

# ARTS

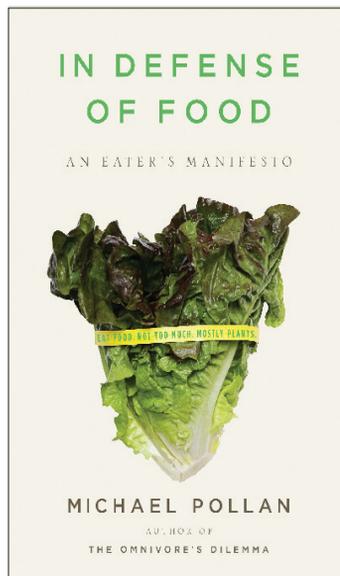
- REVIEWS
- EXCERPT

## There Is No Perfect Meal

by Scott Korb

At the end of *The Omnivore's Dilemma* (2006), Michael Pollan's momentous "Natural History of Four Meals," he makes (and eats, in good company) what he calls the perfect meal. He's "hunted, gathered, or grown" everything on the menu; all the food—from the "Fava Bean Toasts and Sonoma Boar Pâté" to the "Claremont Canyon Chamomile Tisane"—is "in season and fresh"; he has spent no money on the meal; and he has cooked the meal himself. Pollan has even taken the wild yeasts for his bread from the air by "giving them a place to rest and something to eat"—a show of hospitality to make a Jewish mother proud.

Still, as any good investigative journalist might, Pollan disclaims his perfect meal in almost the same breath as he announces it, pointing out where it falls short of his ideals ("it broke several of my own rules") and in terms of practicality for those of us hoping he'll answer the question that opens the book: "What should we have for dinner?" Comparing his "transcendently slow meal" with the fast food he served his family early in *Dilemma*, Pollan concludes "both of these meals are equally



*In Defense of Food*  
Michael Pollan  
The Penguin Press, 2008  
256 pages. \$25.00

unreal and equally unsustainable. ... Going to McDonald's would be something that happens once a year, a kind of Thanksgiving in reverse, and so would

a meal like mine, as slow and storied as the Passover seder."

In Pollan's new book, *In Defense of Food: An Eater's Manifesto*, he picks up where he left off in *Dilemma*, with a new focus on the relationship between human health and food science. His earlier question of "What should we have for dinner?" has an even more practical—and personal—follow up: "Now that you've been to the feedlots, the food-processing plants, the organic factory farm, and the local farms and ranches, what do *you* eat?" Yet Pollan sidesteps this question at first by pointing out just how strange it is that we seek the professional help of journalists, nutritionists, and the government in deciding what to eat, when "for most of human history ... to guide us we had, instead, Culture, which, at least when it comes to food, is really just a fancy word for your mother."

Pollan's manifesto defending food—that is, food his mother (or more realistically his grandmother or even great-grandmother) would recognize as food—examines what has gone wrong in a country where, despite a surfeit of low-fat foods with labels bearing health claims, we've gotten both fatter and

unhealthier. (Pollan points repeatedly to increasing obesity and diabetes rates and questions claims that our “Western” diet has become heart healthier. Turns out it hasn’t—we’re just better at treating heart disease.) The culprits, he concludes, are the very journalists, nutritionists, and government officials—and especially the “unhealthy alliance” of “scientists and food marketers”—consumers have turned to for advice on what to eat. Since the 1970s, their answer has been: nutrients.

Today, in response to the reductive science that contributes to the dangerous, utopian ideology of *nutritionism*, Pollan has a different, much simpler answer: “Eat food. Not too much. Mostly plants.”

