MOTHERHOOD STUDIES / WOMEN'S STUDIES / GENDER STUDIES / FOOD STUDIES

What's Cooking, Mom? offers original and inventive narratives, including auto-ethnographic discussions, of representations, discourses and practices about and by mothers regarding food and families. These narratives discuss the multiple strategies through which mothers manage feeding themselves and others, and how these are shaped by international and regional food politics, by global and local food cultures and by their own ethical values and preference, as well as by those of the ones they feed.

"The essays in What's Cooking, Mom? *explore the multiple ways in which gender, culture, health, and the food industry affect the work of feeding families. By highlighting the personal stories and perspectives of mothers, this collection makes important contributions to feminist mothering studies, food studies, and contemporary discussions about food and family."*
—**HEATHER HEWETT**, Associate Professor of English and Women's, Gender, and Sexualities Studies, The State University of New York at New Paltz

"*Drawn from life, the stories collected in* What's Cooking *introduce students and general readers to just how complex, troubling and rewarding, mothers' responsibilities for feeding their families can be. This is very rich fare!.*"
—**DONNA R. GABACCIA,** Professor, Department of Historical and Cultural Studies, University of Toronto

"*The editors and contributors have broadened the range of stories and experiences related to provisioning our bodies; we hear from mothers who have faced and overcome challenges such as feeding a child with celiac disease, as well as mothers who do not cook. Readers will find the narratives intrinsically interesting because we all must eat, although not all of us write about the experience with the passion of these authors. The book puts the cooking, feeding mother at the centre, while avoiding the moralizing discourses so often associated with the subject of motherhood and food.*"
—**PENNY VAN ESTERIK,** Professor Emerita, Anthropology, York University, Toronto

"*It's exciting to see* What's Cooking *explore in such pointed way the vibrant intersection between Motherhood Studies and Food Studies, even as it works to redress the disturbing absence of maternal voice in discussions of feeding work.*"
—**AMBER KINSER,** Professor and Chair of Communication & Performance, East Tennessee State University

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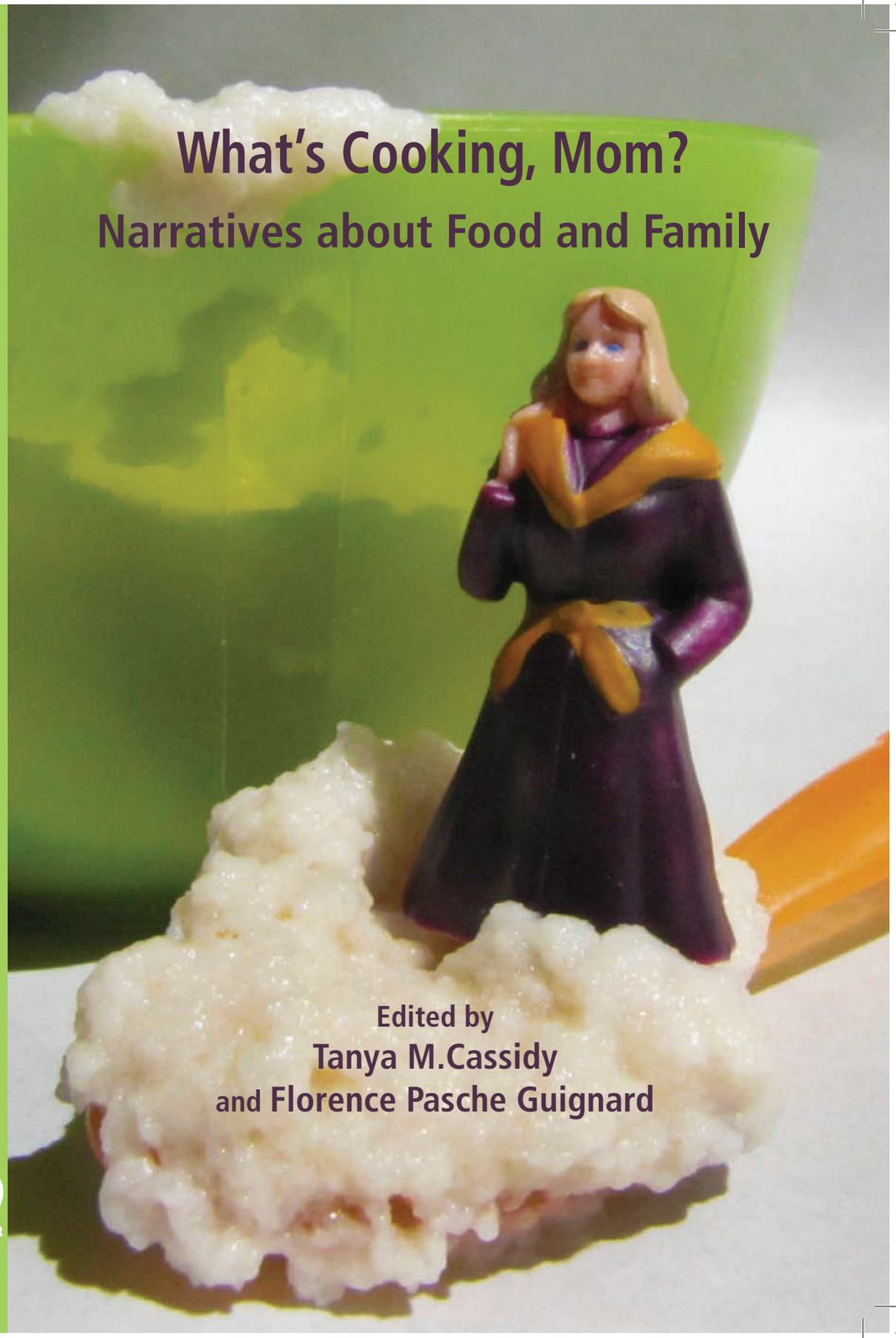
Narratives about Food and Family



