

The Dark Side of Food

Journalist, Author Joanna Blythman Cracks the Code of Processed Foods and Marketing



Joanna Blythman's most recent book, Swallow This, is one of the best ever written about the plague of manufactured food that has afflicted us for lo, these many years. Balancing outrage with a supple command of the facts and a razor wit, Blythman's book offers an eminently accessible and lucid account of what makes manufactured food different from real food, as well as the myriad methods manufacturers and retailers keep trying to put one over even on the most conscientious food shoppers. All of us, even if we avoid it religiously, have to live with the consequences of soaring health care budgets and life in a society where incredible numbers of people rarely cook and eat dinner together as people did for many centuries. It turns out Blythman has been hiding in plain sight in the British press for many years, accessible to Americans only via newspaper and magazine websites until the publication of Swallow This, the first of her many books to cross the pond. Born in Glasgow, the daughter of Scottish activist and songwriter Morris Blythman, she has won many awards for her writing, including a 2007 Good Housekeeping award for Outstanding Contribution to Food. She regularly appears on broadcast media in the U.K. as well as in the columns of The Guardian and other outlets.

Joanna Blythman

ACRES U.S.A. Are people in Britain cynical about packaged food? Americans joke about its dubious quality while we wolf it down in enormous quantities.

JOANNA BLYTHMAN. There's definitely a lot of cynicism here about the food industry because we went through the whole episode of mad cow disease, BSE, at the end of the '80s and during the early '90s. I think that fundamentally rocked consumer confidence in industrial foods. Then of course more recently we had the whole issue of horse meat turning up in processed foods. I think many people expect that a lot of ingredients and additives in processed foods are not exactly wholesome, which is why some people avoid it or eat as little as possible.

ACRES U.S.A. How is the sugar awareness issue shaking out in Britain?

BLYTHMAN. There is certainly heightened awareness. Sugar here in terms of public health is more or less Public Enemy Number One at the moment. Of course the government has announced its intention to enact a sugar tax on sugary drinks. The thinking is beginning to shift and more people are beginning to consider sugar the biggest problem in diet. The previous position, which kind of ignored sugar and suggested that saturated fat was the real menace – well, that's all melting away now. The whole anti-fat fad has gone into meltdown. It's constantly under attack and quite commonly now you will hear people saying "it's really

Interviewed by Chris Walters

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about sugar now, isn’t it.” Obviously in the States you’ve got Nina Teicholz who wrote that excellent book about fats, *The Big Fat Surprise*, and then you’ve also got Robert Lustig who beat a drum for the dangers of sugar. I think there’s always a time lag once you get a public health dogma. It gets entrenched, and doctors and all kinds of public health workers disseminate the doctrine, and it takes a long time to undo that. I’m sure if I stop someone in the street right now who wasn’t terribly informed about these issues and asked her what she thought was right to do, she would say, “Well, I should be eating less fat, less salt.” And if she was on the ball she’d say cut down on sugar. But I definitely think the critique of sugar is on the ascendency, and the demonization of fat is on its way out. It just takes time for that all to filter down.

ACRES U.S.A. I love the term you use in *Swallow This*, the “fatwah on fat.” Was sugar consumption traditionally pretty high in the U.K., or did it go up dramatically after World War II when processed foods hit the market?

BLYTHMAN. I can’t give you figures for that, and I don’t know how anyone could because it’s quite difficult to measure sugar consumption if you consider all the forms of sugar in foods. But my impression would be that in Britain there was always a fondness for sweets as people might drink lemonade and fizzy drinks that were colored and flavored and thoroughly sweet. That was quite common. We also eat a lot of confectionary items, sweet chocolates and the like, the sort of thing that in my living

memory are a feature of the British diet. What I think has changed is that people until about the 1980s tended to cook from scratch at home, so you at least got real foods even though there might have been fizzy drinks and sweets and things that weren’t that great for you. Lots of people were eating real food. What is happening now is that people are cooking less and less and they’re eating more and more processed foods.

ACRES U.S.A. You write persuasively about the way manufactured food changed people’s expectations of how food ought to taste.

