

The Taste of Memory

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Marion Halligan

A Sue Hines Book
Allen & Unwin

Author photograph courtesy of *The Canberra Times*.

First published in 2004

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A Sue Hines Book

Allen & Unwin

83 Alexander Street

Crows Nest NSW 2065

Australia

Phone: (61 2) 8425 0100

Fax: (61 2) 9906 2218

Email: info@allenandunwin.com

Web: www.allenandunwin.com

National Library of Australia

Cataloguing-in-Publication entry:

Halligan, marion.

The taste of memory.

Includes index.

ISBN 1 74114 312 8.

1. Halligan, Marion, 1940–. 2. Food writers – Australia – Biography.

I. Title.

641.092

Edited by Caroline Williamson

Text design and typesetting by Pauline Haas

Printed in Australia by McPherson's Printing Group

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

*To beloved friends, named and unnamed;
may we enjoy lots more eating and drinking and talking*

'Then you should say what you mean,' the March Hare went on.

'I do,' Alice hastily replied; 'at least—at least I mean what I say—that's the same thing, you know.'

'Not the same thing a bit!' said the Hatter. 'Why, you might just as well say that "I see what I eat" is the same thing as "I eat what I see!"'

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On the bone

Before I became a novelist I used to write about food. In an ephemeral and journalistic sort of way, for newspapers and magazines. When I first started trying to do this, my husband, being a perfectionist in his own work, was a bit worried. What if it isn't good enough, he said. What if nobody wants to read it? And anyway, hasn't it been done before?

Well, in journalism most things have been done before. They come round in cycles, with perhaps a contemporary spin, maybe not even that; the longer you live the more often you see the repetitions. But in fact what I was doing hadn't been done before, then. There were plenty of recipes around, but I was interested in stories as well, in words and their meanings, in histories and anecdotes, in food as a conversation that people had with one another.

I wrote at first for *Epicurean*, in the days when it couldn't afford to be coloured and glossy, and had wonderful strange black and white photographs that may have involved food but not in any edible way. I did an article for *Quadrant* in the seventies which was shaped as a lament for the absence of any philosophical writing about food, 'the ethos, the essence, and the idea of eating well', but was mainly about restaurant reviewers, dividing them into three categories: critics, sycophants and pedestrians. In those days a lot of restaurant reviews told you about

how we all went down to Bill Pancetta's marvellous new place and he plied us with half the dishes on the menu and delicious they were et cetera, and it was obvious that Bill was a terrific buddy and that there was nothing at all professional or anonymous about the account of his establishment. *Quadrant* changed 'sycophants' to 'friends' which I thought was very wimpy of them, but I could understand their point, I did name names and it is a litigious trade. Interesting that they didn't censor pedestrians.

Here is the last paragraph of that article. It makes me smile a bit now, and with a certain embarrassment, at the tone of it, so severe, so pontificating. I'm glad I have since found a friendlier voice. But I understand what I was up to, I was young, this was the first time I had been published in what I perceived was a serious intellectual journal like *Quadrant*, I was determined to achieve an appropriate gravitas. And I am not at all apologetic about the sentiments; they are exactly how I feel today, how I feel about this book, any book about food:

Writing about food is not a totally satisfactory activity. It has too many intimations of decadence, in a world where so often the mere presence of food is such an event that the consideration of its elegance would be an obscenity. The only justification of our preoccupation with food is that, since we do eat a great deal, we should do it well. A basic function, which takes up so much of our time, should if it is not to be disgusting, become an art. Similarly, writing about food is only justifiable if it too is done well, if it too becomes an art. In a lot of cases we have succeeded in raising the preparation of food to such a level, but a well-made piece of writing on the subject is a much rarer phenomenon.

Not at all chatty, you'd have to say, but true.

Later I did a weekly column for the *Canberra Times* with the title 'Eat My Words', which gave me the name for the book I published in 1990, and which is the one of all the sixteen I have written that people most often ask me about. Alas, like most back-list books, it is out of print.

How did I get interested in food?

I always was, I think. Greed, might be one reason. The fact that when I was a child we never got quite enough to eat. Or not that exactly, rather that we never got to eat as much as we would have chosen. No magic cut-and-come-again puddings, no second helpings. Perhaps I should not say never but hardly ever. But food was rare enough, and precious, not to be taken for granted. At the same time it was often quite boring, and when I began to read my mother's *Women's Weeklys* I got interested in the vision they offered of food as something varied, interesting, exotic, amusing.

When I came to write *Eat My Words* I realised that my awakening to food, in those postwar years when rationing and austerity gradually gave way to plenty, was of much the same pattern as the country's. That as I learned, so did Australia. Of course I see no causal connection here; it was an accident of my age, of being born when I was. But one of the best things anybody said to me about the book was by a woman who came from Kalgoorlie. She loved it, she said, it was exactly her childhood, her growing up, she recognised her life in it.

