice McDonald, brothers and victims of the Depression, moved to California and found jobs building movie sets. Eventually,. they saved enough to buy a small drive-in restaurant in Pasadena, selling mainly hot dogs. Later, they purchased a larger building and expanded the menu, naming the new drive-in McDonald Brothers Burger Bar Drive-In. Rich and looking for easier ways to operate their business in 1948, they temporarily closed for remodeling and re-opened with an entirely new concept of fast food. Gone were the dishes and silverware; gone were the carhops; gone was the variety of sandwiches, for now only hamburgers and cheeseburgers were sold. The kitchen and service became an assembly-line production, with people standing at counters, ordering their food and carrying it themselves to tables or cars. It became known as the Speedee Service System, and it worked. Overhead expenses were cut, and hamburgers were sold for fifteen cents. Richard designed a new building with the now famous logo of two arches forming the letter "M." The other goal was to change the clientele, from teenage boys to families. Only teenage boys were hired, and they all worked inside. The new restaurant designed by Richard opened in San Bernardino in 1948, the same year that the Hell's Angels was formed, also in San Bernardino.

Carl Karcher copied the McDonald's and opened up his first Carl's Jr. restaurant in 1956, the same year Eisenhower was able to get Congressional approval for the interstate highway system. As the highway system grew in California, Karcher opened up new restaurants on as many off-ramps as possible. His star now wore a smile, booties, and held a burger and shake. Among others who followed the basic concept of fast self-service food were William Rosenbery, a high school drop-out who began Dunkin' Donuts, Glen Bell, a veteran who opened the first Taco Belll, and Dave Thomas, another high school dropout and founder of Wendy's.

Perhaps one of the most unique variations on the theme was the rise of Harlan Sanders, an orphan who quit school at age 15 and drifted from job to job, finally opening a gas station in Corbin, Kentucky. He cooked fried chicken in the back and sold it to customers, later opening up his own restaurant and motel. Deeply in debt by age 65, he sold his business and decided to travel the country, selling his fried chicken recipe. Kentucky Fried Chicken became the largest restaurant chain in America by the early 1960's.

As can be imagined, there were lots of failures as well. Competition was fierce and only a handful survived, but those that did went on to nationwide fame. Wall Street got involved and what had begun as single individually-owned fast food restaurants became giant corporations and a big part of the American economy. Carl Karcher was, initially, on top of the mountain, owning hundreds of restaurants and a publicly-traded corporation. He expanded into Texas with newer menu items and franchises. The restaurants did poorly, and the stock began to fall. At the same time, some of his real estate investments went bad, and he paid huge fines to the SEC to avoid trial for insider trading. Eventually, in 1993, after disagreements about the direction of the food chain, his board of directors ousted him. Carl then implemented a takeover of the company through some partnerships and loans from others and immediately instituted his original plan to save the company—a joint venture with Green Burrito, Inc. to add Mexican food to his menu. The venture was a success, and, in 1997, Carl Karcher Enterprises (CKE) purchased Hardees for $327 million. Still paying off loans, Carl Karcher plans to leave this life debt-free and happy.

Your Trusted Friends

Your Trusted Friends Summary and Analysis

The McDonald's corporate headquarters is located in Oak Brook, Illinois and sports a gift shop, a museum and McDonald's University, where manager, executives and franchisees receive training in the corporate culture—quality, service, cleanliness and value. Like Carl Karcher, Ray Kroc was not of wealthy stock. His early life mirrored that of Walt Disney in many ways and, in fact, the two men served together in World War I and both eventually landed in Southern California. While Disney was certainly more well known, Ray Kroc may have actually influenced American culture far more. HOwever, both men had a unique and iportant ability, that is, the art of selling things to kids. They set in motion a tidal wave of imitators who saw an entirely new market to tap, and huge corporations jumped on the wave avidly.

Ray Kroc was by profession, a traveling salesman who at one time or another in his life sold sheet music, paper cups, real estate, a variety of gadgets, and finally milkshake machines. He visited the single McDonald's restaurant in 1954. It occurred to him that the McDonald brothers could make a mint if they could franchise the restaurants all over the country, especially along highways. The McDonald's were happy with their single thriving business but, with someone else to do the work, agreed to sell the right to franchise to Kroc. Kroc's first thought was to contact Walt Disney, who was in the process of building Disneyland, but that went nowhere. As similar as their earlier years were, Walt Disney already owned a motion picture studio and several prominent cartoon figures. His cartoon movies were created in an assembly line process, not unlike that at McDonald's. Individuals were given one small piece of an animation and drew pages of the same character changing positions just a bit in each picture, and were timed by supervisors while doing so. When Disney workers attempted to become part of the Screen Cartoonists Guild, Walt fired sympathizers, hired "goons" to roughly break up picket lines, finally acquiescing and blaming all of the difficulties on Communists.

As Ray Kroc's McDonald's empire grew, he realized that the fast food industry was going to be "survival of the fittest," a philosophy shared by Walt Disney. While Disney supported right wing conservative groups who favored no controls on business, Kroc remained out of politics until Nixon ran for President. He contributed a total of $250,000 to the election campaign at a time when the fast food industry was lobbying Congress for a law that would allow teenagers to work for $1.28 an hour rather than the minimum wage of $1.60. The bill passed under Nixon.

Disney had other collaborations with the government, through contracts to produce World War II training and propaganda films, and became fascinated with new technologies. For this reasons, one of his sections of Disneyland was called "Tomorrowland" where he took pride in demonstrating for Americans what the future might look like. As well, it served to recognize and praise the German scientists who defected to the United States and figured significantly in the development of the atomic bomb and rocket science. Two scientists, Heinz Haber and Wernher Von Braun, had been Nazi SS officers who had participated in programs and experiments which resulted in the deaths of thousands. They came to be consultants on Disney rides and exhibits in Tomorrowland, as well as co-hosts of Disney television shows. The future envisioned in Tomorrowland was one of corporate sponsorship. General Electric, Richfield Oil, Monsanto and others jumped at the chance to sponsor exhibits and rides. Disneyland was a huge success, and Anaheim, California gave up its citrus groves to motels, fast food restaurants, traffic jams, and industrial parks. Walt Disney was ready to move on to another project in a newer, fresher location. Along the way, Disney developed a new marketing strategy dubbed "synergy." He sold marketing rights to use Mickey Mouse and other famous characters to a host of companies which happily produced books, toys, and food.

During the tough years, Ray Kroc watched the Disney empire grow with envy, and vowed to be as big. He knew Disney was on the right track with his appeal to children. The baby boom had produced a huge consumer group. McDonald's commercials were thus designed for children, using Speedee, a little chef with a hamburger head, for a mascot. The Ronald McDonald mascot was actually the idea of a franchisee in Washington, D.C. who originally hired Bozo the Clown to don the now famous suit and make public appearances. Soon Ronald McDonald became the corporate mascot as well. As McDonald's waxed in fame and fortune, the Disney empire began to wane. Walt had died, and the baby boomers were now in college and rebelling against most of what he had stood for.

Kroc dreamed of a super amusement park for the new McDonald's corporation, just north of Los Angeles. His advisers, however, were able to dissuade him, and he settled for "McDonald-Lands" and "Playlands" at restaurant sites. "The restaurant chain evoked a series of pleasing images in a youngster's mind: bright colors, a playground, a toy, a clown, a drink with a straw, and little pieces of food wrapped up like a present," (p. 42). By 1975, a handful of companies were successfully marketing to children, primarily toy makers, cereal manufacturers, candy companies, Disney and McDonald's. By the 1980's, the marketing exploded, as marketing companies began to play upon the guilt that working couples felt by spending so much time at work. Everything from Joe Camel (now discontinued) to talking chihuahuas have been used to catch the eyes of kids and to foster "pester power," that is the nagging of parents until they buy. Every major corporation now has a children's marketing division, a group of "experts" whose sole job is to study the psyche of the child at each stage of development and to design marketing programs which will promote "cradle to grave" loyalty. Children's focus groups now occur at all ages, beginning as young as two. Dream research shows that young children's dreams are about animals, ergo the animal mascots for so many companies. As well, all major corporations marketing to kids now have websites for "club" membership. Here, children can play games and purchase products with mom's credit card. They can also extract information from children, such as a favorite McDonald's menu item or a favorite book. All of this information is used to design future marketing campaigns and develop new products.

Although the Internet has certainly added additional marketing venues, television is by far the most important medium, as the average child watches 21 hours a week. Twenty-five years ago, Saturday morning advertising was cause for concern of the FTC, and it attempted to ban all ads targeted at children under seven years of age. Groups opposed to this ban, toy manufacturers, National Association of Broadcasters, and the Association of National Advertisers, were able to successfully lobby to kill any such legislation. Today, television advertising to children occurs day and night on cable networks, which comprise 80% of their viewing. In one year, most children in America watch more than 30,000 commercials. Television advertising of fast food chains costs $3 billion, and still new venues are found. McDonald's and Burger King have playgrounds that bring in young children with parents, but, more important, they have toys. Additionally, they have series of toys, so that children return often to complete their sets. Marketing alliances were formed with sports leagues and Hollywood studios. In 1996, Ray Kroc realized one of his early dreams. Disney and McDonald's corporations signal a ten-year joint world-wide marketing campaign.

Just as fast food was looking for new marketing venues, the Colorado Springs School District was facing a budget crunch. It teamed up with Burger King, allowing ads in school hallways and on buses. Disappointed by the initial revenue, the district employed a marketing firm to develop advertising packages for corporate sponsorships. Revenue tripled. The district then signed an exclusive contract with Coca-Cola to carry only its vending machines, gaining an additional $11 million for a ten year contract. Other school districts in Colorado and then those across the U.S. followed. Most of the contracts have been the work of Dan DeRose, who swung the first deals in Colorado Springs. For a percentage of profits, he negotiates on behalf of districts and relies on the competitiveness of the fast food and soda industries. Despite continual criticism that these advertisers have a captive audience among students, districts in financial trouble welcome the income to support ever-increasing costs of curriculum, equipment and athletic programs. The beverage and food industries know that "taste" for certain food and drink items are formed when children are in elementary school, and promote their products there by sponsoring any number of activities with offers of food and drink certificates. The goal, of course, is brand loyalty, and, in gaining that, the producers have a consumer for sixty-plus years to come. Consider that each can of soda has ten teaspoons of sugar and that the average teen drinks 600 cans a year. More recently, the three major soft drink manufacturers have added juices and water to their vending machines, but at much higher cost than the soda. The collaboration between fast food and soda corporations has been a "natural" one, because soda sales generate the greatest profits of these chains. A medium Coke, for example, has about 9 cents worth of Coca-Cola syrup and sells for $1.49.