Edited by
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and Florence Pasche Guignard

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Narratives about Food and Family

EDITED BY

Tanya M. Cassidy and Florence Pasche Guignard

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Introduction

TANYA M. CASSIDY AND FLORENCE PASCHE GUIGNARD

What's Cooking, Mom? Narratives about Food and Family consists of a series of contributions in the memoir tradition, together with autoethnographic, reflexive, and personal discussions. Our original Demeter Press call for papers on the subject of mothers and food resulted in many fascinating abstracts. Following a difficult selection process, we decided to organize the offerings we received around two volumes that we are publishing with Demeter Press, together with a third volume, which is still under negotiation with another Canadian press. All these volumes are in line with a motherhood studies approach that seeks to present authentic and often silenced maternal voices at the center of the inquiry, and this first volume consciously takes a literary and narrative approach. As shown by the many publications relevant to these topics, quoted by our contributors and referenced in the works cited sections of their own chapter, scholarship on motherhood, on food, or on both topics needs not necessarily be based on personal experience. However, through this volume, we deliberately position mothers as more than just objects of study: we position them as active subjects and reflexive narrators.

Some of our contributors are experts in creative writing, while others are scholars in the humanities, the social sciences, and in health research, thus making participation in this volume a unique occasion for reflecting on personal experiences that nevertheless have a much broader relevance. Some chapters are grounded in theory while others are more emotionally spontaneous and take on a narrative turn to share and reflect on some personal elements of

the authors' own lives, not just as researchers but as mothers, as spouses, as consumers, and as (sometimes displaced) participants in specific cultures. Some contributions show that many of these roles cannot be easily distinguished from one another, even as we strive to focus not just on gender or on women but also on motherhood, on mothering, and on mothers who are confronted with the task of feeding (their) children and themselves on a daily basis.

Through this interweaving of autoethnography with personal narratives, we aim at making this volume accessible to non-specialist readers interested in issues related to mothers, family, food, and nutrition. Motherhood studies and food studies scholars will also find several chapters of this volume valuable as well as our other edited collection entitled *Mothers and Food: Negotiating Foodways from Maternal Perspectives* (2016). This second volume features more traditionally research-based contributions, extensively referencing the scholarly literature on this topic. In *What's Cooking, Mom? Narratives about Food and Family*, such references are to be found in the works cited sections of the chapters that follow an autoethnographic approach and, in particular, in those that espouse a more formal academic tone. This first volume is to be understood as rather informal—a comfortable potluck or buffet-style get-together with friends and family, in contrast to a stuffy dinner at a high-end formal restaurant. We invite our readers to pick and choose, depending on their own tastes and expectations, focusing their choice of particular chapters or sections. Reading this book can be done just in the same way one shares such a meal: with flexibility, skipping back and forth, or saving some of the chapters for dessert.

This volume contributes to scholarship on gender and food by re-centring the discussion on maternal perspectives. Drawing from and contributing to motherhood studies, it takes seriously maternal voices and resituates them at the centre of a web of interactions that involves a variety of positions and of actors, including other family members such as fathers, children, and grandparents. In addition, several contributors in this volume discuss other key influences from daycares, schools, government, and health care workers. Some contributions also illustrate how stories of families and food are influenced, now more than ever, by the food industry, especially

agribusinesses, which lobby for government legislation regarding food production, marketing, and safety. Food products are often aggressively marketed to mothers-as-consumers, although children themselves may also be targeted. Many of these stories show that mothers are not bound to be consumers, but that they can also be critical of such industries or that, in order to feed themselves or their children, they can rely on alternative networks that do not necessarily place profit at the centre of their values. Finally, some of our contributors also explore their own past or present position of mother-as-(re)producer, if not of foodstuff itself than at least of food traditions that are culturally meaningful for their own families or for larger contexts.

