Introduction

Eating is a fundamental activity. It is more or less the first thing we do, the primary source of pleasure and frustration, the arena of our earliest education and enculturation. Food is our centre, necessary for survival and inextricably connected with social function. What people eat, how and with whom, what they feel about food and why – even who they eat – are of crucial significance to an understanding of human society. The major significances of eating, however, are not biological but symbolic. According to psychoanalytic theory, formative feeding experiences are inscribed in the psyche; food and eating are essential to self-identity and are instrumental in the definition of family, class, ethnicity. These are not vague associations, for eating practices are highly specific: encoded in appetite, taste, ritual and ingestive etiquettes are unwritten rules and meanings, through which people communicate and are categorised within particular cultural contexts. The essential and necessary qualities of eating invest its surrounding activities with value, whether psychological, moral or affective.

The central role and multiple significances of food and eating entail a link with epistemological and ontological concerns. The prevalence of eating disorders in western culture indicates at least an insecurity about embodiment, the nature of being and the boundaries between the self and the world. Physical boundaries are clearly crucial to food and eating activities as substances pass into, and out of, the body. Uneaten food is 'other', part of the world outside, but its status changes as it is taken in to the mouth, is chewed, swallowed, digested. At what point does it become part of us? How do we locate activities such as tasting and regurgitation, and liminal substances such as spit and vomit? We live in a state of uncertainty about how much the self is influenced, changed, nourished or poisoned by what is taken in of the world, the extent to which people are defined by what they eat, or are affected by whoever provides their food. These questions are gendered, for both bodily and ego boundaries are

subject to varieties of influence and pressure, from the internalised patterns of tradition and custom to the physical disruptions of puberty and old age.

In interpersonal and social arenas, too, an enormous amount of uncertainty centres around food. Eating is an act of absolute trust, for how can we know what is in the food we are given? We cannot even be sure of the qualities of the food we provide, especially in the modern world of additives and modification. What food and its surrounding activities signify socially is equally problematic. The symbolic significances of specific foods and eating rituals in particular circumstances are established by various traditions and rituals, but even so, since these are often largely 'understood' rather than articulated, there is scope for error and confusion. As a means of exchange, whether prescribed or informal, eating and drinking may be saturated with meanings that are not at all necessarily apparent.

Women write about food and eating. Why should this be so? Women's bodies have the capacity to manufacture food for their infants which categorises them as feeders, and in western culture women have traditionally borne most of the burden of cooking for and nourishing others, with all that this implies of power and service. The caring, providing roles and their malign counterparts certainly contribute much mimetic content to women's writing. But women eat as well as cook, starve as well as serve, and contemporary fiction is as much concerned with women's appetites as their nurturing capacities. Some psychoanalytic theories suggest that because of girls' long period of attachment to the maternal figure, women have compelling boundary concerns as eaters. Cultural pressures in recent years have certainly made women particularly conscious of their body boundaries in relation to food and eating (or not eating). As this book illustrates, though, women's writing manifests far more diverse areas of engagement than such basic explanations suggest, ranging from explorations of female culinary sensuousness, creativity and authority in cooking, to the exercise of power or political responsibility through food and acts of eating, to the revisiting of earlier depictions of women's sexuality through appetite and eating, from Genesis onwards.

Although the specifics of food and eating are clearly defined by their cultural context, there is a temptation, especially in the light of psychoanalytic theories, to consider the functions of food as essential to all human beings and therefore somehow 'universal' or outside of cultural difference. Contemporary women's writing does not, in general, do this;

indeed it demonstrates both historical and cultural influences. When, in *The Sadeian Woman*, Angela Carter writes, 'flesh comes to us out of history; so does the repression and taboo that governs our experience of flesh' [*sic*], her referent is sexuality, but her remarks are equally relevant to food.[1] The significances of food and eating, like those of sexuality, are psychologically, socially and politically constructed, and symbolisms, customs and behaviours are indicators and results of cultural conditioning. An obvious if paradoxical contemporary example is bingeing and self-starvation, which occur in a cultural context of rampant consumerism in which consumption (literal or metaphorical) is promoted as wholly desirable, while overweight women are stigmatised and often portrayed as joke figures, as coarse, stupid or sexually promiscuous.[2] Even where eating practices are less obviously culture-specific, however, it is still only possible to consider their general political significance in relation to specific historical and cultural contexts.

The writers considered in this volume have in part been selected precisely because of their evident concern with contemporary history, society and politics (in its broadest sense), especially women's roles and experience. This interest manifests itself very differently in each writer, both formally and in terms of philosophical or political emphases and how these are coded through food, appetite, eating and female bodies. The major focus of attention is on Doris Lessing, Angela Carter and Margaret Atwood, and to a lesser extent Michèle Roberts and Alice Thomas Ellis, all of whose writing of food and eating is inextricably linked to explorations of what it means to be a woman in the latter part of the twentieth century.