The development of "free" curricular materials has given corporations an initial marketing "inroad" into schools. Such materials provide colorful, motivational activities for children and adolescents while promoting the corporation's political, economic and environmental views. As well, they sponsor educational programming on television, complete with commercials. All of this marketing, moreover, is tax deductible. If all of this is not enough, many fast food franchises have successfully moved themselves into school cafeterias, selling items at a lower cost in order to gain "brand" loyalty. Such franchises include Pizza Hut, McDonald's, Taco Bell and Subway. About 30% of American high schools offer fast food in their cafeteria lines, and a large number of elementary schools offer it on "special lunch days" once a week.

Behind the Counter

Behind the Counter Summary and Analysis

Colorado Springs is a city of great contrasts. Originally a mining town, the early part is intact, complete with a quaint retail area along Tejon Street. Going north, however, things change once one passes through the old neighborhoods. Here large subdivisions have been carved out of the prairie, hills and ridges. Every few miles down the main boulevard of Academy Ave. are groupings of fast food restaurants, repeating themselves every several miles. This is the new Los Angeles, for much of this population migrated here from southern California.

The economic growth of Colorado Springs began, just as in Los Angeles, with World War II and military spending. Both the Army and Air Force opened bases and brought both people and money to Colorado Springs. Following the war, more military bases and the Air Defense Command with all of its high tech defense and experimentation efforts, were added. With military installations came defense contractors and their employees, as well as computer and data technology firms. The work force is generally educated and non-union.

The city has a decidedly conservative flavor and has attracted the location of the national headquarters of a number of conservative religious groups, to include James Dobson's Focus on the Family, the Christian Booksellers Association and World Christian Incorporated. Abortion, homosexuality, and stem cell research have no place in this environment, and every elected official is a Republican.

The migration from California to Colorado has been predominantly white middle-class and has been called the "new White flight," as the population of California is now less than 50% white. The population explosion in Colorado has strained governmental services, including less money for education, depleted emergency services and a woefully inadequate highway system. In Colorado Springs itself, the rapid influx of Californians has included gays and other liberal groups, and the city is struggling with its identity as the Christian conservatives and the secular liberals try to co-exist.

Despite the fact that Colorado is teeming with defense-related industry and high tech corporations, the largest employer is actually the restaurant industry. Colorado Springs alone has twenty-one McDonald's. These have been the testing sites of a great deal of technology, including software programs which use satellite imagery to show population spread and thus determine future McDonald's sites, as well as robotic drink dispensers and computer controlled catsup and mustard squirters.

The fast food restaurants of Colorado Springs are run by teenagers, with an adult manager to supervise. High school dropouts get the early morning shift, those still in school, the afternoon and evening, as well as weekends. Teenagers are perfect employees because they are willing to work for less and are all part-time, meaning no expensive benefits to provide. The fast food restaurant corporations have borrowed an important concept from American corporations of the early twentieth century, called "throughput." This is the idea of achieving the greatest amount of production from the smallest number of employees. Making more with fewer employees means larger profits. Food arrives frozen and sometimes dehydrated. It is then thawed, microwaved, grilled on conveyor belts or hydrated. Every fast food restaurant has a "bible" specifying such things as minutes of cooking time, temperatures of each appliance, how each item must look, how employees are to greet customers and, certainly important, the added item suggestions for each order. With such detailed instructions, along with the newer technology of preparation, worker skill is unnecessary, and any employee can be easily replaced. All of this "assembly-line" climate was added as baby boomers entered their teenage years, and there was an endless supply of workers. Now that the teen workforce is reduced, fast food restaurants hire the handicapped, the elderly, and recent immigrants, again for low wages and no benefits. Because improved technology has simplified the work, training has been reduced to very little. Yet, all fast food chains have been able to receive tax credits of up to $2400 for each new low-income they hire. This subsidy is actually part of an incentive rewards program to encourage companies to provide training to America's poor. The subsidy is provided so long as the worker is employed a minimum of 400 hours. Given the turnover in the fast food industry (300-400%), that is a lot of subsidy. Wages remain the lowest of any industry in the country, where profits and executive bonuses skyrocket. A small number of employees are salaried and receive benefits. These are the crew managers on each shift. Promised bonuses if they can cut labor costs, they keep crews to a minimum, sending employees home early if business slacks, and paying them for extra hours in food rather than wages.

There have been periodic attempts at individual McDonald's restaurants to organize and join unions. One of the best defenses against this, of course, is the high turnover rate of line employees. In the few instances of success, the restaurants have simply closed and re-opened in new locations close by, employing all new workers. This seems like a rather drastic measure, but to a corporation that stands to lose huge sums if workers organize, it is a small price to pay. Fast food restaurants now have a difficult time maintaining a full staff, largely because other industries have copied their techniques of using only part-time employees from among certain populations, those being teenagers, poor seniors and immigrants. Wal-Mart, hotels and motels, and telemarketing firms now do the same, and the employees can simply move from one job to the next on a whim.

In Colorado Springs, there is a clear division of neighborhoods and schools. At Cheyenne Mountain High School, most students are white upper middle class kids. They get summer jobs at country clubs and swimming pools or work as babysitters for the summer tourists. Those who work during the school year find jobs in mall stores or more upscale restaurants. Harrison High School serves students at the other end of the socioeconomic spectrum. The population is 60% minority, and these kids work at fast food restaurants starting after school and going into the night. They work long hours to buy cars, do not do homework, and often sleep in class. Both parents usually work, some at minimum wage jobs themselves. About 50% of these students do not graduate and continue in some type of low-level unskilled employment.

Most of the fast food workers find their jobs boring, but the other options are no better and they need the money. Despite national studies that clearly show high school students should never work over 20 hours a week, these kids often work 30, and begin with work permits as young as 15. Federal law is very clear on 15-year old employment. They may not work more than 3 hours on a school day, and they may not use any dangerous equipment. Both of these regulations are violated daily across the country by almost every fast food chain.

Most injuries of teen employees of fast food chains involve burns, cuts and those associated with falls. A bigger potential danger may be from the increasing number of robberies and other violence. Disgruntled employees often return in anger; robbers can exit highways, rob a fast food restaurant and be back on the highway quite quickly, especially late at night, when only a skeleton crew remains. As violence increased at fast food chains, OSHA stepped in to set guidelines for the prevention of crime and violence in all retail establishments. These were successfully opposed by the National Restaurant Association. In their defense, fast food chains did install some safety measures of their own—video camera, drop safes, and burglar alarms. However, given that much of the violence and robberies are perpetrated by former employees who know how to get around these measures, the safety precautions have not always worked. Hundreds of fast food restaurants are robbed every week, and many of these include murder in the commission of that crime.

Success

Success Summary and Analysis

At the heart of most fast food empires is the system of franchising. This enterprising idea was first used by the car industry. Instead of hiring salesmen all over the country, the plan was to let the salesman pay General Motors for the right to a "territory." This caught on quickly, particularly with oil companies and hotels and motels. Once the fast food industry discovered this model, it became the American way to expand. Small investors "bought" the name and all products from the corporation, set up his business, and agreed to follow all the rules and regulations of the franchise agreement.

Ray Kroc perfected this business model with McDonald's franchises. While other fast food corporations jumped in and were charging huge prices for a franchise in order to make a fast profit, Kroc thought the process through. He sold the first McDonald's franchises for $950, because he did not want them purchased by investors who be largely absentee owners. He wanted the owner on site and deeply involved in his business. Individuals were only allowed to buy one franchise and then, after proving their loyalty, were allowed to buy another. The way Kroc and his business partners made money on the franchises was not to nickel and dime the earnings through the sale of supplies to them, but, rather, to buy the land and build the restaurant, and then charge rent to each owner. The first franchise owners became millionaires, from both owning franchises and by buying corporate stock. Eventually, the McDonald brothers sold their small share of profits for a million each. Franchising the McDonald's way became so popular that soon every corporation was on board. From clothing retailers to auto parts, to weight loss, franchising became the most profitable and efficient method of expansion.

Franchising has its downside for the franchisee. A large investment is required up front, there are relatively few guarantees regarding "territory" (that is, distance between franchises), and 38% of them fail within the first 5 years. In addition, if the corporation should go out of business, the franchisee is stuck. The contracts between fast food corporations and their franchisees are tight and favor only the corporation. The franchisee may only purchase equipment and supplies from the corporation, the franchise can only be sold with corporate approval, and the franchiser can terminate the contract for "cause." Abuses of franchisers are not regulated by federal laws, and a civil lawsuit becomes the franchisee's only recourse. Attempts by Congress to regulate franchising have been met with great resistance and strong lobbying campaigns by the International Franchise Association at the same time that they are often funded by the SBA (Small Business Administration). Franchisers often use SBA loans to open "experimental" locations in marginal areas, and a majority of these fail. The corporation is not out any money because the American taxpayers have foot the entire bill. In 1996, $1 billion in SBA loans went to fast food franchises, more than to any other business type. The biggest beneficiary was Subway, followed by McDonald's.

The worry of franchisees is two-fold: first, the franchiser may place too many franchises in an area, cutting into profits, and, second, that another fast food chain will move in and take business. This has happened to Dave Feamster, who owns five Little Caesar's Pizza franchises just outisde of the Colorado Springs area. Papa John's has arrived to compete, and he will have to work harder and treat customers even better if he is to maintain his market share.