BLYTHMAN. The loss of savory food is shocking enough. All the sugar is part of the processed food taste – there’s a sort of generic sweet, salty, slightly sharp taste which I would identify as a common processed food taste. We’ve been encouraging people to go back to the ’60s or ’70s, more or less, when people ate quite a lot of meat and quite a lot of fish and eggs. We ate quite a lot of protein, at least people who could afford it. But because of the kind of dietary advice we’ve been given, we’ve been taught to base our meals on starchy foods, i.e. carbohydrate foods. Things like pasta, any kind of bread, pizza – all these things have been portrayed as healthy foods. What people haven’t appreciated is that carbohydrate foods of that kind are just a different form of sugar. They just take a little longer to hit your bloodstream. Of course the advice on eggs has been so blatantly wrong that the diet authorities have had to reinvent the advice to say that yes, eggs are

actually good for you, eat as many as you like more or less. There’s still a general disinclination to recommend red meat, so what you have in this country are people who have abandoned the traditional protein-based food which didn’t make you fat and gave you good energy, a full release of energy over a period of time, and they are eating far more of not just all things sweet, but the carbohydrate foods that are basically metabolized as sugar. I think in that sense people are eating more sugar in their diets for sure.

ACRES U.S.A. Are maladies such as Crohn’s disease and irritable bowel syndrome on the rise in the last couple of decades?

BLYTHMAN. Yes! Without doubt. It’s interesting, I had this conversation with my mother, who is in her 90s. I asked her if she remembered people having diet issues and intolerances and allergies when she was young, and she said not at all. That’s just one person, and of course there must have been people who had digestive or inflammatory problems or allergies to food, but there are far more of them now. Obviously something like Celiac Disease is a very specific condition which affects only a relatively small number of people, but if we open up the frame of reference to look

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at inflammatory diseases that affect the digestive system, the bowels and so on, then it does seem that these are on the increase. It would be very hard to prove, but it seems to me unlikely that this has nothing to do with suddenly increased amounts of processed food in our diet. Additives and high-tech ingredients have only really been in the food chain for a few decades. The fact is that we don't really understand the interactions between them, the cocktail effect if you like. It's at least a very plausible theory that some of what we're eating is producing a slate of digestive problems. The one we get here all the time is gluten – there are a huge number of people now who presume that they have a bad reaction to gluten, but people have been using gluten for centuries. Modern bread is made by a high-tech method, very fast with a lot of additive enzymes. It's likely this means the gluten is less digestible because it hasn't gone through that patient process of rising and fermentation which actually makes grains digestible. It's such a fascinating area. I think the take-home message is that it's a bit like smoking and tobacco causing cancer or heart disease. If you wait for that to be proven you wait forever. It's sensible to apply the precautionary principle and eat food made from ingredients that you recognize and largely cook yourself, or buy from someone you trust to make it wholesomely.

ACRES U.S.A. Do you think the embrace of packaged foods is driven in your country by overwork and stresses on your way of life? Or is the marketing also truly relentless?

BLYTHMAN. It's both. We live in a culture now which talks about food incessantly. Here in the U.K. we have constant food programs on television, food magazines all over the place, but real cooking happens less and less. It's a strange paradox. I bought some new dining chairs to go around my table, so the other day I tried to donate my old chairs to a charity. I phoned three charities and

they all said the same thing, "I'm sorry, we can't take dining chairs anymore, we have far too many of them." They said it's even worse with tables. No one wants tables any longer, and they don't want the chairs to go with them. It is because people are eating in front of the television or doing something else. They're not sitting down to a meal. This has been a trend here and in the United States for many decades now. They have aggressively marketed value-added, processed foods because those are extremely profitable for retailers and food manufacturers. Even though there's only so much money you can charge for potatoes, if you make them into deep-fried Louisiana potato skins and just pop them in the microwave you can charge a huge amount more. Retailers have a vested interest in selling us processed food.

ACRES U.S.A. What about the image of cooking?

BLYTHMAN. There has been a lot of propaganda here to the effect of, if you've got time to cook, you haven't quite made it in life. That everyone's so busy doing something else, and those something else things are so important, that food has to give way. The supermarkets in the '90s started quite commonly talking about cash-rich, time-poor shoppers. They pandered to people by saying, "Look, life is fast in the executive lane, you don't have time to cook, let us do the cooking for you, you have these more important things."

ACRES U.S.A. How have the austerity policies the British government enacted after financial meltdown affected how people eat?

