

Diet for a Dead Planet: How the Food Industry Is Killing Us. By Christopher D. Cook. 2004. The New Press, New York. 326 p. US \$24.95 hardbound. ISBN 1-56584-864-0.

The most eye-catching feature about Christopher Cook's book *Diet for a Dead Planet* is the vivid, pea-green cover with a white skull and crossbones on the front. Only, instead of crossed bones, it has a crossed knife and fork. The simple yet dramatically done cover is an appropriate representation for how Cook feels about the current food industry in the United States, and it is effective at grabbing a potential reader's attention. On page 11, Cook states that the "one underlying purpose of this book, is to lay bare these connections [between food consumption and production] to stimulate thinking and encourage action." Cook does an admirable job of meeting this goal. *Diet for a Dead Planet* is effective at inspiring thought and is also a reasonably thorough introduction to the issues faced by agriculture today.

The book is divided into 3 parts, with each part containing 4 or 5 chapters. Part 1 is titled "Consumed," and contains chapters 1 to 4, which cover a range of topics including consumer choices, Wal-Mart, animal-borne diseases like mad cow disease, and food-borne diseases like salmonella. The second part, titled "The Rise of the Corporate Cornucopia," contains chapters 5 to 8 and covers the history of agribusiness and technology. The third and final section, "Recipes for Disaster" (chapters 9–13), wraps up the book with a discussion about the environmental effects of agriculture, the abuses of food service workers and immigrant workers, and the Rachel Carson era and the subsequent creation of the various environmental protection policies like the Clean Air Act and the Clean Water Act.

Part 1 of the book is slightly confusing because it covers many different topics. At times it proved difficult reading because there wasn't any real connecting thread between the chapters to lead from one topic to the next. In chapter 1, Cook gives an overview of the issues he will be covering throughout the book, and he also states what he hopes to accomplish by the end of the book. Chapter 2 is about the politics and policies behind food pricing, supermarkets, and major food supply corporations like Wal-Mart. Chapter 2 also covers food availability and consumption patterns of the public. Chapter 3 focuses on livestock diseases like bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE), or mad cow disease; the avian flu virus; the elevated toxins in seafood; and how these problems come to exist within our food supply. Chapter 4 discusses how a process called *bacterial blowback* is increasing the frequency and deadliness of food-borne bacterial outbreaks while at the same time decreasing our ability to treat these outbreaks with antibiotics.

Part 2 of the book is a more cohesive section, as all the chapters are in chronological order and cover the history and development of agriculture in America. Chapter 5 covers President Nixon and his farm bill, the addition of the American food supply to the global market, the Homestead Act, the Civil War, and how these events have led to the conversion of farming from a singular occupation into a modern business. My favorite quotation of the book is in a section on page 94 from a farmer's refrain that reads, "The guys who farm farmers are the ones who get the spoil." Chapter 6 covers the Dust Bowl, farming techniques, and the use of biocides. One of the more thought-inspiring quotations is on page 102, where Cook states, "Many pesticide formulations had started out as nerve agents perfected by the Nazis." The effects of these pesticides are still being realized and are among the major environmental issues discussed in part 3 of the book. Chapter 7 covers mainly the "classic boom-bust cycle" of agriculture and the unexpected societal effects of the loss of the small farmer. Chapter 8 examines the top 3 companies in agriculture (Cargill, ConAgra, and ADM), genetically modified organisms (GMOs), and the green revolution. Also, this chapter discusses how the GMOs and the green revolution have resulted in a complete loss of what little bargaining power farmers previously had at the negotiating table. The result of the power loss is that the food supply chain in America from seed to the dinner table is now owned by a few select companies.

Part 3 effectively analyzes most of the environmental effects of our food industry and consumption choices of the public, but it covered these issues so briefly that it is difficult to understand just how big and controversial some of the issues are. Despite the brevity of the discussion about the environmental issues, the discussion about the exploitation of immigrants and food service workers is informative and thought provoking. Chapter 9 explains the effects and use of biocides and states that even before the use of biocides, we had a problem with overproduction in America. Chapter 10 examines the high levels of air and water pollution that occur from the high concentration of animals in the animal feedlots. Chapter 11 examines the food workers and immigrants and the Direct Job Placement program instituted by some welfare programs. Chapter 12 gives a more in-depth discussion of the Dust Bowl with a new focus on the farming



subsidies, surplus policies, and price controls created by the federal government. It also discusses how these policies were used on both local and global food markets. In the final chapter, 13, Cook ends with a discussion of the potential solutions to these problems, some of which are already being implemented on small scales, and considers what we need to do to implement changes on a larger scale.

Diet for a Dead Planet is interesting reading for anyone wanting to know more about the food they eat and how their choices as consumers can affect farmers, our society, and the environment. The book provides a solid introduction to the issues, some potential solutions, and what is currently being done to address some of the problems. The book is aimed at the general public rather than at scientists or specialists in the subject. Cook is an investigative journalist who focuses mainly on people and politics, so his book approaches the arguments mainly from a more humanist-political perspective. The discussions about the effects of

agriculture on humans, such as those on the food service workers, are strong and arresting arguments. However, the discussions about the environmental effects and animal abuse are superficial, and these sections read less intensely. These issues therefore come off as weaker, lesser interests and imply to the reader that they aren't as important. The book would be more interesting and balanced if an environmentalist or animal rights activist viewpoint had been effectively incorporated into the parts of the book related to these issues. A slightly more balanced approach to some of his arguments would have beefed up some of the weaker sections and increased the impact of the arguments. Ultimately, though, because Cook's discussions of the issues are successful at inspiring thought and the need for action, I would recommend this book to all.

Holly Bowers, Washington State University, Pullman, Washington. ♦

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