Why the Fries Taste So Good

Why the Fries Taste So Good Summary and Analysis

Potatoes grow in Idaho—lots of potatoes. The J.R. Simplot Plant in Aberdeen, Idaho turns potatoes into french fries. It is a wonderfully automated factory with automated peelers and slices and people to watch for problems in the process or to identify bad potatoes which need to be removed from the assembly line.

J.R. Simplot's story is quite a saga. Having run away from home at 15, he took odd jobs throughout Idaho, all related to potatoes. At one point, however, with some extra income he bought six hundred hogs, a rifle and a truck. He went to the desert, shot wild horses, and fed the meat to his hogs all winter. The horsehides he sold. In the spring, he brought the hogs into market and sold them for $12.50 a piece. He then went into potato farming, but not for long. He bought a potato sorting machine and traveled around Idaho sharing its use. With the profits, he decided to become a potato "middleman," building warehouses to store potatoes he bought and sold. He added onions as well. The next endeavor resulted from his purchase of a plum drying machine, which he used to dehydrate onions to sell to the U.S. Army during World War II. His profits from this venture bought potato farms and cattle ranchers, among a variety of other mining and lumber mill investments.

After World War II, Simplot moved into the area of frozen foods. He wanted to establish a new industry in frozen french fries. The fries were pre-cooked, packaged and frozen and put into grocery stores, without much success. While they could be heated in the oven, the taste was better if deep-fried, and American housewives of the 50's were not too interested. Simplot realized that he needed a different market—institutions and restaurant chains.

Simplot sold his idea to Ray Kroc in 1965. Kroc was motivated by the labor savings of peeling and slicing potatoes and by the uniformity he could get nationwide. In 1966, McDonald's switched to Simplot's frozen fries, and the public loved them. They became one of the most profitable items on the menu. Today, Americans eat more than 30 pounds of french fries a year, and 90% of them come from fast food restaurants. Simplot became one of the richest Americans. Using his profits from potatoes, he invested in many other industries and purchased huge amounts of land. His investment in Micron Technologies was perhaps the smartest move.

Two other companies now compete with Simplot—Lamb Weston and McCain—and these three control at least 80% of the American potato industry. They either buy or force out smaller rivals who simply cannot compete with the lower cost that production quantity allows and sell their fries to virtually every fast food corporation in America. The markup of the fast food chains is huge. They pay about 30 cents a pound for process frozen fries, and sell them for about $6.00 a pound.

Taste is a big factor when consumers compare fast food, and especially the fries. The difference is in the oils used. At first, McDonald's used a 93% beef tallow and 7% cottonseed oil. Amid complaints about the effects of saturated fats on the body, however, McDonald's eventually went to vegetable oil, but had to find a way to maintain that slight taste of "beef" that customers were used to. This was achieved by adding a "natural flavoring," which is atually a combination of a variety of chemicals produced in sophisticated laboratories. Like any other producer of processed food items, the key is to add back the taste that canning, freezing and dehydrating removes. This is accomplished by adding "natural flavoring" or "artificial flavoring" to the processed food in order to restore a taste that will be pleasing. The flavor industry, a highly secretive one, has arisen in proportion to the processed food industry and is today a multi-billion dollar business, finding the perfect chemical compound that will add the correct flavor or smell to food.

The flavor industry has largely settled in New Jersey as an off shoot of the perfume industry in New York. At the large flavoring plants, chemists work to add both flavor and odor to processed foods. These scientists know that odor is probably more important than taste, so, as people bit into a food, gases are released which float up to the nostrils or move up the back of the mouth to nasal nerve cells. Color additives are important too. The same chemists who provide flavor and odor are also providing a combination of chemicals in minute amounts, to make processed food visually appealing as well. Studies have also shown that the color of food can affect how one perceives it to taste.

The FDA (Food and Drug Administration) does not require additives to be disclosed as long as the chemicals in these additives are GRAS (Generally Regarded as Safe). The list of chemicals in each additive can be endless. "Artificial strawberry flavoring" found in strawberry milk shakes, for example, is composed of 46 different chemicals. The term "natural flavors" is not truly natural either. The flavor may be extracted from a fruit or vegetable, but it then goes through a chemical process too. Other flavors and colors are formed in strange ways. Natural smoke flavor is achieved by charring sawdust, catching the smoke and then adding water. The flavor, when used on meat, gives the illusion that the sandwich was char-broiled. Unknown to vegetarians, the pink color in Dannon Strawberry Yogurt actually comes from the dried and crushed up carcases of an insect.

The Lamb-Weston Potato Processing Plant makes fries for fast food chains and grocery stores. It is one of the largest french fry plants in the country and produces about 130 different types of fries. Its success lies primarily in an invention of its founder, F. Gilbert Lamb. He developed a process of shooting a potato from a hose at high speed toward a steel slicer, obtaining fries that were uniform in shape. The factory is almost entirely automated with potatoes being floated in water, sorted by size, steam blasted until skins are literally blown off and then shot through the "Lamb water gun" and slicers. From there, they are fried, fast frozen and packaged, to be held in freezers until trucks arrive to take them to their destinations. Samplings of each batch go to a lab, so that size, starch content and color can be analyzed. The goal is to have completely uniform taste and texture.

The potato growing business, like the processors, has become far more centralized in recent years. The small potato farmer faces enormous pressure to get bigger or to get out. As consolidation occurs, and as the three top potato processors gain increasing control over the entire potato industry, the grower finds his prices declining at a time when land costs and harvesting equipment continue to increase. The average potato farmer spends about $1500 an acre to grow potatoes and needs to get $5 per one hundred pounds to just break even. The large processors, however, determine prices, not the free market economy, and many potato growers have just given up, selling their land to the large corporate farms and staying on to manage a portion of the huge conglomerate.

On the Range

On the Range Summary and Analysis

The author met Hank in Colorado Springs. Hank was a rancher with 400 head of cattle that he graced on his ranch about 30 miles from Colorado Springs. He was diligent about caring for his land, rotated grazing areas so natural grasses could replenish themselves, and protected the ecosystem of a creek that ran through his property. He was a dying breed. The small rancher can no longer compete with the few large meatpackers who contract with huge corporate ranchers and control prices of beef. The meatpacking industry has a long history of this behavior, and, in 1920, after an FTC investigation showed that the five large meatpackers colluded to drive the price of beef down, the governemtn forced the five to split up and give up some of their related businesses. Things were better for the independent ranchers, as there was now a competitive market. During the Reagan years, however, the top meatpackers were once again allowed to merge. Today, there are only four top corporations—ConAgra, IBP, Excel, and Natural Beef—who slaughter and process 85% of the country's cows. They now have contracts with large ranchers, their own feed lots, and the ability to purchase cows far in advance of slaughter. The price paid for the cattle is not disclosed, so the independent rancher has no idea what his cattle are truly worth. He does know, however, that the price he can get has steadily declined.

The chicken processing industry is even worse. Eight chicken processors virtually control the market, set prices, and the chicken growers have little to say. They are deep in debt and essentially have to take the contracts that the big processors bring to them. Some of this has been a result of Chicken McNuggets, the brainchild of McDonald's chairman Fred Turner in 1979. He wanted chicken without a bone that could be eaten as a type of finger food. Across the country, people were eating more chicken, and Turner saw a way to capitalize on that. The laboratory at one of the chicken processing plants, Keystone, created the McNugget—a small piece of reconstituted white meat that was then breaded, fried and frozen. McDonald's eventually contracted with Tyson Foods to produce the nuggets, and Tyson Foods began the process of developing a new breed of chicken with a much larger breast. Introduced to the public in 1983, Chicken McNuggets were an immediate hit. Parents saw them as a healthy alternative to hamburgers, though they did not know they were fried in beef tallow, just like french fries. Later, McDonald's gave up the beef tallow and added beef extract, as public demand for less saturated fats grew. Children love them, but what parents also do not know is that they actually contain more fat per ounce than a hamburger.

The impact of the McNugget went far beyond the fast food diet of Americans. It actually dramatically altered the entire chicken farming industry. Upon receiving the McDonald's contract, Tyson Foods immediately went about developing an entirely new structure from the egg to the McNugget. Tyson contracts with chicken growers who supply the land and chicken houses (about $150,000 each). Tyson delivers day-old chicks to the grower, supplies the feed and other support, and picks up the full grown chickens seven weeks later. The grower is paid according to number and weight of chickens minus the amount of feed that was used. Chicken growers are completely dependent upon the eight processors for contracts. These are extremely tight documents and include clauses that the grower may not ever sue the processor, that the grower may not join any association of growers, and that the company may terminate the contract at any time. About half of chicken growers leave the business or go broke within their first three years, and those who remain are little more than serfs.

"Captive supplies" is a term used by the meatpacking industry to refer to contracts with large ranchers that guarantee a steady supply of cows. The independent rancher has no bargaining power in terms of his price, but he knows it is low. The low price may be, in part, due to the surplus of cattle on the market today. American beef consumption is down at a time when human growth hormone is being pumped into cattle to make them larger, so fewer cattle are sold. Independent ranchers began to complain, and in the late 90's the USDA investigated the concentration of processing and packing by the four large firms. It was difficult to get ranchers who sold to these firms to testify for fear of reprisals. One brave rancher from Kansas, Mike Callicrote, decided to take a stand. His business suffered for several years, but he has managed to stay afloat and organize a class-action lawsuit against the four, charging collusion in price-fixing and in secret contracts with large, corporate ranches. The Colorado Cattlemen's Association filed a brief which was attached to Mike Callicrote's suit, alleging illegal buying practices. Without high-powered attorneys and the ability to sustain the lengthy process, the suit went nowhere.

There are far greater risks to the independent small rancher than just prices. As Colorado real estate booms, land has become far more valuable than many of these ranchers ever imagined. Doing poorly, there is large temptation to sell out to developers. The increasing value, moreover, has led to a much larger inheritance tax bill, so children, who are not vehemently committed to a ranch that barely supports a family, often sell all of the land and move on. Some ranchers have granted conservation easements (tracts of ranch land which can never be used for development). While they may receive some satisfaction that at least some of the natural beauty of Colorado will be preserved, as well as a tax break, their remaining land becomes even more valuable to developers who can build subdivisions with great views. The temptation to sell thus becomes greater, and, faced with an ever-increasing risk of going broke, many simply give up and sell. Along with the steady decline in the independent rancher, Colorado is losing its ranching culture. Young people have far more lucrative career choices now, and the prospects of long hours, going into debt, and unstable beef markets are not seen as attractive. In short, the days of the small independent rancher in this country are numbered.

