Fast Food Nation

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ERIC SCHLOSSER

Eric Schlosser grew up in Los Angeles, in relatively well-to-do circumstances; his father, Herbert Schlosser, was for a time the president of the National Broadcasting Corporation. Schlosser attended Princeton as an undergraduate and Oxford as a graduate student. After his studies, Schlosser wrote and reported for *The Atlantic Monthly*. His other books include *Reefer Madness*, about marijuana use and its cultural implications, and *Command and Control*, about the accidents that can ensue when government personnel handle nuclear bombs. All his books have been critically praised, and *Fast Food Nation* was named "One of Time Magazine's 100 Best Nonfiction Books."

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Schlosser wrote *Fast Food Nation* at the close of the 1990s, a time of great upheaval in America—although the results of that upheaval were not to impact large portions of the American public until the first decade of the 21st century. Bill Clinton's presidency was one of, largely, economic growth, of the signing of the NAFTA treaty with Mexico and Canada, encouraging free trade in North America, and of relative peace, with only small US-led skirmishes in the Middle East and Africa. But the phantom of deregulation, which was raised by Reagan and the first President Bush in the 1980s and 1990s, and which continued in large part under Clinton's Administration, contributed to an atmosphere of loose oversight and "bubble economies," especially in the real estate, finance, and tech sectors. The successive collapses of the first tech bubble, in 1999, of the real estate bubble in 2007, and the financial bubble in 2008, led to a serious and sustained economic decline across the globe. This, coupled with major changes in America's relationship to other countries (notably China, Russia, and many nations of the Middle East), has only underscored the corporate influence and worldwide economic interconnectedness Schlosser first traced at the close of the 20th century.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Fast Food Nation takes up, in some sense, the path-breaking writings of Upton Sinclair, whose 1906 novel *The Jungle* first detailed—exquisitely and, to some, repugnantly—the terrible conditions of Chicago meatpacking plants. Sinclair's work, as Schlosser notes in his book, went on to spur Theodore Roosevelt and the Congress to enact regulation in support of hygienic meatpacking practices, and of worker safety in those plants. Schlosser's writing on food might be categorized with Michael Pollan's *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, which describes eating practices around the world based on the "natural history of four meals" announced in its subtitle. Indeed, if one scans the other 99 books included on Time Magazine's "100 Best non-fiction books," of which *Fast Food Nation* is one, one finds other, kindred texts. Schlosser's social consciousness might be traced in Robert Caro's description of Robert Moses, New York's master planner, in *The Power Broker*; his condemnation of certain corporate practices echoes some of Naomi Klein's more strident anti-corporate language in *No Logo*. But Schlosser's work is really its own, melding food writing, social criticism, and a history of corporatization and suburbanization in America. His work is broad-ranging, well-researched, and engagingly-written.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal*
- **When Written:** The end of the 1990s
- **Where Written:** New York City, with significant reporting in Colorado
- **When Published:** 2001
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary non-fiction
- **Genre:** non-fiction; food writing; social criticism
- **Setting:** primarily in and around the cities of Colorado's Front Range
- **Climax:** After visiting a meatpacking plant, Schlosser walks outside and sees the distant beauty of the night sky. Through a window in the plant, he notes the "pink" carcasses of the cattle moving along a conveyor belt.
- **Antagonist:** No single antagonist, although Iowa Beef Processors (IBP) and ConAgra, two enormous agribusinesses, are the subjects of consistent critique
- **Point of View:** third-person, reported

EXTRA CREDIT

Super Size Me. Schlosser is not alone in his critique of the fast-food industry. One of the most famous documentaries on the subject of fast food is Morgan Spurlock's 2004 movie *Super Size Me*, in which Spurlock eats entirely at McDonald's for one month. Spurlock's film discusses many of the same broad topics as Schlosser's book—if, perhaps, doing so in a much more personal, and perhaps self-jeopardizing, way.

PLOT SUMMARY

Eric Schlosser's *Fast Food Nation* is an attempt to describe how American eating and food-production patterns have changed since World War Two. Schlosser charts this transformation by tracking many different people: fast-food employees at franchises, and well-paid executives at fast-food conglomerates; **ranchers** and potato farmers in Colorado and its environs; large-scale farming and ranching operations; workers at meatpacking plants; food scientists tasked with creating new "natural" flavors for food products.

Schlosser begins by noting the emergence of major American fast-food companies, like McDonald's (with its **Golden Arches**), Burger King, and Wendy's, after World War Two. The explosive growth of many of these chains was coupled with the expansion of the American suburbs, especially in California, as soldiers returned from the war and began settling with their families in car-based communities, along highways between major cities. McDonald's "speedee service system," a way of making burgers more efficiently and with little skill on the part of employees, marked, as Schlosser writes, a series of sweeping changes in fast food, causing it to become ubiquitous in America. Increasing mechanization of fast-food production in the 1960s and '70s ensured that companies could easily replace fast-food workers—that these workers would be a transitional workforce, employed nationwide without union benefits.

Schlosser writes that most fast-food companies make the bulk of their profits from the "franchise" system, wherein the conglomerate is actually the landlord for the franchisor, who "rents" the brand. Schlosser tracks the lives of fast-food employees, franchise owners, and fast-food company executives, then shifts his attention to the meat and potato economies north of Colorado, in Wyoming, Idaho, and its environs. Schlosser describes the lives of small-time, independent **ranchers**, and the changes in large-scale ranching that have made independent farming so difficult, almost impossible, economically. Schlosser then moves to later stages of the beef and chicken production "systems" throughout the country, which, like fast-food production itself, has come increasingly to rely on unskilled labor (without union protections) and mechanized processes, often at dizzying and unsafe speeds.

Indeed, for Schlosser, safety and hygiene become important issues for consumers. Large-scale meat and poultry plants often allow fecal matter to contaminate animal food sources—this has led to outbreaks of Salmonella, E. coli, and other viral and bacterial contagions throughout the food supply. But Schlosser laments, too, the patterns of "deregulation" (often spearheaded by Republican groups in Congress) that have kept government agencies like OSHA and the USDA from adequately keeping track of the dangers to consumers, and plant-workers, in the meat-packing and food-service industries.

Schlosser closes the book with two important messages. The first is that the "fast-food-ificiation" of eating habits is not simply an American phenomenon, but one that is becoming increasingly popular the world over, in Europe as well as Asia. The second is an appeal to reform. Schlosser argues that, although many of the factors and processes he depicts in the book seem bleak and unchangeable—dictated by corporate interests with deep pockets—he notes that consumers don't have to buy fast food at all. Even by selectively boycotting certain fast-food and food-production practices, and by learning more about the manner in which their food is caught, cooked, and distributed, consumers can help improve those patterns. Fast food can be made more healthy for consumers, and more economically viable for independent owners; food production can be made safer for workers in plants across the US and the globe. Schlosser writes that these changes, ultimately, begin with us—the readers.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Eric Schlosser – The author of the book *Fast Food Nation*, Schlosser is a journalist based in New York City. He attempts to write a book charting how the rise in the fast-food industry in the United States, and around the world, has changed the way food is farmed, produced, and eaten. Schlosser is very much a character in the book; his accounts are often first-person, though they are bolstered by considerable research, and he refers to himself in the first person frequently—for example, when he tries French fries at a potato factory and finds them "delicious."

Carl Karcher – The founder of the Carl's Jr. chain of burger restaurants, Carl Karcher moved to California before World War Two, and based his business around other developing burger stands in the region—all of which were adapting to the new car- and highway-based culture of the suburbs. Karcher's first Carl's Jr. soon became a chain of franchises, and after the company acquired Hardee's in the 1990s, Carl's Jr. began to spread across the country—making Karcher a great deal of money.

The McDonalds Brothers – The founder of the first McDonald's "Speedee Service Restaurant" outside Los Angeles, California, the McDonalds brothers lent their name and expertise to early developments in burger stands. But it was not until Ray Kroc bought their restaurant and began franchising McDonald's, in the 1960s, that the brand became ubiquitous in the United States—one of the largest corporations in the company, and a bellwether for the state of the American food-prep industry.

Ray Kroc – The first CEO of what would become the

McDonald's Corporation of franchises, Ray Kroc expanded the company into its current global behemoth—the **Golden Arches**. The McDonald's headquarters, in Illinois, has a Ray Kroc Museum, describing, in part, Kroc's relationship with other major corporate executives of the immediate post-war period, including Walt Disney.

Walt Disney – The founder of the Walt Disney Company, famous for its animated films and its theme parks. Walt Disney was, like Ray Kroc, a corporate visionary who saw the enormous profits company's might be able to reap when they marketed their products to children. Like Kroc, too, Disney was a strong anti-union campaigner, although Disney was an even more stridently conservative than Kroc, who still expressed sympathies for some liberal (though non-union) causes.

Elisa Zamot – A worker at a McDonald's in Colorado's Front Range, Zamot is high-school-aged, and puts in long hours with little supervision at the store. Although Schlosser describes Zamot's job as repetitive and difficult, with low pay, still he says that Zamot is mostly happy with the work, as it provides pocket change for her to pay for her car and other incidental expenses.

Dave Feamster – A former NHL hockey player, and the manager of several Little Caesar's franchises in the Pueblo, Colorado, area. Dave Feamster is a compassionate boss who tries to help his employees whenever possible, even though he's constrained by the low wages set by the Little Caesar's corporation. Feamster did not know whether franchising the pizza restaurant would be profitable, but he finds that, after years of hard work, he can make a good living, though by no means an extravagant one.

Hank – A **rancher** whom Schlosser befriends on Colorado's Front Range, Hank is a man Schlosser admires—committed to the land and to his job, fighting as he is against the encroachment of housing developments near his ranching property. But Schlosser is anguished to report later in the book that Hank has committed suicide, perhaps in part because of his inability to make a living for his family as an independent **rancher**.

The Monfort Family – Owners and operates of the meatpacking plant in Greeley, Colorado, for generations before eventually selling it to a massive agribusiness. The Monfort family, as Schlosser describes, were good but "paternalistic" bosses for their workers—paying sufficiently and allowing unions in the plant. The Monfort Family's practices stand in contrast to later, larger companies, like IBF, whose meatpacking plants allow no unions and pay miniscule wages to workers for their dangerous labor.

David Theno – Hired by Jack in the Box to make food safer after an E. coli outbreak in the 1990s, David Theno advocates a series of small reforms in the meatpacking process and by workers in fast-food restaurants, in order to ensure that beef is clean and is prepared at temperatures high enough to burn off disease-causing pathogens.

MINOR CHARACTERS

J. R. Simplot – Idaho's richest man, and the founder of the J. R. Simplot Company. Simplot is the "potato king" of Idaho, having developed, among other processes, a method for speedily cutting and freezing french fries—one that was later imitated by all other American potato companies.

Upton Sinclair – A reporter and novelist of the turn of the 19th into the 20th century, Upton Sinclair is most famous for his novel *The Jungle*. Written in 1906, this novel portrayed the squalid conditions of Chicago meatpacking plants in vivid detail.

Kenny – A meatpacking employee in Greeley, Kenny has sustained a series of injuries on the job, nearly crippling him at the age of 45, and causing Schlosser to wonder at what cost meatpacking employees must earn a meager living.

Lee Harding – A man who came down with E. coli near Pueblo in 1997. Harding, like many in the US, was infected by tainted ground beef, causing Schlosser to detail exactly why E. coli and other pathogens are so common in the American beef supply.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

DIET, NUTRITION, AND FOOD SAFETY

Eric Schlosser's *Fast Food Nation* is, above all, an expose of the conditions in the fast-food industry. It discusses the following topics: how fast-food corporations—like McDonald's, Burger King, Wendy's, and Taco Bell—came into being (who founded them and franchised them); how these fast-food companies shaped the production of food products (especially meat and potatoes); and how systems of food production and consumption shape the American consumer. Schlosser describes the nutritional effects of high-fat, low-nutrient fast foods, the hygienic problems associated with factory farming, and the failure of government agencies to regulate food businesses effectively.

Schlosser is a journalist, and the book is not intended to vilify fast food itself, nor the people who make it and consume it. Schlosser is, however, critical of certain aspects of this eating culture, reserving most of his condemnation for the large corporations that sacrifice the integrity of their product for the "bottom line," and for government regulators who turn a blind eye on food-safety processes that are less than stringent. Schlosser notes that economic and political systems—especially those in favor of corporate profit and consolidation, at the expense of small-business owners—have to a large extent determined what Americans eat.

Thus, the book attempts to show what this food is, how it's produced, and what the consequences of its production and consumption might be. Schlosser concludes that, although the economic forces behind fast food are significant, there are possibilities for reform within this system. One would not need to eliminate fast food entirely in order to regulate factory production of meat and potatoes more effectively or, for example, to encourage school lunches to be more nutritious. The fast-food system could be altered—to better serve consumers, eaters, and small-business owners—without being completely dismantled.

GREED, CORPORATIONS, AND "THE BOTTOM LINE"

Schlosser begins the book by tracing the genesis of fast-food companies, especially McDonald's. Like Disney, another company based in southern California, McDonald's was invested in a product—hamburgers, rather than cartoons—that could be marketed effectively to children, and created in bulk. Disney, McDonald's, and countless similar corporations participated in a post-war economic boom, coupled with the explosion of the automobile and the Eisenhower federal interstate highway system. The "suburbanization" of the United States—whereby middle-class families moved from cities into outlying, car-dominated regions—changed food consumption patterns greatly, and McDonald's positioned itself to capitalize on this shift—indeed, McDonald's encouraged it.

As fast-food corporations like McDonald's grew—largely by franchising, or the land-ownership of independent-operated storefronts—the corporation's officials and stockholders became very wealthy. This was coupled with an increasingly technological streamlining of the food-production process, which meant that the fast-food workforce could, and would, be largely under-trained, under-staffed, workers, often transient, often very young (in high school) or of unsettled immigration status. Fast-food work became, in the second half of the twentieth century, the dominant service-industry job for low-skilled workers. And fast-food work paid terribly, often requiring employees to work overtime without pay, in unsafe or unsanitary conditions, with little possibility of advancement.

Schlosser notes, too, that the economic impact of fast-food rippled beyond both the workers in individual stores and the corporate officials becoming wealthy in the "home offices." Ranching, potato-growing, and other farming practices changed enormously, owing to vast corporate demand for meat and starch products. Small farms became impracticable, and large-scale farming had its own impact on people and the land—promoting the slaughter of cattle en masse, and forcing large tracts of land to be devoted to the growth of one crop (mostly potatoes for French fries).

Thus, for Schlosser, the economic impact of the fast-food industry is a primary engine of, and symbol of, an increase in income inequality in the US following the post-World-War-II boom—fast food, like other corporate industries, prizes profit for a relatively small number, against low wages for unskilled workers. And the social costs of this industry are vast, and often not accounted for: damage to the land, consolidation of food production into relatively few under-regulated companies; low nutritional standards; and privileging of profit over quality of product and service.

INDEPENDENCE VS. THE SOCIAL CONTRACT

Schlosser emphasizes the relationship between one's personal independence—the freedom it implies—and of social welfare, or the common bond between people. This independence cuts different ways. For individuals, independence can be understood as the ability to shop locally, or to run one's own business; thus, fast-food corporations make it more difficult, as a consumer, to receive an individually-tailored meal, or dining experience—food across America becomes the same. For small-business owners, the freedom to run a restaurant, or a farm, or any food-related business is severely impeded by the large agricultural business (agri-business) corporations, by the fast-food companies, and by related conglomerates that manage America's (and the world's) relationship to food.

Meanwhile, large-business CEOs and board members argue that their corporations are built on principles of individual hard-work and sacrifice; that, for example, Ray Kroc (first large-scale manager of McDonald's) and Walt Disney were "do-it-yourself-ers," who managed to make their money without government interference of excessive regulation. But, of course, this isn't the whole of the story: a great many agribusinesses and small companies that became large food conglomerates began with government-sponsored small-business loans, or with other federal programs designed to bolster the economy of post-war America. Thus, even "individual" prosperity is a result of social processes. For Schlosser, the "social contract" between food consumers and food producers used to be more immediate: farmers grew food, and some businesses helped to distribute that food to restaurants and grocery stores. But now that process is "intermediated" by many other businesses, mostly large corporations, who claim to be beholden not to consumer but to "stockholders," or those who might profit from the business.