BLYTHMAN. Obviously we have a lot of people who still are short of time but not necessarily because they're well off, but because they're working on contract or doing two or three jobs just to get by. Again, there's that pressure on time. Many people, particularly young people, are really suffering now and we see

queues for food banks, young people who just can't get jobs even though they're very well-qualified. There is definitely a feeling that many more people feel the cold winter of austerity whistling around them. I think all these things have conspired against real cooking. That having been said, I think the economic situation has made many more people think, "I think I might just cook because actually it would be cheaper, and I would save quite a lot of money." So there is that countertrend, which is good.

ACRES U.S.A. Are you seeing continued growth in farmers' market shopping?

BLYTHMAN. Yes and no. Farmers' markets were very big about 10 years ago and although the numbers are still going up, they've suffered from a critique which isn't always fair, that they are expensive places to shop. I think they've only gone so far because people are feeling really hard up and poverty is on the rise. You may not know that in this country we now have unprecedented numbers of people using food banks, seriously poor people. Now, along with farmers' markets there are other initiatives. We're seeing things here like food assemblies where people get together with neighbors and friends and make a direct link with producers – buying groups. What that does is shorten the food chain so profits that would go to the supermarket chains are removed from the equation. The producers can get the price they need and consumers can buy at a price they can afford. Bread co-ops are another, where groups of people will get together and work with a bakery and distribute things locally. There are lots of original and thoughtful responses to the economic pressure.

ACRES U.S.A. Are buying clubs roughly analogous to CSAs over here?

BLYTHMAN. That's right.

ACRES U.S.A. What is Marks & Spencer? Is it like Whole Foods?

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BLYTHMAN. Marks & Spencer is not like Whole Foods. You can buy everything you might need if you are an adventuresome cook in Whole Foods. Although you can get prepared foods there, when you walk into Whole Foods you see fresh fruits and vegetables. Marks & Spencer is all about ready meals these days. It is aisle after freezing aisle stacked up with boxes of already prepared food. Marks & Spencer here is a kind of lazy cook’s option if you’ve got a bit of money and you want to feel that you’re getting something other than the lowest common denominator for fresh food.

ACRES U.S.A. Do you have an equivalent of Walmart vacuuming up an increasing share of home food budgets?

BLYTHMAN. Walmart bought out a chain called Asda a few years ago, so Asda stores and sales are part of the Walmart family, although if you walk into an Asda, it’s not going to look like Walmart in the States. It would be a general supermarket stocking pretty much everything, but they don’t do so much organic. The first words that come to your mind for describing Asda would be something like “low price value.” It wouldn’t be quality necessarily.

ACRES U.S.A. One impressive thing about your book is that you describe the insides of an actual food factory. Here in the United States, you’d need the combined efforts of the Eighth Airborne to breach the defenses of a processed food factory.

BLYTHMAN. Over the years I’ve been in a good number of food factories because there was a time when they actually took in journalists. Then they realized this wasn’t a good idea because the factories are very unattractive places. When I was researching my latest book I called in a few favors and did manage to get into certain factories. I’m quite convinced that if most consumers knew what those factories looked like inside they wouldn’t want to eat anything that came out of them, and absolutely the same applies to the people who work in these places. The first thing they tell you is, “I’d never touch anything that comes out of here.” It allowed me to see that the messaging put out by the supermarkets, that their ready-prepared food is merely a scaled-up version of what you’d cook at home, is just utter nonsense. They’re made with a radically different approach. Theirs is a totally industrial food model. The things that would motivate a home cook don’t apply. The industrial technologist thinks in terms of how to make it for the least cost of ingredients, how to make it last for a long time, and will it work in our factory with our plant’s equipment. All the goals of industrial food processing are quite different. They’re not about human health, taste, sustainability or anything like that. They’re purely all about profit.

ACRES U.S.A. Everybody knows what is off-putting about factory livestock or poultry operations – they smell like Satan’s chamber pot. What was off-putting about the factories that you visited, which I imagine as more sterile places?