Hank, whose story began this chapter, committed suicide at age 43, a year after the author met him. Cattle prices were at their lowest, Colorado was constructing a highway through his land, and he was having difficulty obtaining a conservation easement. Indeed, the suicide rate among ranchers and farmers is three times the average of the general adult population in America.

Cogs in the Great Machine

Cogs in the Great Machine Summary and Analysis

Some people get so used to smells that they no longer notice them; others never get used to a smell, and it bothers them continually. The people in Greeley, Colorado are of both groups. The smell comes from the slaughterhouses that kill cattle, package the meat, and cook the remains into dog food. Industrialization has now hit the production and packaging of meat, so no skill is required. Thus, low wage jobs for immigrants and high school dropouts have been created, jobs which bring high rates of injury, create ghettos, and generally destroy towns in the West. ConAgra runs the largest meat processing and packing plant in Greeley. It brings cattle into feed lots and feeds them only grain for three months, to fatten them up, aided by anabolic steroids implanted in their ears. A typical cow will gain about 400 pounds and produce about 50 pounds of urine and feces a day. Multiply this times two feedlots, each holding up to one hundred thousand cattle, and Greeley has a major waste problem. The waste is not treated but, rather, dumped into pits called "lagoons."

The town of Greeley was named after Horace Greeley, editor of the New York Tribune in the late 1800s. It was Greeley who coined the famous phrase, "Go West, young man, go West." Nathan Meeker, another New York editor took Greeley's words to heart and decided to build a western city dedicated to education, agriculture, and morality. He founded Greeley, Colorado, and the town thrived, growing beans, sugar beets and grains. The farmers of Greeley did not like ranchers and built a huge fence around their town to keep the cattle out; Nathan Meeker was killed by the Ute Indians, but the town survived and thrived.

During the Depression, when crop prices were at their lowest, Warren Monfort began to buy cheap grains from a neighbor to feed his eighteen head of cattle. What he discovered was that, by using grain instead of prairie grass, he could control when he sold his cattle, by fattening up as he wished. Further, his beef was fattier and more tender, needing no aging time as grass-fed beef did. He built feedlots and expanded and, by 1950, had 20,000 head. In 1960, he and his son opened a small slaughterhouse and brought in skilled union workers, paid high salaries and profited. Greeley gradually became a "company town," but its citizens were prosperous and happy. Monfort was a "hands-on" owner who visited his slaughterhouse often, in order to hear suggestions and comments from the workers. Big changes were coming to the meat-packing industry, however, and the impact on Greeley would be disastrous.

A slaughterhouse in a rural area like Greeley was unusual. Most stockyards and slaughterhouses were in large urban areas with railroad access. Cattle were brought in by rail, slaughtered, butchered and packed, and then sold to local butchers or middlemen. Chicago had the largest meat-packing industry and shipped its beef throughout the U.S. and to Europe. Initially, working conditions in the meat-packing plants were deplorable—long hours, low pay, no benefits, and horrific accidents and deaths. As unions began to rise and, as government moved in to regulate working conditions, the workers gradually moved into the middle class with job security, benefits and a pension. Though still dangerous, meat-packing was considered a desirable job.

Swift was one of the largest meat packers in Chicago and remained privately-owned. Its union workers had the highest wages and the most benefits, including bonuses. Two Swift executives decided to strike out on their own, believing that they could automate meat-packing like any other industry and drastically cut labor costs by using non-union, unskilled packers, trained to do just one task on the line. They opened their first plant, Iowa Beef Packers (IBP) in 1961, in rural Iowa, away from the union-strong urban centers. Trucks could be used, as opposed to railroads, due to the new interstate highway system, and a large pool of unskilled laborers could be brought in from Latin America. Opening its second plant in Nebraska, IBP further refined its operation by cutting beef into smaller units, vacuum sealing them, and shipping them frozen to retailers, who merely had to stock their shelves. Grocery stores were then able to fire most of their skilled union butchers.

Attempts to unionize at the IBP plants were met with fierce resistance, even violence. During one strike, New York's unionized butchers blocked the sale of IBP beef in supermarkets there. Top executives met with Moe Steinman, a New York City mobster, who agreed to bring an end to the boycott for a kickback of five cents on every ten pounds of IBP beef sold in New York. The boycott ended, and Moe's son-in-law, as well as another friend, were given executive positions with IBP. The friend had been imprisoned some years earlier for bribing meat inspectors and selling bad meat to the Army. Finally, in 1974, an investigation exposed all of this, and the IBP executives were found guilty of bribing union leaders and meat wholesaler. Their punishment? A $7000 fine.

Large urban stockyards could not compete with IBP's low costs and so, one by one, they, too, headed west where labor was 50% cheaper, to Iowa, Kansas, Texas, Colorado, and Nebraska. Ken Monfort, who owned the Greeley, Colorado slaughterhouse, got on board as well, cutting wages to compete. His workers went on strike, he hired scabs, and, when the workers were finally allowed back in at much lower pay, there were acts of sabotage and vandalism. Monfort had already purchased another slaughterhouse in Nebraska, so he simply closed the Greeley plant and left. He re-opened it in 1982, as a non-union facility. but he still had his troubles. Across the country, the few top beef processors were buying up smaller processors, all with President Reagan's approval. Though he fought this in court, under the anti-trust laws, Monfort lost and eventually sold out to ConAgra, taking an offered executive position. ConAgra is today the largest meatpacker in the world and has expanded its line of products to include sheep, turkey, frozen foods, flour, chicken and pork. Its name is virtually scattered throughout any grocery store. This growth has not come without legal problems, as ConAgra has paid millions of dollars in fines for its illegal business practices, which have included price-fixing, bribing law makers, and violations of numerous FDA regulations.

Everyone is familiar with migrant farm workers, those people of Mexican descent who travel from state to state as crops need to be harvested. There is now a migrant industrial worker in the meat-packing business. Most come from Mexico, El Salvador, and Guatemala, where advertising campaigns are held and buses are ready to bring them to the factory doors. Others are recruited from slums and homeless shelters throughout the U.S., again with buses available for the trip. They are brought to western meat-packing factories, paid low wages and live in horrible conditions. Turnover is extremely high, but executives like this. Health insurance is often not available until at least six months on the job, and vacation is not given until after the first year. High turnover saves a lot of money. Furthermore, migrants who do not stay on one job too long are far less likely to attempt to unionize.

There is no commitment on the part of large meat-packers to their workforce or to the communities in which plants are located. Low-paid workers without health insurance are a drain on hospital emergency rooms; low-paid workers live in slums where crime and drugs flourish. High turnover means constant change in a town's population and a large segment of people without "roots" or stake in the community. Add to this the constant blackmail by plant executives that they will move unless given tax breaks and other benefits, and you have towns completely at the mercy of one large industry. In Nebraska, ConAgra and IBP were able to get legislation through that not only gave tax incentives to corporations but also reduced personal state income tax for the wealthy. Executives of these two companies benefited personally.

What slaughterhouses in small western towns have wrought has been wholly negative. The poverty and crime are so bad that middle-class people have fled. The odors from the slaughtering are horrendous, including hydrogen sulfide from the waste lagoons, which causes respiratory problems and, at worst, permanent nervous system damage. Through a serious of Republican administrations in Washington, these situations have continued unchecked, and even the eight years of Clinton saw no reforms. Indeed, many of the dangers and abuses that resulted in the writing of The Jungle by Upton Sinclair in the early 1900's are back again, despite a host of regulatory agencies and departments established to prevent them.

The Most Dangerous Job

The Most Dangerous Job Summary and Analysis

Meat-packing is now considered the most dangerous job in the U.S., as it was at the turn of the century when Upton Sinclair exposed the filth, worker abuse, and injuries. Slaughtering chickens ha become much more mechanized because of their size uniformity; cows, however, vary so much in size that the butchering is still mostly completed by hand. Because of the assembly-line process, each worker stands in one position and makes the same cut eight hours a day, as carcasses march on conveyor belts. Because profit is based upon volume, moreover, carcasses move as quickly as possible. Many line workers, afraid of "falling behind," take methamphetamines to increase alertness and speed. All of this culminates in an injury-laden business, with lacerations being the most prevalent injury type, followed by torn muscles, slipped disks and pinched nerves. Workers are encouraged, sometimes bribed, not to report their injuries, and many comply in order to keep their jobs or because they are "illegal" to begin with. Female illegals are perhaps the most vulnerable, with sexual harassment added to the mix.

Many of the most dangerous jobs in a meat-packing plant are carried out by the third shift cleaning crews. This task is contracted out, and the cleaning companies use primarily illegals as a work force. High pressure hoses, using a combination of hot water and chlorine clean off machinery which must be on during the process. The types of injuries, although most to unreported, range from burns and respiratory and lung problems from hot water and chlorine fumes, to dismemberment and death from being caught in machines and grinders. Two deaths at National Beef in Kansas were reported to OSHA, and the company was fined $480 for each death.

The general approach towards OSHA and other regulatory agencies has been to do whatever is necessary not to be caught. Concurrently, throughout the 1980s and 1990s, OSHA steadily lost funding and thus inspectors. During this time, inspections occurred only when required injury reports showed greater than average number of incidents. Injury reports were thus "doctored," either by reporting major injuries as minor or by maintaining two logs, the falsified one going to OSHA. IBP was one of the worst offenders. When caught, IBP executives were able to negotiate a $5.7 million fine down to $975,000, with the promise of a new health and safety program.