Doris Lessing confronts the matter of twentieth-century life over an extended period, most obviously in her realist novels such as the 'Children of Violence' sequence or *The Golden Notebook*. Lessing's scope is comprehensive, and food and eating in her writing act as central vehicles for the expression and working through of problems and questions of value. Her novels (realist and fabular alike) are solidly grounded in contemporary history and culture, highlighting, among other things, the difficulties of establishing self-identity and meaning in the modern world, the dangers of excessive mentalism and concomitant importance of psycho-physical integration and, most importantly, how individuals relate to the greater social body. These questions and other issues are explored in close relation to female bodies, food and its associated activities.

Angela Carter is, typically, more perversely ambitious:

I would like, I would really like, to have had the guts and the energy and so on to be able to write about, you know, people having battles with the DHSS. But I haven't. I've done other things. I mean I'm an arty person. OK, I write overblown purple, self-indulgent prose. So fucking what![3]

Carter's fiction is not social realism, notwithstanding its 'entertaining surface' of characterisation, physical detail and the prevalence of food, eating and desire.[4] Her writing is nevertheless political, as her non-fiction with its sardonic voice and iconoclastic tendency makes quite clear. Styling herself 'the pure product of an advanced, industrialised, post-imperialist country in decline', Carter does not seek to distance herself from the world she anatomises; while she deconstructs the models and conventions by which we live, she recognises their potency and the complexities of human involvement.[5] Fiction is part of that involvement; Carter insists that the novel is part of 'social practice' and this is evident in her detailed, dramatic and often outlandish fictional exploration of issues surrounding power, sexuality and the construction of gender. The play of appetites is a constant in her complicated representations of power and desire and the challenging of the *status quo*; not surprisingly, perhaps, her writing of food and eating is acutely self-aware and often ironised.

Margaret Atwood's political and artistic position is not dissimilar: 'For me, it's axiomatic that art has its roots in social realities.'[6] Food, eating and hunger feature substantially and in detail in Atwood's fiction, both as part of the 'social realities' with which her characters must contend, and as a series of compelling metaphors and symbols that run right through her work, and through which she focuses majors issues. Though her novels are often taken to be realist, with their central, psychologically and socially convincing focus on women, Atwood incorporates elements of genre fiction (Gothic, thriller, fairy tale, historical romance) that connect with her extensive symbolic use of food and eating to highlight themes such as the commodification of women, the duplicity of sexual predation or the negative power of the victim. Atwood's writing confronts a number of pressing issues in this way, but food and eating are especially used in relation to the politics of oppression and individual freedom and responsibility.

Two further writers in whose work food and eating assume a large importance are Michèle Roberts and Alice Thomas Ellis. Michèle Roberts tends to address contemporary issues obliquely or historically, but always with a strong focus on women's lives and experience. She is much concerned with ontological anxiety and the relation of this to both

gender and religion, but located in a highly material context, and her novels combine an acute sense of physical being with explorations of the historical and cultural definition and regulation of femininity. Food and eating suffuse the novels. Poetic and often lyrical, her writing is both deeply sensuous and perspicacious; characters are often literally hungry, but also psychologically, affectively, spiritually.

Alice Thomas Ellis's writing gives a good deal of attention to the functions and pleasures of food, most specifically to the secular role and power of the cook. Like Roberts, Ellis has a Catholic background, but she is less ambivalent about it; Ellis's fiction suggests a desire to face away from contemporary society and towards spiritual or religious contemplation. Her characters are nevertheless *in* and *of* the contemporary world, grappling with what Ellis represents as its baseness and folly. They are often frankly contemptuous of 'fashionable' ideas, including feminism, though feminist issues abound in the complicated interactions and power struggles played out through cooking and eating.

The modern world manifests an overwhelming human yearning for wholeness, oneness or integrity, a yearning apparent in oral appetites, sexual desire, religious fervour, physical hunger, 'back to the womb' impulses, death wishes. Even Doris Lessing's explorations of realism itself, explicitly in *The Golden Notebook*, suggest how strong is the human desire for a unifying vision. Some such yearning underpins the writing of food and eating in all these writers' work. Its most literal manifestation, perhaps, is in deep, often unacknowledged longing to be reunited with the maternal figure, a fantasised return to the status of wholly fulfilled infant at the breast, or even *in utero*. This might almost be said to be the ur-longing, a desire to be reunited with the block off which we are a chip. Such a sense of yearning is partly what powers Lessing's Alice Mellings in *The Good Terrorist*, and it is present throughout Michèle Roberts's writing, as her female protagonists struggle with all that might separate them from the maternal bond: men, social convention, betrayal, external controls, their own ambition, their mothers themselves. It is as part of that struggle that they sometimes revisit attachments to the maternal, discovering their own independent physicality through sensuous relationships with food and its preparation, as well as in relation to religion, culture, men and, above all, with other women past and present.

