

# FOOD FIGHTS IN IOWA: THE VEGETARIAN STRANGER IN RECENT MIDWEST FICTION

BY STEVEN G. KELLMAN

Cassius might have had a lean and hungry look, but not because of famine. Not merely in comedies, but in tragedies, histories, and romances as well, the Shakespearean universe is a bountiful buffet in which much of the dramatic business is advanced at banquets or while characters are otherwise chomping and quaffing or else chewing over food and drink in high-caloric iambic pentameter. Unlike Malvolio, Shakespeare does not count himself virtuous enough to dispense with cakes and ale, and he usually stocks his stage with enough edibles to outdo the costermongers peddling in the pit. “Surfeit-swell’d” Falstaff feasts profusely, but so does melancholy Hamlet, who longs to reduce his too, too solid flesh. A court rejects Shylock’s plan for shedding pounds.

In its gastronomy, as in much else, *King Lear* stands out from the other Shakespeare texts. It is a drama devoid of food, in which the appetite for conviviality is starved. Kent insults Oswald by calling him “an eater of broken meats,” but during the play itself neither Oswald nor anyone else eats meats or anything else. Defying the claims of blood and hospitality, Goneril and Regan refuse to feed or house their father. It is only in the final scene that Albany can look forward to breaking Britain’s fatal fast: “All friends shall taste/ The wages of their virtue,” he promises, “and all foes/ The cup of their deservings.”

In *A Thousand Acres* (1991), Jane Smiley reconceives *King Lear* as the disintegration of an Iowa farming dynasty. Set in

1979, the novel is narrated by Ginny, the eldest of Laurence Cook's three rival daughters. She recounts the disastrous consequences of the patriarch's decision to retire from daily management of their vast, successful spread and to divide it among his grownup heirs: Ginny, 36, Rose, 34, and Caroline, 28. Caroline, a lawyer who has moved to Des Moines, wants no part of the new arrangement, and Larry Cook soon regrets ceding control of the largest farm in northwest Iowa to Ginny and Rose, who have reason to resent his abusive rule. Also cast in the rural drama are the neighboring Clarks, whose sons Loren and Jess are to their doddering father Harold as Edgar and Edmund are to sightless Gloucester.

*A Thousand Acres* is not so schematic that it merely transposes every plot twist and character trait in *King Lear* to the contemporary American Midwest. But in nothing else does Smiley deviate so strikingly from Shakespeare's play as in her treatment of food. While the playwright offers his characters nothing to feed on but one another, the characters in *A Thousand Acres* are almost always either cooking or eating; food is the language by which they communicate among themselves and by which the author divulges mysteries of character, plot, and theme. Its prominence in Smiley's text is all the more remarkable in contrast to the fast of her Shakespearean model.

The surname that Smiley chooses for her protagonists—Cook—emphasizes the salient role she assigns to dining. Their family business is agriculture, the production of crops and livestock for human consumption. But less of the action in *A Thousand Acres* takes place on the Cooks' expanse of arduously cultivated land than in the pantry. This is a woman's novel, not only in being written by a woman and narrated by a woman but in using traditional kitchen toil as a vocabulary of passion and power. Like Laura Esquivel's *Como agua para chocolate* (1989, translated as *Like Water for Chocolate*, 1992, and into the 1992 film directed by her husband Alfonso Arau), the Mexican novel that ascribes mystical properties to its recipes and that became a best-

seller in the United States a year after Smiley's book, *A Thousand Acres* is a woman's work that translates cosmic questions into the terms of conventional woman's work: cooking. So, too, does another recent work also popular as both book and film—Fannie Flagg's *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle-Stop Cafe* (1987). Similarly, Nora Ephron spices the proceedings in *Heartburn* (1983) with recipes for comfort food and for catering to company.

At the outset of Smiley's story, Ginny Cook Smith is preparing meals for three households: her husband Tyler and herself; her widower father Larry; and her sister Rose, recently debilitated by a mastectomy, and Rose's husband Pete Lewis. The three families live in close proximity, but Ginny's domestic responsibilities oblige her to serve an early and elaborate breakfast in three separate kitchens. "My morning at the stove started before five and didn't end until eight-thirty," she reports. Although the clan often takes its other meals together, Ginny still must spend much of the rest of each day preparing and serving dinner and supper. Through the eyes of the oldest of the daughters Cook, life is a daily culinary regimen.