Most workers can rely on workmen's compensation to help them financially if an injury interrupts their work life. Workers' compensation laws have been on the books in every state for many years. When a worker has a job-related injury or illness, he receives payments through statewide insurance programs to which his company contributes. Because injuries are so prevalent in the meat-packing industry, executives have long pushed for cuts in benefits. In 1991, Colorado began a consistent rollback in benefits, and attached a new caveat. The company was given the power to decide which doctor evaluated any injury or illness. This change was led by State Senator Tom Norton whose wife was an attorney for ConAgra Red Meat. The claim forms, moreover, were changed to a much more complicated format. Obviously, Hispanics who have little command of the English language find the forms overwhelming. The claims for obvious injuries are paid. In Colorado, loss of an arm is worth $36,000, a finger from $2200 to $4500, and permanent disfigurement a maximum of $2000. If injuries or illnesses are not externally obvious, claims are much less successful and take years to resolve. Companies file appeals and insist upon endless hearings. The Republican majority in Congress has adopted a "hands-off" stand on both purported abuses of workmen's' compensation and on OSHA investigative activities, which are steadily declining.

The author's frequent trips to meat-packing towns in the high plains put him in contact with many workers who had been injured, all of whom faced the same struggle to get medical care and workmen's comp, the fear of speaking out, and were victims of the seeming indifference on the part of company management. Many workers suffered several injuries over the course of years of employment in the industry and were fired when they could no longer produce as before. One worker of sixteen years, for example, had a total of seven injuries requiring hospitalization and/or surgery, was terminated while still in the hospital with the 7th incident, thus losing his health insurance, and was then denied a worker's comp claim. On appeal, he won a settlement of $35,000, 15% of which went to his lawyer. Unable to work at all, he now lives on social security disability at age forty-six.

What's In the Meat?

What's In the Meat? Summary and Analysis

Food-related illnesses are on the rise in this country. From outbreaks of minor food poisoning to infections from deadly E. Coli, food production processes and distribution can spread such food poisoning throughout the country and world. While E. Coli is perhaps the most well known, because of highly publicized meat recalls, several others have been identified, and there are more to come. Infectious diseases common to beef come from cows that appear healthy but carry microbes in the stomach or on fecal matter. Somehow, in the processing of the beef, the meat cut and packaged has come into contact with stomach contents or feces, and the final product is frozen and shipped out with the microbes. In the words of the author, "There is shit in the meat." If the meat is not thoroughly cooked, then, the microbes infect humans. E. Coli and other microbial infections are more common in beef than pork or chicken, probably because, traditionally pork and chicken are thoroughly cooked. The increasing prevalence of human illness and death from tainted beef has really only occurred since the 1950's. Prior to then, hamburger meat was considered low quality beef eaten only by the poor. White Castle restaurants introduced the idea of fast food hamburgers and began to be patronized by working class males. Once Ray Kroc introduced the McDonald's hamburger as a family food, however, the demand for ground beef became huge, and slaughterhouses responded with huge feed lots and grinders, thus providing the means by which pathogens like E. Coli could be spread. Not until 1993 did doctors and hospitals begin to notice larger than normal cases of E. Coli infections, especially in children. The first major nationally publicized problem of E. Coli infection involved a chain of Jack In the Box restaurants on the west coast. Jack In the Box settled lawsuits and nearly went bankrupt, but the processing plant which supplied the beef was never touched. Many believe this is because the top meat-packing companies had such close ties and contributed so much to the Republican Party which controlled Congress.

E. Coli is a hearty pathogen that can release toxins into the bloodstream that in turn destroy organs. It can survive in dry, wet, hot or cold conditions. It is spread primarily through feces, and the current feedlot environment is a perfect host for its spread. Here, cattle stand in pools of manure. Further, as grain prices have steadily climbed, other protein products have been added, including remains of dead pigs, horses, poultry and other cattle, including their blood. Much of this has been banned now, following the outbreak of mad cow disease; however, waste products from poultry plants are still fed to cattle, including their manure.

From the feedlots, cattle are moved into the slaughterhouse, and three tasks are most dangerous relative to the spread of E. Coli and other pathogens. First, the hide is removed, by machine. If the hide is not fully clean, dirt and manure can fall onto the carcass. Gutting the cow is still completed by hand. It is a tricky process of getting the stomach and intestines out and tying them off so that no remaining contents spill on the carcasses. If there are spills, these can be further spread by the same knife being used to cut into carcasses as they move along on the conveyor belt. Workers themselves become contaminated and infect the beef they slaughter. Grinders, used to make ground beef, can spread contamination exponentially, because the leftovers of large numbers of cattle are ground together. Indeed, a single hamburger patty may contain meat from hundreds of different cows.

Attempts to regulate and provide stiffer inspections have always been met with vigorous opposition from the meat-packing industry. Meat inspection has largely been visual and olfactory. During the 1980's, health officials and the National Academy of Scientists warned that meat contamination was a serious threat and recommended random microbial testing. The Reagan and Bush Administrations, however, disagreed and allowed meat inspection be further de-regulated, including self-inspections. Following the Jack-In-The-Box contamination in 1993, meat processors argued that E. Coli was a common microbe, and that failure on the part of restaurants to cook the beef properly was the single causative factor. The Clinton Administration disagreed, and the new head of the USDA Inspection Service declared that E. Coli contamination would render meat unsaleable and that microbial inspections would begin immediately. Jack-In-The-Box did the responsible thing following its bout with E. Coli; by employing a consultant to set up a thorough and complete system of ensuring non-contaminated beef. All employees received complete training on handling and cooking beef patties. The consultant personally inspected meat packing suppliers and found only two to be acceptable. Jack-In-The-Box purachases beef from these two plants and no others, and in these two plants the contracts about microbial testing are clear—every fifteen minutes.

Unfortunately, the 1994 congressional elections returned a Republican majority to Congress, and further attempts to tighten regulations relative to meat-packing would be failures. Unlike with so many other products, the government cannot force a meat company to recall its contaminated products. It can only suggest and negotiate such recalls, and, if a company agrees to a recall, it does not have to inform the public of all of the details, including which restaurants and stores received the meat. It is usually up to state officials and the press to expose the nature and distribution area of bad meat, if they can get the information. Looking toward the future, there may be promise in irradiation of meat products as a means of sterilizing them. This method is not without controversy, however, and a highly skilled work force would be required to implement such processes. Further, irradiation would be used as an alternative to cleaning up production methods, and consumers would still be subject to consumption of feces with their meat, even though the feces would be cleaner.

One of the most shameful examples of governmental indifference to regulation of the meat processing industry is in the selection of meat suppliers for the National School Lunch Program. The USDA purchases beef from suppliers, based upon lowest bids, and then distributes the meat throughout the country to public school districts. The Cattle King Packing Company, a supplier of beef to Wendy's, was awarded one of the contracts in the early 1980's, but an NBC expose showed that cattle already dead were slaughtered anyway, that diseased cattle were routinely hidden from inspectors and that returned bad meat was mixed in with good. The owner was eventually convicted of selling tainted meat to the government, his second such conviction in two years.

School children have been infected by E. Coli in several parts of the country in the past twenty years and, even when the culprit packers are identified, the U.S. government continues to purchase from them. In 1999, an overwhelming amount of salmonella was found in beef packaged by Supreme Beef Processors in Dallas, Texas. The USDA pulled inspectors from the plant, forcing it to shut down. The next day, a judge ordered the inspectors back and the plant re-opened. Despite continued salmonella and E. Coli findings, the plant continued to operate and sell beef to the USDA for distribution to schools. By the end of 2000, the USDA finally stopped buying the beef and laid out stricter regulations for packers attempting to get School Lunch Program contracts. In restaurants and in public institutions, the final defense against tainted beef and chicken is the handling and cooking. In most institutions, food staff is trained, but fast food restaurants that rely upon teenagers and immigrants with a rapid turnover rate, do not provide such training. The author's interviews with former employees, moreover, have revealed some dangerous and disgusting practices and behaviors on the part of fast food workers.

Global Realization

Global Realization Summary and Analysis

Plauen is a small town in Eastern Germany with a history of contrasts. At one time a thriving center of the German textile industry, it became a center of Naziism and then a part of Communist East Germany. Toward the end of World War II, Plauen was heavily bombed by Allied forces, and much of the town was never re-built. Today, Plauen has a wool factory and other small industry. When the Berlin Wall came down, McDonald's was one of the first American companies to move into East Germany, and it built the first McDonald's on an empty parking lot in Plauen.

The thrust of fast food into the global marketplace has been systematic and aggressive, led by McDonald's and KFC. Today, McDonald's opens about five new restaurants each day, at least four of which are in foreign countries. Indeed, the majority of McDonald's profits today come from its overseas restaurants. As fast food chains have franchised into overseas markets, they have taken with them the related agricultural businesses to supply their food. Large meat processors in the U.S. have purchased or built similar plants in foreign countries. Poultry and potato producers have followed suit. Most all of the food served in fast food restaurants overseas is now locally supplied by American-owned companies.

Germany has been the most profitable for McDonald's thus far, although China may one day surpass this phenomenon. The popularity of hamburgers and fries among German children has resulted in the placement of McDonald's franchises in gas stations, railway stations and airports. McDonald's will now be located in every WalMart built in Germany. One recent franchise addition has been in Dachau, just one-third mile from the entrance to the former concentration camp. Though denying any such thing, McDonald's has been accused of taking advantage of the Holocaust by being the first fast food restaurant to open its doors to the throngs of tourists visiting daily.

Since the fall of the USSR and the opening up of previously isolated societies, American culture has spread rapidly throughout the world, usually spearheaded by fast food franchises. Adopting a more "Americanized" lifestyle, however, has wrought some changes that are not particularly positive. Along with fast food, television and video games, obesity has become an epidemic in the U.S., and it is quickly spreading abroad with hamburgers, fried chicken and french fries, available in "super sizes" for only a small amount more. Recent pressure to introduce healthier selections has failed, because fast food consumers' tastes are already entrenched in the high-fat foods that these chains have promoted for so many years. Everywhere that McDonald's and KFC have gone, obesity has increased, along with heart disease, stroke and several types of cancer.

