

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers visit <https://www.djreprints.com>.

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/hunting-made-humanity-1456519804>

BOOKS | BOOKSHELF

Hunting Made Humanity

Our Paleolithic ancestors made do with scavenging from the carcasses left behind by bigger, more vicious carnivores.



By *Rien Fertel*

Updated Feb. 26, 2016 4:23 pm ET

This year, the average American will eat more than 270 pounds of meat, despite the heightened risk of diabetes, heart disease and cancer that comes with every bite. We will consume three hamburgers a week on average, even though a single burger has the same carbon footprint as 320 miles of driving. (The production and consumption of meat are responsible for up to 22% of global greenhouse gases, according to a 2006 report by the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization.) One Gallup poll found that 25% of Americans agree that animals deserve “the exact same rights as people to be free from harm and exploitation.” Yet we enthusiastically devour a whole ark of animals that, in one way or another, suffer for our pleasure.

We are a people addicted to meat, contends Marta Zaraska, a journalist based in France and the U.S., in “Meathooked.” And its not just carnivores who have taken

the bait. Three-fifths of self-professed vegetarians in the U.S. admit to having eaten meat within the past 24 hours. Even the patron saint of animals, St. Francis of Assisi, she reminds us, could not abstain from feasting on flesh, fish and fowl. In her insightful but at times uneven book, Ms. Zaraska, who describes herself as a “sloppy vegetarian,” explores why it’s so hard to quit eating bacon (to say nothing of foie gras, fried chicken and Slim Jims). Interviewing scientists, farmers and scholars around the world, she finds that the reasons go far beyond the fact that meat tastes good. Meat consumption, she argues, is threaded throughout human history, culture and even genetics. “The history of life on Earth,” she writes, “is a history of eating meat.”

MEATHOOKED

By Marta Zaraska
Basic, 263 pages, \$26.99

Ms. Zaraska’s narrative begins before there was meat to eat, at a time when single-celled bacteria, accustomed to drawing energy from the sun, began to swallow neighboring bacteria whole. Some biologists think of these bacteria as life’s first “predators” and “prey.”

Eventually, the preyed-upon microorganisms developed defense mechanisms to avoid total absorption, instead surviving as part of the whole. “With time and generations,” Ms. Zaraska writes, “these fortified prey would evolve into organelles such as mitochondria,” structures inside cells that are a hallmark of complex, multicellular life. The evolutionary march from bacterium to Big Mac stretches 1.5 billion years. Our carnivorous family tree includes earth’s first true flesh-eaters, Cambrian-era creatures like the penis worm, a toothy, phallic-shaped critter that treats its mud and marine habitats as its own personal buffet table, and the *Nectocaris*, a mini, two-tentacled Kraken armed with “a conveyor-belt-like tongue with teeth on the surface.”

Want to score debate points against that annoying Paleo diet–proselytizing friend? Tell them that our Paleolithic ancestors rarely hunted for the choicest cuts but made do with scavenging from the carcasses left behind by bigger, more vicious carnivores. Brain and bone marrow—from giraffes, rhinos, elephants and other East African savanna-dwellers—provided the most calories, in what

amounted to modern-day dumpster diving. The inherent difficulties and dangers involved in hunting proved less successful at scrounging up the calories to feed a family but proved very useful when probing the power dynamics of politics and sex. The thrill of the chase, Ms. Zaraska asserts, “made us human,” allowing early *Homo* species to develop larger brains, build communities and ultimately migrate out of Paleolithic Africa.

The middle chapters of “Meathooked” cover the modern politics of meat eating.

With only a few basic products—beef, pork, chicken, lamb—the meat industry is not only far larger than the produce industry but also far more consolidated. The National Chicken Council and other lobbying groups have tremendous sway, she writes. Rather than trod these well-hoofed pastures, however, I wish Ms. Zaraska had spent more time exploring the rise of a new breed of farmers, butchers and retailers. Over the past decade just about every American city, large and small, has seen the arrival of nouveau meat markets, where chops and sausages come at a premium and are often displayed like priceless baubles. Will meat eventually become a luxury that few can afford?

But like a master butcher expertly trimming gristle from a prime cut, Ms. Zaraska is often at her best when slicing away the many myths that surround meat. Wonder why our dental architecture resembles that of our pets? Canine teeth do not make us eaters of flesh—deer and horses have them too—but, like the mostly vegan gorilla, we use our canines for purposes of aesthetics and aggression, as in “with bared teeth.” Scared away from a vegetarian diet because of possible deficiencies? Protein, iron, zinc: A plant-based diet is rich in all three. (The essential vitamin B-12, however, can only be procured from meat, eggs and dairy.) Splurge on Kobe beef recently? Genuine Japanese Kobe cows are not fed beer or massaged until properly marbled, as is commonly thought; rather they are bulls and virgin Tajima cows slaughtered in Hyogo Prefecture that satisfy strict textural criteria (look for the official insignia stamped into each side of beef: a purple-inked chrysanthemum).

Contrary to comparable meatless reads of the past several years—Jonathan Safran Foer’s “Eating Animals,” the work of Peter Singer, and a slew of vegan and vegetarian cookbooks—“Meathooked” ends on an optimistically meaty note. Ms.

Zaraska wants us to keep eating meat—even if it doesn't come from animals. In a Netherlands laboratory she discovers scientists growing in-vitro meat—it takes 30 billion petri-dish-grown cells to produce a single burger. In The Hague she visits the “Vegetarian Butcher,” Jaap Korteweg, a farmer and entrepreneur whose soy-, pea- and veggie-derived “proteins” are so meatlike that the superchef Ferran Adrià was fooled by a bite of his “chicken thigh.”

“Meathooked” will likely not scare anyone away from eating another steak. But you might look differently at your next rib-eye. Perhaps enlightened carnivorism is the next evolutionary step toward veganism. “The enormity of eating the scorched corpses of animals,” the lapsed meat eater George Bernard Shaw wrote, “becomes impossible the moment it becomes consciously instead of thoughtlessly habitual.”

—*Mr. Fertel's latest book, “The One True Barbecue: Fire, Smoke, and the Pitmasters Who Cook the Whole Hog,” will be published in May.*

Appeared in the February 27, 2016, print edition.

Copyright © 2020 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers visit <https://www.djreprints.com>.