BOOKS

FLESH OF YOUR FLESH

Should you eat meat?

by Elizabeth Kolbert NOVEMBER 9, 2009

This year, Americans will consume some thirty-five million cows, a hundred and fifteen million pigs, and nine billion birds.

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Americans love animals. Forty-six million families in the United States own at least one dog, and thirty-eight million keep cats. Thirteen million maintain freshwater aquariums in which swim a total of more than a hundred and seventy million fish. Collectively, these creatures cost Americans some forty billion dollars annually. (Seventeen billion goes to food and another twelve billion to veterinary bills.) Despite the recession, pet-related expenditures this year are expected to increase five per cent over 2008, in part owing to outlays on luxury items like avian manicures and canine bath spritz. "We have so many customers who say they'd eat macaroni and cheese before they'd cut back on their dogs,"

a Colorado pet-store owner recently told the Denver *Post*. In a survey released this past August, more than half of all dog, cat, and bird owners reported having bought presents for their animals during the previous twelve months, often for no special occasion, just out of love. (Fish enthusiasts may bring home fewer gifts, but they spend more on each one, with the average fish gift coming to thirty-seven dollars.) A majority of owners report that one of the reasons they enjoy keeping pets is that they consider them part of the family.

Americans also love to eat animals. This year, they will cook roughly twenty-seven billion pounds of beef, sliced from some thirty-five million cows. Additionally, they will consume roughly twenty-three billion pounds of pork, or the bodies of more than a hundred and fifteen million pigs, and thirty-eight billion pounds of poultry, some nine billion birds. Most of these creatures have been raised under conditions that are, as Americans know—or, at least, by this point have no excuse *not* to know—barbaric. Broiler chickens, also known, depending on size, as fryers or roasters, typically spend their lives in windowless sheds, packed in with upward of thirty thousand other birds and generations of accumulated waste. The ammonia fumes thrown off by their rotting excrement lead to breast blisters, leg sores, and respiratory disease. Bred to produce the maximum amount of meat in the minimum amount of time, fryers often become so top-heavy that they can't support their own weight. At slaughtering time, they are shackled by their feet, hung from a conveyor belt, and dipped into an electrified bath known as "the stunner."

For pigs, conditions are little better. Shortly after birth, piglets have their tails chopped off; this discourages the bored and frustrated animals from gnawing one another's rumps. Male piglets also have their testicles removed, a procedure performed without anesthetic. Before being butchered, hogs are typically incapacitated with a tonglike instrument designed to induce cardiac arrest. Sometimes their muscles contract so violently that they end up not just dead but with a broken back.

How is it that Americans, so solicitous of the animals they keep as pets, are so indifferent toward the ones they cook for dinner? The answer cannot lie in the beasts themselves. Pigs, after all, are quite companionable, and dogs are said to be delicious. This inconsistency is the subject of Jonathan Safran Foer's "Eating Animals" (Little, Brown; $25.99). Unlike Foer's two previous books, "Everything Is Illuminated" and "Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close," his latest is nonfiction. The task it sets itself is less to make sense of our behavior than to show how, when our stomachs are involved, it

is often senseless. “Food choices are determined by many factors, but reason (even consciousness) is not generally high on the list,” Foer writes.

Foer was just nine years old when the problem of being an “eating animal” first presented itself. One evening, his parents left him and his older brother with a babysitter and a platter of chicken. The babysitter declined to join the boys for dinner.

“You know that chicken is chicken, right?” she pointed out. Foer’s older brother sniggered. Where had their parents found this moron? But Foer was shaken. That chicken was a chicken! Why had he never thought of this before? He put down his fork. Within a few years, however, he went back to eating chickens and other animals. During high school and college, he converted to vegetarianism several more times, partly to salve his conscience and partly, as he puts it, “to get closer to the breasts” of female activists. Later, he became engaged to a woman (the novelist Nicole Krauss) with a similar history of relapse. They resolved to do better, and immediately violated that resolve by serving meat at their wedding and eating it on their honeymoon. Finally, when he was about to become a father, Foer felt compelled to think about the issue more deeply, and, at the same time, to write about it. “We decided to have a child, and that was a different story that would necessitate a different story,” he says.