Acceptance of American fast food is far from unanimous in many foreign countries. Farmers, left-wing liberals, vegetarians, consumer groups, health officials, educators, and labor unions all have their specific grievances. In London, for example, a loose affiliation of Greenpeace began to distribute leaflets about McDonald's, claiming unhealthy food, exploitation of children and workers, and animal cruelty. McDonald's decided to sue. The case, with appeals, lasted several years, and, even though McDonald's won on a few points, the negative publicity was especially harmful, particularly in the areas of unhealthy fat content disclosures, wages and working conditions and the manner in which cattle were slaughtered. Despite all of this, the expansion marches on, and fast food franchises continue to pop up throughout the world.

Epilogue: Have it Your Way

Epilogue: Have it Your Way Summary and Analysis

There are "holdouts" throughout the western U.S., people who have refused to give in to the speed and efficiency by which fast food is purchased, processed and sold to consumers. Dale Lasater of Colorado has a huge cattle ranch where nature is in charge. Cows are not given steroids or antibiotics, not fattened on expensive grain in feedlots, and are sold as organic, grass-fed beef. He will not turn back the tide of modern beef processing but does his part nevertheless. In Colorado springs, the Conway family runs it Red Top Restaurant in traditional fashion as well. Hamburger is purchased fresh every day from a small local supplier. Potatoes are peeled and cooked fresh. Workers earn a minimum of $10 an hour and have benefits. There are a few other Red Top Restaurants in neighboring towns, but further expansion is questionable. The In-N-Out burger chain in California, about 150 locations in all, is owned exclusively by the Snyder family which refuses to franchise and engage in the agri-business practices of its larger rivals. Employees start at $8.00 an hour, and all full-time workers receive full benefits.

None of these traditionalists believes that the U.S. will ever revert back to their ways. Indeed, the trend throughout the latter half of the twentieth century has been for corporations to grow by systematically eliminating their rivals. The challenge for twenty-first century America will be the curtailment of dangerous and excessive corporate power that threatens freedom, controls politicians and appears to have an amoral outlook toward the consequences of actions. Corporate power, in fact, has been responsible for the reduction of worker safeguards, consumer safety, and the continued destruction of the environment. The current fat food industry is a complete reflection of corporate power and greed run amuck in America. The low price of fast food has come with high cost—low wages, no benefits, infected and diseased meat, elimination of sound independent business owners, exploitation of children, and lack of concern for the health of its customers. The author has a set of solutions which may turn the tide somewhat, as follows:

1. A ban on all advertising of unhealthy food to children. Congress had no problem banning cigarette advertising to protect adults and should do the same to protect our children.

2. The elimination of tax breaks that allow fast food chains to continue to pay low wages and provide little to no training on health and safety.

3. New laws to assist union organizing might encourage the industry to treat workers better.

4. Repair the broken food safety inspection system and tighten regulations of meat processors who are selling beef for school consumption.

5. Consolidate the food safety and inspections agencies and committees into one single agency that has authority to test and inspect through every aspect of food production, from farm to table, from start to finish. Separate this agency from drug safety so that it can focus solely on food.

6. Significantly tighten up controls on meat processors so that dangerous pathogen infestation and huge worker injury rates are reduced. OSHA fines need to be stiffened, the largest so far being $70,000 for death resulting from "willful employer negligence."

7. Promote worker organization in the meat processing industry. The absence of a union has allowed this industry to exploit and mistreat its poor, non-English speaking, often illegal work force. If allowed to continue unchecked, these corporate behaviors can spread to other industries and certainly have already done so to some extent.

It is unlikely that Congressional action will quickly occur. The nation's fast food chains have one of the most powerful lobbyist organizations in Washington. The method of securing change must come from outside Washington, from a generalized grass roots movement for change. While not realistic, the author admits, it is not impossible for the public to demand more of its fast food restaurants and to boycott those that refuse to make important changes for the health and safety of everyone.

Afterword: The Meaning of Mad Cow

Afterword: The Meaning of Mad Cow Summary and Analysis

When the first edition of this book was published, European governments were just preparing to slaughter huge numbers of cattle possibly infected with mad cow disease. The very next month, England had to burn sheep and cattle because of foot-and-mouth disease. These scares awakened the public throughout the world, a public that now began to worry about the safety of its own meat consumption. Actually, in 1996, the FDA had addressed the issue of mad cow disease prevention by prohibiting the inclusion of some animal proteins in cattle feed. Scientists know that the disease is spread to cattle by their consumption of the remains of other infected animals and believe that the disease could certainly pass to humans through consumption of that cattle. So elaborate rules were established. Cattle could be fed certain types of animal remnants but not others. Obviously, the meat production industry opposed all of these new regulations as well as the cattle feed producers. Even though the restrictions were put in place, policing them was another matter. Mad cow disease receded from the headlines until 2001 when infected cows were found in Europe. An immediate investigation of feedlots throughout the U.S. demonstrated that the regulations had been ignored or were not known in the first place. Responding to this disaster, and in an attempt to shore up its business, McDonald's announced that it would not purchase beef coming from any feedlot that failed to follow the new regulations. Immediately, suppliers complied.

It is the author's hope that the glory days of the fast food industry in America are waning. Consumption has leveled out, and new franchises are primarily being built overseas at great expense. McDonald's new plan for growth involves increasing consumption at existing restaurants in the U.S., and this may be a difficult goal. In an attempt to repair its damaged reputation, McDonald's has become a leader in humane methods of animal slaughter. It has not yet become a proponent of more humane treatment of meat processing employees, however. The other optimistic kernel is that smaller regional chains, offering healthier fares are higher cost, are now experiencing more rapid growth than the fast food giants.

Contaminated meat continues to be a threat in the U.S. The threat of mad cow in Europe, however, has drastically reduced beef consumption there and has, as well, altered the means by which beef is now fed and processed. The smaller independent farmer and local processor are back in Europe, as the entire process has been de-industrialized. In America, things continue to consolidate, however. Tyson Foods has purchased IBP and is now the single largest meat packing firm in the nation in both beef and poultry. This further consolidation of power is never good.

Characters

Eric Schlosser

Author of Fast Food Nation, Eric Schlosser is an investigative reporter and correspondent for the Atlantic Monthly. As well, he is a frequent freelance contributor to a number of journals and magazines in his efforts to uncover and expose corruption, governmental indifference to serious social ills, and other threats to health and safety. Fast Food Nation was his first book and remained on the New York Times Bestseller List for over two years. In the writing of this book, Schlosser traveled throughout the United States, interviewing people from every part of agribusiness and the fast food industry, conducted extensive research into the workings of the USDA, the FDA, and a host of other governmental agencies charged with keeping food safe, and uncovered appalling conditions in the meat-packing industry, both in the indifference to disease hazards and in the abuse of its workforce. In order to assess the impact of the fast food industry internationally, Schlosser traveled to a number of foreign countries that had embraced the all-American meals of hamburgers, fries, fried chicken and pizza, and documented the negative consequences on these societies as well. Schlosser is particularly critical of Republican administrations since Reagan, which have systematically relaxed controls on food processors and handlers, reduced the power and authority of OSHA, and relegated the food inspection process to little more than perfunctory visual processes, thus placing the American public, particularly its children, at great health risk. Continuing in the vein of investigative journalism, Schlosser has authored two other books, exposing the American Black Market and prison system. Critics of Schlosser charge him with "yellow journalism," that is, taking a few extreme examples and applying them to the entire industry. Schlosser, however, has the facts on his side, and provides an irrefutable case for major reform in the entire food industry.

Carl Karcher

Considered the pioneer of the fast food industry, Carl Karcher moved from Ohio to southern California just before World War II, leaving a life as part of an itinerant farm family, to work in his uncle's feed store. As a side job, he drove a bakery truck for extra cash, met a girl, and got married. For $326.00, he purchased a hot dog stand, placing it across the street from the Goodyear Tire factory, selling hot dogs, chili dogs, and sodas to workers on their lunch breaks. During World War II, the Goodyear plant expanded its operation with government contracts, and Carl purchased more hot dog carts. By 1944, he owned four carts and was ready to expand in other ways. He purchased Street-Side Restaurant in Los Angeles, turning it into a drive-in barbecue. The restaurant was strictly owner-operated, with Carl making his own sauce on his back porch each Sunday. After visiting the McDonald Brothers' restaurant in San Bernardino, Carl saw the way of the future—an automated, dish and carhop-free restaurant which could sell food cheaply by cutting overhead costs. He opened the first Carl's Jr. restaurant in 1956 and went on to expand onto every highway off-ramp possible, placing his shiny, neon star atop each site. Expansion into Texas was not successful, and his company faltered. The Board of Directors removed him, but, undaunted, he staged a takeover and returned triumphant. He went on to purchase Hardee's, placing his famous star atop each of these restaurants. Karcher is old but tireless, and deeply in debt. He vows to leave this life debt-free.

Ray Kroc

A traveling salesman of moderate success, Ray Kroc landed in southern California selling milkshake machines. He became intrigued with the efficiency of McDonald's, and saw an opportunity for national growth, if the owners would franchise the operation. The McDonald brothers were not interested for themselves, but gave Kroc the right to sell franchises for them. He did so with gusto and became a multi-millionaire in the process. Kroc correctly predicted that the new market for advertising would be the baby boomers who were just young children at the time and, as franchises continued to be sold, he established the pattern of marketing McDonald's to children via mascots, who eventually morphed into Ronald McDonald.

J.R. Simplot

Simplot began his road to wealth by purchasing 600 hogs and taking them to the desert. There, he shot wild horses and fed the remains to his hogs all winter. In the spring, he sold his hogs for a substantial profit and went into potato farming. During World War II, he added onions and a dehydration machine, selling the onion flakes to the U.S. Army. After the war, he moved into the area of frozen french fries, without much success, until he realized that the real market for them was institutions and restaurant chains. He sold the idea to Ray Kroc in 1965, as a means to greatly reduce labor costs and to guarantee uniformity of size and taste in all McDonald's restaurants. Simplot, along with two competitors, now control 80% of the American potato industry.

