



A Feast of Stories

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Mary Hoffman ruminates on food in children's books...

Mary Hoffman ruminates on food in children's books ... all the year round, not just at Christmas!

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Can you remember a passage in a children's book about eating? Back over the years there come to me the illicit pickled limes that Amy March was caned for, the chicken and peaches that the railway children's mother was given by the Kind Old Gentleman and the buns the same children had for tea every time she sold another story. A quick trawl round my family produced Alice's dry biscuit, proffered to quench thirst by the White Queen, the breakfast of buckwheat and muffins given up to the poor by the March girls (Alcott really knew how to make gastronomic impressions) and the archetypal plum pie at the end of **Each Peach Pear Plum**.

It begins further back than that even, with the first songs and stories we tell children out of our, significantly, oral traditions. Goldilocks eats the porridge, the wolf eats the little pigs (and Red Riding Hood's grandmother, for good measure), Snow White eats the apple. Little Miss Muffet has a curious meal of curds and whey, the Knave of Hearts notoriously runs off with the Queen's patisserie and as for pies ?well, from one that masquerades as the first letter of the alphabet, to the one Jack Horner stuck his sticky thumb in, they are everywhere, containing blackbirds, or being denied to careless kittens and impecunious simpletons like Simon. The pie is so deeply ingrained in the English consciousness as the epitome of delicious nosh, that you must not be surprised to find it still on today's menu.

Famine, feast and fullness

Probably the best-selling children's book of all time is **Charlie and the Chocolate Factory**. You may say with hindsight that a story giving a poor child control over a sweetie empire was bound to succeed, but it is more than that. Dahl, like other successful writers for the age group, captures a recurring experience which most adults have forgotten. In the affluent West, few people know the horrors of real famine, but the language of childhood does not reflect this. 'I'm starving,' they say, 'I could eat a horse', 'I can't wait till supper'. Young children empty out and fill up much more quickly than adults. Half an hour's wait for a meal can seem an eternity.

And they don't want healthy little appetisers like crudités, either! Offer a child who hasn't eaten for three or four hours the choice between a chocolate bar and a raw carrot, and we know which one proves the more mouth-watering. Charlie Bucket's family were chronically short of food and a chocolate bar was an unprecedented treat. Of course it had to contain the golden ticket too - after such a dearth, glut is the only possible next step.

Charlie never sickens of his luscious inheritance, because all the bad aspects of greed and over-indulgence are split off into other characters like Augustus Gloop and Verruca Salt. But it is characteristic of a certain kind of children's book that the heroes - and the reader - move from appetite, to satisfaction, to surfeit and nausea. **Jam** by Margaret Mahy is a good picture-book example, in which a family bottle and eat a whole tree's worth of plums, getting so fed up with the

jam that in the end they are using it as an adhesive for bathroom tiles.

You can experience the same progression reading Posy Simmonds' **The Chocolate Wedding**, in which Lulu pigs herself so heartily on Easter eggs that she's too sick to be a bridesmaid after all and dreams queasily of seas of chocolate and sugar people. Perhaps it's there in **The Very Hungry Caterpillar** too, though Eric Carle takes us through to a final tranquil stage beyond bingeing and tummy-ache, when we are beautifully cured and metamorphosed into something no longer monstrous.

Nature red in tooth and claw

Carle says that the theme of his most successful book is 'nature's own story' and she is co-author of many another plot involving eat or be eaten. The harsh realities of the food chain are familiar from traditional tales like 'Chicken Licken'. But of course the sub-text of **Rosie's Walk** is all about a fox's supper too, which he fails to get, though not because Rosie is any more yardwise than her predecessor (or is she?).