BLYTHMAN. No, there was one factory where the smell was bad. That was the factory making lasagna as a ready meal. The smell of the béchamel white sauce part of that product was really, really unpleasant. But I think it’s more about the whole environment. If I walk into your kitchen and you’re cooking, I’m going to see real foods and I’m going to feel the heat of the oven and I’m going to smell whatever you’re cooking, and it’s probably going to make me feel hungry. You go into a factory and it’s

just thoroughly and utterly industrial. No sign of real food, real ingredients, so nothing is quite what it seems. When you see that a product, for example, has onions on the ingredient listing, it won’t tell you that these onions were skinned, pre-chopped frozen onions that were just added at the last minute. We have this idea of people standing there chopping onions. It just doesn’t happen. When the large manufacturers say they’re using oregano, for example, we may think they’re using great leafy bunches of it, but of course they’re not. They’re using dried or frozen, not very good oregano or parsley that’s khaki green because it’s so old and so unlike the herb in its fresh state. Eggs would be another example. You won’t see someone shelling eggs in these factories. They’ll be pouring some egg-like substance out of a package into a machine and it’s mixed with other associated ingredients, all of which have been in some way adapted for this industrial manufacturing system. What is weird about the food factory is that nothing there makes you think of food. There’s nothing to stimulate the appetite or make you hungry or think, “I can’t wait to taste how this turns out.” It’s just a whole lot of elements, highly processed components that arrive at the factory and then are assembled in vats. The equipment is really quite simple – with the right number of additives to make them work. They are colored, flavored, heat-treated and so on and then spewed out the other end. That is qualitatively different from any kind of real home cooking, and it’s why processed food doesn’t taste like good, real food.

ACRES U.S.A. If you look around you won’t find much video or prose on these places. The ordinary person cannot get a look inside, much less the ordinary journalist.

BLYTHMAN. They’re all huge, windowless sheds – industrial estates with security fencing and security guards. Almost all of the workers in these factories here are people who have emigrated here from abroad and are trying to get a start in the labor market. They’re just desperate to take

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any job they can because the locals never want to work there due to the reputation of what it's like inside. The conditions are absolutely appalling – extreme levels of noise, freezing cold temperatures or unpleasantly hot. There is no way to work in a sociable, collaborative way with other people because the place is just too noisy and alienating – long shifts with short breaks, pretty much minimum pay. It would only be a job that you take out of desperation.

ACRES U.S.A. One surprising thing in your book was the penetration of nanotechnology into food processing. Were you surprised?

BLYTHMAN. No, not really. What happened was I became vaguely aware of nanotechnology, that there were applications for nanotechnology in our foods and the packaging and in the creation of things like flavorings and colorings. A lot of people have a similar reaction to nanotech as they would have to genetic modification – their eyes just glaze over and they can't take it on board, it's too complex. That sort of scientific incomprehension has allowed nanotechnology to creep into our food chain in ways that most people are not aware of, and that's a real issue because the implications for health were never really examined. We do know that nanoparticles can actually travel to parts of our body where we don't want them, and the damage they can potentially do there can be quite serious. It's all part of how modern food manufacturing uses sophisticated, highly advanced technology which is way, way in advance of anything that consumers understand or appreciate. What is worrying is that there isn't enough regulatory oversight to make sure whether something that is technologically clever is necessarily wise in the long term. Wisdom and cleverness are not the same thing.

ACRES U.S.A. Despite their cleverness, do you think they might be stymied at the moment as to what can be done about sugar?

BLYTHMAN. The thing about the food industry is that they constantly reinvent. They just frame a new thing to do the same job. Now with the sugar problem a lot of companies think, okay, we have to cut down the sugar. They'll look at every alternative they have, and then come up with what seems like healthy substitutes for sugar. The question is whether these are any better for us than sugar. If you look at the pure, highly refined, very specific extracts of Stevia now being used in processed foods, there is science to suggest that they are endocrine disrupters, i.e., they disrupt our hormones. That is very worrying. The artificial sweeteners somehow also may disrupt the hormones that control appetite, and this would help explain why numerous trials have shown that people drinking artificially sweetened drinks don't lose weight. They're actually as bad as or possibly worse than conventional sugar. When it's pointed out that there is a problem with an ingredient or a substance they use they come up with a new one which is supposedly better. Then in the fullness of time we often find that it was just as bad as the one before, but then they come along with a new one.

ACRES U.S.A. Which leads to a radical question you and other writers like to ask: why does everything have to be sweet?

BLYTHMAN. That's absolutely right. The essential thing we all need to grasp is that we must unsweeten our palates. People gradually need to reduce the amount of sugar that they want and think is normal. My experience with that, and this is the good news, is that it can be done quite quickly because when you start cutting down on sugar, when you go back to what you used to think was normal, the old normal can seem just ridiculously sweet. Retraining the palate can happen in weeks or months, not years.

ACRES U.S.A. I had the same experience.