If a yearning for the mother is evident in Roberts's work, elsewhere the desire for oneness is more subterranean and more coded. It is

discernable, for example, in love relationships sought by hopeful romantics such as Atwood's Joan Foster (*Lady Oracle)*, in sexual desire and in the wider play of appetites that pervade the fiction of Angela Carter. Eros, the libidinal drive, powers Carter's nurturing mother-substitutes (Aunt Margaret in *The Magic Toyshop*, Uncle Peregrine in *Wise Children*), her life-enhancing eaters, such as Fevvers in *Nights at the Circus* and her various sexual initiates. Indeed, the erotic appetite almost irresistibly demands completion. But the connection of food with sex, in Carter's fiction at least, can assume an insatiable and sometimes malignant eroticism, and both the predatory quality and the unappeasable nature of the appetite suggest not only Eros but something more deathly. The longing for consummation by negation is manifest in motifs and figures of cannibalism and vampirism in both Carter's and Atwood's novels and short stories. The monstrous appetites of these figures suggest an inner emptiness, fantasies of omnipotence or unfulfillable yearning for an impossible state of wholeness – a condition that may suggest deathly appetites in the modern sensibility.

A desire for oneness does not have to be either negative or regressive, however. It may indeed fuel the passage to enlightenment, as occurs to some extent with Carter's Desiderio and Walser (*The Infernal Appetites of Dr Hoffman* and *Nights at the Circus*) and Roberts's Thérèse and Léonie in *Daughters of the House*. Several of Doris Lessing's protagonists (Martha Quest and the protagonists of *The Golden Notebook, The Marriages of Zones Two, Three and Four* and *The Making of the Representative for Planet 8*) achieve a kind of wholeness through personal and spiritual growth. Lessing sets up this path to growth through a paradoxical *lack* of desire, as if to suggest we do not understand what we yearn for; in order to gain integrity and a sense of human connection her characters are put through breakdown and *dis*integration. This is brought about, in part at least, through self-starvation, the antithesis of Roberts's women's sensuous engagement. Elsewhere in Lessing's writing, characters such as Jane Somers are powered by a desire for more immediately human association, even attachment, and become materially involved in feeding and physical care for others, confronting in the process what is most disturbing about the body.

The spiritual growth Lessing focuses on is associated with striving for human or super-human connection and, even when this moves into a metaphysical realm in her writing, the desire and its fulfilment have a somewhat secular, and certainly anti-messianic, flavour. Religious

impulses seek a similar sort of metaphysical completion, but through the divine, and this can be seen in Alice Thomas Ellis's novels, which have a manifestly religious undercurrent of longing that is directly contrasted to the entanglements of food, sex and power that dominate her fiction. Each of Ellis's novels has a non-participant or semi-detached character whose longings are focused quite elsewhere, usually on death or divine immanence. This is thrown into relief by contrast with the most worldly of desires: the central characters' longing is for power, not for political but for personal reasons. This desire for power is an appetite, its gratification therefore fleeting and ultimately unsatisfying, and especially so by implied comparison with the numinous. Unlike the other writers considered here, Ellis's interest is moral rather than political: her self-aware, theatrical cooks use their cooking for delight, parody, social comment or even vicious satire; power is strenuously if wittily fought for and dubiously coupled with responsibility.

Emphasis on the need for responsibility and autonomy suggests a less egocentric interpretion of yearning for wholeness or integrity, and one which is implicit in all these writers, if most evident in Lessing and Atwood. Atwood, like Carter, explores the general and particular construction of victims (the eaten, the over-eaters, the self-consumers). Against the forces of oppression – in which she includes cultural constraints, political necessity, marital and familial pressures, the coercion of friends and self-created persecutions – she sets the need for women to resist the victim position. This resistance is effected through political engagement of the most basic (and food-related) kind. It suggests a connectedness that opposes social fragmentation and allays both individual and cultural yearnings for completion. Integrity has a similar ambiguity in Lessing's and Carter's writings, in both of which is discernible a socially focused, public agenda in which the desire for integrity takes the shape of political ideals and concomitant disillusion. Here we see both what is longed for and that it remains an ideal; community – the mutuality of, for example, shared cooking and eating – is punctured by individual isolation, and resisted by that in humans which cannot or will not join the feast.