The first chapter was called 'From Castor to Olive in One Generation', which related how for me as a child oil was castor and a cure for all ills that was so absolutely frightful a punishment that the mere mention of it got you better instantly. A child too sick to go to school could be miraculously restored to health by the prospect of castor oil. But by the time I was barely grown oil was olive and utterly delicious. And there were the olives themselves. And garlic.

In Newcastle I had a boyfriend called Lionel who gave me a cook-book for my birthday. French cooking it was. I still make its recipe for

onion soup. Then I came to Canberra to the Australian National University and lived in Bruce Hall, where all meals were included. Lunch was buffet, but dinner was served to the table on large platters. It was a good idea to try to sit near the end they arrived at, otherwise if the greedy scholarship boys got in first they'd grab everything. This was in the last days of Oxbridge-in-the-Antipodes, when we said grace in Latin and wore gowns to dinner and High Table promenaded in at the last minute. Except Saturday night which was informal and when we had steak since a lot of people went out that night. Tough steak, and overcooked, and kept warm in a bain-marie, but we were supposed to be grateful for the idea.

I was in Canberra to do an MA which I never actually did finish partly because it was about Shakespeare and I got stuck in the reading. Nobody told me just to read Shakespeare's plays and not the five million books about him in the university library and so I got overwhelmed. I'd wanted to do something on Australian little magazines which could have been a useful piece of scholarship, Alec Hope was to have been my supervisor but he couldn't or I think wouldn't do it. Twenty-five years later he launched my first novel, *Self Possession*, and made a speech in which he said he'd realised early on in my association with him that I was not a born scholar, which seemed as if it was going to be a difficult thing to hear on this occasion, but then he went on to say that he had not however realised I was a born writer. Which was a lovely thing to say and quite possibly he meant it, he was not known for mincing words, and indeed there is a story that somebody whose book he reviewed harshly committed suicide. He is famous for saying that Patrick White wrote 'pretentious and illiterate verbal sludge'.

Later, being a naturally optimistic sort of person, I decided that it was lucky I never did finish that MA, I might have become an academic and I don't think that is a good path to becoming a novelist. It is better not to be scholarly when you write fiction, you need to learn to trust

your imagination. Sometimes people say of my books, is that true, is that a fact, did that really happen? And I reply, Well, my character thinks it did. I'm not responsible if he's got it wrong.

But Bruce Hall: I moved out because I got sick of living in a public institution, however luxurious. I wanted to have my own place and do my own cooking. Just before I did this I met my husband, who had newly come to Canberra to a lectureship in the French department and was staying in hall until a flat became available. We were a bit nervous about being isolated in our separate flats, and exchanged addresses. I invited him to dinner in mine; I did have a flatmate but she was away somewhere. It was mostly a double garage under an enormous Red Hill house, very far out it seemed, a long way from the city, cold, draughty, with a concrete floor and a small rug with a dining table and chairs in the middle of echoing space, not made any cosier by strange shrouded shapes around the walls. This was in the days of housing shortages and subsidised rents for public servants who'd had the good sense to marry before they arrived, which meant landlords could charge astronomical prices. The tiny kitchen was also the laundry for upstairs. A very bad arrangement as I would have dinner parties and not do the washing up, and the landlady would come down early in the morning thinking she could do her laundry and find the place stacked with the debris of my dinners. I have always been much more interested in cooking than cleaning up. I want to be a television chef with unseen fairies whisking all the used pots away.

And of course being a double garage so cold I caught pneumonia and went on my honeymoon with a rash from a penicillin allergy. But that was later.

Graham was my first dinner party. I remember one of the dishes I cooked was called Ghivech, from a book I had bought at a sale. It was a kind of vegetable stew, Romanian, you put a whole lot of vegetables in a dish with chicken stock and cooked them for an hour and a half. It

was nice but I remember a slight doubt about it, and now I see why, that's a ludicrously long cooking time for diced potatoes even, let alone cabbage and beans and peas and zucchini. It was extremely mushy, with little colour or texture, even if the flavour was good. I got pretty French in my recipes, after that, probably only partly for Graham's sake.

Graham was annoyed with himself for failing to bring a bottle of wine. How could he have not done so, he berated himself, he'd been overseas for five years, in Cambridge and then in Paris, he'd been a student but that didn't mean not drinking wine. He didn't imply any reproach of me for not providing it, the wine was his job. I had most of a bottle of Penfold's cooking wine which was not very good but had cost four shillings and sixpence, an enormous amount of money for bad wine, I could have got a whole flagon of delicious plonk for less than that. But anyway we had a glass of it. That was in my still fairly teetotal days, before I learnt to drink wine.