BLYTHMAN. A classic case here would be someone who always has two sugars in her coffee, so you say, "okay, you're having one-and-a-half for the rest of the week, and next week you're coming down to one, and the week after that you're coming to three-quarters, and then a half." Then you ask her to go back to two sugars for one day, and most people will say, "That's just too sweet, I don't enjoy it." When you start consciously retraining yourself not to want sweet things, it happens quite naturally. Britain is pretty much more like North America and the United States than it is like Europe in this respect – we seem to have more of a love for junk food and the sugary taste. But if you go to say France or Spain or Italy, you just don't see people eating as many very sickly sweets, foods. The palate is different and it's partly because people in those countries do more cooking. People know what natural flavors are, so they know what a natural level of sweetness would be in a piece of fruit or even in some homemade cake. A very sweet piece of confectionary that would go down really well in America or Britain just won't go down well there. It's all about training your palate with normal foods and having a range of benchmarks. If you have those benchmarks then an awful lot of processed food tastes ridiculously sweet and unpleasant.

ACRES U.S.A. Do you see people doing this in any numbers?

BLYTHMAN. Young people here are beginning to retrain their palates quite a bit, and a lot of parents with young children are now quite careful about what they give their children. I'm sure those children will have palates that seek less sugar than perhaps their parents before them. That's a really positive trend.

ACRES U.S.A. It raises the pleasant prospect that over time people are going to be less vulnerable to marketing once their parents show them how it works.

BLYTHMAN. I think that's right. And I think cynicism should be the default position for everyone who buys food, that you just don't believe the marketing. What you have here are phases where people are quite susceptible to marketing. Obviously children just believe what they see and that's why marketing and advertising to them has to be strictly controlled and isn't strictly controlled enough. I think middle-aged people tend to be more cynical, and older people generally tend to be more cynical, but even then the marketing for elderly people is very skillful. We've had a lot of marketing for margarine-type spreads that are supposedly healthier for you than butter. A lot of elderly people buy these really low-grade processed products. They're full of additives and thoroughly unnatural and people pay several times the price for them thinking that this is doing them good. Older people are quite vulnerable to bogus health marketing – this will keep you alive and make you healthy. None of us can really get away from marketing, but the people who really are adrift are those who only ever get processed foods, that is their world. They have no external comparators. The lucky people are the ones who are either at home or somewhere like a school with a progressive school lunch where they get to taste real food. The great thing we've got going for us, those of us who love and cherish real food, is that it just always tastes better and that eating it is always a vastly more attractive experience.

ACRES U.S.A. Has there been a struggle over the content of school lunches in the U.K.?

BLYTHMAN. Yes, absolutely. This has been going on for a decade now. It's kind of a patchy picture. You might be lucky if you're in a school where they are trying to do more straightforward cooking where they just buy good ingredients locally and cook them, but there are now so many complications around contracts with the companies that supply the foods so there's still too much bad food. I don't think we've made the progress there that we need to have made by now.

ACRES U.S.A. Since the Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts originated in the British Isles, maybe the basic idea could be adapted into sending children to summer camps for gardening and cooking instead of tromping through the woods and so on.

BLYTHMAN. I couldn't agree more. I think being able to cook, being able to buy simple ingredients and knock up a meal from that, is a core life skill. It should be really important, and we should be teaching it at the center of every educational initiative. It's just as important as being able to count or read. It is a core skill. It's about your health, your well-being, and we haven't given that enough energy. Obviously in the past home cooking was something that was passed down in families. It was a precious chain of knowledge which was passed down, usually through the female line. People just picked it up by absorption. They saw their mother cooking, their grandmother cooking, and that was what they ate. But that chain has been disrupted now, and we can't rely on kids learning in this traditional way. How are we going to teach them now with so much propaganda about how you don't need to bother with cooking? It's a real challenge, and we will be fighting that battle long after I'm in my grave.

ACRES U.S.A. Are you finding a receptive audience for your work as time goes by?

BLYTHMAN. Definitely. I had a phenomenal reaction, actually, to *Swallow This*. There's a very keen interest here. Obviously there are a lot of people who are encouraging bad foods, but there are also a substantial number of people who want to eat better. The critique of the food industry is resonating with a lot of people. We have a battle on our hands, but there is a good dynamic at the moment where people want to see more cooking, want to see real food. This argument is finding its way to a larger audience, and that's very encouraging. There is a real hunger to learn about the host of industries making our food and a mistrust of the food industry. I think that's really healthy.

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