Thus the old social contract, in which individuals work for the betterment both of themselves and for society on the whole, is warped in the food economy when ranches, potato fields, restaurants, and other food distribution companies are owned by large corporations, and when competition between companies is stifled by monopolies within industries. For Schlosser, then, change in the food economy, both in America and around the world, requires a reexamination of what is "individual" and what is "social" about food production and consumption. Schlosser believes that large companies can still mass-produce food without necessarily damaging the economy or forcing people to eat un-nutritious items produced exclusively by machines.

BUREAUCRACY AND COMPLEX SYSTEMS

Schlosser's examination of the food industry also applies more broadly to the analysis of bureaucracies (especially of the government variety) and of complex systems. Every step of the food production process in America, as it has become streamlined for maximum efficiency, has counter intuitively become more complicated, because food is now manufactured so quickly, and in such volume, that new problems present themselves at newer, faster, larger scales. When one man slaughters one cow, he can do so relatively slowly and carefully, and without fearing that unnoticed fecal matter from the steer will make its way into the meat. But a complex system, wherein hundreds of thousands of pounds of meat are prepared in large factories by many specialized workers—each of whom sees only one small part of the process—means that the possibility of error "propagates," or becomes far more likely to be amplified over time.

The complex systems of food production in America present problems, even as they are designed to make food production more efficient. Because plants across the country are so effective at preparing (for example) meat products, the profit for meat preparation decreases over time due to the laws of supply and demand: the more meat there is, the less it costs. This means that workers are encouraged to work even faster to produce even more meat to generate profits, which means errors can arise—for example, when meat is not cleaned and prepared properly, leading to bacterial infections (of E. coli and other varieties).

Additionally, the government bureaucracies in charge of managing the American food supply are, according to Schlosser, hopelessly in the thrall of big businesses, who keep inspectors from doing their work, or lie about their data to make food plants seem more safe, or push for legislation that allows the food industry to "regulate itself" (which typically results in decreased food safety standards).

For Schlosser, complex systems of food production run by bureaucrats who manage food production but are separated from the laborers who actually work on the "assembly line," lead to a gulf between the profit-making features of the food economy and the actual healthfulness and value of the food being produced. Schlosser argues that complex systems naturally tend toward self-perpetuation at all costs—which, in many cases, means making a profit without regard to the quality of the product.

WORK AND "THE GOOD LIFE"

Throughout the book, Schlosser talks about the natural beauty of the North American continent, especially the West, and of the people who (used to) work the land, raising cattle and farming potatoes, starting small businesses, and helping to feed their communities. These workers have a holistic relationship to what they do—**ranchers** see the cattle they raise, and men and women running small businesses have a more direct connection to the places they live.

In contrast, large companies, the suburbanization of America (especially the West), and the desire to push less-healthy food at a profit causes people's quality of life—and the quality of the food they consume—to decrease. Fast food, then, is just one symptom of a world that is at odds with Schlosser's ideal vision for America, in which companies are not "people" but are instead composed of individuals, who feel they have a choice in what they eat, what they do, and how they live their lives.

Schlosser further argues that his vision, though it sounds romantic or utopian, is in fact not so difficult to put into practice. Schlosser pushes for reforms that would make the food industry more accountable, rather than massive revolutionary changes that would entirely dismantle the global food-production network. Schlosser believes that workers should be trained to perform a skill, and should be paid fairly for their work. He is opposed to governments that give in unnecessarily to the interests of wealthy corporate interests, especially when they run counter to the interests of the "regular people" buying the conglomerates' products. Schlosser also believes that large parts of the country, in particular in the West, present a natural beauty that can be swallowed up by cars and **Golden Arches** crowding already over-developed roadsides.

For Schlosser, American food development since World War Two has brought on immense technological advances, but created a world in which workers no longer feel immediately connected to a "good life," an integrated life of food and community. Schlosser's book, published in 2001, perceived many of the climatic and food-based concerns that have become widespread issues of political conversation a decade later.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

GOLDEN ARCHES

McDonald's Golden Arches began as a stylistic quirk of the first McDonald's Speedee Service Restaurant in San Bernardino, CA—a quick way for drivers to spot the burger stand from the side of the highway. As McDonald's expanded throughout the company—after Ray Kroc took over from the McDonald brothers, and decided to "franchise" locations in many states—the Golden Arches moved from an architectural feature of the restaurants to a broader symbol of the company. By the 1970s, the "M" in McDonald's signage was created of out two interlocked arches, and often affixed to the top of buildings—again, so that drivers could see McDonald's from the road.

RANCHERS

But, more importantly, the Golden Arches reflected a uniform dining experience for customers; in any state, at any McDonald's, one could expect the same fries, the same burgers, the same "speedee service." Thus the Golden Arches have come to represent not only one restaurant chain, but an entire method of doing business, of producing food efficiently—and, as a consequence (as Schlosser notes), of radically altering the means by which Americans eat, farm, work, and live. The Golden Arches are today a symbol of an immensely powerful global conglomerate—a physical representation of that company's economic impact on the nation.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Mariner edition of *Fast Food Nation* published in 2012.

Introduction Quotes

The key to a successful franchise, according to many texts on the subject, can be expressed in one word: "uniformity." Franchises and chain stores strive to offer exactly the same product or service at numerous locations.

Related Characters: Eric Schlosser (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 5

Explanation and Analysis

One of Schlosser's primary objectives in *Fast Food Nation*is to understand in social and historical terms the rise of the fast food chain restaurant. One of the keys to the chain is the reduction of the eating experience to a set of smaller, more easily replicated tasks, both for the producer of the food and for the consumer. This is why franchises must be uniform - they must operate such that practices in one location can be used, with only a minimum of modification, in another.

Schlosser recognizes that this uniformity and "franchising" of fast food restaurants is part of a larger sweep, in the "modernizing" West, of economic policies favoring the wealthy over the poor, and the corporate over the individual. Fast food restaurants seem designed to produce profit for those with stakes in the restaurant, rather than to create an eating experience enjoyable for the consumer, or a working experience that is satisfying or sustainable for the average employee. What is most upsetting to Schlosser is the idea that these forms of eating and cooking have replaced other more individualized, local, and fulfilling kinds of food consumption.

Fast food is now so commonplace that it has acquired an air of inevitability, as though it were somehow unavoidable, a fact of modern life. And yet the dominance of the fast food giants was no more preordained than the march of colonial split-levels, golf courses, and man-made lakes across the deserts of the American West.

Related Characters: Eric Schlosser (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 7

Explanation and Analysis

Schlosser sees the rise of fast food as being coupled with the rise of the suburb and the car in American life. The fast food restaurant, after all, derives from the McDonald's franchise model - wherein restaurants were placed in easy-to-access locations at the exits of major freeways across the United States. As middle class families, often white families, moved out of cities and into the suburbs, they used cars to travel, and in traveling they needed places to stop for a quick bite to eat. Thus the fast food restaurant was no more "preordained" than the highway and the car and the suburban subdivision. These restaurants, instead, were a part of a plotted policy, which moved middle-class American life away from cities and into more spread out, "planned" communities.

As in the first quotation, this shift from city to suburban eating went hand-in-hand with a "streamlining" of the food production process - which meant consumers all along a given highway were, in a McDonald's restaurant, eating the same burgers assembled using the same mass-production methods.

Chapter 1: The Founding Fathers Quotes

> The southern California drive-in restaurants of the early 1940s tended to be gaudy and round, topped with pylons, towers, and flashing signs. They were "Circular meccas of neon," in the words of drive-in historian Michael Witzel, designed to be easily spotted from the road.

Related Characters: Eric Schlosser (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 17

Explanation and Analysis

This passage is another depiction of the symbiosis between the rise of the fast-food restaurant and the rise of the highway. Just as a city or town would be viewed as a blur from a speeding car on a highway, a fast food restaurant could be recognized only by the bright lights and colors it produced. Thus the car was once again the functional unit for the transportation of people in mid-century, middle-class American society. And restaurants therefore catered to the car and centered on the car - were geared toward people whose lives were lived, for better or worse, in cars.

Nevertheless, Schlosser also seems somewhat wistful for the early days of fast food, if only because the novelty of these restaurants, and of the highways they were placed along, was something striking and somewhat individual in the postwar American boom of economic development. The optimism of higher-quality, mass-produced food might be traced, ultimately, to a utopian, if flawed, idea - that producing food in large quantities according to streamlined processes might actually benefit, rather than hinder, people's health and wallet - and thus create more free time for them to spend with their families.

> Richard McDonald . . . though untrained as an architect . . . came up with a design [for McDonald's stores] that was simple, memorable, and archetypal. On two sides of the roof he put golden arches, lit by neon at night, that from a distance formed the letter M.

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 20

Explanation and Analysis

The Golden Arches, in Schlosser's estimation, are one of the great design innovations and trademarks of mid-century America. They are instantly recognizable, and were no small reason why McDonald's became lodged in the American consciousness so soon after the war. The Arches were associated with a cheap, fun, easy place to eat - and to eat as a family, after a ride along the highway, especially in California where the brand began. The Arches thus took on the optimism, indeed the utopian quality that early franchised fast food assumed in the American consciousness. They were, in short, arches symbolizing progress over backwardness, cleanliness and comfort over difficulty, uniformity and expectedness over messy, unpredictable individuality.

Over time, the Golden Arches have remained a symbol of McDonald's, and they have moved that symbolism into other countries, where McDonald's is now prevalent. The Golden Arches are thus, in many parts of the world, a symbol not just of cheap food but of American influence, of the manner in which fast food-style eating has become the norm for people in all walks of life.

> When I first met my wife . . . this road here was gravel . . . and now it's blacktop.

Related Characters: Carl Karcher (speaker), Eric Schlosser

Related Themes:

Page Number: 28

Explanation and Analysis

Carl Karcher of Carl's Jr. believes, and not incorrectly, that fast food restaurants played a large role in the modernization of the American West. They certainly did - it is hard to dispute the idea that freeways, suburbs, and fast food shaped the way Americans recreated and moved through space. What separates Karcher from Schlosser, however, is the idea of this being a good, or positive, development for American society. Karcher sees fast food as an engine of economic growth that made the West, along with myriad suburban developments, livable for a large number of people. Before Karcher, the West was nothing more than a set of paths and land for grazing livestock.

But this idea of the West as a rugged, natural, untouched place is, for Schlosser, an important one. Fast food really did change the American landscape, and Schlosser argues it did not change it for the better. Patterns of food consumption are one thing. But as the book progresses, Schlosser will go on to describe the ways that food production - namely farming and herding techniques - were negatively altered in order to accommodate large food conglomerates.

This is rat eat rat, dog eat dog. I'll kill 'em, and I'm going to kill 'em before they kill me. You're talking about the American way of survival of the fittest.

Related Characters: Ray Kroc (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 37

Explanation and Analysis

Ray Kroc's idea of McDonald's franchising, and the business model that keeps McDonald's afloat, is very different, in this telling, from the positive image the company projects in its restaurants and advertising. McDonald's succeeded, and continues to succeed, according to Schlosser, because it is a restaurant that understands the amorality and occasional brutality of the market. McDonald's restaurants therefore are strongly anti-union, because they consider labor law to be an impediment to corporate profits and growth. They are also opposed to any of the social safety net policies that might protect their workers over time. Indeed, McDonald's restaurants run best, for Kroc, when they are staffed with people who do not stay very long - who therefore can claim no seniority and therefore no higher wages or extra benefits.

Likewise the franchises, once established, must perform well and court customers or else risk being taken over by other nearby restaurant chains. McDonald's strategy of ruthless competition therefore prizes corporate profits above all else - and makes the dining experience all the more "streamlined," meaning mass-produced, impersonal, and, ultimately, inexpensive.

Chapter 3: Behind the Counter Quotes

Despite all the talk in Colorado about aerospace, biotech, computer software, telecommunications, and other industries of the future, the largest private employer in the state today is the restaurant industry . . . [it] has grown faster than the population.

Related Characters: Eric Schlosser (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 65

Explanation and Analysis

Schlosser takes great pains to link the fast food industry to what he views as the larger, underlying economic dislocation that has happened in the American West since the Second World War. He chooses Colorado because it is, in his words, a place a lot like California was in the 1950s (he is writing in the 1990s) - a region with lots of land, lots of people willing to work for relatively low wages, and a combination of high-tech and service-industry jobs.

Schlosser then notes that, despite the media emphasis on Colorado as a place where new technologies are created and used, its economy derives its strength largely from the kinds of jobs that go unreported: jobs that involve people working at Hardee's or McDonald's or Chik-fil-A, often without much by way of training, and with significant turnover. By explaining this aspect of the fast food industry, then, Schlosser is helping to describe an important part of the "boom" economies of the end of the 20th century in the United States, and suggesting why such "booms," when they are built on such high-turnover, low-skill work as the fast food industry, inevitably lead to "busts."

Every Saturday Elisa Zamot gets up at 5:15 in the morning. It's a struggle, and her head feels groggy as she steps into the shower. Her little sisters, Cookie and Sabrina, are fast asleep in their beds. . . .

Related Characters: Eric Schlosser (speaker), Elisa Zamot

Related Themes:

Page Number: 67

Explanation and Analysis

What makes Elisa's story so impactful - and causes Schlosser to relate it here - is not that it's unique, but rather it is the norm for a great many workers in the fast food industry. Wages for people in Elisa's position are often extremely low, and hours can be hard to come by; thus workers will take whichever shifts are offered, which is why Elisa must wake up so early to commute to the closest McDonald's.

In examining the labor practices of the fast food industry, Schlosser takes pains to show that workers are treated not so much as individuals, but rather as "components" of a much larger system of food production. This system, he argues implicitly, is mirrored in the packing of meat and in other aspects of the factory farming that provide the food for McDonald's to cook and process. In this way, the fast food industry's practices have shaped the practices in related fields - to the detriment of those working in the industry.

The fast food industry pays the minimum wage to a higher proportion of its workers than any other American industry. Consequently, a low minimum wage has long been a crucial part of the fast food industry's business plan.

Related Characters: Eric Schlosser (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 73

Explanation and Analysis

One of the most important aspects of the fast food industry is the continual depressing of costs. Because fast food can be produced using a system of linked smaller cooking processes, rather than a single cooking process undergone by one person from start to finish, the actual labor involved in fast food production is relatively easy to convey.

Thus, McDonald's tends not to value this labor particularly highly, and makes sure to resist any efforts to unionize on the part of workers - which would make it more difficult to hire and fire workers, thus forcing McDonald's to pay wages appropriate to the work that is already being done. Schlosser notes the fine line McDonald's, and similar fast food companies, maintain - they wish to retain workers long enough to stack their stores, but not so long as to cause those workers to earn raises, which would in turn raise the company's cost and eat into its profits.

As franchises and chain stores opened across the United States, driving along a retail strip became a shopping experience much like strolling down the aisle of a supermarket. Instead of pulling something off the shelf, you pulled into a driveway. The distinctive architecture of each chain became its packaging . . . .

Related Characters: Eric Schlosser (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 97

Explanation and Analysis

Schlosser here notes a feature of suburbanized American life in the 1990s and early 2000s - the transition, in local economies, from local "Mom and Pop" stores to larger chains, whose economies of scale allow them to sell goods and services at much lower prices, and thus force local stores, who do not have these economies of scale, out of business. Big box stores and other national chains are, like fast food companies, designed to be uniform. Variation between one store and the next is frowned upon. Thus commercial strips on highways in the suburbs surrounding major cities look largely the same. They contain the same stores, in the same configurations, and sell mostly the same products for the same prices.

Schlosser argues that this system, which is good for the big box stores participating in it, is not nearly so good for the consumer, who often has a more limited set of choices as to where to buy goods. This, not to mention the monotony of encountering the same several stores on each commercial area in a given suburban region.

Chapter 5: Why the Fries Taste Good Quotes

McDonald's began to sell J. R. Simplot's frozen french fries the following year. Customers didn't notice any difference in taste. And the reduced cost of using a frozen product made french fries one of the most profitable items on the menu—far more profitable than hamburgers.

Related Characters: Eric Schlosser (speaker), J. R. Simplot

Related Themes:

Page Number: 115

Explanation and Analysis

Schlosser isolates the invention of the french fry, by J. R. Simplot, as one of the great innovations in fast food history - and for good reason. The french fry becomes a staple of fast food not only because it is delicious for consumers, but because it is easy to produce, immensely cheap, and its production can be streamlined to maximum efficiency by freezing.