Coined in 2002 by Australian sociologist of science, Gyorgy Scrinis, *nutritionism* assumes, “namely, that we should understand and engage with food and our bodies in terms of their nutritional and chemical constituents and requirements.” Pollan takes this argument a step further: “Since nutrients, as compared with foods, are invisible and therefore slightly mysterious, it falls to scientists (and the journalists through whom the scientists reach the public) to explain the hidden reality of food to us. In form, this is a quasireligious idea, suggesting the visible world is not the one that really matters, which implies the need for a priesthood.” Where health is concerned, this priesthood believes in “progress” more than anything else. (Pollan uses scare quotes because their belief in progress is what makes these priests utopians, and somewhat frightening.) To the nutritionists who understand our food—and apparently us—as the sum of its parts, we’re on our way to a lifetime of perfect meals, and consequently, perfect health. All we have to do is supplement our Western diet—mainly processed foods, refined sugars, and added fats and few vegetables, fruits, or whole grains—with the secret, invisible nutrients our bodies and minds need to grow. These nutri-

tionists began in earnest about thirty years ago. And like many utopian movements that have come before it, nutritionism has proven to be another great disappointment.

Pollan’s argument is not with science itself. Although he initially grounds his case for eating food (as opposed to “edible foodlike substances”) in the cultural context of a mother’s dinner table, at the core Pollan’s attack on the Western diet and its attendant ideology of nutritionism is an evolutionary one.

Using evolution to challenge utopians has become his signature. In his 2002 essay “An Animal’s Place,” in which he defends using animals for food, he takes down utilitarian philosopher and famed animal rights advocate Peter Singer, author of *Animal Liberation*, as a “vegetarian utopian.” (Pieces of this essay were later incorporated into *Dilemma*, where the slur “utopian” was applied to vegans.) Seeing animal liberation as “the next logical step of moral progress”—following the expansion of “the white man’s circle of moral consideration ... to admit first blacks, then women, then homosexuals” Singer and “the swelling ranks of his followers,” Pollan argues, “betray a profound ignorance about the workings of nature.”

To think of domestication as a form of enslavement or even exploitation is to misconstrue the whole relationship, to project a human idea of power onto what is, in fact, an instance of mutualism between species. Domestication is an evolutionary, rather than a political, development. It is certainly not a regime humans imposed on animals some 10,000 years ago. Rather, domestication happened when a small handful of especially opportunistic species discovered through Darwinian trial and error that they were more likely to survive and prosper in an alliance with humans than on their own.

This time challenging a utopian conception of moral progress, Pollan

concludes, “If our concern is with the health of nature—rather than, say, the internal consistency of our moral code or the condition of our souls—then eating animals may sometimes be the most ethical thing to do.” (It’s worth noting that Pollan and Singer come together on the issue of animal suffering. Pollan eats only non-industrial meats. Singer, for his part, demurs: “I would not be sufficiently confident of my arguments to condemn someone who purchased meat from one of these farms.”)

With *In Defense of Food*, beyond an argument concerning the social and ecological relationships that have evolved around the dinner table (and before that, the campfire, in the woods, etc.), Pollan’s case for evolution is essentially that “[t]he human animal is adapted to, and apparently can thrive on, an extraordinary range of different diets, but the Western diet, however you define it, does not seem to be one of them.” Sure, if we continue to eat a Western diet, given time our bodies would probably adapt and metabolize processed meats and refined carbohydrates more efficiently. And Pollan points out that type 2 diabetes rates are lower among ethnic Europeans, whose food environment changed before ours. But for now and the foreseeable future, those “foods” continue to make us sick, no matter how “nutritious” we make them. Like evolution—or more likely by way of evolution—the way in which we use food is a deeply complicated, sometimes inefficient, and messy process. We simply don’t know how whole foods travel through our systems, and what unspoken good a carrot does that a beta-carotene supplement could never do.

In the end, a perfect meal does not exist. There is no perfect eating, only eating or not. And we need to eat. So Pollan’s only practical answer to the question “What do you eat?” is: food. But not too much and mostly plants. Don’t eat anything with ingredients you don’t recognize. Spend more on food and



eat less of it. Don't buy food products bearing health claims. Try shopping the perimeter of a supermarket, or better, go to a farmers' market. "In order to eat well," Pollan concludes, "we need to invest more time, effort, and resources in providing for our sustenance, to dust off a word, than most of us do today." In defending food, Pollan wants to calm us and offer us a place to rest and something to eat. Once we're there, the words we'll reach for, he hopes, are the ones of gratitude he sought before eating his "perfect meal" at the end of *Dilemma*: grace.