Such hungers are the stuff of psychoanalytic theory, and much of the discussion in the following chapters consequently draws on Freud, Klein, Kristeva and others. This book is not restricted to psychoanalytic accounts of food and eating in literature, however, and its arguments

draw on a number of disciplines, including literary criticism, cultural studies and sociology. The central focus is on literary texts, illuminated by insights and ideas from a variety of perspectives. The resulting interdisciplinary approach is intended to reflect the complexity and importance of the subject, to allow a productive overview and to mirror the contradictory, integrative and associative functions of eating itself.

The book as a whole argues for the centrality and versatility of food and eating in women's writing. Not only does the action of the novels examined often occur through food preparation and eating, or through oral and alimentary preoccupation of one sort or another, food and eating themselves convey much of the meanings of the novels. This results from diverse factors such as the longings or hungers outlined above, deep associations between food and the psyche, specific socio-cultural pressures, especially on women's bodies, cultural and artistic inscriptions, and from the fact that food and its activities offer multiple possibilities for expression and action. Indeed, if anything could function as a universal signifier, it would surely be food.

The book is organised into chapters centred on specific food-related topics. The first chapter, 'The food of love: mothering, feeding, eating and desire', concerns the powerful relationship between food, love and sex across a range of writers. It examines maternal and pseudo-maternal nurturing, its responsibilities and failures, and the satisfactions and (dis)empowerment of the mothering role in a number of texts, Nancy Chodorow's seminal work *The Reproduction of Mothering* providing an analysis of this role and its perpetuation. The chapter moves on to an examination of the connection of food with sexuality, with the focus on Angela Carter's frequently erotic writing and Freud's linking of genital, anal and oral desire in 'Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality'.

Chapter 2, 'Cannibalism and Carter: fantasies of omnipotence', considers both the 'positive' desire for union with another expressed through cannibalism, and the more usual brutal and predatory cannibalism of myth and monster. Carter's cannibal motifs are considered briefly as figures of oppression and colonialism, but the chapter concentrates on interpretations in the light of psychoanalytic theory, especially Melanie Klein's theory of the oral stage and Freud's theory of life and death drives.

Despite their differences of focus and content, the perspective of these first two chapters is generally personal or individual. The third and fourth chapters provide a hinge between this and the more thoroughly

social focus of the final two chapters. Chapter 3, 'Eating, starving and the body: Doris Lessing and others', examines eating and not eating in relation to a culturally constructed 'ideal' female body image and in the light of anxieties about bodily functions and boundaries. Theory about the body and eating disorders, together with Julia Kristeva's writing of abjection, provides a perspective on self-starvation and related questions of control, empowerment and enlightenment, especially in Doris Lessing's fiction. The chapter concludes with a brief examination of the complicated relationship between the fat body and pleasure in eating, and argues for the disruptive, if equivocal, potential of the big woman.

Chapter 4, 'Sharp appetites: Margaret Atwood's consuming politics', takes as its focus a single writer whose writing encompasses virtually all the aspects of food, eating and appetite discussed in the book as a whole. The sheer variety of cultural and political issues focused through food and eating by a single writer testifies both to the importance of the activities themselves and to the richness and mutability of the subject as an adaptable metaphor or symbol. The central argument of the chapter concerns Atwood's overall emphasis, through food and eating, on women and responsibility.

The last two chapters discuss social eating. Chapter 5, 'Food and manners: Roberts and Ellis', is concerned with signifiers, tracing in Michèle Roberts's fiction the ways in which the connotations and significances of both food itself and the conventions surrounding it may be used to convey a wealth of subsidiary meanings. The argument draws on both sociological and anthropological research and broaches the question of control through social training. The chapter moves on to examine customs, manners and their significance in the context of Foucault's theory of 'micro powers', investigating the play of power relations through the activities surrounding cooking and eating in the novels of Alice Thomas Ellis.

'Social eating: identity, communion and difference', the final chapter of this book, is an attempt to formulate how we might truly speak of social eating, how the activities surrounding food might connect through food and eating. Factors examined in earlier chapters inform the discussion of fiction by Doris Lessing and Angela Carter, as do Anthony Giddens's analysis of the disconnections of modernity and Bakhtin's theory of carnival, and the complexity and difficulties of human interaction figure significantly. Indeed, the difficulties of any kind of community or communion are probably more firmly established than any ideal of collectivity, though none of the writers discussed extols an alimentary

individualism. If Carter stresses disruption and Lessing and Atwood emphasise both difficulty and responsibility, their fiction – like that of many other contemporary women writers – nevertheless repeatedly examines the social significances of all the activities connected with food.