Although unfrozen french fries are by no means the healthiest or most natural of foods, according to Schlosser they were at least somewhat closer to food in its original state - food that has not been manufactured to highest efficiency at the cost of its original taste and integrity. Schlosser believes that the french fry, as well as similar developments in burgers and chicken nuggets, sped the growth of fast food chains by making products more or less exactly the same across stores. This causes customers to expect - and to receive - the same products regardless of location, thus creating another efficiency of production and sales, but a dehumanization of food production and consumption.

Since 1980, the tonnage of potatoes grown in Idaho has almost doubled, while the average yield per acre has risen by nearly 30 percent. But the extraordinary profits being made from the sale of french fires have barely trickled down to the farmers.

Related Characters: Eric Schlosser (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 117

Explanation and Analysis

This passage describes another example of what Schlosser considers the economic erosion of the second half of the twentieth century in the United States. Because of the nature of ruthless economic competition in the farming industry - and the practices that cause farm conglomerates to form increasingly fewer, and vastly larger, corporations - the margins on any particular crop are driven far lower. This makes it difficult for small farmers to make money selling most crops. Only the largest of companies, who sell the most crops at a particular low price (and for low profit), can sell enough to continue to stay in business.

This economic system, in which money is concentrated within an industry among conglomerates, is not a "true" or "good" manifestation of market capitalism (Schlosser believes), but is instead an unfortunate byproduct of it. He believes, further, that certain forms of regulation could ensure economic competition and keep prices reasonable while also keeping smaller-scale farmers in business.

Chapter 6: On the Range Quotes

Toward sunset we spotted a herd of antelope and roared after them. That damn minivan bounced over the prairie like a horse at full gallop, Hank wild behind the wheel . . . we had a Chrysler engine, power steering, and disk brakes, but the antelope had a much superior grace, making sharp and unexpected turns, bounding effortlessly . . . .

Related Characters: Eric Schlosser (speaker), Hank

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 135

Explanation and Analysis

In a book of economics and summarization, this is a scene of more or less pure description. Schlosser takes up Hank's story (and includes this scene of admiration for the natural beauty and power of the antelope) because Hank, he believes, is an exemplar of what he considers best in American farming: a sense of integrity, a willingness to work hard to make one's living, and a belief that ethical business practices are best for nature, the environment, and the consumer. Hank, however, is a rancher from the old guard, and most new factory farming ranch outfits do not care about the land the way he does. Factory farm companies are not invested in protecting the farms around Colorado Springs because they do not, largely, exist for the benefit of local communities. Instead, large factory farm companies are multinational, seemingly based nowhere, and they produce goods only to maximize profit and serve the bottom line.

As Schlosser will report, too, these large farming conglomerates are not kind to small business owners, and people like Hank, who try to work "the right way," are largely shut out of the industry before long - unable to provide for their families.

Many ranchers now fear that the beef industry is deliberately being restructured along the lines of the poultry industry. They do not want to wind up like chicken growers—who in recent years have become virtually powerless, trapped by debt and by onerous contracts written by the large processors.

Related Characters: Eric Schlosser (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 139

Explanation and Analysis

The poultry industry, by Schlosser's logic, is an example of economic deregulation run amok. Farmers can barely make enough money selling chickens to larger distributors to cover the cost of feed and overhead for the next month, and high customer demand does not correlate with high profits for the initial chicken producer - the small farmer. Indeed, the worldwide craze for chicken nuggets, which Schlosser notes is an important part of the "second" boom in fast food sales in the decades following the Second World War, seems only to enrich those who run the franchises and purchase chicken meat in bulk. Local chicken farmers have little to no say over whom they wish to sell to, as only a small number of companies control the industry.

To the extent that the cattle ranchers are capable, then, they wish to work for themselves, and to maintain that independence that Schlosser views as so central to the American West, and to business ethics in general.

The suicide rate among ranchers and farmers in the US is now about three times higher than the national average. The issue briefly received attention during the 1980s farm crisis, but has been pretty much ignored ever since. Meanwhile, across rural America, a slow and steady death toll mounts. As the rancher's traditional way of life is destroyed, so are many of the beliefs that go with it.

Related Characters: Eric Schlosser (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 146

Explanation and Analysis

Schlosser is clearly affected by the death of Hank, who commits suicide in part over despair at his inability to make a living cattle ranching in Colorado. Schlosser does not necessarily hold large agricultural companies directly responsible for the upsurge in farmer suicides, but he does believe a wide variety of factors, including economic difficulties, put an incredible burden on farmers that is very, very difficult to lift. And without adequate public health services, including mental health services, many of these farmers' needs go unanswered.

Schlosser walks a fine line in the text between advocacy for the positions of disenfranchised farmers like Hank and for fast food workers continually bilked of their already meager pay by management. But he also wishes to report on things - not so much to editorialize as to make clear just how out-of-joint the fast food industry can be. Occasionally, however, this reporting becomes tinged with a personal anecdote, like the story of Hank - making that story all the more affecting.

Chapter 7: Cogs in the Great Machine Quotes

Greeley became a company town, dominated by the Monfort family and ruled with a compassionate paternalism. Ken Monfort was a familiar presence at the slaughterhouse. Workers felt comfortable approaching him with suggestions and complaints.

Related Characters: Eric Schlosser (speaker), The Monfort Family

Related Themes:

Page Number: 151

Explanation and Analysis

Schlosser again walks a fine line between valorizing an old economic system, which he understand to have problems of its own, and attempting to depict honestly the real difficulties and deficiencies of the system of agricultural production that replaced it throughout the United States during the era of deregulation, which Schlosser dates to the 1970s and '80s. The Monforts were by no means a perfect family, and they did not run their business as a charity; they were businessmen, and their workers were not paid any more than they had to be. But those workers were at least supported in their work, knew their bosses, and the Monforts believed in helping those who worked at the plant at least to some extent.

The system replacing this, in which a large and depersonalized agricultural conglomerate slashed wages and benefits, produced no such goodwill between workers and their bosses. This might have resulted in slightly higher corporate profits, but it did not help to support those families whose incomes derived from the meatpacking industry. And this, by degrees, harmed the towns in which these meatpacking plants were located.

Far from being a liability, a high turnover rate in the meatpacking industry—as in the fast food industry—also helps maintain a workforce that is harder to unionize and much easier to control.

Related Characters: Eric Schlosser (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 161

Explanation and Analysis

This is the same logic that Schlosser identifies in the fast food industry itself, where McDonald's, for example, wishes only to train workers sufficiently so they can stay on the job for a matter of months, only to quit or be fired. Workers with a small amount of experience are somewhat useful, but meatpacking, like the fast food industry, has become so streamlined as to require relatively little human activity or skill. This means that human beings, once so central to the production of food in the United States, are rapidly becoming secondary to that process.

Schlosser notes again and again that in meatpacking, as in fast food, the concept of "throughput" is increasingly important: that is, the amount of material that can work its way through a production system in a timely manner. If throughput is all that counts, and if machines can aid in parts of the production of meat, then humans amount to no more than a small sliver of that production process.

Workers often bring their knives home and spend at least forty minutes a day keeping the edges smooth, sharp, and sanded, with no pits. One IBP worker, a small Guatemalan woman in graying hair, spoke with me . . . telling the story of her life . . . the whole time sharpening big knives in her lap as though she were knitting a sweater.

Related Characters: Eric Schlosser (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 173

Explanation and Analysis

Schlosser does not have to try hard to make the meatpacking industry seem extraordinarily unpleasant for those involved in that labor. The only physical connection that a person has to the meat being "produced" is through the complex system of cuts and incisions made along the assembly line, by workers so specialized that they might make a single cut, over and over again, many hundreds of times in a given shift.

This act of distributing the labor of meatpacking among a large number of people, each working in a small area of production, is similar to the manner in which cars are made - a "Fordist" model, which works well in producing "output" but renders the manufacturing job itself dull, numbing, and difficult because of its sheer boredom. This boredom, as Schlosser notes, can be especially dangerous in the meatpacking context, as those not paying attention can find themselves in danger along the production line.

Chapter 9: What's in the Meat Quotes

Every day in the United States, nearly 200,000 people are sickened by foodborne disease, 900 are hospitalized, and fourteen die. . . . Most of these cases are never reported to the authorities or properly diagnosed. The widespread outbreaks that are detected . . . represent a small fraction of the number that actually occurs.

Related Characters: Eric Schlosser (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 195

Explanation and Analysis

In this section of the book, Schlosser makes plain some of the problems associated with factory farming - problems that affect the consumers of meat and poultry far more than they affect the producers. For work environments like the meatpacking plant Schlosser visits are low on safety regulations and high on "throughput," meaning that a great deal of product is pressed through the assembly line in a very short amount of time. This gives safety inspectors, already tasked with making sure that other parts of the factory are safe and secure, with examining far more of the meat or poultry product than can be adequately examined in the time allotted. The result is a simple statistical reality -

the lessening of safety standards over time will, inevitably, produce meat and poultry that are less safe to eat. And these less safe products will cause some to get sick - and some proportion of the sick will die - all to serve ideals of greater efficiency and profit.

The pathogens from infected cattle are spread not only in feedlots, but also at slaughterhouses and hamburger grinders. The slaughterhouse tasks most likely to contaminate meat are the removal of an animal's hide and the removal of its digestive system . . . if a hide has been inadequately cleaned, chunks of dirt and manure may fall from it onto the meat.

Related Characters: Eric Schlosser (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 203

Explanation and Analysis

The problem with maintaining a high-quality and clean packing environment is a complex one. It requires the buy-in of large numbers of people at the plant - all of whom, to make sure they are doing their jobs fully, should be protected with safe jobs and with benefits, to encourage good work. Workers should receive staff oversight and should labor in the presence of trained regulators, who can spot problems long before they become potential illnesses far down the line.

But Schlosser believes that the ethos of deregulation, in which government spending of any kind (in the '70s, '80s, and '90s) was considered inherently bad, caused food inspections to trail off significantly. In these instances, then, plants that normally would have been inspected with regularity instead allowed things like animal skin and unwashed body parts to seep into the supply chain - thus resulting in serious illness for a small number of consumers unfortunate enough to eat tainted meat. For Schlosser, however, these problems are not an inevitable consequence of the plant or of packing itself. They are a consequence of a government that does too little to support those who work in some of the country's most important industries.

In addition to letting meatpacking executives determine when to recall ground beef, how much needs to be recalled, and who should be told about it, for years the USDA allowed these companies to help write the agency's own press releases about the recalls.

Related Characters: Eric Schlosser (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 213

Explanation and Analysis

This passage offers another example of how radical deregulation can skew incentives and protect company profits over the needs of the consumer and the best interests of society at large. Considered rationally, of course, it would make no sense at all for companies to "regulate themselves" and make sure they were producing meat cleaned to the utmost standards - for companies who wish to save money will, in part, cut down on regulatory costs, meaning that the company has no financial incentive to make its food safe (as long as widespread illness doesn't inspire distrust in the consumer, and harm the "bottom line"). Only the government, or another trained third-party arbiter, can determine the safety and security of the meatpacking process. And this safeguarding requires at least a certain amount of government investment and oversight.

But, as Schlosser notes, Republican governments, especially in the West, view this kind of oversight as a "violation" of the rights of those businesses to engage in private enterprise as they see fit. All this serves mostly to protect corporate profits as the expense of consumer safety.

Chapter 10: Global Realization Quotes

As the fast food industry has grown more competitive in the United States, the major chains have looked to overseas markets for their future growth. The McDonald's Corporation recently used a new phrase to describe its hopes for foreign conquest: "global realization."

Related Characters: Eric Schlosser (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 229

Explanation and Analysis

Schlosser's passage here points out some of the inherent absurdities of the corporate position. Schlosser believes that McDonald's is expanding for one reason, and for one reason only - to make money, more of it, by finding new populations who will buy their hamburgers, fries, and nuggets. But "global conquest" would not be a particularly marketable term for this, nor would it play well with investors, who wish to maintain McDonald's language the notion of community. Thus "global realization" makes it seem that McDonald's is fulfilling for people exactly what they want - that the company is only "realizing" the desires of those who, for so long, have had to go without cheap, uniformly produced food.

This kind of corporate language, which veils actual meanings and instead uses euphemisms designed to mislead, is, for Schlosser, another indication of the way that money transforms industries. The larger the company, the greater its interest in protecting itself and its profits - and the greater its distance from the reality of actual describing its motives and methods.

❝❝ As people eat more meals outside the home, they consume more calories, less fiber, and more fat. Commodity prices have fallen so low that the fast food industry has greatly increased its portion sizes, without reducing profits, in order to attract customers. The size of a burger has become one of its main selling points.

Related Characters: Eric Schlosser (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 241

Explanation and Analysis

Although Schlosser touches on this idea relatively little, it is important to note just how unhealthy and devoid of nutritional value fast food is. Fast food, as Schlosser notes throughout, is designed to sell itself, to make itself irresistible to those who wish to buy it. Fast food companies therefore have no interest in producing healthy options. Instead, they cater their food exactly to what customers want, or think they want - the tastes they crave, without adequate information about where the food comes from, or what its actual nutritional content is.

Again, Schlosser does not seem to think that all fast food companies should be strictly healthy establishments. But Schlosser does believe that the industry's single-minded pursuit of profit at all costs causes it to neglect other imperatives, which include the feeding of very large numbers of people. When McDonald's cares only about satisfying people's taste buds, on a long-term scale, people who eat there for long enough become unhealthy - and Schlosser makes no qualms about pointing out this connection between fast food and ill health.

Epilogue: Have It Your Way Quotes

❝❝ Today's fast food industry is the culmination of larger social and economic trends. The low price of a fast food hamburger does not reflect its real cost—and should. The profits of the fast food chains have been made possible by losses imposed on the rest of society. The annual cost of obesity alone is now twice as large as the fast food industry's total revenues.

Related Characters: Eric Schlosser (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 261

Explanation and Analysis

Schlosser here attempts to use economic language to show why fast food is actually not so "cheap" a proposition for society as it might initially seem. Fast food, after all, produces, as in any market, "externalities," or consequences beyond the market forces of supply and demand that nevertheless might influence supply and demand in the future. Thus, if people eat too much McDonald's and become unhealthy as a result, there will be other drags on the economy - more people, for example, might require certain kinds of expensive healthcare, causing healthcare costs to rise, which in turn might cause other aspects of the economy to be harmed (prompting inflation, for example). In this last chapter Schlosser wishes to make plain just how dangerous fast food and corporate farming practices can be, not just for the consumer who eats the foods, but for those who live in a society dominated by this form of unhealthy, and utterly profit-minded, form of food production.

❝❝ [At the fast food counter], think about where the food came from, about how and where it was made, about what is set in motion by every single fast food purchase, the ripple effect near and far, think about it. Then place your order. Or turn and walk out the door. It's not too late. Even in this fast food nation, you can still have it your way.

Related Characters: Eric Schlosser (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 270

Explanation and Analysis

Schlosser makes plain that he is not blaming or vilifying people for eating fast food. Nor is he necessarily and always blaming those who produce fast food. New technologies in manufacturing and related fields have, in the twentieth century, produced great capabilities in industry, opportunities for humans to do good for one another, to make far more food available for one another - literally to feed the world. But Schlosser argues that there are good ways to do this and bad ways. There are ethical ways, that take into account economic and physiological realities, and there are unethical ways, that focus only on the short-term monetary gain for a relatively small number of people.

Thus Schlosser asks only that the reader consider all the aspects of food production before making a choice about food consumption. It might not change the world entirely, or in one day - but it would perhaps cause changes in consumption that could eventually alter the methods by which food arrives ready to be eaten. This kind of enlightened consumption would then be a start to a healthier and more fairly distributed system of reward in the food industry. Schlosser earnestly believes this might work - and urges the reader directly, in this passage, to take his message to heart.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

INTRODUCTION

Eric Schlosser begins his account of the American fast food industry by focusing on one region of the United States in particular: Colorado's "Front Range," or a group of cities including Denver, Colorado Springs, and Fort Collins, just east of the Rockies. Schlosser believes that this expanding, suburbanized region of the Mountain West is an emblem of late 20th-century economic growth, and the problems that go along with that growth.

Although Schlosser's account attempts to describe the attitude of all—or a great many—Americans toward fast food, and the impact of fast food on all Americans' eating, Schlosser chooses to set his narrative in a particular place. This allows Schlosser to track, within a relatively small geographic area, a cross-section of society as it relates to food production.

