

Food, Narrative, and Fantasy in David Leavitt's *The Body of Jonah Boyd*

SERENA FUSCO

FOOD AS SYSTEM OF SIGNS AND FANTASY

The aim of this essay is to analyze food as a system of signs, narrative fantasy, and metanarrative element in the novel *The Body of Jonah Boyd* (2004) by David Leavitt. In this first part, I shall illustrate some implications of, and strategies for reading food practices as a system of signs and/or cultural narratives; then I shall move on to argue that this signification can be related to an idea of fantasy—a imaginary relation between individual subjects and a given form of reality—a power-charged relationship that can be conservative or subversive, emancipatory or oppressive, adaptive or transformative. In the second part, I shall use the relationship between food, signification, and fantasy as a critical tool for reading Leavitt's novel, one that features food and its rituals as a code through which fantasies and fictions shape reality—taking, in turn, the form of (meta)literary, combinative clues to be deciphered.

In the preface to Massimo Montanari's *Food is Culture* (2004), Albert Sonnenfeld maintains that

a meal constitutes a syntax, the sequence of modified nouns coordinating main dishes . . . with complementary or accompanying dishes . . . Sauces, spices or flavorings ful-

fill further adjectival or adverbial functions. So a meal may be diagrammed or parsed, with various syntactical choices dictated by historical, social, and political factors. (Sonnenfeld ix)

An increasingly expanding body of work on food as a cultural code and object of cultural investigation exists nowadays.¹ Roland Barthes suggested a semiotic approach to food as early as 1964. For Barthes, food is one system of signs among others—such as images, advertisements, printed books, street signals, fashion, and more. In “Deciphering a Meal” (1972), anthropologist Mary Douglas also treats food practices as an integral part of a complex system of signs and signification. The ways ethnic groups relate to food bespeak, among other things, cultural belonging and social status within that culture. Identifying with a culture is stated and reinstated through daily nutrition rituals such as, for instance, the tripartition of meals in some cultures. Cultural belonging is also stated and reinstated in the organization of the calendar year according to festivities, with each festival being marked by its own structure of meals and special foods (see Douglas 62, 69). Conversely, some food representations emphasize the grim, even antisocial aspects of nutrition, thereby suggesting that, if food can hold human groups together and convey positive connotations—affection, care, intimacy, reconciliation etc.—it can also be associated with individual disempowerment and even reveal the violent, destructive side of cultural belonging. For instance, Sau-ling Wong has pointed to food-related themes and “quasi-cannibalistic images with overtones of sacrifice” (Wong 31) as a recurring motif in Asian American literature. Wong reads this motif “in context,” combining a cultural explanation with a socioeconomic one. One cannot simply ascribe the grim quality of Asian American food practices to strange or exotic “ethnic” cultural traditions: the emphasis on eating as an act that can entail devouring your own kind is to be read in the context of a deprivation of economic resources and pressure exercised on the immigrant community on the part of “more diffuse and potent societal forces, such as the structural enclosure of minorities or stratification of the labor market by race and gender” (Wong 39). Carole M. Counihan has analyzed how the relation to food can also be gender-inflected. Investigating how food orchestrates mother-daughter bonds in a Florentine family relocated in the United States, Counihan maintains that, in the case of women, food practices can both favor and limit the possibility of emancipation from the family circle. Counihan’s analysis constructs different possible relations, mediated by food, between the realm of the family and a much broader socio-cultural, intercultural context.

What I find especially significant is her conclusion whereby in the relationship between individuals and communities, food can work as both “tie and rup-

¹ Providing a comprehensive outline of the expanding discipline of Food Studies—both in its historical and most recent developments—is a task that cannot be attained within the limited scope and space of this essay. For a work that offers a general purview of scholarly approaches to food through a Cultural Studies perspective, see Counihan and Van Esterik.

ture” (Counihan 156). While meanings associated with food are deeply embedded in cultural discourses, in food-related daily cultural practices, but also in literary or filmic discourse, food itself can be mobilized and become a signifier for many non-food related signifieds. Elspeth Probyn maintains that food “moves about all the time. It constantly shifts registers . . . it is the most common and elusive of matters” (Probyn 63). Unveiling food as a rhetorical system at work in literature is predicated on the possibility of a metonymical relation between food-signs and other signs:

Literature allows us a very privileged view into . . . foodways, which are often moulded into specific story-telling threads and lead us into an exploration of character and society. In so doing, food, cooking and eating . . . cease to be simply themes, but . . . develop into fully functional parts of the narrative which “help define” the nature of “the writing.” (Piatti-Farnell 3-4)

In other words, food habits and practices—eating or not eating certain foods, cooking methods, places where and occasions when to consume food, etc.—can work as flexible markers of identification and/or restrain or facilitate the positioning of an individual within pre-existing frames of discourse and/or sociocultural realities. As I shall presently maintain, *The Body of Jonah Boyd* employs food signs as literary clues and intertwines them with a metaliterary reflection. Making sense of those clues will enable Denny, the novel’s narrator, to win a dual victory. At a (meta)narrative level, Denny’s voice will emerge as the most powerful in the text; socially speaking, she will finally act out her fantasy of being part of the suburban middle-class she had been skeptically skirting for most of her life.

To sum up: 1) food practices and signs may have the function of reinforcing the solidity of families, communities, and their socio-cultural practices; 2) or, on the contrary, they can be used as critical tools for undermining/questioning narratives of belonging; 3) food as a system of signs does not operate in isolation; to the contrary, it interacts with other system of signs, and in literature it can acquire (as it does in Leavitt) a metaliterary value. Within the context of these premises, I suggest that it may be possible to conceive of the experience of food as “fantasy” and I intend to deal with this issue in the following pages.

In *States of Fantasy*, Jacqueline Rose maintains that one of the functions of fantasy is to suture, albeit temporarily, the rifts in a collectivity. Rose sums up the workings of fantasy as the psychological grasp that the modern nation engenders in the psyches of its citizens in order to smooth out its inevitable, deep-seated contradictions. Rose draws on Freud to suggest that “fantasy is not . . . antagonistic to social reality; it is its precondition or psychic glue. . . . Fantasy surely ceases to be a private matter if it fuels, or at least plays a part in, the forging of the collective will” (3). Fantasy entails elements of disruption and preservation, of overcoming boundaries and staying within them: “If fantasy can be the ground for license and pleasure . . . it can just as well surface as fierce blockading protectiveness, walls up all around our inner and outer, psychic and historical, selves”

(Rose 4). Donald E. Pease draws on Rose when he suggests that it is fantasy which provides the necessary “reality effect” to a political entity such as the State: “State fantasies incite an operative imagination endowed with the power to solicit the citizens’ desire to believe in the reality of its productions” (Pease 4). Interestingly, through a logic of disavowal, the subject of the fantasy experiences the gaps into the reality effect of a not-so-seamless collectivity not as proof of the impossibility of a synthesis—but, instead, as sources of attachment, spurs to a repeated investment. Both Rose and Pease underline and imply that fantasy is what makes the identification of an individual with a given order of discourse possible and impossible at the same time. Fantasy smoothes out contradictions, while at the same time putting the subject through a reiterated and incomplete relationship with (what is defined as) reality—by virtue of the fact that “reality” is not fully realizable. Fantasy is what keeps subjects investing in a “wholesome” reality.²

I have already suggested that food themes and imagery can provide a terrain for reabsorbing the most problematic, contradictory aspects of (cultural) identification; or, conversely, that they can accompany an exacerbation of the contradictions in the process of identification and make them concrete through violent images of grim eating, fasting, decomposition, or even cannibalism. In Leavitt’s work, food is analogous to fantasy to the extent that it forms a subtext accompanying and reinforcing the contending, ambivalent ways in which desire and imagination—substantiated as narrative and fiction—grapple with, and remake the world.

THE BODY OF JONAH BOYD: FOOD AS CLUES, METANARRATIVE, AND FANTASY

Leavitt employs food as imagery, symbolic repertoire, and as an element mobilizing the plot in several works. Fiorenzo Iuliano has recently explored the use of food in Leavitt’s novella *The Wooden Anniversary*. Iuliano demonstrates how Italian—more specifically, Tuscan—cooking constitutes the fantasy sustaining the temporary, perhaps even illusory reconstruction of a harmonic expatriate American community in Tuscany, one composed of characters who (unsuccessfully) attempt to leave past traumatic experiences behind.