Scott Korb is the coauthor, with Peter Bebergal, of *The Faith Between Us*. His writing has appeared in Harper's, *Gastronomica*, and elsewhere. He lives in Brooklyn.

*Your Inner Fish: A Journey into the 3.5 Billion-Year History of the Human Body*  
Neil Shubin  
Pantheon, 2008  
240 pages. \$24.00

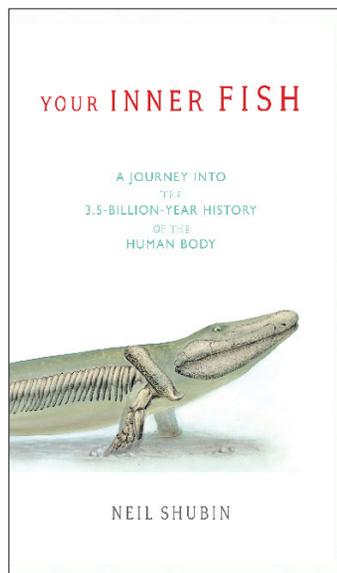
## FISHY BEGINNINGS

Small changes. Big time. That is the simple recipe for how we got here. The details make for a far more interesting story. Told as a half-anatomical, half-geological (and fully humbling) tale by Neil Shubin, *Your Inner Fish* presents the sordid history of human physiology from our unicellular past to our present complexity.

After Charles Darwin's unveiling of natural selection and the discovery of genes, scientists are now able to predict our past, or at least where the answers to our questions about it lie: the fossil record and DNA. Neil Shubin is one such scientist.

As a paleontologist and an anatomist, Shubin studies both bones and life's building blocks. He began his career just as he begins this evolutionary tale—with the art of fossil hunting. Once he

learned to see fossils in "highly ordered" rocks, Shubin writes, he never lost his ability to spot them. We accompany him on expeditions to Pennsylvania's roadsides and barren high Arctic fields, where in 2004 Shubin discovered a fossilized missing link between fish and land-living animals.



His descriptions are complemented with pictures and diagrams that simply convey complex concepts—the best is a diagram of eye evolution and its increasingly clear view of a Hostess cupcake.

*Your Inner Fish* is full of intrigue and delightful metaphors—our "scaffolding" can be found in single-celled animals and our "blueprint" is revealed "in creatures with no limbs at all." Shubin describes the first fish with bony heads, which appeared about 500 million years ago, as "hamburgers with fleshy tails."

But "nobody starts life with a head: sperm and egg come together to make a single cell." In this single cell is life's biggest mystery. If the Arctic seems too far away to look for life's origins, Shubin describes a do-it-yourself technique for extracting DNA using a blender, some dish soap, meat tenderizer, and rubbing alcohol. In Shubin's hands, a substance as common as rubbing alcohol (and more importantly its interaction with the

human brain) reveals "a veritable tree of life." Examining the genes that control our sense of smell, scientists can detect the split into two different types of smelling genes—one used in water and one used in air—that occurred 365 million years ago when animals transitioned out of liquid and onto land.

Shubin's great strength is his ability to explain humankind's fishy beginnings—"all of our extraordinary capabilities arose from basic components that evolved in ancient fish and other creatures," such as sea anemones and jellyfish—in such a way that humanity is not reduced in the process. In fact, when he writes of our microbial makeup—"we are a package of about two trillion cells assembled in a very precise way,"—some readers may even feel a bit special.

Nonetheless, imagining the 3.5 billion years between our origins and our current state has a way of making a human head (made, more or less, of tiny fish teeth) spin.

Brooding about deep time for 184 pages can certainly call into question one's significance. So when arriving at one of Shubin's final sections on "Why History Makes Us Sick," one might expect him to acknowledge our gloomily short eighty-year human lifespan. Instead, Shubin concludes with why we can blame sharks for our hernias, primates for our sleep apnea, and fish for our hiccups. For an explanation of why bits of our design seem unintelligent, we need only to look to our ancestry.

—Jennifer Jacquet

*Jennifer Jacquet is Ph.D. candidate at the University of British Columbia Fisheries Center. More of her writing can be seen at [scienceblogs.com/shifting-baselines](http://scienceblogs.com/shifting-baselines).*