"Hey! Let's eat meat!" exclaims Rose, impulsively, to celebrate a successful checkup three months after her right breast was removed. Almost every major scene in *A Thousand Acres* involves some eating, and meat usually figures prominently on the menu. Sausage or bacon is the centerpiece of the lavish breakfast that Ginny places on three tables every morning. The first event recorded in the novel is a pig roast, organized by Harold Clark to mark the homecoming of his prodigal son Jess. Thirteen years after deserting the U. S. Army during the Vietnam War, Jess has returned to Iowa, but exile in Vancouver and then Seattle has alienated him from his origins. Nothing so clearly distinguishes Jess from the Iowans he left behind as his relationship to meat. Much leaner than his brother Loren, who has "gotten a little thick in the middle, the way you do when there's plenty of meat and potatoes around," Jess has been a vegetarian for the past

seven years. The Swiss steak that his late mother used to make was Jess's favorite food, but when Rose brings Swiss steak to the pig roast, Jess abstains. Plagued by childhood guilt over Bob the Beef, a champion steer he raised for slaughter, Jess has secret plans to convert Harold Clark's five hundred acres into a gentle organic farm. Like his Shakespearean antecedent Edgar, Jess, too, in effect declares: "Thou, nature, art my goddess," adopting a gracious garden as his model for nature, not a bloody jungle red in tooth and claw.

By contrast, Ginny's husband Ty dreams that, after consolidating control over the thousand acres his father-in-law has amassed, he will preside over an empire of pork, a prosperous operation processing 4,000 edible hogs. One of his first actions after the transfer of ownership is to convert its vegetable assets into porcine ones. He plows up 20 acres of corn in order to make immediate room for new buildings to hold the livestock and its slurry. The Cooks are able to accumulate the largest farm in the region because of the failure of their neighbors, the Ericsons, to maintain their 370 acres. They are not sanguinary enough. While Cal Ericson is not exactly a vegetarian, he lacks the cruel efficiency of Larry Cook. "The Ericson farm was more like a petting zoo," reports Ginny, by way of explaining why Ericson lost out to the meat-and-potatoes ethic that ruthless Cook pursues. During a rare visit to a restaurant, following an appointment with the chiropractor, Larry insists on ordering the full hot dinner special, including roast beef and mashed potatoes, while daughter Ginny makes do with a grilled cheese sandwich.

Most often, though, all but Jess indulge in meat. Whenever family and neighbors gather, they eat, and when they eat the fare is almost always flesh. Immediately following the funeral for Ginny's mother, dinner is served, and it consists of ham and scalloped potatoes. The annual Father's Day dinner for which the Cooks assemble to honor Larry offers crown pork roast "surrounded by pickles and roasted potatoes and a big bowl of peas from the garden." Every year on the Sunday

after July Fourth, the church in nearby Cabot celebrates the anniversary of its founding with a potluck meal, to which Ginny brings a noodle-hamburger casserole. The resulting buffet includes “barbecued ribs, scalloped potatoes with ham, three kinds of potato salad, four meat casseroles, green beans with cream sauce three ways, two varieties of sweet corn salad, lime Jell-O with bananas, lime Jell-O with maraschino cherries, somebody’s big beautiful green salad, but with a sweet dressing.” In this meat-and-potatoes country, Jess, who ran a counterculture food co-op in Seattle, nourishes himself with carrot-raisin slaw. When Ginny invites a farm construction contractor to stay for dinner—grilled pork chops and new potatoes—he is grateful: “Man, this is heaven to me, this kind of dinner on this place.”

For Smiley, this kind of dinner is symptomatic of a certain human arrogance. Her men in particular are often overbearing egotists oblivious to the damage they cause to others. Larry Cook pursues his ambition to become lord of a thousand acres even when the price means antagonizing his neighbors, ravaging his family, and poisoning the land. His sexual depredations against at least two of his own adolescent daughters are an extension of the plowman’s imperialistic presumption. So, too, is Cook’s rabid carnivorousness, his insistence on meat three meals a day.

In this, he is reminiscent of Robert Miller, the fiercely independent farmer who narrates Smiley’s 1989 novella *Good Will*. Robert’s determination to impose his will on 55 acres of Pennsylvania soil is as strong as his compulsion to control the lives of his wife Elizabeth and their young son Thomas. During a scene whose latent cruelty undercuts what an impressionable outsider calls “paradise,” Robert ridicules the eight-year-old’s revulsion over his father’s annual ritual of slaughtering the summer lambs. “Do you want to be a vegetarian?” asks Robert scornfully. “We took good care of those lambs. They ate good grass and had plenty of fresh water, and now they won’t know what hit them. This is a good life for a lamb, Tommy, all the way to the end and past it.”