Published in 2004 and set in the late sixties, *The Body of Jonah Boyd* centers on the Wrights, a white, middle-class, liberal American family with several skeletons in the cupboard, and on a fateful Thanksgiving that will change the life of Ben, the youngest of the Wright children, and of Denny, the narrator of the novel. Judith “Denny” Denham is a secretary having an affair with her boss Ernest Wright,

² Several essays in a recent collection (Nyman and Gallardo-Torrano 2007) mention the role of food as a unifying or, alternatively, pluralizing fantasy in selected postcolonial literary texts that revolve around conflicts of culture and identity. The historical contingency, hence fundamental mobility of food as a system of signs, forms an indispensable background to this scholarly effort.

a psychology professor at the fictional University of Wellspring, California. Denny is also friend, unpaid domestic help, four-hand piano partner, and surrogate daughter to Nancy, Ernest's domineering wife. On a Thanksgiving, Nancy's friend Anne and her husband, the novelist Jonah Boyd, pay a visit. The disappearance of Boyd's notebooks, containing the only copy of his unfinished novel, is eventually revealed to be a scheme thought up by Anne to teach her husband a lesson. Anne enlists fifteen-year-old Ben, an aspiring writer, as an accomplice. Ben eventually reworks Boyd's stolen work into his first novel; after this initial act of plagiarism, he continues to write and manages to become an authentically competent and successful author. In the end, Denny uncovers the mystery of the notebooks and marries Ben, who dies of cancer shortly after. Finally, she settles into the Wright's house, Nancy's pride and joy, which becomes her rightful inheritance.

In many ways, the novel resembles a detective story, centered round discovering clues to the enigma of the lost notebooks. Food serves as one of the links in the orchestration of the various plot patterns that, at the end of the novel, will metanarratively converge in a reflection on the power of narrative and fantasy to create, validate, and suture alternate forms/versions of reality. Food is used as a system, a series of clues—or, to paraphrase Rose, a psychic glue—to make sense of the events and link them narratively.³ In this sense, it is metonymically linked to the metaliterary element of the lost notebooks and Ben's act of plagiarism.⁴ Significantly, Jonah Boyd's lost notebooks were fruitlessly searched for in the very trash can where the carcass of the Thanksgiving turkey will end up, in a way symbolically taking their place:

The turkey carcass . . . lay bony and denuded on its platter . . . Perhaps Nancy would boil it for broth, before throwing it into the trash she had earlier searched so patiently and so fruitlessly [for the notebooks]. In any case, she would get rid of it. No one wanted to look at the thing anymore. (Leavitt 107)⁵

(Considering this passage in the general economy of the novel, it should be remarked that the association between food and literature takes on decidedly cannibalistic overtones, as it is also mediated by the association between Boyd's

3 On the metaliterary and metanarrative potential of detective fiction see Waugh, 82-86. The recurrence of food themes in detective, mystery, and crime fiction has been noted both in scholarly work and the media in general. According to Angelica Michelis, "[f]ood and the rituals that surround its preparation and consumption have often played a role in crime fiction . . . Food and eating . . . like clues in detective and crime fiction are never meaningful in themselves but always refer to something other" (Michelis 144, 155).

4 The novel is clearly a fictional response on the part of Leavitt to the accusation of plagiarism brought against him by Stephen Spender—an accusation that, following a successful lawsuit, resulted in Leavitt's novel *While England Sleeps* (1993) being withdrawn and eventually revised before being reissued (see Olson).

5 All references are to the 2005 Bloomsbury edition of the novel. Page numbers will henceforth be included parenthetically in the text.

writing and his *body*, confirmed in the final scene of the novel—see below—and by the fact that the novelist’s last name is actually an anagram for “body”).

