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### Q&A: Taras Grescoe

December 5th, 2008 by Jared Bland in The Shelf



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Taras Grescoe's excellent book *Bottomfeeder* is now out in paperback, and recently won the prestigious Writers Trust Award for best non-fiction book of the year. I reviewed Taras's book in our June issue. He was kind enough to answer my questions about fish, food writing, and fans.

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**The book's main argument—that we should stop eating large, predatory fish and instead consume the more sustainable bottomfeeders—requires an adjustment in our attitudes toward dinner. In researching and adopting the ideas in the book, what has been the single biggest adjustment you've made?**

I've completely adjusted my eating habits when it comes to seafood.

Before I started researching and writing *Bottomfeeder*, I figured that getting my protein in the form of seafood, from the oceans, was smarter than getting it in the form of chicken, poultry, or beef, from industrial abattoirs and factory farms. It was a fairly straightforward decision, one I made in the early 90s: fish was clearly more sustainable, and healthier, than meat. At the time, it seemed to me the oceans were inexhaustible as a food source.

Soon enough, though, I started noticing that things weren't so simple. The cod collapse happened, which made me wonder about whether it was ethical to eat bacalao and frozen fish sticks. Some fish were in enough trouble to be the target of consumer boycotts: Chilean sea bass, for example, and swordfish. Then I started hearing about mercury, PCBs, dioxins in tuna and farmed salmon. I started questioning my healthy, sustainable choice, and out of that *Bottomfeeder* was born.

When I became a piscivore, I ate indiscriminately up and down the food chain, from oysters to shark. In researching *Bottomfeeder*, in seeing some of the last wild bluefin tuna being auctioned off at Tsukiji market, in seeing exactly what goes into the feed of farmed salmon (ground up sardines and chicken manure, among many other things), in seeing the devastation to oceanic food webs caused by the removal of sharks, skates, and other top-level predators, I've definitely changed my eating habits. I eat at the middle to lower end of the food chain now, favoring small schooling fish like mackerel, sardines, and herring, for my day-to-day eating. (Forget Chicken of the Sea for lunch: I'd rather have a mackerel-salad sandwich).

This doesn't limit me to bait, though. I also look forward to Nova Scotia lobster and Belon oysters; I enjoy Pacific halibut, arctic char, and smoked trout on my bagels.

Seafood isn't like beef, poultry, or pork. There are 350 species of seafood on sale in the North American market, so it stands to reason: if you want to choose wisely, you've got to get informed. Writing *Bottomfeeder* was my way of turning myself into a knowledgeable piscivore.

**You spend much of the book talking to people—chefs, fishermen, scientists, consumers. Beyond their levels of knowledge and awareness, did you find that these groups had different ways of understanding or relating to fish?**

Sure. Top chefs are interested in the quality of the flesh, the ease of cooking: that's why they liked Chilean sea bass, aka the Patagonian toothfish, whose flesh is so marbled with fat that you can forget it in the oven for 40 minutes. They're also interested in reliable supply lines. Manhattan's top chefs get their FedEx bills from Alaska, France, and Japan, which is why you pay so much: you're covering their FedEx bills. For most chefs, the aesthetic aspects of cooking fish are paramount; and I respect them for their perfectionism. However, I have more respect for the growing number of chefs I've met from Sydney, Australia, to Wolfville, Nova Scotia, who are trying to marry sustainability with aesthetics.

It is impossible to generalize about fishermen. For some, it is an industrial activity; the fish could be widgets or battery hens. In general, however, the smaller-scale, artisanal fishermen tend to express more concern for the future of the oceans. And quite a significant number make a point of minimizing the suffering of the fish they've caught on their nets or lines.

As for scientists, some are in the employ of government agencies, like the DFO or the NMFS, and their research is often determined, or even squelched, by their superiors (as was the case in the cod collapse). The ones who seem to have the clearest outlook work in the ecology or fisheries departments of universities. I'm thinking of Daniel Pauly at UBC, and Boris Worm and the late Ransom Myers of Dalhousie (the latter an escapee from the DFO). The relationship these independent academics have with fish is unfortunately rather bleak: they see the oceans in constant decline from a recent past of unbelievable abundance to a near future of prehistoric barrenness.

Consumers, finally, are just plain bewildered. Most know that some species might be high in mercury, that some might be overfished. Too many assume that farmed equals bad, which is simply not the case.

**Your book's subtitle mentions eating ethically. You've spoken in the past about the direction food writing in general is taking. What would you say to readers—and your fellow writers—about the idea of writing ethically about food?**

Don't be pedantic, overbearing, or self-righteous. We all have to decide what we're going to put in our mouths two, three, sometimes five times a day. But people have other things on their mind besides food: jobs, kids, mortgages, sick relatives. Figuring out how to be a locavore, a vegan, or a well-informed fish-eater isn't for everybody. In fact, up until now, it's been for a rather privileged few. You need the luxury of time, a luxury not everybody has.

I happened to have the luxury of a book contract, which gave me three years to figure out how to better feed myself. The approach I take now is to explain my choices—when people ask. But you won't find me haranguing waiters, fishmongers, or my fellow diners.

Surely one of the pleasures of writing this book was the months of travel and eating. But it couldn't all have been highlights. What was the worst meal you had on the road, and why?

I really got into the research for the chapter on fish 'n' chips in the UK. I had a couple of dozen plates of battered groundfish, from London to Edinburgh, in the space of two weeks. By the end my complexion was in full adolescent sebaceous crisis and their were mushy peas coming out of my nostrils.

Strangely, though, in all of this extreme seafood-eating, from hairy crabs in Shanghai to cuttlefish gonads in Marseilles, I never once got sick.

**You've now toured all over with this book. What have readers you've met found the most surprising in it? And how have you been surprised by people's reactions to the book?**

People have no idea where farmed shrimp comes from or how bad it can be. No inkling of the connection between mangrove destruction, contaminated groundwater, and rural poverty in Asia and the popcorn shrimp all-you-can-eat meal deals in strip malls across North America. I was surprised by their surprise.

And I was surprised by the reactions of the vegetarians and raw-food faddists who believe we shouldn't eat any fish at all. This mostly came from city-dwellers in California and British Columbia. Having grown up on the west coast, I should have anticipated it: there are people who think that everybody should survive on soyburgers and noni juice. It's an elitist position, one that denies the reality of the billion humans, among them the poorest on the planet, who get most of their protein from the oceans. (What we need to do is stop catching perfectly edible small ocean fish and grinding them up to feed to luxury species, like shrimp and salmon, or using them to fatten pigs or spread on lawns in the form of fertilizer.) It also denies the fact that humans are omnivorous primates that likely evolved in shorefront environments, and whose brains actually need DHA and EPA, two omega-3 fatty acids that are abundant only in the oceanic food chain, to grow and function properly.

Which explains why vegans will never win this debate. Their neurons just don't fire fast enough any more.

**What are you working on now?**

For the time being, that's between me and my agent.

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