Schlosser notes that the Cheyenne Mountain Air Force Station, near the Front Range, is one of the most technologically advanced military installations in the world, hidden in the mountains, known only to select government employees with high-level security clearances. Yet there, like many, many other places of work, employees still order pizzas from Domino's, and burgers from Burger King. This station relies on the same kinds of fast food eaten down the road, by men, women, and children from all walks of life.

Behind Schlosser's account of the US food production industries is a larger, sometimes implicit critique of how power—economic and political power—shapes Americans' lives. McDonald's and other fast food companies are enormous businesses with impressive buying power that gives them the ability to affect large portions of the American economy—and Schlosser makes plain that the relationship between the American food industry and the US government is a complex and important one.

Schlosser writes that "this is a book about fast food, the values it embodies, and the world it has made." He vows to trace the impact of fast food companies both "backward" and "forward" in the food chain—from the farmers who raise steer and grow potatoes, to the agribusinesses that process the food, to the restaurants like McDonald's that sell it, to the consumers who eat it.

This "backward and forward" movement will be important to Schlosser throughout the book, as he moves from individual cases (Hank, or Kenny, in later chapters) to larger, "institutional" biographies, which chart how companies come into being and grow.

Schlosser begins by focusing on McDonald's—to many, *the* symbol of American fast-food culture. McDonald's is, as Schlosser writes, one of the largest companies in America, one of the largest retail property owners, and one of the major buyers of meat, bread, and potatoes. The techniques McDonald's developed to make money from the sale burgers and fries—ideas like the franchising of stores, or the speeding-up of the food assembly process—have swept across the fast-food industry, into Taco Bells, Wendy's, Burger Kings, pizza chains, and every other imaginable type of food.

For Schlosser, McDonald's serves two purposes. It is, on the one hand, a very sensible subject for any treatment of the American food industry, as its buying power is vast, and its franchises are located in all fifty states. But McDonald's, in addition to being an economic force, is itself a potent symbol—of the way Americans eat, and of the new "efficiencies" that have drastically altered our relationship to food.

Schlosser notes that he is not interested in making fun of, or writing judgmentally of, people who consume fast food—who often, though certainly not always, are people in lower-middle or working class families. Instead, Schlosser wants to write a history of American fast food in the 20th century that is also a history of larger social and economic processes in this country. Schlosser sees the rise of American fast-food culture as complementing the growth of the automobile, the rise of standardization and automation across industries, the defeat of Democratic Great Society ideals (and their replacement with notions of individual autonomy and corporate deregulation, often associated with Republicans), and the prevalence of suburbs as the primary unit of demographic organization in this country.

An important point. Some might approach Schlosser's text thinking that he is critiquing Americans' reliance on fast food, or their inability to differentiate good, "local" food from "bad," mass-produced food. But throughout the book Schlosser acknowledges the immense appeal of hamburgers and fries. And he does not consider the explosion of fast food in American to be a sign of "weakness" on the part of lazy consumers. Instead, Schlosser sees fast food as a manifestation of the capitalist values that have shaped America since the end of the Second World War.

CHAPTER 1: THE FOUNDING FATHERS

Schlosser begins his story with Carl Karcher, the eventual founder of Carl's Jr. fast-food restaurants. Karcher was born to a large German-Catholic family in northern Ohio, in 1917, and moved at the age of 20 to Anaheim, where his uncle Ben had offered him a job at Karcher's Feed and Seed, a business Ben owned. Carl Karcher was amazed by the natural beauty and abundance of southern California, its pleasant weather—and its potential for economic growth.

Schlosser finds Karcher's story important, in part, because it is so quintessentially an American story of success—a man rises from relative obscurity, works hard, and finds economic opportunity by moving West. Of course, Schlosser wants to drill deeper into this story, too, to see exactly how American "self-reliance" mixes with other economic and political forces.

Carl realized, after marrying and purchasing a hot dog cart in Anaheim, that he could expand his business to fill the needs of car-bound southern Californians, who, more than ever, were driving and in need of quick sustenance on the go. Carl bought several more hot dog carts, then founded his own Carl's Barbeque Drive-In in 1944, just as cars began taking over the region. Carl's family ran the store with him, and he hired carhops, or waiter, to take food out to passengers in their automobiles, who had parked in the lot of the store.

Schlosser takes pains to emphasize the impact of the car on his story—indeed, there are times when one wonders whether Schlosser is writing about the American food industry or about its system of interstate highways. Both fast food and those highways came into being largely in the 1950s, and cars quickly acquired both practical and symbolic significance. One needed cars to drive on those highway—and one needed a car, too, to symbolize one's independence, the freedom of the road, and of consumer choice while looking for food along the roadside.

Schlosser argues that Carl Karcher's business took off at exactly the same time as other key southern California corporations, including Walt Disney's—he was constructing Disneyland essentially around the corner from Carl's first BBQ—and McDonald's, which began as a drive-in in Pasadena in 1937, founded by the McDonald brothers, Richard and Maurice.

Interestingly, the McDonald's brothers lent their name to the restaurant, but it was Ray Kroc who later extended it, through franchising, into a national and global behemoth.

Schlosser notes that the McDonald brothers helped innovate what they called the Speedee Service System, after about ten years of operation in southern California, whereby they increased the grill size and the automation of their restaurant, trimmed the menu, and sought to lower prices and increase speed and efficiency. The result was a boom for McDonald's business, and a precedent that swept through the fast-food industry: an emphasis on mass-produced food, available as cheaply as possible, and made through a system of labor such that larger jobs were broken down into much smaller tasks—thus turning "cooks" into "assembly-line workers" within the McDonald's kitchen.

This is the first instance of a phenomenon Schlosser will track throughout the book—that of "throughput," or institutional advancements in systems of production that put the focus on efficiency in a workplace. For McDonald's, this meant breaking down the creation of a hamburger—typically a task that one person sees through to completion—into a series of far smaller sub-tasks. Individuals then complete only these sub-tasks, and the act of making a hamburger becomes a process for many people, working repetitively and in concert. The result is that each worker has less skill and oversight, but the entire process generates more product.

Schlosser notes that Carl Karcher visited the San Bernardino "Speedee Service" location of the McDonald's brothers, and imported some of their efficiency improvements to Carl's Jr., which he reopened accordingly in 1956. In 1953 Matthew Burns and Keith Cramer founded what would become Burger King, and Glen Bell, also in the '50s and also in southern California, founded what would become Taco Bell. Harland Sanders' "finger-lickin' good" chicken restaurants became Kentucky Fried Chicken, outside Salt Lake City, Utah, in 1952. Certain fast food chains folded quickly, while others expanded throughout the car cultures of the American west. By the 1960s and '70s, fast food brands were national economic powerhouses—Schlosser writes that these formerly "regional businesses became a fast food industry, a major component of the American economy."

Schlosser also notes that fast food was originally a concept belonging to a particular place, southern California, which was the center of car culture in America immediately after the Second World War. The region was also booming—with a great many families moving there in search of jobs and cheaper housing. This series of "Californian" inventions—the car, the highway, the speedee service system—then took the nation by storm, moving regional brands into the national spotlight. But it is worth noting that, really, a large part of America was imprinted with an idea that was initially Californian in origin.

Schlosser notes that, for men like Carl Karcher, it was not always a straight line of success. In the early 1990s, Karcher was accused of insider trading, and an expansion of the Carl's Jr. franchise into Texas nearly proved disastrous for the California-based company. Karcher was ousted as chairman of the board of Carl Karcher Enterprises (CKE), and was locked out of his own office in Anaheim, at CKE's headquarters.

Another refrain in the book—that some businessmen succeed, in part, because they are willing to bend, or break, the rules. Although Karcher has earned a great deal of his success, his business practices are not unimpeachable—and a great many other food conglomerates have done similar things to ensure that profits stay high.

But eight weeks after this "lockout," Karcher managed to find an investment group that would take on some of Carl's Jr.'s debt, and would agree to some of the new terms Karcher had conceptualized, for the company's about-face. Karcher expanded the business by purchasing a series of Green Burrito franchises—not unlike Taco Bell—and Karcher later engineered the purchase of Hardee's, making CKE "the fourth largest fast food company in the US" by the end of the 1990s. Because Hardee's has a nationwide scope and was re-branded with Carl's Jr.'s signage, Karcher had achieved a level of success previously unknown for the company. Karcher tells Schlosser, at the close of the chapter, that he "believes in progress," and that the road outside his office in Anaheim "used to be gravel . . . and now it's blacktop."

Schlosser seems to imply, here, that there is an open question in Karcher's career trajectory: whether he has gotten to where he is through his own disciplined work ethic, or luck, or some combination of the two. For all the people Schlosser profiles, the author does his best to remain objective, and to relate the facts of that person's life—but for some individuals who work hard, like Hank the rancher later in the book, success is far more difficult to come by. Schlosser is interested in tracking the relationship between hard work, good fortune, and success for many of his characters.

CHAPTER 2: YOUR TRUSTED FRIENDS

Schlosser describes a visit to One McDonald's Plaza in Oak Brook, IL, where he goes to the McStore—an enormous gift shop for the company—and the Ray Kroc Museum. Schlosser is impressed and slightly confused by the overwhelming amount of McDonald's merchandise for sale, many items of which include the stars and stripes of the US flag. Schlosser notes that the tone of the McDonald's museum, and indeed its entire corporate complex, is "Disneyesque," and he argues that this is not a coincidence, since Kroc—the man who took the McDonald's brother's small company and made it a behemoth—and Walt Disney have a great deal in common.

Schlosser goes to great pains to show that McDonald's, like the Disney company, is a major US conglomerate whose business model is largely predicated on the selling of products to children. The toys in the McStore are not dissimilar from the toys, cartoons, and rides that Disney offers, in film and in its theme parks. To Schlosser, both these companies realized that, after the Second World War, an enormous "baby boom" generation was waiting to be catered to—and though McDonald's ads were directed at children, it was their parents who paid big bucks for burgers and toys.

Both Kroc and Disney were self-educated, and their training facilities they christened "universities," to make employees at Disney and McDonald's feel that they were entering an institution of higher learning by becoming part of the company. Both Kroc and Disney, Schlosser continues, were "great salesmen," who were skilled especially at "selling things to children." Kroc was trained as a salesman in Oak Park, Illinois, and was selling "milk-shake mixers" to the McDonald's Speedee Self-Service restaurant in San Bernardino, CA, in 1954, when he "envisioned putting a McDonald's at busy intersections all across the land." "Kroc convinced the McDonald's brothers to sell him the right to franchise McDonald's nationwide," as Schlosser puts it, and the brothers, content to retire on what was then a significant (but not astronomical) amount of money, thus agreed to let Ray Kroc become head of the soon-to-be McDonald's corporation.

Ray Kroc's primary idea—franchising—was perhaps even more important than McDonald's speedee service system. With the franchising model, fast food restaurants could expand quickly around the country, using the same technologies developed in McDonald's LA locations, without forcing the McDonald's corporation to expand beyond its financial means. In essence, as Schlosser explains later, McDonald's franchising model allowed for "risk-sharing" in the process of expanding the company: the franchises made money for McDonald's, but those starting the franchises were partially small business owners, trying out new markets to see if they made money for themselves and for the McDonald's corporation.

Schlosser notes that, after purchasing McDonald's franchising rights, Kroc sent a letter to Disney, then already quite famous as head of the Disney movie studio, to ask to sell McDonald's products at the soon-to-open Disneyland theme park in Anaheim. Disney was polite but ultimately dismissed Kroc's advances—something Schlosser attributes to the relatively small size of McDonald's at the time, versus the corporate heft and buying-power of Disney.

What is hard to believe, at this point in the narrative, is that there was a time when McDonald's and Disney weren't similarly large conglomerates. As Schlosser tells it, McDonald's played "catch up" for about a decade with Disney, the latter of which was the far larger company immediately after World War II.

Schlosser explains Disney's methods for making cartoons during the 1930s and '40s: for Disney, his studio was "a machine for the manufacture of entertainment." Schlosser argues that exactly this quality, of a machine producing something customers, especially children, might want, was deeply influential for Kroc, who imagined the McDonald's Speedee Service System nationwide, as a blueprint for the efficient production of burgers and fries.

Schlosser directly compares the Disney model of creating cartoons—with some cartoonists recreating parts of a cartoon over and over, breaking the work down into smaller segments—as an analogue to the speedee service system at McDonald's. This "rationalization" of labor occurring after the Second World War, as Schlosser notes, took place across multiple industries.

Disney, as Schlosser notes, was a strong supporter of Republican causes. Ronald Reagan, a former movie star who would go on to be a Republican Governor of California and President of the United States, was, for example, part of the Disneyland opening ceremony. Schlosser argues that Kroc's politics were harder to trace, since Kroc tended not to get involved in national political issues—unless they directly affected his business. Thus, in the early 1970s, Kroc donated a large sum to Nixon's reelection campaign, in part because Nixon supported a bill that would allow fast-food restaurants to pay high-school-age workers less than the minimum wage—a bill men like Kroc staunchly argued for.

Of course, when a company gets large enough, it begins to have influence in politics, at the local, state, and federal level. Disney executives wanted to be sure the company could gain access to cheap land to build its theme parks; McDonald's wanted to be able to pay its employees as little as possible to maximize profit. For McDonald's, a transient labor force was acceptable, since the speedee service system made the job of making a hamburger so simple that employees needed very little training to do it.

Disney was also greatly enamored with "progress," not unlike Carl Karcher, the founder of Carl's Jr. In particular, Disney's progress, like Kroc's, involved an America that looked more suburban, and required families to drive on major interstate highways. Disney's Tomorrowland amusements at his theme parks promoted exactly this type of future, and coupled it with something he called corporate "synergy," wherein other companies would sponsor exhibits in Tomorrowland and across Disneyland, as a way of promoting a clean, corporate—and, by Schlosser's reckoning, pro-capitalist and anti-communist—future.

Interestingly, Tomorrowland at Disney made the entire future look like a suburb—which, to Schlosser, is a major indication of how the Disney company viewed the world and its future. Disney and his design teams could have just as easily made Tomorrowland a densely-populated super-city—but, to Disney, the future revolved around the automobile, and the sense of boundless freedom emanating from the car. McDonald's, too, made use of this model as it expanded stores along highways across the country.

Kroc also believed in this kind of progress. He tried, for a time, to plan a McDonald's theme park, also in the LA area, but settled, as Schlosser writes, for smaller "McDonaldlands" and PlayPlaces, situated at McDonald's franchises across the country. Kroc also helped introduce what would become McDonald's most recognizable corporate embodiment—after the **Golden Arches** themselves—Ronald McDonald, the red-and-yellow-suited clown who would go on to achieve even broader name recognition than Mickey Mouse, according to polls conducted in the 1970s in the United States.

Schlosser cleverly links the PlayPlaces located at McDonald's location across America to Disneyland and Disneyworld, both theme parks in the "official," large-scale sense, where patrons pay admission to go on rides. McDonald's PlayPlaces were more like playgrounds, without rides—but they invited children to spend more time at McDonald's locations, thus boosting sales for children and the parents who spent time looking after them in the ball pit or on the slide.

Schlosser argues that McDonald's and Disney were part of a broader shift in the American economy, in the late 1970s and into the '80s and '90s, wherein sales and marketing were directed increasingly to children. There were many reasons for this, although, in part, children's tastes were relatively easy to predict—indeed, to mold—and McDonald's and Disney pioneered the practice of making their burgers, fries, movies, and theme parks seem irresistible to younger consumers, who would then convince their parents to spend cash. Schlosser points to the increasing amounts of television watched nationally in the US in the 1980s as a major contributor to advertiser's access to children, since spots could be placed in with cartoons and other kid-friendly programming.

Another link Schlosser draws is that between television, children, and the post-war economy. Television advertising, paired with programming directed toward children in the 1950s and '60s, allowed for direct marketing of hamburgers, toys, cartoons, and other amusements to an enormous audience of kids, who could then be depended upon to ask their parents for the product in question. To Schlosser, Disney and Kroc were really the first two innovators to realize just how powerful, and how lucrative, the kids' market could be.

Schlosser writes that corporate synergy reached a new zenith in 1996, when McDonald's and Disney signed a ten-year agreement for cross-promotion of products between the companies—especially the marketing of Disney films as part of McDonald's toys in happy meals. "McDonald's also began to sell its hamburgers and French fries at Disney's theme parks," Schlosser notes, stating that "the life's work of Walt Disney and Ray Kroc had come full-circle."

