

NONFICTION

The Stuff We're Made Of, Thanksgiving Edition: TFT Review of *Eating Animals* by Jonathan Safran Foer



Let me first say this: Jonathan Safran Foer's *Eating Animals* is a real downer. As a meat-loving omnivore, I found myself alternately nauseous and guilty as I read. An unflinchingly brutal, uncomfortably self-conscious and fact-filled exploration of the factory-farming industry, *Eating Animals* doesn't ask, but demands the attention of even the most unapologetic carnivore. Safran Foer embraces the role of activist with the publication of the book and his omnipresence in promoting it.

In addition to nauseous and guilty, I felt dirty, ashamed and, eventually, deeply annoyed. Why did I get assigned this book to review *now* when life in New York is hard enough already, what with the economy in the tank, the everyday complications of personal lives, and even just the more general woes of Saturn being in return? Couldn't my editor have asked me to review *The Unofficial Chuck Norris Fact Book: 101 of Chuck's Favorite Facts and Stories*, also recently published? Surely, that would have been funnier. And now this guy is trying to get me to give up steak? Chicken? Even shrimp? Couldn't he just stick to his fiction and save all of us a lot of trouble?

I called my 75-year-old father in North Carolina. "Oh, of course," he said, when I relayed to him the horrors I was reading. "I remember when my first grade teacher took us to a shrimp-packing plant back in Sumter [South Carolina]. It was summer, and it was hot – I wasn't wearing any shoes. There was blood everywhere! I wonder why she took us there."

Seriously, Dad? No shoes? I pondered the thought of my six-year-old father, bare feet covered in blood, smelling of shrimp; I wasn't necessarily grossed out. Instead, I found myself nostalgic for my hometown of Chapel Hill, North Carolina, and hungry for the Shrimp and Grits from Crook's Corner, one of the town's landmark restaurants. The late great Southern chef Bill Neal made a Shrimp and Grits there that has been a favorite of my family's for as long as I can remember. Cheddar and Parmesan, balanced with the brightness of lemon, green onion and mushrooms, not to mention oceans of tender, garlicky shrimp; it's the perfect dish. My brother Zoli worked at Crook's in high school. When we would visit him at the restaurant, somebody always ordered that Shrimp and Grits and whoever it was would spend the rest of the meal shooing the rest of us away from his or her plate.

Still, as hard as I tried – as much as I *wanted*— to avoid the facts with which Safran Foer was confronting me, I couldn't. "Like pornography," he writes, "factory farming is hard to define but easy to identify. In a

narrow sense it is a system of industrialized and intensive agriculture in which animals— often housed by the tens or even hundreds of thousands— are genetically engineered, restricted in mobility, and fed unnatural diets (which almost always include various drugs, like antimicrobials).” Not to mention the massive environmental impact of factory farming: “A University of Chicago study recently found that our food choices contribute at least as much as our transportation choices to global warming,” he writes.

If you think you’re doing a good thing by only eating seafood, think again: industrial fishing is just as bad as factory farming, if not worse. “The average shrimp trawling operation throws 80 to 90 percent of the sea animals it captures overboard, dead or dying, as bycatch,” Safran Foer writes. Consider yourself an environmentalist? Keep a copy of *An Inconvenient Truth* on your nightstand? Then maybe lay off the factory-farmed animal products. This isn’t so easy to do unless you plan on becoming a vegan like Safran Foer. According to the book, some *ninety-nine percent* of the meat, eggs and dairy in the United States are factory farmed. Forget “free range,” “natural,” “cage free”: these labels mean very little.

So, what’s the verdict? In spite of the damning evidence, I am not scheduled to go vegan (or even vegetarian) anytime soon. I tried vegetarianism for nine whole months at the tender age of ten, after watching a film on factory farming at my Quaker grade school, but it didn’t take. I am comfortable with Safran Foer’s assertion that “rationally, factory farming is so obviously wrong, in so many ways,” and for this reason, I have made – and will continue to make— a concerted effort to eat fewer animal products, and also to try to ensure that the animal products I do eat are of the more sustainable, humane, family-farmed variety.

That said, I will not become a vegetarian today, for the same reason I failed to when I was ten: We were visiting my grandparents in Budapest (my father is a Southerner, my mother is Hungarian) that Christmas, and I could not say no to my grandmother’s *paprikás csirke* (chicken with paprika and little, buttery dumplings=heavenly). The reality, as Safran Foer admits, is that “food is not rational. Food is culture, habit, and identity. For some, that irrationality leads to a kind of resignation.” Food is a very powerful thing; Safran Foer acknowledges this because he would be a fool not to. He speaks of his grandmother, a WWII survivor, who barely escaped Europe with her life: “the story of her relationship to food holds all of the stories that could be told about her,” he writes. “Food, for her, is not *food*. It is terror, dignity, gratitude, vengeance, joyfulness, humiliation, religion, history, and, of course, love.”

Food is part of our humanity. A decision to change what we eat is a decision to change who we are, both as individuals and as a people. This is not something one does lightly, and rightly so. As Safran Foer admits, “Life overflows with imperfections,” and, for many of us, our decision to continue eating animals is simply one of the imperfections that weaves itself into the stories of our lives. This “act of forgetting,” as Safran Foer describes it, is an act of life without which we would not be ourselves, for better or worse.