Hank

An independent rancher not far from Colorado Springs, Hank was thoroughly committed to growing natural cattle. He rotated grazing fields, maintained an environmentally sound and safe ranch, and tried to "weather" the consolidation of ranches into mega-corporations. As the price for his beef continued to decline and the cost of raising them continued to increase, Hank went deeper into debt. The decline in local processors who could purchase his beef and sell it to small family-owned groceries and restaurants further added to his financial troubles. Ultimately, he failed to save his ranch and committed suicide at the age of 43.

Nathan Meeker

A New York newspaper editor who envisioned a better life in the west, Meeker founded Greeley, Colorado, a small town dedicated to education, agriculture, and morality. His town thrived, growing beans, grains and sugar beets. Though he was killed by Ute Indians, Greeley survived intact until the meat packing industry moved in after the Depression. Today, Greeley is a filthy, smelly place, populated by poverty-stricken meat-packing workers. Education is of poor quality, there is little agriculture to speak of, and the slums spawn drugs and crime.

Warren Monfort

A small rancher in Greeley, Monfort discovered that, by buying cheap grain from his neighbors, he could fatten up his cattle at will and therefore control when he sold them. He also discovered that grain-fed beef was fattier and more tender, needing no aging time. His "experiment" eventually revolutionized the entire beef processing industry. He opened the first beef processing plant in Greeley, Colorado, using skilled union processors and packers. Eventually consumed by greed, Monfort closed the plant and re-opened it as a non-union facility. Eventually, he sold the Greeley plant to ConAgra.

Rich Conway

Rich Conway is the patriarch of the Conway family that owns four Red Top Restaurants in and around the Colorado Springs area. These are low-tech operations which purchase ground beef fresh daily from a local processor, peel two hundred pounds of fresh potatoes for french fries, and offer a small but varied menu to their customers. Workers are primarily full-time and start at $10.00 an hour with benefits. Management positions are all held by family members who pride themselves in quality and independence. Red Top has a loyal following of customers, and the business is highly profitable.

Harlan Sanders

A man of many diverse occupations, Sanders finally owned a gas station and served food at a table in the back of his station. His fried chicken became locally famous, and he eventually added a motel where it was served. Selling the station and motel to pay off debt, Sanders traveled the south, selling his fried chicken recipe to restaurants. Today, Kentucky Fried Chicken is one of the largest fast food chains around the world.

Jose Bove

Bove is a French sheep farmer who has opposed the new "imperialism" of America through its fast food expansion into Europe. When McDonald's decided to build a restaurant in his hometown of Millau, he led an attack on the building, destroying it. Bove was convicted and sent to prison, where he wrote a book titled, The World Is Not For Sale....Nor Am I! Today, he is a hero of the French nationalists who wish to keep American culture and influence out of France.

Objects/Places

Southern California

Where it all began. The first fast food restaurants began primarily in response to the automobile and highways in and around the Los Angeles area.

San Bernardino, California

Site of the first McDonald's Restaurant with the new automated system of preparation and service in 1948.

One McDonald's Plaza, Oak Brook, Illinois

Site of the Ray Kroc Museum, the McDonald's Gift Shop and McDonald's Hamburger University where managers and franchisees are trained.

Colorado Springs, Colorado

Site of huge growth because of "White flight" from California and defense industry growth and site of many fast food chains. McDonald's has used its restaurants here as testing sites for new technology and food items.

Aberdeen, Idaho

Home of the J.R. Simplot Potato Plant, where potatoes are processed from field to frozen fries of all types. Simplot supplies most of McDonald's frozen french fries.

New Jersey

Along the New Jersey turnpike sits the "Flavor Capitol of the World." Numerous chemical laboratories provide the research and development for "natural flavoring" and "natural coloring" additives to food.

Greeley, Colorado

Site of the largest meat-packing complex in the United States, owned by ConAgra.

Plauen, Germany

Site of the first McDonald's Restaurant to open in the former East Germany.

Lexington, Nebraska

A traditional western town completely destroyed by the opening of an IBP meat-packing plant. Now called "Mexington," it runs a close second to Greeley Colorado in filth, slums, crime, and poverty.

Matheson, Colorado

Site of an all-natural cattle ranch owned by Dale Lasater, one of the last holdouts against the corporate beef raising and processing industry.

Themes

Fast Food is Unhealthy and Dangerous

Americans can no longer ignore the multiple health hazards of a fast food diet. With the advent of fast food chains following World War II, Americans have latched on to the ease and convenience of ordering a meal which is ready within minutes and which, because of advertising and gimmicks, is especially popular with children. The all-American meal is now a hamburger, fries and a Coke, available at any number of chains, or tacos, delivered pizza, and fried chicken, all within a few miles of home. Fat content of these meals is horrendous, not to mention the dangerous amounts of sugar in the sodas which we consume daily. Obesity has now become an epidemic in America, and our children are suffering the most. Years of fast food consumption have resulted in a host of related diseases as well, to include diabetes, heart disease, stroke, and a number of cancers. The growth and popularity of fast food has altered the entire beef and chicken processing industry, spawning the risk of E. Coli and salmonella infections throughout the world. Without proper inspection and regulations, the nation's meat processors are free to operate contaminated and highly dangerous production of the meat that finds its way into fast food restaurants, onto grocery shelves, and into school cafeterias which are a part of the National School Lunch Program. Powerful lobbyists and collusion among meat processors and government officials continue to block important inspection reforms and regulations which would guarantee safety in meat. It is time for public response to these betrayals and a re-commitment on the part of government to put the health of its society above corporate interests.

Only Greed and Profit Drive Mega-Corporations

The fast food industry has spawned a host of mega-corporations related to the production and processing of food to supply that industry. As it has grown, so too have the size of meat packing and potato processing companies. Today, there are only four meat processors that control virtually all feeding and slaughtering of beef, pork and poultry. There are only three corporations which control the processing of potatoes into frozen products. These giants have been able to control pricing, reward or punish growers and ranchers, and successfully eliminate unions, thus eliminating or drastically reducing wages and benefits to workers. Greed and profit margins have caused these giants to establish powerful lobbyist organizations in Washington and to influence legislation and court decisions which allow them to continue to thwart public health concerns and deny proper pay and benefits to workers. They have systematically destroyed towns, squeezed out independent ranchers and poultry growers, and polluted the environment with their untreated waste lagoons. These mega-corporations are symptomatic of a larger trend in virtually all industrial and manufacturing areas—the mergers and buyouts that continue to place power into fewer and fewer hands and increase the potential for corruption and abuse. A series of Republican administrations has allowed this dangerous trend to continue unchecked, and it will take aggressive federal and state governmental action to halt and, indeed, reverse this trend.

Advertising to Children Should be Regulated and Curtailed.

Fast food advertising campaigns to children are quite sophisticated. Within their corporate structures are child psychologists who recommend the types of advertising that will work at various stages of child development. The immediate goal is to get kids to "nag their parents and nag them well"; the long-term goal is to establish brand loyalty for a lifetime. Television remains the biggest venue for advertisers, and kids watch an average of 30,000 commercials in a year. In 1995, the American Academy of Pediatrics declared that "advertising directed at children is inherently deceptive and exploits children under eight years of age." No ban was proposed, however, as that would infringe upon an advertiser's free speech. Congress must act to ban the advertising to children of all food that is high in fat and sugar, just as it banned tobacco advertising because of its danger to health. In doing so, it might just force the fast food industry to develop healthier food options that could be advertised. They will make the changes if their profit depends on it.

Style

Perspective

As an investigative journalist, Eric Schlosser has approached his research and writing with a comprehensive, well-organized journey through the fast food industry from its beginnings in southern California to its current global realization. He met and interviewed individuals from virtually every aspect of the industry—ranchers, chicken growers, potato farmers, meat-packing workers, fast food restaurant employees, small independent restaurant owners, and citizens of foreign countries into which fast food chains have expanded. Further, he has researched the history of the growth of agri-business corporations and their ability to wield extensive political power to get favorable legislation and relaxation of regulations. Along the way, he intertwined the personal stories of individuals affected by the fast food industry and exposed the abuses of the mega-corporations which support this industry. His research continued into the areas of health dangers, exposing the risks of obesity and the current methods of processing meats. Schlosser's biases are obvious. He is adamantly opposed to the current state of affairs in this industry and condemns Republican administrations which have allowed repeated relaxation of regulations and reduction of inspections. He calls for a general public response to the abuses and the real and potential dangers of both fast food and meat processing. In the mix, he seems to condemn the entire trend of corporate mergers and buyouts which result in too much power in the hands of a few, whose only motivation is profit and whose power allows control of local, state and federal law-makers. Though criticized for his subjectivity in reporting on this industry, he does, nevertheless, have the facts on his side.

Tone

The entire tone of the book is actually mild, considering the subject matter and the obvious negative content. Schlosser is not ranting and raving, and is not filling his work with words of strong condemnation of the fast food industry and its supporting agri-business corporations. Rather, he is relying on calm, reasoned factual data and interviews, telling the story through the eyes of those living within the industry itself and citing statistical data which cannot be ignored or denied, to quietly condemn both the fast food industry itself, the mega-corporations which have grown as a result of this phenomenon, and the indifference of local, state and national government officials to abuses and dangers inherent within the entire process of getting the hamburgers and fries delivered to consumers. As well, rather than simply expose the negative and dangerous aspects of a huge industry, he puts forth a series of solutions, in the form of changes that must take place if we are to return to a society that can depend upon healthy, safe food processing and delivery. He ends on an optimistic note, predicting that fast food will be a twentieth century relic, and he cites the current growth of smaller regional chains as evidence of this decline.

Structure

Fast Food Nation is divided into two large sections. Section One, titled "The American Way," traces the history of fast food from its early ancestors in southern California through its growth and expansion throughout the United States, its consolidation into uniformity of delivery, its spawning of agri-business mega-corporations, and its global expansion. As well, this section describes in detail the most common fast food chain employee, a part-time, non-union teen or uneducated/minority adult who receives little training and no benefits. The other common factor of all fast food chains is the relatively recent concept of "franchising," a method of expansion that has now spilled over into many retail corporate structures. Section two, titled "Meat and Potatoes," includes chapters on the use of chemical additives to flavor foods, the current corporate processes of raising and fattening cattle, poultry and growing/processing potatoes, and the inherent abuses of the workforces involved and the dangers to the health of the consumer at the end of the line. The Epilogue and Afterword sections pose additional concerns relative to pathogens and diseases related to beef and proposed solutions to improve the health and safety of workers and consumers. Throughout the work, factual data and personal stories are intertwined to lend credence to the assertions being made. This is an effective journalistic strategy and it certainly works in this case.