By the '90s, the former distinction between "big-time" Disney and "small-time" McDonald's was obliterated; both corporations had enormous national and global reach, and a deal between them secured giant revenue streams for both companies into the 21st century.

Schlosser describes other situations in which the "synergy" between companies and consumers is more suspect—even somewhat invasive. Schlosser notes that, by the 1990s, McDonald's was concerned that families were no longer buying McDonald's food out of loyalty to the brand, since some consumers thought that other fast-food establishments had better burgers for less money. Thus McDonald's circulated internal memos arguing that the company should be considered, by families, a "trusted friend," such that parents believe they are doing something special for their children by taking them out for a burger and fries.

Brand loyalty isn't always about the taste of a hamburger and fries, or the nature of the toy one finds in a happy meal. Kroc understood that brand loyalty was deeper than that—if parents and children could connect McDonald's to a happy and peaceful time in their lives, they would be willing to go to McDonald's for the remainder of their days, perhaps in search of those same happy memories. It is a slightly cynical view on the part of the corporation—but a profitable one.

In public schools, too, McDonald's, and other large fast-food and beverage companies, began in the 1990s to ink contracts that would enable their products to be marketed and sold on the school grounds. The beverage companies, in particular (like Coca-Cola and Dr. Pepper) believed that aggressive marketing to younger consumers could create a "brand loyalty" that would increase sales of the product long-term, after the students had left school. Although some of these partnerships were more profitable than others, one such agreement, in the schools of Colorado's Front Range, allowed a school administrator named John Bushey to leave his job in the Colorado Springs district, and to move to Florida to become "principal of the high school in Celebration, a planned community run by The Celebration Company, a subsidiary of Disney."

Schlosser believes, and takes pains to point out, that corporate "synergy" has its limits, however. Schlosser barely reserves his scorn for a food program in the nation's school that privilege fast-food companies and their profits. These deals help to enrich school administrators, who wind up sometimes leaving the school and working for the fast-food company in question. And they certainly don't serve the best interests of students, whose lunches ought to consist of fruits and vegetables, rather than mass-produced burgers and fries containing far fewer essential nutrients.

CHAPTER 3: BEHIND THE COUNTER

Schlosser opens the chapter by describing the "sedimentary" layers of Colorado Springs—its development from an old, Mountain West city, with a downtown and few chain stores, into a sprawling, suburbanized chain of housing developments, with names like "Sagewood." Academy Boulevard, a high-trafficked suburban road in Colorado Springs, Schlosser notes, resembles the main drags of 1950s Anaheim, which became the home to fast-food franchises like McDonald's and Carl's Jr. Schlosser argues that "this resemblance is hardly coincidental."

Schlosser returns, here, to a description of the natural beauty one can find around Colorado Springs, and contrasts it to the "unnatural" housing developments that have cropped up in the region. Schlosser criticizes these developments for two reasons: first, because they are genuinely bad for the environment, carving up farmable land and diverting water supplies; and second, because they "pretend" to be natural, with names that evoke a natural-sounding lifestyle.

Schlosser traces the economic changes that have taken place in Colorado Springs over the past 50 years, which some local residents, who resist these changes, call the "Californication" of the region. As California was a magnet for "disaffected middle-class Americans" looking for work in the 1930s, so, in the 1980s and 1990s, was Colorado Springs, which saw explosive growth in housing—its suburban enclaves like Sagewood—and a matched increase in the kinds of fast-food businesses that crop up along major roads and highways.

Schlosser is skilled at finding and constructing analogies, such that the book is linked by a chain of arguments from fast food products to food production to farming. Here, Schlosser sees California's suburbanization as a process that catches on elsewhere in the country, with Colorado Springs as just another example of a region exploding with highways, cars, and housing developments.

Colorado Springs' economy used to be based primarily on the land—ranching in particular—but over the second half of the 20th century, the aerospace and military industries began relocating there—and this was accelerated by the establishment of the Air Force Academy just outside town after the Second World War. Paired with increased military spending was an increase in the evangelical Christian population, whose figures, like Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson, saw in the Front Range region large, relatively affordable swaths of land, and populations primed to hear their particular brand of Christianity.

What sets Colorado Springs apart from some regions of California, however, is a particular kind of development, focusing on the US military (aviation in particular), and a set of groups that make sense as corollaries to a largely Republican, defense-minded region—namely, evangelical religious groups and Christian megachurches. This isn't to say that the military and these megachurches always follow one another, but Schlosser is charting a set of cultural patterns in Colorado, ones that also include a heavy emphasis on deregulation and "self-reliant" conservative capitalism.

Schlosser notes that Colorado Springs now has 21 McDonald's (at the time of writing), and describes how certain efficiency and time-saving technologies, like computers that mark exactly how long it takes to cook fries, are being debuted in Colorado Springs, since it's a region with high demand and a growing customer base. Schlosser sees in Colorado Springs another generation, and another market, wherein the philosophies of efficiency and expansion once espoused by Disney and Ray Kroc might be applied.

Just like southern California in the 1960s and '70s, Colorado Springs in the 1990s allows major fast food corporations, like McDonald's, a robust market for the testing of new strategies of food production. This is another way that Colorado Springs resembles the California of thirty years prior—both are hotbeds for a kind of corporate capitalist culture, where speed, efficiency, and cheap labor are king.

Schlosser turns to the story of Elisa Zamot, a sixteen-year-old worker at a McDonald's in south Colorado Springs. Zamot gets up early—often at 5:15—and first prepares the frozen food with one other employee, then mans the cash register for about seven hours, at which point she walks home or takes the bus, to rise again the next day while it's still dark out. Schlosser notes that Zamot's story is not unlike a great many others in Colorado Springs and across the country. He states that "there is nothing about fast-food that requires young workers," but that, instead, employers like young employees because they can be paid less than older ones, and because they are "easier to control."

Schlosser, as is characteristic for him, turns from a broad-based depiction of an entire region to a story of one person, whose life is affected by the fast food industry in that region. Zamot could be any high-school student—she works hard, and she doesn't really mind her job at McDonald's, despite having to wake up early on the weekends. But Schlosser makes plain that Zamot labors, quite hard, for a company that cares little for her welfare, that pays her almost nothing—and that would replace her immediately if for some reason Zamot could no longer work.

Schlosser introduces the industrial-efficiency concept of "throughput," "the speed and volume of a factory's flow," which is far more important in the fast-food industry than "the number of workers a business employs, or the value of its machinery." In fast food, efficiency is everything, and a better throughput situation maximizes profit for the corporation—if not necessarily making the working conditions pleasant for the employees. Indeed, Schlosser argues, throughput as a defining concept has made working in fast food almost a robotic exercise—"everything's add water," says one employee at Taco Bell—"Just add hot water."

"Throughput," like suburbanization, is one of the book's central principles. Schlosser believes that an emphasis on workflow processes—on exactly how much product can be moved through a production line in a given time—has caused enormous changes in the way Americans eat. These changes affect consumers, food producers (like McDonald's), and the farmers who must grow the food quickly enough to supply the high "throughput" demands of agribusinesses and fast-food giants.

The vast majority of fast food workers are young men and women, often high-school aged, and recent immigrants to the United States—populations that are more likely to be maltreated by employers, especially since many fast-food employees don't know their rights, or are too scared and intimidated to ask for what they're guaranteed. Many fast food workers work overtime but are not compensated for it, and others are asked to stay late without being paid.

Here, Schlosser notes a common tactic in the fast-food (and, later, meatpacking) industries. High throughput demands mean that workers do very little at each stage of the production process, and they do it repetitively. This means that working the job is easy—and that, therefore, nearly anyone could do the job. Workers therefore have little value to the corporation, and can be hired and fired more or less at will and be paid very little.

Employers and franchisers, however, have reported vastly increased profits over the past twenty or thirty years, primarily as a result of increased automation and "throughput" within the industry—but "real wages" of employees (adjusted for inflation) have dropped in the fast-food industry for nearly 30 years. Many employers, rather than pay employees more for the work they do, are encouraged by fast-food corporations to "stroke" their employees—or to laud them with empty praise, which does not result in higher earnings or a more stable job.

To keep employees happy without allowing unions, collective bargaining, increased wages, or better benefits packages, employers are encouraged by the fast-food conglomerates to give their employees fast and free encouragement. It's an ingenious system, as this encouragement costs nothing for the company—and it can make at least some workers happy, for a time.

McDonald's is also notorious for its union-busting policies on the corporate level. Schlosser notes that not a single current employee of a McDonald's restaurant, as of the book's writing, is in a union; when McDonald's management in Oak Park learns of potential unionization, as happened in Mason City, Iowa, in the 1970s, or outside Montreal in the 1990s, McDonald's uses a variety of anti-labor practices to quash the union sentiment—including lie detector tests for employees (asking if unionization has been discussed) or even the closing of entire potentially unionizing stores, as in the case of the restaurant outside Montreal. McDonald's opposes unions zealously, because non-unionized employees cannot argue as effectively for increased wages, better schedules, or more stable jobs.

Unions, indeed, exist primarily to fight the kinds of labor practices in which McDonald's and other fast food companies regularly engage. For example, unions combat the relatively low bargaining power of individuals by encouraging those individuals to band together—thus the strike is a powerful tool for unions, since it offers a counterweight to relatively untested corporate power. If a corporation wants to cut wages, the employees can all strike together—and the company cannot, for a time, make money. Thus unions offer a check to corporate authority. Without a union, this check does not exist.

Schlosser notes that Elisa Zamot, who works at the McDonald's in Colorado Springs, works weekends and two evenings a week, and, like many high school students at fast-food restaurants across the country, she does so to earn spending money to help buy and maintain a car—to help her family somewhat with expenses—and because the work, though "monotonous," provides a certain autonomy for young high-schoolers who are otherwise closely observed in classes or by their parents. Thus Schlosser does not make every fast-food job seem like purgatory; rather, he notes that the enjoyability of a job in the fast-food industry depends largely on the disposition of the manager, who might be kind or strict, depending on the location.

Schlosser does his best to argue the other side of the story, however: that fast food jobs are, for many, a right of passage into adulthood, a job for part-time in high school, and one that can provide a small income stream to supplement certain high school expenses. This is, of course, the truth for many; but it's not the truth for all. And, increasingly, fast-food jobs are the primary source of income for parents and families—which means that the low wages, long hours, and absence of overtime have a real impact on the US workforce.

But Schlosser does describe the safety conditions in many fast-food restaurants as sub-par, especially when it comes to the frequency with which these restaurants are robbed, often by former employees with a grudge against their managers. Schlosser cites incidents from across the country, wherein former fast-food workers use information about the layout of the store, and the hours in which it might be most vulnerable, to steal cash from a day's or week's business.

In addition to these low wages, the safety record at places like McDonald's is deplorable. Schlosser's critique of the fast-food industry is perhaps never stronger than here, when he wonders aloud what other industry is so beset by robberies from former employees. Indeed, this kind of violence and criminality is directly connected, in Schlosser's opinion, by the harsh employment practices of the fast-food industry itself.

Schlosser also describes the disconnect between the boring, unglamorous, often physically demanding work that recent immigrants and high-school students perform in fast-food restaurants, with the Annual Multi-Unit Foodserver Operators Conference, a gathering for managers and franchise owners in fast-food, in which anti-labor and anti-union practices are discussed. The corporate climate at these outings is one of positivity, a kind of relentless cheerfulness, yet speakers tend to undercut discussion of teamwork and the "value of people" as fast-food workers with anti-union diatribes, and arguments against the raising of the minimum wage, which, as one executive puts it, "chills" him. Schlosser implies strongly that he finds the executives' discussion of teamwork hypocritical at best.

Schlosser finds these sorts of trade gatherings fascinating, perhaps as ways of seeing, in very public form, how fast-food executives view their jobs and their relationships to their employees. Schlosser sets the "cheerfulness" of the surroundings in contrast to some of the grinding difficulties and frustrations of actually working behind the counter at a McDonald's or a Taco Bell. The executives of these companies seem to acknowledge their employees only collectively and in the abstract—not as individuals, as people who might find their jobs harsh, low-paying, and perhaps even unsafe.

CHAPTER 4: SUCCESS

Schlosser follows Matthew Kabong, a pizza delivery man in Pueblo, Colorado (40 miles south of Colorado Springs) at a Little Caesar's pizza franchise. Schlosser is attempting to understand how one fast-food franchise operates, from the inside. Kabong was born in Nigeria, and he studies electrical engineering when he's not delivering pizzas. Another employee, Scott, studies at the University of Southern Colorado in Pueblo. And the owner of the franchise, Dave Feamster, can also be seen on the premises—although Schlosser writes that Feamster looks "out of place" in the dim light of the store.

Fast food pizza restaurants have the additional element of delivery, which provides another difficult and low-paying job to employees. But Schlosser finds that these particular Little Caesar's establishments are run fairly well, and with some concern for their workers—this, because the manager and owner of the franchises, Dave Feamster, has a stronger connection to his employees and to his community than do many fast-food franchisors.

Feamster was a professional hockey player for the Chicago Black Hawks in the 1980s, until a freak injury at the base of his spine kept him from playing. Not knowing what to do with himself after a lifetime of playing hockey, Feamster eventually realized that he had played youth hockey with the son of Mike Ilitch, the founder of Little Caesar's. A friend dialed Ilitch, Sr., and Feamster eventually found the courage to talk to Ilitch on the phone—he began to be trained as an assistant manager, and used 15,000 dollars (most of his remaining savings) to buy a franchise.

Feamster, although he was an NHL player, has not had a particularly easy life, and Schlosser takes pains to describe how brief and unsatisfying Feamster's playing career was. It was difficult for Feamster to leave the bright lights of professional hockey for the relative anonymity of running a few pizza franchises—and Schlosser seems to respect Feamster for his choice and his hard work.

Schlosser goes on to explain how the franchising system, so important to fast food in America, works. "The franchisor wants to expand an existing company without spending its own funds. The franchisee wants to start his or her own business without going it alone." Although franchising was invented by American businesses at the tail end of the 19th century, it was really the fast food industry, and Ray Kroc in particular, who pioneered and perfected the idea. Many fast-food companies, like McDonald's, now make a good deal of their money as landlords, who own the land on which new franchises are built and maintained, and from franchise fees.

Here, Schlosser lays out in detail how franchising works, although before this point he has referenced how important it is to the profits of major fast-food companies. Perhaps most important is the idea that fast-food companies are essentially landlords for franchisees who "buy," but really rent, the store and the logo, and sell the food. In this way, then, because the fast-food corporations make their money from the rents and not as directly from the food, food quality, as a result, is less than important to the company and to the franchise.

Schlosser notes that Ray Kroc encouraged "tenacity" and "competitiveness" among his early franchisees in the 1960s and '70s, and he "made many millionaires" of them, the way "Microsoft did in the 1990s," helping those who had bought small amounts of stock in the company early to cash out big in ensuing years. Schlosser also writes that McDonald's in the 1970s, during a period of franchise expansion, changed some of its stores from the original, "old-time" McDonald's, whose **Golden Arches** were a structural part of the buildings, to the common "mansard roof" McDonald's now seen—though the company retained the golden arches in their sign, as a way of pointing to the company's rich history and powerful brand connection with its customers.

This section describes the transformation of the Golden Arche, from an architectural feature of the first McDonald's to a logo and a symbol—a way for people to identify rapidly that a McDonald's is in the area, enticing them with the yellow glowing light of its sign. Schlosser notes just how identifiable the Golden Arches are, and implies, here as elsewhere, that McDonald's connection with its customers is as much psychological and emotional as it is related to the taste of the burgers and fries.

Franchising lobbying groups, like the International Franchise Association (IFA), and the big fast-food corporations argue that franchising is both a successful proposition for the franchisor (nearly always, because of the rents and fees franchisees must pay) *and* a good, safe investment for the franchisees themselves. But Schlosser argues that these statistics are misleading, since only those franchises still in business are included in surveys conducted by the IFA—and many franchises do not stay in business long. A Burger King or McDonald's franchise, in the late 1990s, cost over 1 million dollars to purchase, whereas Subway franchises cost the lowest of the major chains—about 100,000 dollars.

Schlosser strongly implies here that franchise success rates are not particularly high, and that corporations use franchises as a means of "testing out" markets where they might like to expand—not caring necessarily if the businesses in those markets fail, since the corporation's cash flows are large enough to suffer a few lost franchises here and there. Of course, for the franchisees opening those stores, the loss of income can be highly damaging, to say nothing of recently-hired employees who are then quickly without a job if the franchise folds.

