

Muckrakers: differing styles in upton sinclair and eric schlosser

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The *Jungle* by Upton Sinclair and *Fast Food Nation* by Eric Schlosser are two extremely different books about the same topic: the American food industry. Paired excerpts explore the behind-the-scenes work that goes into processed food and how the industries mislead or deceive the public. However, the authors' presentations of the industry and messages are so different from one another as to make them unrelated on all levels except for the topic.

Sinclair, a 19th century journalist for a social newspaper, was examining working conditions in Chicago stockyards when he was inspired to write his book. Under the guise of fiction, he reveals the various disturbing means used by the Chicago meat-packing industry to create canned foods. Bringing up every element of a can of deviled ham from beef tripe to cow gullets, Sinclair spares no nauseating detail in strangely matter-of-fact descriptions like, "It was a nasty job killing these, for when you plunged your knife into them they would burst and splash foul-smelling stuff into your face; and when a man's sleeves were smeared in blood, and his hands steeped in it, how was he ever to wipe his face, or to clear his eyes so that he could see?" (Sinclair 352). These repulsive details are employed very intentionally to upset the reader and send the author's message. Sinclair even goes as far as to claim that some of the factory's products had "killed several times as many United States soldiers as all the bullets of the Spaniards" (Sinclair 352).

The book being released only eight years after the Spanish-American War, lines like these make it unsurprising that *The Jungle* was shunned by all of the publishers the author sought. Sinclair wasn't content with describing

every sickening detail about the ingredients in canned meat—he also completed his original purpose, which was to evaluate working conditions. He mentions a shocking variety of ailments prevalent in meat factory workers, from rheumatism to butchered hands to tuberculosis to falling into enormous vats. Regarding the latter, Sinclair concludes with the sickening assertion that workers who came to such a fate were often not found until “all but the bones of them had gone out to the world as Durham’s Pure Leafard!” (Sinclair 355). Through describing the working conditions and contents of its products, the author thoroughly and completely expresses his disapprobation for the meat-packing industry in this dark and persuasive novel.

At times offering a cheery contrast to Sinclair’s revolting description of 19th century meat packing, *Fast Food Nation* by Eric Schlosser provides insight into, among other topics, the chemistry behind engineered flavors. As a journalist, Schlosser was permitted entrance to the main facility of International Flavors & Fragrances (IFF), one of many facilities in the New Jersey industrial parks that he claims manufacture two-thirds of all the flavor additives that are sold in the United States. At first, the excerpt from his book seems like it must be building to some harsh, persuasive conclusion about the food industry, in lines such as, “...the manipulation of volatile chemicals to create a particular smell. The basic science behind the scent of your shaving cream is the same as that governing the flavor of your TV dinner” (Schlosser 361). At this point, Schlosser comes off as one of the countless authors who prey on the average American reader—the

uninformed and gullible person who knows “volatile” to mean liable to sudden violence and who thinks “chemicals” to mean toxic compounds like arsenic and hydrogen cyanide, rather than knowing that a volatile chemical is a scientific class of liquids that includes such harmless ingredients as water and rubbing alcohol. Schlosser continues to expound on the formation of recognizable flavors, revealing that perfume companies created the first flavor additives and listing by, their full and lengthy names, all forty-nine ingredients in an artificial strawberry flavor. These and many other instances in the passage seem prime opportunities for the author to follow up an analysis with a powerful argument against the inventors, against the marketers, against the manufacturers, against something—but Schlosser proceeds in an unexpectedly non-confrontational tone. While he doesn’t take the care to list them out in another massive paragraph, he concedes that the smell of a real strawberry is comprised by over 350 chemicals.

Although criticism of the industry is apparent upon examination of Schlosser’s diction and phrasing, it is generally veiled by his human error: his inability to remain critical of processes and research by which he is so impressed. He describes his sampling of an artificial flavor in the sentences, “Grainger’s most remarkable creation took me by surprise. After closing my eyes, I suddenly smelled a grilled hamburger. The aroma was uncanny, almost miraculous. It smelled like someone in the room was flipping burgers on a hot grill. But when I opened my eyes, there was just a narrow strip of white paper and a smiling flavorist” (Schlosser 368). Even if the author will decide to persuade against or denigrate the processed food industry in the

rest of the book, the message this passage conveys is mostly informative and oddly reassuring.