The economic, cultural, and even religious specificities of each context and the particular *foodways* and expectations laid on parents and, more particularly, on mothers are important to consider in any discussion of mothers and food, as we now live in a globalizing world and in an interconnected era. People get information from everywhere, and foodstuffs are imported and often available from all over the world. We get online ideas not only for what to serve but also for how to prepare it, frequently with emotive maternal discussions about the choices—often taken within a range of constrained options—that mothers around the world make every day. Several of the narratives and autoethnographic accounts in this volume add texture and complexity to often simplistic views of individual and, more importantly, maternal responsibility regarding the feeding of families. Through such discussions, this volume also intends to contribute to the burgeoning and highly interdisciplinary field of food studies.

Several of the contributions explore multiple and sometimes interdependent aspects of mothering and feeding, and could have occupied several of the sections of this book, organized around three main themes. The first section, dedicated to positionality, ethics, and meanings, includes five chapters centred around reflexivity and responsibility. Confronting her sometimes conflicting perspective as an expert dietician, as a feminist scholar, and as a mother, Christin L. Seher "talks back to herself" while she recounts her own difficult experiences of breastfeeding and of feeding her son with sensory challenges. In line with the issue of confronting

experts, getting help, and negotiating personal responsibility in cases of difficult feeding, Joyce L. Mandell discusses her experiences of being a mother to a child with celiac disease in a gluten-dominated world. In the following chapter, Sarah N. Gatson, who explores positionality from an intersectional perspective, offers an autoethnographic account of maternal food production. She links her discussion to her academic or pedagogical self and to the transmission of gardening and cooking skills. Lorin Basden Arnold then highlights some of the conflicts that arise when confronting particular ethical diets, "good mothering," and the feeding of loved ones. Along with questions of a mother's own dietary preferences the authors also explore issues of limited maternal authority over the family's food choices and responsibility towards the environment and animals. Tanya M. Cassidy, one of the editors of this volume, and her partner, Conrad Brunström, end this first section with a discussion of the meanings of human donor milk. Discussing these meanings for both premature babies and for their mothers, the authors shape their discussion around personal experiences about such breastmilk. By highlighting these highly medicalized experiences of breastmilk and breastfeeding, the authors' intention is not to treat breastfeeding negatively but rather to demonstrate inventive and inspiring communal means by which challenges can be tackled.

The six chapters of the second section of the book centre around memories of food and expose some of the issues that make feeding the family such an intensive and at times challenging work. The narratives in this section further disrupt the normative and culturally constructed impression of women as perfect nurturing mothers, of food work as essentially or naturally feminine and maternal, and of family meals as necessarily happy times. Key to most of the chapters in this section is a reflexive exploration, sometimes distanced in time, of emotions—especially the heightened anxieties of maternal guilt, fear and shame, topics that several contributors address—from different perspectives. First, Robin Silbergleid writes about feeding and weaning her daughter, and about confronting doctors and experts, another recurring theme in this volume. Writing from the perspective and with the distance of a mother whose children are now grown up, B. Lee Murray tackles mater-

nal regret in her discussion of the intensive labour associated not just with preparing but with *producing* food. Her exploration of farm-work culture shows some of the conflicts that might arise when food is emotionally linked to considerations about time as a (scarce) resource. Similarly, Kari O'Driscoll's narrative exposes how feeding a family can become a full-time job. She describes the time spent, and the labour associated with, preparing and *purchasing* food with care while dealing with health related issues, which enhances a sense of maternal responsibility. Writing from the perspective of a grandmother, Dominique O'Neill recalls how and why her "mother did not cook," and how this affected her later role as a mother and a grandmother. Her perspective conveys the reality that some mothers do not cook and that mothers are not the only ones who cook for and with children. Her narrative shows how preparing and eating meals together can potentially be not only a source of pleasure but also of tension. Erica Cavanagh then explores memories about food, in particular about sweets, as an expression of love, and about the expectations placed on American women as wives and mothers in the twentieth century. She shares some of the lessons that her grandmother, the central figure in her chapter, has taught her. Finally, Grace M. Cho's piece examines how her familial maternal history of immigration from Korea to the U.S. influenced her strong desire for exclusive breastfeeding. In addition to sharing her disappointment at not being able to breastfeed exclusively as she had wished, her contribution also reflects on negotiating cultural difference and thus marks a transition to the following section.