Schlosser notes that franchises are beneficiaries of major legal loopholes, which enable the corporations to whom rent is paid, like Burger King, to make enormous profits, while pushing a great deal of the risk—and the potential for failure—onto the franchisees themselves. Subway franchises, for example, must pay extra large payments to the Subway corporation, in exchange for the smaller up-front fee to purchase the franchise. In addition, some franchises are not protected by federal laws designed to enforce fair contractual practice, since franchisees are labeled "independent contractors" and not businesses or vendors typically afforded those rights.

The use of the "independent contractor" label falls into the more general category of "deregulation," against which Schlosser argues again and again in the book. Because "independent contractors" do not have official status as employees, they are not covered by the same regulations regarding fair payment and other equitable practices. In effect, the franchisee is "left out" of the pact between the business and the government. Instead, the federal government financially backstops the large corporation coordinating the franchises—even though these corporations make millions or billions in profits, dwarfing the franchises' earnings.

Moreover, federal funds designed to help small businesses, as part of a federal program called the Small Business Administration (SBA), are often used to help franchisees, on the argument that they are not representative of large corporations, like McDonald's, but rather "small business owners" contracting with those corporations. Thus government money is taken to fund private enterprise and drive out genuinely independently owned business (mom and pops); in addition, many SBA recipients fail, thus ensuring that the federal government must foot the bill for corporations who wish to "experiment" in franchising locations, often in places where business is no good—all the for the sake of corporate profit, and at the expense of the franchisee.

This is perhaps one of the more shocking revelations in the book. Because of the independent contractor loophole, franchises are treated as small businesses, meaning the corporate parent can receive government small-business funding. But, of course, this funding does not benefit mom-and-pop stores, as was intended—rather, it supports exactly the same corporate behemoths, like McDonald's, that are putting mom-and-pop stores out of business. Schlosser points out this loophole and considers it a glaring error in the way government monitors business practices.

Schlosser closes the chapter by writing that Feamster is a relatively rare success story in franchising. He now owns five Little Caesar's stores in the Pueblo area, and though he began as a franchisee about 200,000 in debt, he now presides over a business that clears 2.5 million dollars a year in revenue. Feamster is active in the community, and he supports a local hockey team, as a way of reconnecting with his former NHL life. Schlosser notes that Feamster even buys tickets so his employees can attend a "Success Seminar" of Peter Lowe's, nearby. Some of the workers are won over by a speech in which the actor Christopher Reeve notes how his riding accident (which left him paralyzed) changed his life and helped him to value what was important, although Schlosser implies that the event alternates between moments of genuine emotion and calls for personal success that are often tied to making money.

Here, Feamster is attempting to do something nice for his staff—a break in the monotony of the work-day, and perhaps, too, a genuine opportunity for staff members to learn something new about themselves and how to operate in the corporate world. But it is worth noting, as Schlosser implies but does not articulate outright, that Feamster's practice here is not so different from the "stroking" used by other franchises owners and managers, to encourage workers without necessarily giving them better wages or increasing their benefits. Thus, without realizing it, Feamster is falling into the patterns of behavior common across the fast-food industry.

CHAPTER 5: WHY THE FRIES TASTE GOOD

Schlosser traces the life story of another figure, one of the most famous and richest men in the state of Idaho—J. R. Simplot, whose potato empire would go on to change the ways potatoes were consumed in the US. Simplot was born in Iowa in 1909, and as a young man worked for a landlord named Lindsay Maggart, and the two of them, in 1928, purchased what was then a new invention, an "electric potato sorter" capable of sifting through vast numbers of potatoes at one time, arranging them by size, and ensuring more even and efficient slicing and packaging of potatoes. Simplot and Maggart purchased the machine together, and when they decided to part ways in business, they were unable to purchase another expensive sorter, so that each could have one. Thus, they decided to have a coin flip for the electric sorter—which Simplot won, a first instance of good luck that was to follow him throughout his career.

The coin flip for the electric potato sorter is an important moment in Schlosser's book—both for Simplot's narrative, and for its larger symbolic value. For, of course, Simplot probably would not have gone on to build his potato empire without the sorter. And, more importantly, the very fact of the coin flip makes literal the function of luck in Schlosser's broader tale of human success and failure. Yes, Schlosser implies, Simplot has worked hard and has made the most of the opportunities that came his way. But even more so, Simplot has been the beneficiary of circumstances that continually break in his favor—he is, in short, also a lucky man.

The J. R. Simplot Company went on to also develop, just before the Second World War, a "method for drying potatoes," and these dehydrated potatoes became essential to army rations throughout the campaigns in the Pacific and in Europe. In 1953, Simplot "began selling frozen, pre-cut french fries" directly to consumers, and by the 1960s, Ray Kroc began buying Simplot's frozen fries, since they tasted nearly similar to the fresh-cut variety in stores, and were vastly cheaper and "more uniform." Simplot became a multibillionaire, though he "still ate at McDonald's," and his company grew—influencing American eating habits along the way. Simplot diversified his company into ranching and related concerns, without abandoning his core business in potatoes.

In contrast, this section demonstrates Simplot's business acumen—which, in addition to his luck, of course plays a role in his success. It was an enormous insight of Simplot's to recognize that pre-cut and frozen potato fries might have market value. And it was doubly clever for him to see that he could not only sell these fries directly to consumers but also to fast food restaurants, who would then turn around and sell them at a great mark-up. Lots of consumers buy french fries frozen from the store, but truly immense numbers of people buy them cooked at McDonald's.

Today, three potato companies—Simplot, Lamb Weston, and McCain—"control about 80 percent of the American market for frozen french fries, having eliminated or acquired most of their small rivals." Although farm groups like the Potato Growers of Idaho (PGI) do their best to represent the interests of small farmers, even as those farms are often bought up and managed by the conglomerates, Schlosser notes that, at the time of his writing, there are only 1,100 independent potato farmers remaining in Idaho, despite that state's reliance on the crop as the bedrock of its economy.

One of the more shocking statistics in the book. Although Idaho is known as a state for potatoes and potato farmers, the actual process of farming potatoes is so heavily impacted by technology, and by consolidation in the industry, that it only takes about 1,000 farmers to raise enough potatoes to feed much of the nation. This is a triumph of productive efficiency—and also a major adjustment for the farmers themselves, many of whom have been forced out of business.

Schlosser believes that potato farmers in Idaho, who hope to sell their crops to one of the large potato corporations, have fallen under the sway of what he terms "the fallacy of composition," "a mistaken belief that what seems good for an individual will still be good when others do the same thing." This fallacy has encouraged growers to spend enormously on every new invention and efficiency technology they can. However, when other farmers do the same, *everyone* produces more potatoes and the profit margin for potatoes goes down even more—thus making it even more difficult to generate enough income to sustain a living farming the crop.

Another important term, in Schlosser's lexicon: the "fallacy of composition" might be applied to other "arms races," or forms of self-destructive competition, across the fast-food and meatpacking industries. Schlosser introduces this term to show that competition—one of the mainstays of right-wing discourse on the "free market"—is not always a net good for society, nor is it necessarily always a net good for the businesses competing.

Schlosser writes that McDonald's fries used to be made in beef tallow, giving them a taste that many customers raved about. But since1990 the fries have been made in less expensive "pure vegetable oil." To maintain their characteristic flavor, they are then treated with "natural flavors," which themselves are chemicals made in laboratories (most of them in New Jersey) specializing in developing flavors and scents used across the US food industry.

A significant irony. "Natural" in this case means, simply, "derived" in some sense from an object that was at one point natural. Under this definition, most things could be considered natural, as the vast majority of products Americans use are, at least in the beginning of their production cycle, extracted from some sort of compound occurring in nature.

Schlosser visits several plants where flavors and scents are made, and reports on what he sees. One company, International Flavors and Fragrances (IFF), has, like others at the top of the field, reduced the science of tasting and aroma to the "smell of gases being released by the chemicals you've just put in your mouth." IFF researchers help to create the characteristic tastes—sweet, spicy, fatty, salty—that "enhance" many of the foods we consume—although flavor companies (themselves a field valued at over 1 billion dollars) are not required to "disclose the ingredients of their additives . . . as long as they are 'Generally Regarded as Safe.'" This means, in practice, that flavor companies like IFF have wide latitude over what they put in the natural flavorings that go into the foods many Americans eat.

Schlosser's response to this visit is a complex one. On the one hand, he seems to appreciate the chemical wizardry and the intelligence of the scientists when he sees the amazingly "realistic" "natural" compounds, tastes, and aromas they can create in a lab. But Schlosser also implies that these tastes and aromas have a strange, almost otherworldly quality—not because one can distinguish them from "the real thing," but because one cannot. That science has progressed to such a degree, that it can trick consumers into believing they are eating an actual peach or an actual apple, is a striking development.

Schlosser notes, with some irony, that the line between "artificial" and "natural" flavors can often be quite thin—or, even, impossible to see. As Schlosser explains, in theory, "artificial" flavors are those synthesized in a lab—built "from scratch" by combining different molecules and arriving at a certain taste and smell. "Natural" flavors, again in theory, are those organic compounds derived from the breaking-down or recombining of other compounds already found in a given "natural" or organic product—such as an apricot. In practice, however, a flavor is always a combination of chemicals—and whether that combination is synthesized in a lab or derived from an apricot makes no difference at all, biologically or scientifically. Despite this, because "natural" flavors sound better to consumers—and healthier, although they are exactly the same as "artificial" counterparts—agribusinesses try to include as many natural flavors as possible in their food products.

Here, too, Schlosser implies that a major inefficiency has been built into the system of the production of natural and artificial flavors—and that this inefficiency wastes a fair amount of time and money. Even if an artificial flavor would be far easier to synthesize than a "natural" flavor, the artificial flavor is far, far less in demand among food producers, since consumers balk at the idea of eating products they believe have been "synthesized" in labs at all. Of course, consumers tend not to recognize the fact that even natural flavors are developed in labs over a period of years. Thus Schlosser underscores just how important consumer perceptions of "naturalness" are in the fast-food industry.

Schlosser closes the chapter with his description of a tour of a potato factory in American Falls, Idaho, which is one of the "biggest fry factories in the world" and a supplier for McDonald's. Schlosser notes that, even though he understands and has seen the complex machine processes that sort, cut, and place the fries, flash frozen, and ready for consumption, in a warehouse, he nevertheless marvels at the delicious taste of the fries—which a worker guiding him through the plant provides him, at the end of his visit, on a plate with salt and ketchup. Although Schlosser writes that the fries seem "wildly out of place in this laboratory setting, this surreal food factory with its computer screens, digital readouts, and shiny steel platforms...," he notes that the fries "were delicious," and that he "asked for more."

Although Schlosser has spent a great deal of time up till this point critiquing the fast food industry, its practices of the production of food, and its treatment of employees, he does not want to lose sight of what attracts consumers to places like McDonald's in the first place. Indeed, the food has been finely tuned and crafted—by scientists, and over decades—to make us hungry, to encourage us to eat more. Finding fast food delicious doesn't make one a bad person, as Schlosser demonstrates. It merely makes one human.

CHAPTER 6: ON THE RANGE

Schlosser describes his first meeting with Hank, a **rancher** in Colorado Springs, who takes Schlosser on a tour of his property. The ranch lies "twenty miles south of town," and near some of the new developments that have sprung up amid the natural beauty of the Front Range. Hank explains to Schlosser some of his "land management" plans, which include taking into account the "grazing patterns" of buffalo and antelope, who have "lived in the area for millennia." Hank notes the sharp contrast between this method of land management and the artificial and environmentally-unfriendly housing developments that continue to choke the landscape.

Hank, like many of the characters in the book, will be important for Schlosser for two reasons. First, clearly Schlosser finds Hank to be engaging: a family man with a real concern for the land, and with a desire to make a profit without making a killing—the prototype of a small-business owner. Schlosser also believes that Hank is a symbol of something that no longer exists—the honest broker, the "straight shooter." In this way, Hank hearkens back to the West of the past, before the rise of franchises, conglomerates, and suburban subdivisions.

Schlosser describes the arc of the meatpacking business over the course of the last century. At first, around the turn of the 20th century, cattle production, like tobacco and other industries, was consolidated into a nearly nationwide "trust," a means of creating legal monopolies to control prices and keep profits for business owners high. Although the Sherman Antitrust Act had been passed by Congress in 1890, it took decades for the federal government to dismantle the beef industry's trust, and encourage open competition among **rancher**s, which improved their businesses and kept prices lower. This marketplace lasted for about fifty years in the middle of the 20th century.

Schlosser also notes, here as elsewhere, that the changes that have allowed conglomerates to consolidate their influence in the meat and poultry industries were not always possible. In other words: the deregulation of major industries in the US, spearheaded by Republicans in the '80s and '90s, was not an inevitable trend—it was a direct rebuke of more populist policies that had defended consumer rights and small businesses, in the middle of the 20th century.

In the '70s and '80s, however, philosophical changes at the federal level—which became enveloped by the term "deregulation," and were espoused mostly by Republicans—enabled large agricultural and food businesses (agribusinesses) to consolidate once again. Small **rancher**s now had relatively few places where they could sell their beef—their profits shrank, those of the agribusinesses rose, and the beef marketplace became far more difficult for ranchers, because it was less competitive. Meatpacking agribusinesses now put ranchers like Hank in a very tough position—making them wonder whether ranching is still possible, or profitable, in the US.

What Schlosser implies here is that deregulation, or the primacy placed on a "competitive" and "free" market, is not always the system that ensures the best product, or the highest consumer satisfaction—or even the highest profits. Because, in industries like meatpacking, technological advances and the consolidation of many firms into a few behemoths has actually made profit margins quite small—companies have to sell enormous quantities of meat and poultry to make money.

Schlosser notes that this consolidation in beef mimics that which happened in the middle and end of the 20th century in the chicken industry—which was defined, in particular, by the invention of a single, ready-to-eat finger food, the chicken nugget. Fred Turner, the chairman of McDonald's in 1979, asked suppliers to make a bite-sized, fried chicken bit, and suppliers obliged—in 1983, McDonald's introduced the Chicken McNugget to great fanfare, "changing not only the American diet but also its system for raising and processing poultry." A vast majority of chickens in the US, after the nugget, were sold not whole but in parts to suppliers, who ground up the flesh to make the fried morsels.

The chicken nugget is another example of a so-called "development" in the production of chicken, one that has, in the longer run, made the consumption of chicken more common but less healthy, more in demand at places like McDonald's but less profitable for the producer. Chicken nuggets are almost "too" easy to make for the poultry companies—they can be churned out almost endlessly, which means that the individual value of a nugget is quite low—and this devalues chicken prices overall, making for lower profits for those same agribusinesses.

Schlosser shifts back to the meatpacking industry, and notes that other changes have occurred in the past 30 or so years: cattle are now fed hormones and are thus much larger than in the past, and a system called "captive supplies" is used by meatpackers and slaughterhouses—a way of managing the number of cattle slaughtered at any one time, to keep prices steady. This system makes it extremely difficult, however, for **rancher**s to make a profit per head of cattle, and though ranchers have sued large meatpackers arguing that these agribusinesses have "fixed" the market in order to ensure their own profits, few rancher lawsuits have been successful. Meatpackers, for their part, say they are trying to save the beef industry, since overall meat consumption in the US has gone down since the 1970s, matched with an increase in the consumption of chicken.

Interestingly—and Schlosser takes pains to point this out—meatpacking companies are all for competition and free markets when they believe those markets will suit them—or when they believe they are being taxed unfairly by the federal government. But when controls on prices or supplies would be favorable for them, as meatpacking companies claim that "captive supplies" are, then the philosophy of free markets is immediately swapped for a controlled, managed economy. The only difference: meatpacking companies want to collude to set these prices without government interference. Although Schlosser doesn't define it as such, this is the behavior of a cartel—an industry that sets its own prices and stocks.

Schlosser closes the chapter by noting the impact of disruption in the ranching economy. Colorado, he states, is losing its "ranching and cowboy culture," and far more ranches are now owned by gentleman farmers, who look over the land as a conservation project—which is good for the land—but ultimately bad for the non-gentleman farmers who have no other source of income, and who farm not as a retirement practice but as a means of feeding a family. In closing the chapter, Schlosser writes that Hank, the **rancher** whom he interviewed at the beginning of the chapter, wound up taking his own life, in part because of his difficulty in maintaining his ranch in the face of ongoing development outside Colorado Springs. Although Schlosser does not argue that Hank's death is entirely attributable to changes in the beef industry, he does write that cattle ranchers have a suicide rate that "is now about three times higher than the national average."

