

Michael Pollan's *In Defense of Food: An Eater's Manifesto*
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I read Michael Pollan's *In Defense of Food* almost immediately after reading his *Omnivore's Dilemma*. The books are extremely similar; *In Defense of Food* is essentially a reduction of *Omnivore's Dilemma*, only with a slant towards some kind of action. That is, *In Defense of Food* is based around three rules—more like guidelines—“Eat food. Not too much. Mostly plants.” These seven opening words are good advice, and a decent outline of the book. Pollan goes on to expand each of these maxims.

Stylistically, *Omnivore's Dilemma* resisted falling into a pattern—*Defense* did not. The book felt mechanically written; some parts made feeble stabs at self-deprecating humor but the intention was clear: this is not a book about food culture or larger issues as much as it is a weary explanation of how to eat. I was under the impression that Pollan basically thought readers should be able to understand as much from *Omnivore's Dilemma*, but when they didn't, he wrote this book.

Is that a flaw in the writing? Not necessarily. The book isn't particularly witty or fun to read, but it does progress rapidly from point to point. Whereas *Omnivore's Dilemma* occasionally slipped into what I felt was prose for the sake of prose, *Defense* was far more streamlined. This may be due mostly to the extreme amount of carryover from *Dilemma*, but it was still effective. *Defense* had me captured quickly and it was an effortless read after the first few pages of Pollan's self-effacing drivel (“I hate to give the game away right here at the beginning of a whole book devoted to the subject, and I'm tempted to complicate matters in the interest of keeping things going for a couple hundred pages of so.”).

As Pollan states early on, most of what he writes in the book is not surprising information. At least, it wasn't surprising to me. Yet I realized while reading this how unanchored “American” food culture really is, and how even in a fairly traditional, stable family like mine—with statistically unusual habits such as nightly family dinners that are, in fact, real sit-down affairs with a shared menu, all prepared within the past few days—there is still a sort of schizophrenic relationship to food. My father's father was quick to embrace any new food product—the more processed, the better. My mother's father has delivered diatribes against basil (and essentially all other spices); my mother's mother exalts fast food.

A few years ago, my mother went on a carb-free diet. She lost some weight, but was miserable the whole time and gained it back. She finally lost a substantial amount of weight last winter through a combination of mild exercise and more moderated eating—in fact, though she was hardly influenced by Pollan, her “diet” looks a lot like what his recommendations would prescribe. Whole grains? Check. Reduce processed foods as much as possible? Check. No snacking between meals? Check.

However, I have some objects to this book. After reading *Omnivore's Dilemma*, I came away feeling as though the non-middle class (and upper-middle-class, at that) were not being addressed. *Defense* does speak—in a few sentences—to the issue of cost, but Pollan typically adopts a tone which seems almost condescending of the poor, and continually emphasizes how additional money and time spent on food is obviously worthwhile.

Yes, it is obviously worthwhile. To him. And to me, and to many others in my (upper middle class) socioeconomic class. However, he is patently unhelpful to an underprivileged reader. Much of *Defense* uses a repeated plotline: there is a “Western” disease and it is caused by the Western diet. If

you change a certain factor, there is some study that shows that the Western disease will retreat or be less prevalent. However, many of the studies Pollan uses for support point to correlations and probabilities, not as many individual results or causal relationships between specific dietary changes and better health. He makes the point (ad nauseum) that we don't understand everything about what's in our food that may be good for us, so we can't use reductionist science to figure out the one nutrient that's key to our health, or anything like that. Fair enough. But is telling people to "be the kind of person who takes supplements" really anything more than telling people to "be middle class"? At least he recognizes that the critical factor here is really disposable income (to be spent on supplements) more than the supplements themselves (which are not really supported by any studies—and even he freely admits this).

Pollan's books consistently leave me inflamed, so maybe they're worthwhile just for that. What gets to me the most, though, is not the industrial food system, which is admittedly horrendous, for basically any reason you can conceive. What gets me is that Pollan is not alone in writing about these issues, but they're being addressed as though everyone has the choice between organic and not, or the pasture-fed beef versus a McD's hamburger. On a day-to-day level, not everyone has this choice. Of course, Pollan is writing to his fairly well-understood audience. But there is another audience out there—who is speaking to them?

Furthermore, Pollan doesn't address that eating better (and thereby cooking/preparing food better) doesn't only require additional money. You can purchase a CSA basket and feel great about yourself and still not eat better if you do not know how to handle the produce. Skills like old-fashioned methods of food preservation (salting, etc.) are being lost. It is not just a question of time and money but also of knowledge and resources which has changed the way we eat. Time and money are easy to speak to; knowledge and resources are much more difficult to address.