Robert, who later boasts of bagging a wild Thanksgiving turkey with only one shot, forces young Tommy to participate in butchering the lambs. The sociopathic act that the troubled boy soon commits against a little black girl at his school is both a consequence of and analogous to Robert's brutal way with lambs.

Smiley suggests a direct connection between the urge for total dominion and the lust for flesh. In *A Thousand Acres*, the heirs of Larry Cook's agrarian empire find relief from their labors by sitting around playing Monopoly and devouring multiple hamburgers. Monopolist Tyler Smith extends the legacy of Larry Cook by perpetuating the old man's ways. Spiritually more akin to Larry than is the man's own daughter, he sides with his father-in-law against his wife. When Ginny thinks she has finally had enough, she walks out on Ty, but only after first cooking him his supper of pork chops and potatoes. She leaves the scene after plotting the death of her sister Rose, whom she cannot forgive for outmaneuvering her. Ever a Cook, Ginny leaves behind an appropriate agent of assassination: a homemade pork liver sausage laced with hemlock.

By any rational calculation, Larry's thousand acres should have continued to flourish and multiply. But too many Cooks spoiled the math. And Ginny, like Rose, remains a Cook even—and especially—when breaking with her father, her sister, and her husband. En route to a new life in St. Paul, she first stops in Mason City for a hot dog. Even out of Iowa, nothing demonstrates more vividly the persistence of Cookery in Ginny than the job she takes in Minnesota: waitress at a Perkins franchise. Three years later, when Ty suddenly materializes at one of her tables, she recommends the blueberry pancakes and the sausage. During her lunch break, they go off to talk in a nearby Wendy's.

Ginny, who has suffered five miscarriages without ever bringing a pregnancy to term, covets Rose's two healthy daughters. Though both sisters conduct clandestine affairs with Jess Clark, Ginny resents the fact that it is Rose who gets

the man. After Pete's death, Jess moves in with Rose and her daughters, converting them to vegetarianism. Their aversion to meat persists even after Jess fails at organic farming and he disappears. When, three years after Ginny moved to St. Paul, Rose, dying of cancer, summons her older sister to her hospital bed, she makes an odd request. "Go home and make them some dinner," Rose, concerned about her daughters, instructs Ginny. "Make them fried chicken."

It is a peculiar menu selection, since Rose's kitchen has been vegetarian for three years. But the senior surviving Cook honors her sister's culinary request as though it were the most natural thing imaginable. Ginny buys a chicken and prepares it and mashed potatoes for her nieces Linda and Pam. Explaining that they had continued eating meat at school and at Kentucky Fried Chicken, the girls do not hesitate about reverting to carnivorousism at home. As if eager to assist Smiley in proving the lingering authority of the old abusive ways and in erasing the last traces of gentle Jess Clark, they devour Aunt Ginny's grilled fowl.

## II

It happens that another recent American novel also recounts the adulterous passion of an Iowa farm wife for a vegetarian from the Pacific Northwest. Like *A Thousand Acres*, Robert James Waller's *The Bridges of Madison County* (1992) also uses food as a measuring cup of personality, a leavening for plot, and an ingredient in the theme. It is in a farmhouse kitchen that the two main characters first embrace.

When photographer Robert Kincaid steps out of a green pickup truck that he calls Harry and into Francesca Johnson's life, her husband and two children are conveniently gone for the week, at the Illinois State Fair, exhibiting a prize steer they will later sell for slaughter. Francesca immediately notices something striking about this lithe and long-haired stranger: "In contrast with the local folks, who fed on gravy

and potatoes and red meat, three times a day for some of them, Robert Kincaid looked as if he ate nothing but fruits and nuts and vegetables.” That astute observation does not hinder Francesca from offering Robert the standard-issue Iowa supper of pork chops and garden vegetables. When he declines the pork, they dine on an improvised vegetable stew. For Waller as for Smiley, food becomes a principal tool of communication and seduction.