Hank's death clearly comes as an enormous shock to Schlosser, because he has gotten to know Hank, because he respects Hank, and because Hank and his family are, in many ways, emblems of the kind of self-reliant "Westernness" that Schlosser lionizes in the book. But Schlosser uses the statistics on farmer and rancher suicide to show that Hank is hardly an exception. Schlosser notes that few people talk about the enormous pressures placed on farming families in the United States. But because interest groups protecting farmers have little clout at the federal level, compared with interests for the fast-food companies, the issue of farmer welfare and suicide is rarely broached in national conversation.

CHAPTER 7: COGS IN THE GREAT MACHINE

Schlosser introduces Greeley, a "factory town" in Colorado with one primary industry—meatpacking—that covers the town in a terrible, unique smell. Schlosser rues that meatpacking companies "have turned one of the nation's best-paying manufacturing jobs into one of the lowest-paying, created a migrant industrial workforce of poor immigrants, tolerated high injury rates, and spawned rural ghettos in the American heartland." He believes that companies like ConAgra, which runs the meatpacking plant in Greeley, have pursued company profits at the total expense of safety for workers and consumers of beef products.

Schlosser moves his attentions to the meatpacking industry, which, unlike the fast-food industry, did once have significant union protections for its workers. But these union plants, as Schlosser will go on to describe, moved out from Chicago (with its pro-union sentiments) to the Plains and Mountain West, where unions were far less common. The de-unionization of the meatpacking industry has had dire consequences for workers in that industry, and for the meat that's produced, as Schlosser will show.

Schlosser notes that, in Greeley, the meatpacking plant was originally worked as a small business and controlled by the Monfort family with "compassionate paternalism." The Monforts negotiated with meatpackers who were in a union, and job conditions and wages remained strong. Schlosser notes that meatpacking plants, in the earlier part of the 20th century, tended to be found in cities—such as the stockyards in Chicago, detailed in Upton Sinclair's famous expose, *The Jungle* (1906). After the book prompted President Theodore Roosevelt and Congress to pass sweeping food-safety regulations, urban meatpacking entered a more stable period—worker wages were relatively high, unions negotiated with management, and meatpacking companies were largely run privately—without stockholders.

Schlosser uses the historical example of Chicago meatpacking in the early 20th century, as depicted in The Jungle, as a counterpoint to unionization in meatpacking in the middle of the 20th century. Schlosser, here as elsewhere, notes that pro-union, pro-worker legislation was common from about the time of FDR's New Deal in the 1930s until the 1970s, when deregulation began in earnest at the federal level, as initiated by Republicans in Congress. Deregulation became a kind of de facto government program during the Reagan years of the 1980s, and it was during the 1970s and 1980s that meatpacking plants began to move westward, beyond union influence.

But, as Schlosser writes, the rise of Iowa Beef Packers (IBP) changed meatpacking "and proved as influential as the first Speedee Service McDonald's in San Bernardino." In the 1960s, IBP began breaking down the meatpacking process into smaller units—chopping this or that part of the cow—just the same way that McDonald's food assembly lines allowed for quicker production of hamburgers and fries through small, easily replicable processes. This meant that meatpacking jobs, like fast-food jobs, became largely automated, and required fewer skills. This allowed IBP to depress wages, to fight back against unionization, to move plants farther out to the anti-union Mountain West (away from Chicago and other cities). Schlosser notes that only one meatpacking plant, one used for "old hogs," still existed in Chicago at the time of the writing of *Fast Food Nation*—a massive collapse for a major industry in the region.

Once again, Schlosser finds an connection between the meatpacking industry and the fast-food industry, which the meatpacking plants serve and stock with beef. By making meatpacking a series of very small, easily imitated tasks, IBF has managed to move more beef through the factory—to increase "throughput," which, as Schlosser has noted before, is one of the primary goals of many executives in the food production industry. Unfortunately, this diminishment of individual tasks in the plant, and the consequent increase in the speed of the plant, will have severe safety impacts, as Schlosser later discusses.

Schlosser then tracks the changes in meatpacking during the 1970s and 1980s—the Monfort plant in Greeley was purchased by ConAgra, one of the largest agribusinesses in the US. In Greeley under ConAgra's ownership, union influence in the plant waned, wages decreased, and job conditions became worse, as oversight and support for workers declined among management.

Again, Schlosser notes that the tendency, since the '70s and '80s, runs toward consolidation in meatpacking, as it has in other deregulated American industries. That a handful of companies control the meatpacking industry allows those companies an inordinate say in the practices of the entire field—which often results in lower quality beef for consumers.

Although ConAgra was sued several times in the '80s and '90s by the federal government for various violations of labor and business practices (often involving mistreatment of cattle and chicken suppliers), ConAgra executives testified that having high worker turnover was a "plus" for the company, since "vacations don't accrue until the second year." Thus workers at ConAgra and other meatpacking plants, more than ever before, were considered "cogs in the great machine."

Again, just like in the fast-food industry, executives in meatpacking agree that it is perhaps better for that industry that workers don't stay very long. By not staying, workers do not have to be afforded the full plate of benefits longer-tenured employees might rightfully earn. Thus, the meatpacking industry has every incentive to cycle employees out as quickly as possible and, by extension, to make the job not at all pleasurable.

Schlosser notes "about one-quarter of all meatpacking workers in Iowa and Nebraska are illegal immigrants." This pattern is seen across the nation, since meatpacking jobs pay so little, have poor benefits, and are largely unsafe—thus they are far from desirable jobs, and are often worked by people with few other options for gainful employment. Schlosser writes, ruefully, that meatpackers like IBP and ConAgra have also negotiated deals for tax breaks with local and state authorities by promising to keep plants and the jobs they supply in certain locations if tax breaks are provided, only to move plants later to locations where lower wages might be paid.

Schlosser notes here, as elsewhere, that a kind of collusion between major players in deregulated industries and the federal and state governments in the US creates situations like this, where governments do everything they can to lure businesses, yet in which businesses then make no promises save for the "bottom line" promise, that maximum profit is delivered to company shareholders, and to executives.

Schlosser closes the chapter by describing the town of Lexington, in Nebraska, known now by some white residents pejoratively as "Mexington." There, turnover among residents is high, because of the IBP plant in town—the town's school and facilities are poor, and few government or transitional resources exist for laborers and their families. Just as he began the chapter with the smell over Greeley, Schlosser notes that the smell in Lexington is powerful and terrible—a physical reminder of the difficulties and deprivations workers in the meatpacking industry must now suffer.

Schlosser bemoans the current state of the meatpacking industry from the perspective of labor. More than anything, Schlosser notes that meatpacking jobs used to be good, stable, safe, unionized—a pathway to the middle class for anyone willing to work them. They weren't perfect jobs, nor was the industry perfect, but they were far better than the jobs currently available in that field.

CHAPTER 8: THE MOST DANGEROUS JOB

Schlosser begins the chapter by describing an actual visit to a meatpacking plant, "one of the nation's largest," "somewhere in the High Plains." The journey through the plant begins normally enough, with very small pieces of meat not dissimilar from what one might see "in the supermarket." But as Schlosser moves further and further inside, he finds things that are difficult to understand or put into words: hundreds of workers standing near each other, slicing up larger chunks of cattle, standing in pools of blood inches deep, or workers "popping" cattle in the head, knocking them out, while another worker then slits the cattle's throat to kill it. Schlosser notes the high, cold sky outside and contrasts it with the industrial horror inside.

This chapter presents some of the most disturbing images and descriptions in the book—and they are all the more disturbing for being real, for taking place in the world—for affecting people in the meatpacking industry throughout the Great Plains region. Schlosser makes no bones about his disgust at factory executives and plant managers, who allow deplorable and unsafe working conditions in the meatpacking industry to remain—mostly because those executives want to maximize profit and minimize government "intrusion" into their safety practices.

Schlosser notes that, although a great number of machines have been introduced to the meatpacking process over the past decades, the different sizes of cattle mean that the most important cuts—unlike in the chicken industry, where poultry are bred to be roughly the same size—must be performed by hand, with knives. Workers, especially at IBP plants (where a great many "efficiencies" in meatpacking have been introduced), must make a series of quick cuts into cattle coming off the assembly line—and the speed of this line, to Schlosser, is almost inconceivable. Schlosser notes that some plants today now slaughter 400 cattle an hour, up from 175 cattle an hour only two decades previous.

Speed becomes one of Schlosser's primary focuses. Because profit margins for meatpacking are so low—because, in other words, increased technological efficiencies in production of meat make meat easier to package and sell—plants must now push workers to the brink, to extract every penny of profit. But this speed has consequences. For workers, it means lots of quick cuts with knives in close quarters. And for the cattle, it means a great deal of slaughter, of blood-letting, also in close quarters.

Conditions for workers at IBP and other major meatpacking plants are torturous. Because of the speed of the line, worker injuries are common, and workers have very little sick leave, meaning that many continue to work hurt, and are encouraged by supervisors to do just that. Other workers take drugs, like methamphetamine, or "crank," to keep working as fast as possible on the line. It is also not uncommon for female workers to engage in sexual relationships with supervisors as a way to "transfer to an easier job at the plant."

As a consequence of the "need for speed" in the meatpacking industry, employees who want to keep their jobs must do what they can to maintain the pace. Taking drugs is one way—although, of course, drugs might make employees less able to cut safely, or to do an adequate job. That, coupled with the health effects of sustained drug use over time, contributes to some of the major challenges for labor in the current meatpacking industry.

Some of the worst jobs at meatpacking plants are those of cleaning-crew workers, who come in late at night, and must rinse out the fetid plants with a 100-degree mixture of chemical solvents and water. This mixture often produces a fog in the plant, making it nearly impossible to see—and increasing the risk that workers might get lodged in or fall into a machine, or "succumb to hydrogen sulfide fumes." Schlosser notes that, despite the seriousness of a vast array of injuries that occur in meatpacking plants—both to meatpacking employees working "on the line," and to cleaners who disinfect the factories after hours—OSHA rarely fines agribusinesses for failing to protect worker safety. And, when OSHA does manage to fine these companies, the fines are often triflingly small—maybe a few thousand dollars, in comparison to the companies' multi-billion-dollar profits.

Schlosser has a keen eye for parts of the labor economy that might not necessarily appear to those quickly glancing over a factory. For many, a tour through the meatpacking plant might foreground those working with knives, or near enormous chopping machines. But Schlosser digs deeper, and notes that there is a job at the plant even lower on the wage scale—and even less safe—than working on the line. Cleaners aren't directly employed by the plant; thus they are afforded even fewer labor protections than those meager few given out to non-unionized workers. Schlosser is clearly horrified by the dangers to which cleaning crews are exposed.

Schlosser describes the overall state of safety inspections, supposed to be conducted by OSHA, at plants like the IBP plants in Nebraska and Iowa. In general, Schlosser notes that regulations enforcing worker safety began to be altered in the 1980s, to reflect a more "friendly" and less "adversarial" relationship between meatpacking and the government—another instance of the government deregulation of industry during the Reagan administration. OSHA, which once conducted safety checks of meatpacking plants in person, agreed in the 1980s to allow plants to "self-monitor," which led to many plants keeping "two sets of safety books," one with actual accidents listed and another trimmed down list that was supplied to OSHA.

It is exactly this idea of "friendliness" between government and large corporations that Schlosser tracks throughout the '80s and '90s. Of course, friendliness is a euphemism: what it means, in practice, is far less oversight of how plants conduct business. The plants argue, for their part, that they can regulate themselves—but, as Schlosser points out, this is far from the case, for plants have no economic incentive to spend extra money to make themselves safe. Thus it ought to be the role of government, Schlosser implies, to force those plants to set up adequate safety regulations—even when the "bottom line" might not justify them.

Schlosser states that OSHA is essentially in the pocket of meatpacking plants, aided by a government oversight system that, because it does not monitor plants directly, cannot offer effective discipline to keep plants safe. Schlosser adds to this that workers' compensation benefits, in places like Colorado, have fallen drastically over the past decades, especially in the meatpacking industry, where essentially any injury short of on-site amputation can cause protracted legal arguments over the meatpacking company's willingness to pay out any worker claims. Some serious injuries, which are attributable to negligence on the part of plants, but which cannot be absolutely and directly "proved" as such by OSHA and the conglomerates, lead to very small payouts to those injured, perhaps only $2,000 over one's lifetime.

Essentially, in Schlosser's telling, meatpacking plants do everything they can to avoid playing workers' compensation claims. They do this because they don't want to increase costs, in the short term. And, in the long term, they don't want to set a precedent, whereby they are forced to pay out every time someone is hurt in the factory. But, as Schlosser implies, if companies were held financially responsible for people hurt while on the job, then companies would have every incentive to make themselves safer—and this would help the workers in the plant. Hence, again, the role of government as a regulator for businesses is a key one.

Schlosser closes the chapter by describing the various injuries suffered over several decades by a man named Kenny, a meatpacking employee. He was thrown against a conveyor belt, causing his back to be severely injured—he was made to breathe in sustained chlorine fumes, which caused his body to blister and his lungs to ache—and he was hit by a train on the packing premises, slow-moving, but still serious enough to "knock both his work boots off."

Kenny, like Hank, has suffered great misfortune. Kenny's is more directly attributable to the malfeasance of a large corporation, but Hank, too, felt hemmed in on his land, by encroaching housing developments also constructed by large, profit-obsessed conglomerates. Schlosser makes sure, throughout the book, to track the human toll of the industries he describes.

Despite these injuries, a great many of which are directly attributable to horrific safety conditions within the former Monfort plant in Greeley, the meatpacking company fought his full payout of workers' comp claims, and Kenny received only 35,000 dollars for a lifetime of injury—and for a future filled with physical pain. Schlosser notes that, despite his crippling ailments, Kenny is only "forty-five years old."

Kenny's payout was, in a sense, an insult, since it could come nowhere close to paying his full medical bills, nor to making up for the years of wages lost, because Kenny can no longer work a job requiring physical labor. Schlosser ends the chapter on this chilling note as a way of underscoring just how insensitive to worker needs meatpacking plants can be.

CHAPTER 9: WHAT'S IN THE MEAT

Schlosser tells the story of Lee Harding, a 22-year-old man living in Pueblo who, in 1997, came down with a "virulent" case of E. coli. Public health officials in Pueblo asked Harding to recall what he had eaten five days before his illness—which was severe and required hospitalization, but from which he recovered—and though Harding believed beef patties from Hudson Foods, which he and his family had eaten, could not be responsible (because only he got sick), Pueblo officials tested the patties and found the same virulent E. coli strain. Hudson Foods eventually recalled some of its products about a month later, but by that point, as Schlosser reports, "about 25 million pounds of the ground beef had already been eaten."

Schlosser next focuses on the safety not just of factory workers in the meatpacking industry, but of the meat itself that that industry produces. Schlosser notes, throughout the chapter, that it is actually quite difficult to track the source of food-borne pathogens in the United States. There are several reasons for this, some more preventable than others: a great deal of meat is produced in this country; government oversight in meatpacking plants is rather low; and meat production is a complex system with many inputs, making cause and effect hard to determine.

Schlosser describes the nature of these outbreaks in the '70s, '80s and '90s, and why food contamination in the era of factory farming and high-efficiency food production is so dangerous. In the pre-agribusiness era, the relatively small region served by smaller food-production companies meant that when disease-causing E. coli or Salmonella were found in food, far fewer people would be affected and the outbreak was much easier to respond to. But vast increases in the size of food-production facilities, coupled with slackened food regulations pushed through the federal and state governments sympathetic to the economic interests of agribusinesses, have increased the likelihood and scale of lethal food-born pathogens.

Here, Schlosser again notes that deregulation is perhaps the most immediately treatable cause of certain food-borne illnesses in the United States. The regulators who are charged with ensuring that meatpacking workplaces are safe for employees are similar to the regulators (though from different branches of the government) who are tasked with making sure the beef that passes through the plants is clean. More than anything, effective regulators require access to plants, time to look them over, and money—to make sure there are enough health inspectors to actually do the job.