Foxes and wolves are always hungry in children's books. Young readers, brought up on the three little pigs, immediately spot the dangers in **Mr and Mrs Pig's Evening Out**, when the babysitter is introduced as Mrs Wolf, and the writer Mary Rayner plays with this deliciously. Just as the babysitting wolf is foiled, so the one in Catherine Storr's brilliant series of stories about Clever Polly is always planning new ways to catch and eat the little girl and is always thwarted. This gives rise to the wolf's favourite piece of emotive and useful poetry:

'Monday's child is good to fry

Tuesday's child is best in pie

Wednesday's child is good meat roll

Thursday's child is casserole

Friday's child is rather tough

Saturday's child is tender enough

But the child that is cooked on the Sabbath day

Is delicious when eaten in every way.'

I'm sure no child has ever been horrified by this blood-curdling philosophy. Like Polly, they accept the *donné*, quite unrealistic though it may be, that a lone wolf will always want to eat a human, and the literary convention in Storr's world is that he will always fail.

We'll eat you up, we love you so

More disturbing may be the frisson of cannibalism, in **The BFG** for example, where the giants, though hideous, are clearly humanoid and have horrible names like Bonecrusher and Childchewer. Adults assume quite reasonably that children will be terrified by the idea of being eaten alive, particularly by a grown-up human, which is what analysts like Bruno Bettelheim tell us that giants represent. Yet have you never nibbled on the toes and fingers of a dimpled baby or made yum-yum noises while you nuzzled its neck? And what did the delicious baby do? Squealed with delight, almost certainly.

Maurice Sendak says the Wild Things in his most famous book were only slightly exaggerated pictures of his aunts and uncles as seen through a small child's eyes. And they entreat Max to stay with them with the enticement, 'We'll eat you up, we love you so.'

Food as magic

As every young reader discovers with reassuring pleasure, Max's supper is waiting in his bedroom on his return, and it is still hot! There is a strong element of magic there, but perhaps the arrival of hot food on the table is magic to a small child? They certainly show no perception of the stages by which it gets there. Perhaps this is why food in their favourite stories has hidden and unexpected properties, like Alice's mushroom which makes her grow or shrink. It can make one incredibly strong, like Popeye's spinach or John Burningham's baby's avocados. It can renew itself inexhaustibly like the traditional pasta/porridge pot or Norman Lindsay's **Magic Pudding**. It can get out of hand and threaten to take you over, which is what happens in Margaret Mahy's **The Great Chewing-Gum Rescue**.

Food as consolation

Above all, food can console you. It is a friend and as with some friends, children like to stay with a trusted favourite. Remember how in **Harriet the Spy** she always took tomato sandwiches to school? My own hero, Leon of **Leon's Lucky Lunch Break**, is a peanut-butter freak. Sometimes this gives parents a problem and they want to encourage children to be more adventurous. The classic technique is saturation with the chosen food. In **Mrs Pig's Bulk Buy**, the mother stocks up on nothing but huge bottles of tomato ketchup and the piglets get predictably sick of it. In **Bread and Jam for Frances**, Russell Hoban's badger parents are a bit more subtle but with the same result. 'How do I know what I like if you never let me try it?' wails a Frances loaded to the gunwales with bread and jam, while her loving family tuck into spaghetti and meatballs.

The joy of eating

But some descriptions of food in children's books are so frankly sensuous that they sound positively erotic. Is this the latency equivalent of pornography? Tolkien is riddled with references to food and anticipations of meals described with physical longing. (I found this out while reading **The Hobbit** to my medically 'starved' child who was waiting to go down to the theatre to have her appendix out!) At a not untypical meal, Gandalf eats 'two whole loaves (with masses of butter and honey and clotted cream) and [drinks] at least a quart of mead'. Even allowing for his being a wizard, there is something definitely Rabelaisian about such gorging.

There are whole books, such as Jill Barklem's first 'Brambly Hedge' quartet, which really only exist for the purposes of describing a good blow-out. In these four, each named after a season, **Autumn Story**, etc., the mediocre text is subservient to the wonderful pictures and the central idea of obtaining or providing the appropriate seasonal feast. That this is so can be confirmed by the existence of Brambly Hedge merchandising, allowing one to buy very expensive china replicas of the bulging larders and groaning boards of Jill Barklem's world.