The next day, for their second meal together, Francesca cooks up a more elaborate menu of peppers stuffed with tomato sauce, brown rice, cheese, and chopped parsley, followed by spinach salad, corn bread, and applesauce soufflé. But the wholesome feast evidently remains untouched, since before they can sit down at the table, Robert and Francesca move upstairs to her bedroom, from which they do not emerge until morning. It is already the third of four precious days of passion after which they must part forever. We do not learn very much more about Robert’s diet, except that he is not averse to a Milky Way bar for breakfast and to an occasional can of beer. He is forever puffing on a Camel, and, although the affair is set back in benighted 1965, it is still one year after the surgeon general issued an official warning that smoking can be hazardous to the health.

Health seems incidental to Robert’s vegetarianism, which, like his sublime sexuality, is rooted in something more spiritual than mere hygiene. Invoking Rachel Carson, John Muir, and Aldo Leopold, the man from Bellingham expounds on the iniquity of trying to dominate or destroy nature. “My contention is that male hormones are the ultimate cause of trouble on this planet,” says Robert, whose testosterone is potent enough to convince Francesca that he is the perfect lover. Yet, for all his manifest virility, she finds him unlike any man in Iowa. Like them, Robert, too, alters the world, by recording and transforming its images, but to Francesca her lover’s photography seems far less aggressive and destructive than commercial agriculture: “Farmers also dominated the land with chemicals and bulldozers. But Robert Kincaid’s



way of changing nature was elastic and always left things in their original form when he finished." To an Iowa farm wife, Robert, like Jess Clark, seems a gentle alternative to the brutally aggressive men who have seized control of the land.

Encouraged by Robert, Francesca concedes that she has long been a crypto-vegetarian. "Around here that point of view would not be popular. Richard and his friends would say you're trying to destroy their livelihood. I don't eat much meat myself, I'm not sure why, I just don't care for it. But every time I try a meatless supper on the family, there are howls of rebellion. So I've pretty much given up trying." Francesca loves Robert for his differences from her husband Richard and all the other Iowa men. And, although she attributes mystical virtues to him, it is his refusal to eat meat that is Robert's most conspicuous distinction. Unlike the Iowa farmers, he does not have to reconcile affection for animals with the business of butchering them. "Something I've never been able to adapt to, to understand, is how they can lavish such love and care on the animals and then see them sold for slaughter," says Francesca, disturbed by the "cold, unfeeling contradiction in that business."

Francesca's dormant feelings are aroused by her brief encounter with the vegetarian stranger. However, duty calls, and she chooses to renounce her marvelous private pleasure to return to the public responsibility of a wife and a mother. The afterglow of four days of reckless intimacy in August, 1965 sustains Robert and Francesca for the rest of their lives. But there is no evidence that, in returning to Richard, Michael, and Carolyn, Francesca does not also go back to meat and potatoes. Indeed, the fact that, 24 years later, revelation of their deceased mother's erotic idyll with a stranger carrying a camera comes as a total surprise to Carolyn and Michael Johnson makes it unlikely that Francesca had exhibited any striking change in behavior, like a sudden refusal to ingest pork chops. The concept of vegetarianism becomes, like the note his beloved left on Roseman Bridge that Robert saves as a keepsake of Francesca, a

sentimental memory to be forever cherished for its association with a vanished idol. Vegetarianism becomes that much more venerable as it remains an abstract ideal. To implement it might almost be a sacrilege.

*Kitsch* is, according to Milan Kundera, not merely the celebration of commonplace emotions but the additional reflexive action of savoring that very celebration:

“Kitsch causes two tears to flow in quick succession. The first tear says: How nice to see children running on the grass!

“The second tear says: How nice to be moved, together with all mankind, by children running on the grass!

“It is the second tear that makes kitsch kitsch.”

What makes Waller’s Iowa farm novel kitsch is in part its self-congratulatory reverence for the distant piety of abstract vegetarianism. After more than a year atop the best-seller list, when it might have seemed as if *The Bridges of Madison County* was outselling McDonald’s hamburgers, almost all mankind and womankind appeared to be shedding tears over the exquisite erotic renunciation enacted by the novel’s middle-aged lovers. But that merely makes the book sentimental. What makes it kitsch is the fact that readers are invited to feel ennobled for submitting to its sweet sorrow and for admiring a diet they would not adopt themselves. “The silver apples of the moon/The golden apples of the sun,” recites Richard, as he gazes at the rural August sunset. It is an image of fruit, not meat, and it is meet that Francesca, who studied literature at her Italian university and tried to bring poetry to the savage adolescents of Winterset, Iowa, should immediately catch the literary allusion: William Butler Yeats’s “The Song of Wandering Aengus.” “Poets were not welcome here,” concludes Francesca, who has abandoned her futile mission to teach poetry in the local high school. Poetry—like vegetarianism and like the man from Bellingham she associates with both—becomes something preciously exotic, all the more precious for being exotic. When Robert, “who wrote a little poetry but not much fiction,” rides off into the Pacific Northwest, Francesca can

worship the man without fear of qualification by further contact. So, too, is poetry exalted most by those who once encountered it and never bothered to sustain the acquaintance. And many esteem vegetarianism who will not forego pork chops with their potatoes. The second tear that readers of the novel shed says: How nice to be moved, together with all mankind, by the virtuous renunciation of romance, poetry, and rutabagas!