Foer ends up telling several stories, though all have the same horrific ending. One is about shit. Animals, he explains, produce a lot of it. Crowded into “concentrated animal feeding operations,” or CAFOs, they can produce entire cities’ worth. (The pigs processed by a single company, Smithfield Foods, generate as much excrement as all of the human residents of the states of California and Texas combined.) Unlike cities, though, CAFOs have no waste-treatment systems. The shit simply gets dumped in holding ponds. Imagine, Foer writes, if “every man, woman, and child in every city and town in all of California and all of Texas crapped and pissed in a huge open-air pit for a day. Now imagine that they don’t do this for just a day, but all year round, in perpetuity.” Not surprisingly, the shit in the ponds tends to migrate to nearby streams and rivers, causing algae blooms that kill fish and leave behind aquatic “dead zones.” According to the Environmental Protection Agency, some thirty-five thousand miles of American waterways have been contaminated by animal excrement.

Another of Foer’s stories is about microbes. In the U.S., Foer reports, people are prescribed about three million pounds of antibiotics a year. Livestock are fed nearly twenty-eight million pounds, according to the drug industry. By pumping cows and chickens full of antibiotics, farmers have been instrumental in producing new, resistant

strains of germs—so-called superbugs. As soon as the Food and Drug Administration approved the use of a class of drugs known as fluoroquinolones in chickens, for instance, the percentage of bacteria resistant to fluoroquinolones shot up. Officials at many health organizations, including the Centers for Disease Control, have called for an end to the indiscriminate use of antibiotics on farms, but, of course, the practice continues.

A third story is about suffering. Intuitively, we all know that animals feel pain. (This, presumably, is why we spend so much money on vet bills.) "No reader of this book would tolerate someone swinging a pickax at a dog's face," Foer observes. And yet, he notes, we routinely eat fish that have been killed in this way, as well as chickens who have been dragged through the stunner and pigs who have been electrocuted and cows who have had bolts shot into their heads. (In many cases, the cows are not quite killed by the bolts, and so remain conscious as they are skinned and dismembered.)

Foer relates how, one night, he sneaked onto a California turkey farm with an animal-rights activist he calls C. Most of the buildings were locked, but the two managed to slip into a shed that housed tens of thousands of turkey chicks. At first, the conditions seemed not so bad. Some of the chicks were sleeping. Others were struggling to get closer to the heat lamps that substitute for their mothers. Then Foer started noticing how many of the chicks were dead. They were covered with sores, or matted with blood, or withered like dry leaves. C spotted one chick splayed out on the floor, trembling. Its eyes were crusted over and its head was shaking back and forth. C slit its throat.

"If you stop and think about it, it's crazy," she later told Foer. "How would you judge an artist who mutilated animals in a gallery because it was visually arresting? How riveting would the sound of a tortured animal need to be to make you want to hear it *that* badly? Try to imagine any end other than taste for which it would be justifiable to do what we do to farmed animals."

One day while in Berlin, Franz Kafka went to visit the city's famous aquarium. According to his friend and biographer Max Brod, Kafka, gazing into the illuminated tanks, addressed the fish directly. "Now at last I can look at you in peace," he told them. "I don't eat you anymore."

Kafka, who became what Brod calls a *strenger Vegetarianer*—a strict vegetarian—is one of the heroes of "Eating Animals." So is the philosopher Jacques Derrida, and a vegan theology professor named Aaron Gross, who is working on plans for a model slaughterhouse. "This is not paradoxical or ironic," Gross says of his slaughterhouse work.

Foer's villains include Smithfield, Tyson Foods, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and—rather more surprisingly—Michael Pollan. There is perhaps no more influential critic of the factory farm than Pollan, and Foer acknowledges that he "has written as thoughtfully about food as anyone." But when Pollan looks at animals he doesn't feel worried or guilty or embarrassed. He feels, well, hungry.

"I have to say there is a part of me that envies the moral clarity of the vegetarian, the blamelessness of the tofu eater," Pollan observes toward the end of his book "The Omnivore's Dilemma," shortly after describing the thrill of shooting a pig. "Yet part of me pities him, too. Dreams of innocence are just that; they usually depend on a denial of reality that can be its own form of hubris."

According to Pollan, it is naïve to see domesticated animals as victims. Some ten thousand years ago, "a handful of especially opportunistic species discovered . . . that they were more likely to survive and prosper in an alliance with humans than on their own," he writes. The results speak for themselves. Domesticated chickens have never been more numerous, even as the Red Burmese jungle fowl from which they descended is disappearing. Meanwhile, if animals have had to make adjustments to live with people, the reverse is also the case. Humans developed the ability to digest lactose into adulthood, for example, only as a consequence of keeping cows.