In the six chapters of our last section, entitled "Negotiating Cultural Difference," eight contributors share their perspectives regarding food and feeding in both space and time and especially in relationship to cultural traditions. Emily Weiskopf-Ball first asks which lessons mothers can teach their children through "traditional foods" as she emphasizes the passing of family traditions that may not always correspond to dominant—but not always widely followed—norms of "healthy eating" in a given context. Florence Pasche Guignard, one of the editors of this volume, and her husband, Thomas Guignard, discuss their experiences as European newcomers navigating cultural differences at the intersection of

parenting and foodways in a multicultural urban centre in Canada. Their intertwined narratives underline how culturally constructed ideals of good parenting and healthy foodways concern the mother and the father to different extents. Two complementary and contrasting discussions from mothers regarding Japanese food culture follow. They choose different strategies to navigate among their own preferences, those of their children and other relatives, and several sets of sometimes conflicting expectations placed on mothers. Wendy Jones Nakanishi explains how and to what extent, as a long-time resident in Japan married to a Japanese farmer, she embraces cultural differences. Her discussion reflects her awareness of her particular position as a foreigner and as a working mother in a context where most women are expected to stay home to raise their children and do all the domestic work. She also acknowledges the importance and support of her mother-in-law in such uncommon arrangements. In the next chapter, during her stay in Japan, Meredith Stephens reflects on the impact of her very different choices and experiences on her daughters and herself, and its lasting effects after their relocation to Australia. Her chapter shows how the notion of "healthy food choices," again, is framed as a maternal responsibility and how notions of health vary across cultures. Although these two mothers lived as foreigners in the same country, their experiences of mothering and feeding children were not the same, despite some common elements. Rosa E. Soto and Sharmila Pixy Ferris offer another cultural comparison in a U.S. context. In this partially autoethnographic piece, they use results from a pilot study to discuss Caribbean food and family traditions, echoing elements raised by other authors earlier in this section. Finally, the issue of migration also underpins the excerpt from Dorothy Abram's stage drama titled *The Cooking Lesson*. Shifting from the purely narrative perspective of the other chapters of this collection, in this excerpt from a longer series of plays, she dramatizes in particular the relation to food traditions and notions of home and family, in which the mother plays a central role, for Bhutanese Nepali Hindu refugees in America.

We close this introduction by recognizing the important caveat that it is difficult to speak about mothers and food without being accused of essentialism, of glorifying women's role as nurturer,

and therefore reducing women to this role. In many cultures, feeding within the family is often the domain of women, and in particular mothers, although this may be changing in some countries as the recent edited volume about fathers who cook for their family, entitled *Man with Pan* (Donohue), may indicate. A way for feminist scholars to avoid being drawn into this essentialist trap is to point out how the responsibility of "feeding the family" (DeVault) remains highly gendered but also shaped by cultural variations, as several contributions in this volume demonstrate. Acknowledging that the vast majority of food work for the family is still completed by women, and more specifically by mothers, is not the same as positioning food labour as "natural" processes situated at the intersection of both care work and domestic work. Key to all of these narratives is the recognition that the activity of feeding children and families is a crucial aspect of everyday life and therefore deserves to be celebrated and recognized for its centrality in understanding culture, society, and individuals.

This collection has no intention of proposing a normalizing—or worse, a normative—discourse. Particular diets, foodways, feeding, and the food work done by mothers can be positioned as part of the institution of motherhood or as part of a potentially empowering mothering experience, following Adrienne Rich's distinction. As several contributors show, not all experiences of mothering and feeding are as easy, happy, and perfect as marketing efforts and public health agencies would have us believe. Some chapters take an earnest tone to show how difficult the highly gendered work of feeding the family remains, even for those who are more privileged in terms both of socio-economic status and education. Several of our contributors (Seher, O'Driscoll, O'Neill, and Murray) mention the economic and professional constraints that they or their own mothers endured—or that they stomached—during their own childhood. Others (Gatson, Soto and Ferris) reflect on the specific challenges that mothers who are part of ethnic minorities or in situations of economic migration find themselves entangled in and that are often tied to other socio-economic issues.

These challenges provoke creative responses and ongoing initiatives on the part of mothers that illustrate the improvised nature of global maternal foodways. That this edited collection features

no chapter written from the perspective of a mother explicitly self-identifying as coming from or dealing with a low-income situation is not a deliberate choice from our part as co-editors but simply reflects the contents of the proposals generated through our widely circulated call for contributions. This absence also serves as a reminder that low-income mothers are more often than not the object of study rather than subjects in their own right. To be sure, some scholarship relays their voices (as do several chapters of our forthcoming volume *Mothers and Food*) and takes them seriously, but most of the time, low-income mothers are prone to be subjected to moralizing discourses (about breastfeeding, children's health and "healthy nutrition," among others) that this volume precisely tries to avoid.

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