Schlosser notes that, in the first half of the 20th century, hamburger-grade beef had a bad reputation for food cleanliness, since typically the least desirable parts of the least desirable cattle were slaughtered to make them. Although fast-food companies like White Castle, on the east coast, helped to destigmatize hamburger meat after the Second World War, problems still arose at fast-food outfits, including the notable Jack in the Box E. coli scandal of 1993, in which Jack in the Box employees accidentally served undercooked hamburgers that were laced with E. coli.

As before, in the early part of the 20th century, drastic changes occurred in government oversight of food safety. Before the 20th century, consumers were tasked with "being aware" of the illnesses that could arise from undercooked meat and poultry. But government regulations passed during and after Theodore Roosevelt's administration made the health and safety of America's food supply a government priority.

Schlosser identifies several factors that most likely led to the Jack in the Box E. coli outbreak in 1993, and to other, similar (if less noteworthy) cases since then. The primary vector for E. coli is fecal matter, and cattle at large feedlots are now fed a slurry of food that, instead of simply grain, can include bits and pieces of other animal matter, including bone, tissue, and feces. E. coli can enter the cows' guts this way, and can then be "amplified" by the close quarters of large feedlots and meatpacking facilities, especially if these facilities are less than stellar in terms of cleanliness.

The speed with which factories load cattle into meatpacking facilities is one of the primary issues in maintaining a clean butchering environment. The more cattle that pass through a plant in a given timeframe, the denser that plant is with cattle, and the less likely it is that a worker will notice diseased or malnourished cattle, or will be able to ensure cleanliness of the animals. This vastly increases the change that fecal matter might make its way into the meatpacking process.

Schlosser argues that the beef industry, since Upton Sinclair's The Jungle in 1906, has sought to "deflect" any criticism the government or consumers might direct its way whenever outbreaks of virulent bacteria are caused by ground beef. By the 1980s, a cozy relationship between the beef industry and the USDA, the government agency responsible for ensuring that beef supplies are healthful, meant that the beef industry was essentially expected to self-monitor—with the consequence that enormous lapses were permitted along the production chain and that there was little governmental "teeth" to spur recalls when tainted meat was produced.

It's worth noting that Schlosser is by no means interested in the government solving all problems, or in regulating all industries—Schlosser does lionize, after all, Hank's, and other ranchers', self-reliance and individual initiative. But Schlosser notes that, where safety is concerned, there can be no more important independent actor than the government, which has no overriding concern for the "bottom line."

But Schlosser writes that he believes some progress can be made, even within a system where government oversight of factory-farm meat production is minimal. David Theno, hired by Jack in the Box in the wake of the 1993 E. coli scandal, instituted a system of "performance-based grading" at all Jack in the Box locations, and made sure that managers were trained in proper food-handling and cooking techniques for meat. Although this process occurs just before meat is cooked—and not along the production line—both Theno and Schlosser seem to agree that a "performance-based" compliance system, with real consequences for failure to comply, can make for safer beef—and isn't very expensive for the corporation in question.

Meanwhile, Theno advocates other kinds of reforms, ones that can tackle, through moderate and easy-to-replicate guidelines, appropriate cooking temperatures in restaurants. In an ideal world, meat would be prepared perfectly cleanly, and therefore restaurants wouldn't have to be so vigilant about cooking at the appropriate temperature—but that world is almost a utopia, and it's not difficult to make sure employees know at what temperature, and for how long, meat must be prepared in order to be safe.

Schlosser notes the difficulties the USDA faces in demanding recalls of meat products—even beef that has been demonstrated to possess virulent strains of dangerous pathogens. Because of the meatpacking and processing companies' leverage with the federal government—and with the aid of lobbyists who support various political campaigns of congressmen—the USDA is often forced to merely implore or cajole companies, rather than force or fine them, which means that the companies can then choose how and when to recall the meat. This leeway is ostensibly allowed by the government, and demanded by meat-processing companies, because the "trade secrets" of those companies' meatpacking technologies must be protected. Schlosser notes that Bill Clinton introduced bills that would increase fines and penalties for companies producing tainted beef after the Jack in the Box scandal in 1993, but Republican congresses over the next several years consistently opposed these measures, and sided with the meatpacking companies.

Even if pathogens are detected in food, however—even if the government invests sufficient funds into monitoring meatpacking plants—that doesn't guarantee that the meat will be recalled in the event that a pathogen is found. Thus, in addition to monitoring, enforcement of severe penalties and immediate demands for recall ought to be in the government's purview. But, as Schlosser here notes, lobbyists for the meatpacking industry have successfully kept away such mandatory penalties, arguing that it would stymie the industry, or make it no longer profitable to produce meat in the US on such a large scale. Schlosser doesn't buy this argument, and feels that government enforcement would only result in safer beef for individuals.

Schlosser further notes that USDA inspectors, when they are present in meatpacking plants, are often so hopelessly behind the speed of the plants' production that they cannot possibly account for the cleanliness of every stage of meat production. Meatpacking corporations argue that this state of affairs is OK—and have developed alternate technologies to make beef "safe," including irradiation. Irradiated meat is treated with gamma rays in the plant—the rays "disrupt the DNA" of any foodborne pathogens and make it impossible for them to reproduce. Although the American Medical Association agrees that eating irradiated meat is safe, irradiation still doesn't address systemic problems with safety protocols within plants that could target issues of cleanliness at their source.

In addition, the mere presence of inspectors in a plant by no means guarantees that those inspectors will find everything, mark down every infraction, and thus keep the plant perfectly safe. Inspectors are human beings like anyone else, and are prone to error. The fewer the inspectors, the more likely the error. Thus, Schlosser implies, plants must have adequate numbers of inspectors to insure that they are not overworked, that they are ready and able to spot infractions of proper hygiene when they seem them.

Schlosser ends the chapter with two rather sobering facts. First, a large amount of cheap beef, produced quickly in factories with the least-stringent cleanliness oversight, is frequently shipped to the nation's schools—which with their limited budgets are looking for the lowest prices. Instances of E. coli contamination from meat served in schools—as occurred in North Carolina, Georgia, and Washington in 1998 alone—underscores just how immediate the impact of these inadequate safety policies can be.

Another unintended consequence of low-quality meat and lack of government funding. Because schools across the US are systemically defunded by the states tasked with supporting them, those schools must purchase whatever beef they can afford. And if that beef has not been inspected properly, American students will have a higher likelihood of getting sick.

Second, Schlosser writes that the cleanliness of beef production, although vastly important, cannot make beef preparation in commercial kitchens any cleaner—workers at fast-food restaurants must be trained, as the workers at Jack in the Box were after the 1993 scandal, to handle and cook meat properly. Unfortunately, Schlosser concludes, a great many under-trained and overwhelmed employees at fast-food restaurants sacrifice food safety for quickness of food "delivery," to the customer, no surprise considering it is "throughput" and speed that dominates the bottom line at these establishments.

Schlosser argues, convincingly, that safety in a complex system requires a complex and multifaceted solution. It's not enough to have inspectors, and it's not enough merely to make sure employees at a given restaurant chain know how to cook meat properly. True safety in meat production requires all these factors to exist in concert with one another.

CHAPTER 10: GLOBAL REALIZATION

Schlosser begins this chapter by describing Plauen, a smaller German city in a region called Vogtland, about halfway between Munich and Berlin. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Plauen was a textile town. But when these industries collapsed following the German defeat in World War One, the town became a hotbed of radical National Socialist sympathy—for example, on Kristallnacht, in 1938, "a crowd eagerly destroyed Plauen's only synagogue." During the World War two, Plauen was mostly spared until the end of the fighting, in 1945, when the British bombed the city heavily, destroying most of its buildings.

Schlosser ends the book not in the American context, but abroad, with an examination of how fast-food culture impact the rest of the globe. Schlosser settles on Germany for the reasons he explains—because, in many ways, the two German states in the second half of the 20th century represent two different cultural attitudes, capitalist and socialist, regarding the relationship between the state and individual economic enterprise.

The Soviets eventually took over control of Plauen—it was "just" inside the East German state, only nine miles from the border with the West. Although Plauen suffered under the economic strictures of East Germany (which was controlled by the Soviets), it was chosen, in 1990, as "the first McDonald's site in East Germany." And that McDonald's was the first new building built in Plauen since the re-unification of Germany after the falling of the Berlin Wall.

Plauen's McDonald's, Schlosser notes, therefore has a kind of double symbolism. McDonald's itself is already a potent symbol of American economic might, and of the kinds of food-production efficiencies that now exist the world over. And, for a McDonald's to exist in the former Socialist East Germany, is to underscore just how much that country has changed since 1990.

Schlosser notes that throughout the 1970s and 1980s, and increasing in the 1990s, fast-food companies in America began setting their sights on overseas expansion as a way of increasing profits, since so much of the American food market had been saturated. When fast-food companies expanded abroad, they also brought with them the "efficiencies" of food production developed in the United States, transforming how food was produced in foreign cultures. In places as remote as India, Beijing, and Germany, fast-food in the '90s was hip, modern, and "American," a "status symbol" for many who wanted to appear knowledgeable of American culture.

What Schlosser implies, throughout this chapter, is that fast-food companies had reached a kind of near saturation of the American market by the 1980s or so. Companies need to expand to continue to make profits—thus, McDonald's and other fast food conglomerates looked abroad, hoping to find new and eager consumers of mass-produced burgers and fries.

Schlosser tells of the most "bizarre" experience he had during the three years writing the book: a speech he witnessed, in Las Vegas in 1999, delivered by Mikhail Gorbachev, the last leader of the Soviet Union, and given to the 26th Annual Chain Operators Exchange, a meeting for owners and franchisers of fast-food restaurants. Schlosser notes that Gorbachev's politics—far to the left of many anti-union American franchise owners—were an odd match for the convention, and some people became so bored during Gorby's speech that they walked out of the auditorium, complaining that the previous year's speaker, Margaret Thatcher, was better. Schlosser tells this story simply to demonstrate how powerful fast-food interests in the US are: they are capable of hiring the most famous politicians in the world to speak at their conventions—even politicians who are a poor fit for their policies.

Here, Schlosser tracks one of the many peculiarities of the economic and political order of the 1990s. Mikhail Gorbachev is by no means a "Republican" or a "conservative" in the American sense. But he did, of course, begin the project of opening the Soviet Union to the West, which ended in the dissolution of that union and the reemergence of a non-Soviet, at least superficially democratic Russia, in the 1990s and 2000s. Thus, Gorbachev is a kind of "hinge" figure between state control and private enterprise—making him a sought-after public speaker for events like this.

Schlosser describes the impact of "Americanization" of food on global health. Fast-food is low in fiber and nutrients, high in fat and sugar—a poor substitute for fruits and vegetables and home-cooked meals. And yet Americans, and many others in countries around the world, are eating more fast-food—and experiencing a vast increase in clinical obesity. Schlosser notes that obesity, as a national and global problem, is hard to fix, especially since fast-food chains seem to satisfy such high and entrenched consumer demand, inside and outside the US.

Of course, the Golden Arches have a dark side to them. They are an indicator of American efficiency and marketing—but they are also a sign that native food cultures, and native patterns of nutritious eating, might be falling by the wayside in other countries. It would be unfair, of course, to blame this entirely on McDonald's, but fast-food chains are leading the push toward a globally "American" style of dining out, and of mass-produced food.

Schlosser mentions another case, which was litigated throughout the 1990s, in which London Greenpeace activists produced and distributed a leaflet, accusing McDonald's of selling food filled with "lethal toxins." McDonald's fought Greenpeace in court, using aggressive British anti-libel laws, which typically allow corporations and famous individuals to fight back against those who criticize them without strict and complete factual accuracy (celebrities have also fought British reporters in court using these laws). But despite this, various courts of appeals in the UK still acknowledged that some parts of the "McLibel" leaflets, issued by Greenpeace, were true—that McDonald's food is unhealthful, and that it causes, or is one of the primary causes of, an enormous number of ill societal effects, including increased obesity on a grand scale. Schlosser notes that, as of his book's publication, the McLibel case had not been fully settled one way or another.

This is a complex legal trial, and Schlosser is less concerned with who wins and who loses—a result which wasn't even determined by the time of the book's publication. Instead, Schlosser views the McLibel case as an indication that strong and concerted opposition to the fast-food industry exists in other countries. Schlosser implies that that opposition could also exist in the United States, if enough people were to join together. But, of course, Schlosser also points out that McDonald's was more than willing to fight these charges in court, and to defend its image before the public, even at great expense to the company.

Schlosser closes the chapter by writing that life in Plauen now is far different from what it was in East German times, and that McDonald's plays a major part in that city's "Westernization." American-themed bars have sprouted up, and the McDonald's in town is "spotless," a "beacon" of American-style living, hard to miss when one walks around the downtown portion of Plauen. Plauen is by no means perfect, as Schlosser asserts—there is, as a consequence of the influx of western-style businesses, a more visible difference between the "haves," who run these businesses, and the "have-nots," who have not benefitted directly from market-style reforms in East Germany. Schlosser notes that Germany presents a "new frontier" for companies like McDonald's, which were founded in the "frontier" land of California in the US—a place where capitalist values and spurred the streamlining and explosive growth of the fast-food industry.

Perhaps one of the most important through-lines in Schlosser's book is the idea, now discussed a great deal in the second decade of the 21st century, that a very clear divide exists between those who have money and economic power, and those who do not. Fast-food can then be, among other things, a symbol of income inequality. People who have more money typically don't eat as much fast food, and the executives who manage fast-food companies make a great deal of money. But people who work in, and eat frequently in, places like McDonald's might be precisely those segments of the population harmed by a government that is unwilling, or unable, to focus on lower- and middle-class economic issues. Instead, the federal government, according to Schlosser, is often more focused on ensuring that corporate profits remain high.

EPILOGUE: HAVE IT YOUR WAY

Schlosser begins his Epilogue by noting that not everyone in the food production and fast-food industries behaves the way that the companies described earlier in the book have. One **rancher** in Matheson, Colorado, Dale Lasater, runs his cattle ranch in part as a wildlife preserve, and believes that "organic, free-range" beef might be the future of the industry. Conway's Red Top restaurant, in Colorado Springs, has "hamburger patties...still formed every day by hand, using fresh, not frozen, ground beef." And In-N-Out Burger, in California and Nevada, sells no franchises, pays its employees more than minimum wage, and has some of the "highest-quality food" in the fast-food industry.

Schlosser does not want his readers to abandon hope of reform. Indeed, he sees reform as a long, slow process, one that involves a great many people doing their part. But this reform need not be predicated on drastic or revolutionary action on the part of consumers. Schlosser notes, here, that some people already in the 1990s are rejecting the culture of "fast" food and of mass-produced nutrition. There are also businesses that thrive by catering to the quality of their food and the health of their customer bases.

Schlosser argues explicitly what has been implicit throughout the book: that "market forces," used by fast-food and food-processing companies to justify activities that suit their bottom lines at the expense of consumer health and supplier profits, are purely economic arguments rather than moral ones. Change is possible in the fast-food industry, Schlosser writes. Job training at fast-food restaurants can be more comprehensive and mandatory. Oversight in meatpacking plants can include better food safety testing and better employee risk and health management. And a "single, unified" food safety agency, not beholden to corporate interests, can guarantee that massive E. coli outbreaks don't threaten large swaths of the population.

Here, Schlosser notes that the answer might not necessarily need to be "more" government, just a better, more efficient form of government. For of course it is wasteful for the government to scramble together a number of different agencies to combat food safety, especially since food safety is such a complex problem in itself. Complex problems like that are solved by one coordinating agency making a series of reforms—and by that agency, whatever it may be, having the power to discipline companies who don't shape up.

Schlosser ends with a point that, though simple, resonates back throughout the book: purchasing fast food is a choice—one that a great many Americans, and people around the world, make every day. But if large parts of those populations decided to stop buying fast food—to boycott parts of the industry, as a protest to the malfeasance and problems of food production in the US—then that industry would be forced, by shrinking demand, to accede to the wishes of its consumers. It sounds like a far-fetched idea, but Schlosser argues that saying "no" to fast food, and the cultures and economies it produces, is the first step toward making food consumption more ethical, better for the environment—and safer for the people doing the eating.

Schlosser closes the book with an appeal to the consumer. Schlosser has taken pains, throughout Fast Food Nation, *not to blame people who eat fast food—indeed, he talks about how delicious fast food can be! But he also notes that consumption patterns represent choices, and consumers can do their best to be informed about how companies operate. Boycotts by consumers are like strikes by unionized workers—they allow individuals to band together, and to wield far greater influence than they might alone.*

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