Given this history, Pollan says, it's too late for people to start worrying about eating animals. The problem with factory-farmed meat isn't the meat; it's the factory. The solution is to return animals to the sorts of places where they can graze and root and fly—or at least flap around—before being dispatched. "I don't eat industrial meat anymore," Pollan recently told *Newsweek*. "I eat grass-fed beef, organic chicken from a place I know."

Foer finds Pollan's account of inter-species alliances unpersuasive. "Chickens can do many things," he notes, but they cannot make "sophisticated deals with humans." And, in any case, if they could, shouldn't the same terms apply to pets? Once we're done showering Kitty and Fido with trinkets, let's bleed them out and fry them up: "If we let dogs be dogs, and breed without interference, we would create a sustainable, local meat supply with low energy inputs that would put even the most efficient grass-based farming to shame," Foer writes.

Meanwhile, the notion that factory-farmed meat can be replaced with boutique-bred beef depends on its own denial of reality: "There isn't enough nonfactory chicken

produced in America to feed the population of Staten Island and not enough nonfactory pork to serve New York City, let alone the country."

Foer seems particularly incensed by the suggestion that deciding *not* to eat meat represents a delusion of innocence or, worse still, sentimentality. "Two friends are ordering lunch," he writes:

> One says, "I'm in the mood for a burger," and orders it. The other says, "I'm in the mood for a burger," but remembers that there are things more important to him than what he is in the mood for at any given moment, and orders something else. Who is the sentimentalist?

Of the nearly two billion chickens currently being raised in the United States, a dozen live in my back yard.* They were shipped six months ago as chicks, and arrived at the local post office in a cardboard box. Now full-grown, they spend their days laying eggs, pecking around in the grass, and shitting on the walkways. The chickens are happy, or so I dream, as I sit at the window when evening falls.

Much of the credit (or blame) for the back-yard-chicken fad belongs to the "local food" movement, which Pollan helped launch. When I ordered my chickens, from a hatchery in Missouri, it was with the idea that my children could learn what it's like to raise what you eat. I also hoped, in a more Foerian vein, that the experience might prompt a reëvaluation of their relationship with chicken fingers. Recently, I asked whether they would consider becoming vegetarians. One of my sons proposed that, instead of dropping meat, we eat it exclusively. We could, he suggested, call ourselves "mea-gans."

By this point, my kids certainly know that "chicken is chicken," and also that beef is cows and pork is pigs. About a mile away, there's a farm with its own little store. Every so often, some piglets arrive at the farm. My sons like to go watch the piglets roll around in the mud. Then they like to go to the store and purchase the sausages that have been made from the piglets' predecessors.

In this way, the boys are a lot like the chickens. Though the hens have plenty of feed in their coop, they prefer to scratch in the dirt for living things. They are especially fond of centipedes and grubs. More than once, I've seen them pick up a red-spotted newt by its neck, shake it dead, then toss it aside. (The newts are poisonous, something the chickens apparently discover too late.) A few weeks ago, they cornered a small rabbit under a neighbor's car. Whether or not they were hoping to kill it, the creature was clearly terrified.

Very broadly speaking, there are two arguments to be made on behalf of eating animals. One is that people are animals. Different animals naturally have different diets;

in our case, this diet includes meat. Our ancestors certainly liked a nice bone to gnaw on. Indeed, one theory of human development posits that a diet high in animal protein was what allowed human beings to become human in the first place. (As hominids' brains grew, the theory goes, they became better hunters; this allowed their guts to shrink, which facilitated further brain growth.) Studies of hunter-gatherer societies show that anywhere from twenty-six per cent (in the case of the Gwi, of southern Africa) to ninety-nine per cent (the Nunamiut, of Alaska) of their caloric intake comes from eating meat.

The second argument is that animals are not people. People may have obligations toward animals—to enforce these, there are laws against animal cruelty—but these obligations do not preclude ingesting them. Pollan contends that "people who care about animals should be working to ensure that the ones they eat don't suffer, and that their deaths are swift and painless." Similarly, the author and livestock expert Temple Grandin, who designs what are often called "humane slaughterhouses," argues, "We owe animals a decent life and a painless death." We "forget that nature can be harsh," she has written. "Death at the slaughter plant is quicker and less painful than death in the wild. Lions dining on the guts of a live animal is much worse in my opinion."