### III

*A Thousand Acres* complicates the recipe. Jess Clark, its carnivorous interloper from the Pacific Northwest, is not nearly as pacific a figure as Robert Kincaid. Though not quite as patently evil as Edgar, his diabolical Shakespearean prototype, Jess nevertheless exploits the affections of two Cook sisters in his scheme to gain control of the agricultural holdings of both Harold Clark and Laurence Cook. "The word 'relentless' was coined to describe you, Jess," says Rose during their first meeting after 13 years, and Jess proceeds to demonstrate that the coin is still tender. Jess's return to Zebulon County initiates the novel's brutal plot, and, though he has studied Buddhism, Jess manages to sow destruction and disorder before leaving Iowa again. When, like Robert Kincaid, Jess rides off into the Northwest, the survivors see blood.

Smiley does not sentimentalize Jess's vegetarianism. Her novel suggests that organic farmers can spread other toxins of their own. "He was more self-centered and calculating than you gave him credit for," says Rose to Ginny about their ginseng-guzzling lover Jess. Corn flakes not hogs are the witness if not the cause of Larry Cook's demise; the cantankerous old carnivore suffers a fatal heart attack while pushing his cart down the cereal aisle of a supermarket in Des Moines. Ultimately, though, pollution and butchery triumph. The Iowa soil continues to be saturated with the chemicals that poisoned Ginny's barren womb. And the family's thou-

sand acres are finally sold to an agribusiness conglomerate, the Heartland Corporation, which uses them to harvest five thousand sows. *A Thousand Acres* is the story of how the American garden becomes a killing field, but it is sophisticated enough to implicate its visiting vegetarian too in the atrocity.

Hamburger University, the training center for McDonald's employees, is appropriately located in the Midwest, in Oak Brook, Illinois. But so, too, is Battle Creek, Michigan, home of the dietary cranks satirized in *The Road to Wellville*. "A steak is every bit as deadly as a gun," proclaims Dr. John Harvey Kellogg in T. Coraghessan Boyle's 1993 novel. Also in the Midwest, and not far from McDonald's Oak Brook headquarters, is Oak Park, Illinois, home of *Vegetarian Times*, the sprightly monthly that has built a circulation of 165,000 in less than twenty years. A recent issue reported that 12.4 million adult Americans currently consider themselves vegetarian, double the figure for 1985. The United States Department of Agriculture, which long promoted frequent carnivorousness by defining meat as one of its basic food groups, now promotes a Food Guide Pyramid, in which meat has ceased to be essential to daily nutrition. *A Thousand Acres* and *The Bridges of Madison County* reflect the anxieties of traditional livestock culture suddenly challenged by a newly fashionable ethic of abstention from animal flesh. During Waller's lengthy run atop the fiction best-seller list, the nonfiction list included Dean Ornish's *Eat More, Weigh Less*, which urges reduction if not elimination of meat for a healthier diet. On April 14, 1992, while a broad coalition of environmental, animal-protection, health, family-farm, anti-hunger, and development organizations was launching "Beyond Beef," a campaign to reduce American beef consumption by at least fifty percent, the best-seller lists included Jay Kordich's *The Juiceman's Power of Juicing*, which proselytizes for a hale and happy life nourished by liquefied fruits and vegetables.

Robert Kincaid fancies himself "the last cowboy," but, in

1965 Iowa, he is the avant-garde of a new breed of boys who do not threaten cows. Instead, they threaten the American Midwestern ethos of dominating and subduing nature. They are conceived of as outsiders, even, in the case of military deserter Jess Clark, traitors to the values of an Iowa farmstead. Invading a world in which real men don't eat quiche, Jess and Robert reject the pork chops that are the prerogative and provender of patriarchy. After proving their virility, they drive off into the sunset, leaving behind a curious taste.