Denny had made her entrance as a “supplementary” member of the Wright family on the occasion of a previous Thanksgiving dinner. Food rituals and consumption are instrumental in defining Denny’s character as well as her (misrecognized) central position in the community. She forthrightly described herself as fat—yet her fatness does not make her unattractive to men; on the contrary, it allows her to occupy the space of independence and partial invisibility that suits both her needs and those of her lovers: “Affairs with married men . . . suited my character” (18). “One of the married men . . . when his wife found a love letter he had written to me, insisted that it was for another woman—a more conventionally ‘pretty’ woman” (17). Denny’s sensuous relationship with food, and the body that goes with it, mark her as an outsider in gender, class, and educational terms, yet one who, in the long run, exploits this liminal position to her own ends. The scene of the first meeting between Denny (twenty-eight at the time) and Ben (thirteen) is accompanied by the presence of food as a way of opening up possibilities, a realm of fantasy, and a narrative clue to be eventually made sense of. The scene takes place in a beauty parlor,⁶ where Ben has accompanied Nancy. They order sandwiches for lunch and, in her confusion, Denny eats half of the sandwich ordered by Ben. At the end of the novel, when the two eventually get married, Ben reworks this scene as a symbolic anticipation of their conjugal union: “Well, doesn’t that prove that we were meant for each other . . . ? For what was that dividing of the sandwich, if not a foreshadowing of the champagne toast at the wedding, the bride and groom sipping from the same glass?” (211).⁷

Unlike Denny, Ben is presented from the start as a “picky eater” (4), with a paranoid need for orchestrating the components of what enters his body:

if any of the foods on his plate touched any other . . . he would refuse to eat altogether. His eating habits were a source of great distress for Nancy, who seemed incapable of getting her son’s meals arranged properly, and eventually had to buy a special plate divided into sections to keep him from starving himself. (4)

6 As already remarked, Denny does not subscribe to the conventional female beauty standards of her culture and historical time. She claims to have gone to the beauty parlor quite casually and only because spurred on by a colleague (18). This scene marks her, from the very beginning, as an ambiguous outsider to the middle-class world of which Nancy is a committed female incarnation.

7 Food consumption also turns out to be a clue in the case of Ernest’s murder. Ernest is eventually shot by a jealous student, Phil Perry, whose main characteristic is to be scrawny, yet to eat a lot (86). The disparity between Phil’s physical appearance and his eating habits seems, retrospectively, to indicate that something—like an intestinal parasite of jealousy—had been consuming him from within.

Ben's paranoid relation to food resurfaces in several parts of the novel. In his case, food appears to be a structure of signification upon which to exercise a controlling intervention. Rhetorically speaking, for all that he is such a picky eater, Ben will go as far as absorbing and digesting Boyd himself, feeding on his body-of-work in a symbolically cannibalistic act.

The two main characters, Denny and Ben, are polarized yet complementary in investing in a fantasy and relying upon each other to imbue that fantasy with a reality effect. The whole novel can be interpreted as the final denouement of Denny's fantasy as openly shared with the reader from the start:

[Ernest] didn't want to leave [Nancy] for me, and I didn't want to marry him. I adored . . . both. And so we proceeded fairly harmoniously, although I would be dishonest if I did not admit to sometimes experiencing a sense of emptiness . . . akin to what one feels when one arrives home alone after a Thanksgiving dinner. For there *was* one thing I would have liked . . . and that was to have a bed of my own at that house. . . . Not a bed I would sleep in every night . . . : I still treasured my independence. Yet was it too much to hope that someday my role in the family might be legitimized? (34-35)

A passage in the second half of the novel perfectly illustrates the suture/excess structure relating narrative, fantasy, and food. A "supplementary" act of food consumption works as an event that may or may not open a totally new narrative path, creating an excess of meaning that may or may not be reabsorbed. Several years after the disappearance of the notebooks, Ben and Denny get together again for dinner at the faculty club, where food is "expensive and bad" (120). Ben claims to believe in a cosmic reason not only for the disappearance of the notebooks, but for any major event occurring ("[l]ike in novels," 126). After a depressing dinner ("salmon filets and heartless little vegetables . . . : the sort of meal after which you have to go out and get yourself a cheeseburger", 125), Denny goes alone for a burger and reflects on Ben's idea. This second moment of food consumption opens up a realm of fantasy and tension with(in) narrative control:

The necessary cheeseburger arrived. I took a bite. And now, as if to illustrate the very matters Ben had spoken of, the waiter who had served us at the faculty club stepped through the door . . . So perhaps this was serendipity, and the waiter and I were destined to fall in love. Or perhaps . . . when I finished my cheeseburger, he would follow me out to the parking lot and strangle me. Or perhaps nothing would happen—coincidence within which no pattern could be discerned . . . We did not speak, and after I paid my bill, I drove home without incident. (127-28)

