

## Book Review

Obesity and Learned Eating Behavior: A Review of *First Bite: How We Learn to Eat*, by Bee Wilson. New York, NY: Basic Books, 2015, ISBN: 978-0465064984, 352 pages, \$15.93, paperback.

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*First Bite: How We Learn to Eat* by Bee Wilson is a historic- and scientific-based reading about how humans learn to eat. The influences that shaped eating patterns resulting in today's obesity are discussed in detail. Wilson painstakingly explains how food memory, especially taste, is formed early in life. As such, what one remembers guides what to eat even as an adult. Important in this process is what children are fed by their parents, and mothers in particular. Foods according to the author are culturally based and availability dependent, although foods are now trending toward societal or corporate ideals of what good foods are or what children like. The quest for attaining and maintaining ideal weight has been elusive, as the early food memory encoded in the memory cells in the brain hampers the realization of ideal weight unless adults relearn tastes and how to eat.

As Wilson indicated, literature abounds on what, when, and how to eat, yet poor eating habits persist, leading to an inability to lose or maintain weight loss or maintain ideal body weight. The author describes succinctly cultural eating patterns and habits that made eating vegetables and meats a taboo for babies and children. In certain cultures, female babies are more at risk of death than male children, as larger amounts and more nourishing foods are given to male children. If these female children survive, they are more at risk for obesity due to the type of food they have ingested. The assumption that watery and bland porridge made from rice, corn, and other starches is suitable for infants and children leads to a lifetime of poor feeding, resulting in weight and health issues. The confusion of what to feed babies and children abounds. Due to this confusion, school lunches have become the research ground for public policy and pronouncement for what constitutes good nutrition. Food policies and nutrition guidelines were and still are adopted based on expert opinions. The acceptance of each "expert's" opinion and pronouncements has not resulted in better foods to feed children. Meanwhile, each new expert developed a worst option than the previous, resulting in poor nutrition and unpalatable foods that children disliked. The notion was and has been essentially that children should not like food and should not have a choice in what to eat. Some experts advocated that foods are to encourage good behavior or teach children how to chew. As Wilson surmised, the idea of eating foods for nourishment appears not to be important to the experts.

Still, cultural norms appear to be the major culprit as to how humans eat. From the time a child is born, mothers and caregivers tend to soothe a crying baby with food. The juxtaposition of love and food may be the ultimate problem surrounding feeding a child, as most parents are raised on the idea of the necessity to "clean your plate." Culture apart, new technologies have not been helpful. Television, ease of traveling, and other means of communication have changed how cultures normally eat. Typical examples are the Chinese drinking more coffee with many calories in place of tea, or the eating of potato chips in almost all countries, even in those who have anosmia (the inability to taste or smell food). Furthermore, big conglomerates that produce children's foods have tapped into what mothers like, such as chocolate, sugars, and salt to make babies' and children's food more palatable, thereby conditioning babies and children to a life of sweet indulgence and obesity.

Although the incidence of obesity is higher in Western countries and developed economies, developing countries, on the other hand, have not escaped this modern scourge in which lack of food and protein malnutrition (or kwashiorkor) occur. In developing countries, the norms of feeding include bulky, starchy foods mainly for females, whereas men eat meat or other proteins. In the developed economies, eating disorders such as bulimia persist. Apart from using intravenous means to renourish bulimic individuals, teaching them how to eat again becomes the basis of the treatment. Wilson indicated there are five ways of looking at feeding or nutrition. The first is thinking about sensory perceptions. In this case, presenting foods to appeal to all senses is important, such visual presentation, smell, and taste of the food. The second way of looking at nutrition is through people's response to food, which can be either with pleasure or pain. The third way is through preference, an ability to form a preference based on sense and response. The fourth is to eat—the preference one forms about a type of food and the decision to eat or not eat it regularly. The final way is through nutrition, when all the nutrients in a food are taken in if eaten.

Responding to questions on the minds of many with weight problems, Wilson brought reassuring information that obesity and patterns of improper feeding can be changed, as they are not genetic. However, she cautioned that these patterns can be influenced by poverty or availability of foods. More importantly, she called improper eating a habit, and, like all habits, it can be broken.

*First Bite* is well written and researched. The organization is good, with sequential and connecting chapters. The examples, anecdotes, and comparative style make for easy reading and comprehension. The scientific and historic material makes the book functional. *First Bite* clearly and thoroughly deals with the complexities of feeding and foods that makes sense. This book will appeal to adults, college students, and everyone looking to improve his or her health by improving nutrition.

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