Quotes

"Hundreds of millions of people buy fast food every day without giving it much thought, unaware of the subtle and not so subtle ramifications of their purchases. They rarely consider where this food came from, how it was made, what it is doing to the community around them. They just grab their tray off the counter, find a table, take a seat, unwrap the paper and dig in.... They should know what really lurks between those sesame-seed buns. As the old saying goes: You are what you eat," (p. 10).

"The typical American child now spends about twenty-one hours a week watching television—roughly one and a half months of TV every year....Outside of school, the typical American child spends more time watching television than doing any other activity except sleeping. During the course of a year, he or she watches more than thirty thousand TV commercials. Even the nation's youngest children are watching a great deal of television. About one-quarter of American children between the ages of two and five have a TV in their room," (p. 46).

"The fast food industry now employs some of the most disadvantaged members of American society. It often teaches basic job skills—such as getting to work on time—to people who can barely read, whose lives have been chaotic or shut off from the mainstream. Many individual franchisees are genuinely concerned about the well-being of their workers. But the stance of the fast food industry on issues involving employee training, the minimum wage, labor unions, and overtime pay strongly suggests that its motives in hiring the young, the poor and the handicapped are hardly altruistic," (p. 71).

"Today's unprecedented degree of meatpacking concentration has helped depress the prices that independent ranchers get for their cattle. Over the last twenty years, the rancher's share of every retail dollar spent on beef has fallen from 63 cents to 46 cents. The four major meatpacking companies now control about 20 per cent of the live cattle in the U.S. through 'captive supplies'—cattle that are either maintained in company-owned feedlots or purchased in advance through forward contracts. When cattle prices start to rise, the large meatpackers can flood the market with their own captive supplies, driving prices back down. They can also obtain cattle through confidential agreements with wealthy ranchers, never revealing the true price being paid....independent ranchers and feedlots now have a hard time figuring out what their cattle are actually worth, let alone fining a buyer for them at the right price," (p. 138).

"Although many factors helped revolutionize the poultry industry and increase the power of the large processors, one innovation played an especially important role. The Chicken McNugget turned a bird that once had to be carved at a table into something that could easily be eaten behind the wheel of a car. It turned a bulk agricultural commodity into a manufactured, value-added product. And it encouraged a system of production that has turned many chicken farmers into little more than serfs," (p. 139).

"The billions of fast food hamburgers that Americans now eat every year come from places like Greeley. The industrialization of cattle-raising and meatpacking over the past two decades has completely altered how beef is produced—and the towns that produce it. Responding to the demands of the fast food and supermarket chains, the meatpacking giants have cut costs by cutting wages. They have turned one of the nation's best-paying manufacturing jobs into one of the lowest-paying, created a migrant industrial workforce of poor immigrants, tolerated high injury rates, and spawned rural ghettos in the American heartland. Crime, poverty, drug abuse, and homelessness have lately taken root in towns where you'd least expect to find them. The effects of this new meatpacking regime have become as inescapable as the odors that drift from its feedlots, rendering plants, and pools of slaughterhouse waste," (p. 149).

"During the same years that the working conditions at America's meatpacking plants became more dangerous—when line speeds increased and illegal immigrants replaced skilled workers—the federal government greatly reduced the enforcement of health and safety laws. OSHA had long been despised by the nation's manufacturers, who considered the agency a source of meddlesome regulations and unnecessary red tape. When Ronald Reagan was elected president in 1980, OSHA was already underfunded and understaffed: its 1,300 inspectors were responsible for the safety of more than 5 million workplaces across the country. A typical American employer could expect an OSHA inspection about once every eighty years. Nevertheless, the Reagan administration was determined to reduce OSHA's authority even further, as part of the push for deregulation. The number of OSHA inspectors was eventually cut by 20 per cent, and in 1981 the agency adopted a new policy of "voluntary compliance." Instead of arriving unannounced at a factory and performing an inspections, OSHA employees were required to look at a company's injury log before setting foot inside the plant. If the records showed an injury rate at the factory lower than the national average for all manufacturers, the OSHA inspector had to turn around and leave at once—without entering the plant....These injury logs were kept and maintained by company officials," (pp.178-79).

"Today it can take years for an injured worker to receive workers' comp benefits. During that time, he or she must pay medical bills and find a source of income. Many rely on public assistance. The ability of meatpacking firms to delay payment discourages many injured workers from ever filing workers' comp claims. It leads others to accept a reduced sum of money as part of a negotiated settlement in order to cover medical bills. The system now leaves countless unskilled and uneducated manual workers poorly compensated for injuries that will forever hamper their ability to earn a living. The few who win in court and receive full benefits are hardly set for life. Under Colorado's new law, the payment for losing an arm is $36,000. An amputated finger get you anywhere from $2,200 to $4,500, depending on which one is lost. And "serious permanent disfigurement about the head, face or parts of the body normally exposed to public view" entitles you to a maximum of $2,000," (p. 185).

"During the first two years of the Clinton administration, OSHA seemed like a revitalized agency. It began to draw up the first ergonomics standards for for the nation's manufacturers, aiming to reduce cumulative trauma disorders. 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 ergonomics standards but also raised questions about the future of OSHA. Working closely with the U.S. chamber of Commerce and the National Association of Manufacturers, House Republicans have worked hard to limit OSHA's authority. Congressman Cass Ballenger, a Republican from North Carolina, introduced legislation that would require OSHA to spend at least half of its budget on "consultation" with businesses, instead of enforcement. This new budget requirement would further reduce the number of OSHA inspections, which by the late 1990's had already reached an all-time low...despite the fact that near his own district a fire at a poultry plant killed twenty-five workers in 1991. The plant had never had an OSHA inspection, its emergency exits had all been chained shut, and the bodies of workers were found in piles near the locked doors," (pp. 185-86).

"Although the rise in foodborne illnesses has been caused by many complex factors, much of the increase can be attributed to recent changes in how American food is produced...the nation's industrialized and centralized system of food processing has created a whole new sort of outbreak, one that can potentially sicken millions of people. Today, a cluster of illnesses in one small town may stem from bad potato salad at a school barbecue—or it may be the first sign of an outbreak that extends statewide, nationwide, or even overseas," (p. 195).

"The pathogens from infected cattle are spread not only in feedlots, but also at slaughterhouses and hamburger grinders. The slaughterhouse tasks most likely to contaminate meat are the removal of an animal's hide and the removal of its digestive system...the increased speed of productions lines makes these tasks more difficult...the consequences of a single error are quickly multiplied as hundreds of carcasses quickly move down the line...a contaminated knife spreads germs to everything it touches," (p. 20).

"For years, some of the most questionable ground beef in the United States was purchased by the USDA—and then distributed to school cafeterias throughout the country. Throughout the 1980's and 1990's, the USDA chose meat suppliers for its National School Lunch Program on the basis of the lowest price, without imposing additional food safety requirements. The cheapest ground beef was not only the most likely to be contaminated with pathogens, but also the most likely to contain pieces of spinal cord, bone and gristle left behind by Automated Meat Recovery Systems (contraptions that squeeze the last shreds of meat off bones). A 1983 investigation by NBC News said that the Cattle King Packing Company—at the time the USDA's largest supplier of ground beef for school lunches and a supplier to Wendy's—routinely processed cattle that were already dead before arriving at its plant, hid diseased cattle from inspectors, and mixed rotten meat that had been returned by customers into packages of hamburger meat.... Rudy "Butch" Stanko, the owner of the company was later tried and convicted for selling tainted meat to the federal government. He had been convicted just two years earlier on similar charges. That earlier felony conviction had not prevented him from supplying one-quarter of the ground beef served in the USDA school lunch program," (pp. 218-19).

"Today's fast food industry is the culmination of those larger social and economic trends. The low price of a fast food hamburger does not reflect its real costs—and should. The profits of the fast food chains 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. The environmental movement has forced companies to curtail their pollution, and a similar campaign must induce the fast food chains to assume responsibility for their business practices and minimize their harmful effects," (p. 262).

"Future historians, I hope, will consider the American fast food industry a relic of the twentieth century—a set of attitudes, systems, and beliefs that emerged from postwar southern California, that embodies its limitless faith in technology, that quickly spread across the globe, flourished briefly, and then receded, once its true costs became clear and its thinking became obsolete. [...] Whatever replaces the fat food industry should be regional, diverse, authentic, unpredictable, sustainable, profitable—and humble. It should know its limits. People can be fed without being fattened or deceived. This new century may bring an impatience with conformity, a refusal to be kept in the dark, less greed, more compassion, less speed, more common sense, a sense of humor about brand essences and loyalties, a view of food as more than just fuel. Things don't have to be the way they are. Despite all evidence to the contrary, I remain optimistic," (p.288).

Topics for Discussion

Schlosser appears to believe that somehow we can return to past systems of raising and processing meat, to include independent ranchers and chicken growers, clean, humane methods of slaughter and more sanitary measures of processing and packaging. What political changes would have to occur in order for this to happen?

The fast food industry has been charged with causing numerous societal ills. Name three problems and discuss the cause-effect relationship between fast food and each problem.

Schlosser attributes the rise of fast food in large part to the automobile. Trace the relationship between these two seeming unrelated things.

The federal government banned all tobacco advertising from television, arguing that it could influence children to become smokers. Considering the health hazards of fast food, why do you think a similar ban has not been imposed?

Schlosser states that the fast food industry has created low cost meals at a "high cost" to society as a whole. Giving specific examples, what has been the "high cost" to society?

Without violating the Constitution, what steps might local, state or national governments take to force fast food restaurants to change their menus?

Schlosser states that the mega-corporations created by the fast food industry wield power that is dangerous to the well-being of society. Given that there are also mega-corporations in the drug and health insurance industries, what dangers might these pose for our well-being?