Denny will have her fantasy fulfilled both in narrative terms—she is the ultimate narrator of the novel and she is the one, it is revealed, finally and substantially editing Ben's work for posterity—and in terms of plot—she survives both Ben and his parents and, as Ben's widow, she inherits the Wright's house. Denny has, finally, her role in the family thoroughly legitimized: she replaces Nancy as lady of the house. This will be, to a certain extent, her reward for interpreting the

clues to Ben's act of plagiarism and then for covering it up. Once in full control and rightfully settled in the house, Denny performs a final act of consumption: in the novel's finale she becomes the sole keeper of Ben's secret when she sets fire to the notebooks that are still hidden in an unused barbecue pit in the garden—"the body of evidence, the body of the work, the body of Jonah Boyd" (215). The "carcass" that, like the Thanksgiving turkey, has been repeatedly scraped, and that no one wants to look at anymore, serves, retrospectively, as a memento of the intermittent, renewing powers of fantasy, and the possibility of unpredictable twists in any storyline. By contrast, Denny's final act of food consumption, taking place on the Thanksgiving night following Ben's death and preceding the pyre erected for the notebooks, is an anticlimactic one: alone, she eats "part of a turkey breast, and some potatoes reheated in the microwave" (215), as if attempting to expel—albeit temporarily—the unexpected and the extravagant from the storyline. To conclude, in *The Body of Jonah Boyd* food appears as one of the systems of signs orchestrating narrative expectations, as well as a major channel through which characters—especially Denny and Ben—negotiate their desires to validate a fantasy and transform it into an alternate reality via the combined powers of narrative and fiction. Food as fantasy can serve both to perpetuate a certain version of reality, or a certain chain of signification—or to call them into question by exaggerating their contradictions and teasing out of them a further space of signification that could open up new avenues of thought. To a certain extent, food practices suggest that far from rivaling each other, reality and fantasy supplement each other in an endless cycle of reproduction—and that eating a cheeseburger on the heels of a plate of unappetizing salmon may be a consequential completion of the meal, an unpredictable choice, or both.

WORKS CITED

- Barthes, Roland. "Elements de Sémiologie." *Communications* 4 (1964): 91-135. Print.
- Counihan, Carole M. *The Anthropology of Food and Body*. New York: Routledge, 1999. Print.
- Counihan, Carole M., and Penny Van Esterik, eds. *Food and Culture: A Reader*. 3rd Edition. New York: Routledge, 2013. Print.
- Douglas, Mary. "Deciphering a Meal." *Daedalus* 101.1 (1972): 61-81. Print.
- Iuliano, Fiorenzo. "Il crudo, il cotto e il finto: piaceri del cibo e identità di *gender* tra Italia e Stati Uniti." *Migrazioni: Sessualità e generi in movimento*. Ed. Stefano Asperti. Roma: Aracne, forthcoming.
- Leavitt, David. *The Body of Jonah Boyd*. London: Bloomsbury, 2005. Print.
- Michelis, Angelica. "Food and Crime: What's Eating the Crime Novel?" *European Journal of English Studies* 14.2 (2010): 143-57. Print.
- Nyman, Jopi, and Pere Gallardo-Torrano, eds. *Mapping Appetite: Essays on Food, Fiction and Culture*. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007. Print.
- Olson, Ray. "The Body of Jonah Boyd." *Booklist* 100.15 (1 Apr. 2004): 1348. Print.
- Pease, Donald E. *The New American Exceptionalism*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2009. Print.
- Piatti-Farnell, Lorna. *Food and Culture in Contemporary American Fiction*. New York: Routledge, 2011. Print.
- Probyn, Elspeth. *Carnal Appetites: FoodSexIdentities*. New York: Routledge, 2000. Print.
- Rose, Jacqueline. *States of Fantasy*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998. Print.
- Sonnenfeld, Albert. Series Editor's Preface. *Food is Culture*. By Massimo Montanari. Trans. Albert Sonnenfeld. New York: Columbia UP, 2006. Print.
- Waugh, Patricia. *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*. New York: Routledge, 1984. Print.
- Wong, Sau-ling. *Reading Asian American Literature: From Necessity to Extravagance*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1993. Print.