Foer's position is that all such arguments are, finally, bogus. We eat meat because we like to, and we devise justifications afterward. "Almost always, when I told someone I was writing a book about 'eating animals,' they assumed, even without knowing anything about my views, that it was a case for vegetarianism," he says. "It's a telling assumption, one that implies not only that a thorough inquiry into animal agriculture would lead one away from eating meat, but that most people already know that to be the case." What we know about eating animals is that we don't want to know. Although he never explicitly equates "concentrated animal feeding operations" with the Final Solution, the German model of at once seeing and not seeing clearly informs Foer's thinking. The book is framed by tales of his grandmother, a Holocaust survivor whose culinary repertoire consists of a single dish: roast chicken with carrots.

Foer's novels are pointedly postmodern; they play with voice and genre, language and typography. ("Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close" ends with a flip book of a body either falling out of or flying away from the World Trade Center.) "Eating Animals" is written in a similar po-mode; it is constantly shifting among formats—a glossary of terms, interviews, personal vignettes—and each chapter is introduced with a page or two of graphic art. The chapter titled "Hiding/Seeking," for example, opens with an outline of a box, sixty-seven squares in area, which is supposed to illustrate the amount of space

allotted to a typical laying hen. Some may object that Foer's style is too playful (or gimmicky) for what he contends is a deadly serious subject. Others will argue that he lacks the courage of his convictions.

For much of "Eating Animals," it appears that Foer is arguing for vegetarianism as the only moral course. Then, it turns out, he isn't—or, at least, not quite. In the middle of the book, Foer becomes friendly with a farmer named Frank Reese, who raises what are known as "heritage" turkeys. (It is for Reese that Aaron Gross, the vegan theology professor, is trying to design a model—and also mobile—slaughterhouse.) Evolutionarily speaking, heritage turkeys fall somewhere between the wild variety that the colonists encountered and the obscenely large-breasted breeds that now fill the meat aisle. A heritage turkey is probably what your great-grandparents served if they celebrated Thanksgiving.

"I have placed my wager on a vegetarian diet *and* I have enough respect for people like Frank, who have bet on a more humane animal agriculture, to support their kind of farming," Foer writes. "This is not in the end a complicated position." But it *is*, or at least it's complicated to parse. If the problem with nonfactory chicken is that there isn't enough of it, how can heritage birds represent a solution? (There are barely enough heritage turkeys being raised in America to feed Tottenville, let alone all of Staten Island.) And what does it mean for Foer to "support" Reese's kind of farming while urging his readers to boycott his product?

Meanwhile, it could be argued that even a vegetarian diet falls short. As Foer is well aware, some of the animals that suffer most from the factory-farm system aren't the ones that end up on the table. Most dairy cows spend their lives in sheds, where they are milked two or three times a day by machine. Many develop chronic udder infections. Laying chickens are kept in cages, jammed in so tightly that they don't have room to spread their wings. To prevent them from cannibalizing one another, their beaks are trimmed with a hot blade. When their production begins to decline, they are starved for a week or two to reset their biological clocks. Foer never says anything about forgoing eggs or dairy, which seems to imply that he consumes them. In "The Face on Your Plate: The Truth About Food" (Norton; $24.95), Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson offers many of the same observations about factory farming as Foer. To align his food choices with his ethics, Masson writes, he had to take the "final step" and become a vegan.

But is even veganism really enough? The cost that consumer society imposes on the planet's fifteen or so million non-human species goes way beyond either meat or eggs.

Bananas, bluejeans, soy lattes, the paper used to print this magazine, the computer screen you may be reading it on—death and destruction are embedded in them all. It is hard to think at all rigorously about our impact on other organisms without being sickened.

"Eating Animals" closes with a turkey-less Thanksgiving. As a holiday, it doesn't sound like a lot of fun. But this is Foer's point. We are, he suggests, defined not just by what we do; we are defined by what we are willing to do without. Vegetarianism requires the renunciation of real and irreplaceable pleasures. To Foer's credit, he is not embarrassed to ask this of us. ♦

*Correction, November 4, 2009: The number of chickens currently being raised in the United States is nearly two billion, not four hundred and fifty billion, as originally stated.