It's not surprising that books appealing to children will capitalise on the pleasures of oral gratification. Their audience is, after all, still close to the time when demand is necessarily quickly followed by supply. That is why Pooh, with his constant optimistic view that it is always 'time for a little something', will continue to speak the language that most of us still understand. Peter Rabbit, in his progression from gourmandising on beans and lettuce to indigestion and the need for a little parsley, has something to say to children and adults alike. In his case, of course, there also looms the shadow of Mr and Mrs McGregor and the possibility that he might follow his father's footsteps into a pie.

Perhaps that accounts for the timeless popularity of Peter and his friends? They are near enough to the base of the food pyramid to be both hungry and hungered after. Their appeal to small and helpless readers, whose eyes are bigger than their bellies, will endure, along with all the other pie-eaters, -makers and -avoiders of the children's book world.

Mary Hoffman is the author of many children's books. The illustration here taken from her own **Leon's Lucky Lunch Break**, ill. Polly Noakes, published by Dent, 0 460 880217, £6.50; 0 460 88122 1, £2.99 pbk.

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The Railway Children, E Nesbit, various editions

Through the Looking-Glass, Lewis Carroll, various editions

Each Peach Pear Plum, Janet and Allan Ahlberg, Viking, 0 670 28705 9, £8.50; Puffin, 014 050919 4, 0.99 pbk

Charlie and the Chocolate Factory, Roald Dahl, Collins, 0 00 185430 5, £4.99; Puffin, 014 031824 0, £3.50 pbk

Jam, Margaret Mahy, Mammoth, 0 7497 0885 9, £2.99 pbk

The Chocolate Wedding, Posy Simmonds, Cape, 0 224 02759 X, £6.95

The Very Hungry Caterpillar, Eric Carle, Hamish Hamilton, 0 24101798 X, £8.50; Puffin, 0 14 050087 1, £3.50 pbk

Rosie's Walk, Pat Hutchins, Bodley Head, 0 370 00794 8, £7.99; Random Century, 185681074 7, £3.99; Puffin, 014 050032 4, £3.50 pbk

Mr and Mrs Pig's Evening Out, Mary Rayner, Pan Macmillan, 0 333 193717, R£5.95; 0 333 46118 5, £3.25 pbk

Clever Polly and the Stupid Wolf, Catherine Storr, Puffin, 014 030426 6, £2.50 pbk

The BFG, Roald Dahl, Cape, 0 224 02040 4, £8.95; Puffin, 014 031597 7, 0.50 pbk

Where the Wild Things Are, Maurice Sendak, Bodley Head, 0 370 00772 7, £8.95; Lions, 0 00 664086 9, £3.99 pbk; Puffin, 014 0500316, £3.99 pbk

Avocado Baby, John Burningham, Cape, 0 224 02004 8, £6.99; Lions, 0 00 6625916, £2.50 pbk

The Magic Pudding, Norman Lindsay, Angus & Robertson, 0 20716731 1, £4.95 pbk

The Great Chewing-Gum Rescue, Margaret Mahy, Mammoth, 0 7497 0250 8, £2.50 pbk

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Mrs Pig's Bulk Buy, Mary Rayner, Pan Macmillan, 0 333 30978 2, £5.95; 0 333 51039 9, £2.99 pbk

Bread and Jam for Frances, Russell and Lillian Hoban, Puffin, 014 050176 2, £3.50 pbk

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Spring Story (0 00 183922 5), **Summer Story** (0 00 183923 3), **Autumn Story** (0 00 183739 7), **Winter Story** (0 00 1837117), Jill Barklem, Collins, £4.99 each

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The Tale of Peter Rabbit, Beatrix Potter, Warne, 0 7232 34604 1, £3.99

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