Shortly after that he bought a car so he could come and visit me; Red Hill was the end of the earth in those days and the buses hopeless, mostly we walked from Manuka. I remember realising at twenty to five one Friday afternoon that I had no money or prospect of getting any over the weekend (young people can't imagine how difficult life was before ATMs, not to mention credit cards) and running all the way down to Manuka, fortunately it was down, from Red Hill, to get to the bank at about a minute to five. I took out some money and was about to set off home, uphill this time, when Graham came past in the VW, coming to visit me, so that all ended very nicely. How lovely, to have a car to ourselves and be able to go wherever we wanted. I can't remember what we did, but we passed a good evening, probably mainly talking, though we may have gone to the continental cinema in Queanbeyan which was the only place you could see foreign films. I do remember the happiness of our companionship. And those first

tentative steps towards couplehood, when you think, this is good, maybe it is going to keep on going? Maybe, possibly, perhaps, there is a pattern being set here?

And that was the beginning of a whole life together, a whole life of food and conversation. Of going shopping together, or me coming home with little parcels of goodies, and Graham always delighted, opening a bottle of wine to go with them, discussing how they would be cooked, what we would eat them with. Every day he would ring me from work: was there anything he could get, anything he should buy, had I forgotten anything? He wasn't a great giver of flowers, but he loved bringing home interesting bottles of wine to try. We never argued on the phone, or got cross with one another, as though this line connecting us could have nothing to do with life's ordinary vicissitudes.

Once I said to Graham that I wondered what would have happened had I married an engineer and gone to Saudi Arabia, instead of a medievalist who took me to France. What would I have written about then? Would I have got interested in putting food into words?

He was disturbed by this. He did not at all like the idea that I might have become a drastically different person by marrying someone else. But in those days and probably still to an extent women's lives were shaped by the professions of the men they married. Maybe now sometimes men's are shaped by their wives'. And of course the person we become owes a lot to our spouse. But I think a lot of life is much more accidental than we give it credit for being. Small choices, let alone large ones like the person you marry, can set things going in different directions. I think I would have been interested in food and cooking and the idea of it whoever I'd married, but there's no doubt that a number of sabbaticals in France, usually a year long, helped. Especially as we didn't have much money, and had to be thrifty, and live like the locals, and I did have enough French to go to the markets and shop quite successfully. Though I could get into muddles.

Once I was at the market in Suresnes which is a suburb of Paris with Graham and some colleagues and our children, we were newly arrived and I was shopping for the first time, on this occasion but also the first time ever in France, Jane and Colin were showing us around. I asked for half a kilo of liver pâté. The woman looked stunned. She measured out a huge chunk with her knife and grinned at me. Jane came to the rescue. It was a matter of vocabulary. One didn't ask for weight, one asked for *un morceau*, a morsel. The woman would then put her knife at some arbitrary spot on the pâté or terrine or cheese or whatever and you would say, yes, or no; more, or less, making your own chopping gesture with your hand. So you bought the amount by eye, knowing how much you wanted by the look. Whenever I went to the market after that, the woman, red-checked and round and made even rounder by the layers of clothes she was wearing against the cold, would shout, A kilo of pâté de foie for madame? And roar with laughter.

*

Late in the eighties I was on a panel at the Melbourne Festival, I think it was called Spoleto in those days, with a publisher. The panel was called 'My companion had the veal'. I talked about different ways of writing about food, how recipe books had changed, the role that coloured pictures played in the presentation of dishes. Why didn't I write a book about it, the publisher said. And there was *Eat My Words*. I soon realised Graham would have to be in it. He was so much part of the narrative, he had to be named. He wasn't very keen, being a private person, but recognised the necessity. What shall I call you, I said. I'm certainly not going to say *my husband and I*, in the fashion of our queen. He didn't want to be called by his own name, not then, not at all. The initial G seemed pompous and pointless. Well, I said, what about if I call you Cosmo. He liked that, said Yes.

Cosmo was one of the names we talked about for calling our son.

Along with Orlando. I don't think they were ever much more than fantastical. Though I still think Orlando would have been good. Orlando Halligan: it has a ring. James is appalled by this. In fact nothing makes him shudder quite so much as the small slip of paper in the *Pan Book of Boys' Names*, with its list of possible names for our new son. I dare not repeat them here. He considers he had a lucky escape. He could do push-ups at several hours old, or at least turn himself in his crib from one side to the other, and pulled off his nametag, those clever plastic bracelets that can only be removed by cutting away, so he had to have another. I still have this ripped off label with Baby Halligan on it. Did they muddle him with another child, you might wonder. No. No doubt. But it took a while to decide a name for him. Even a new baby has a personality, the name has to fit; maybe we thought Orlandos don't drag off name tags. Whereas with Lucy there was no problem. I said to Graham once, in the VW in Manuka days, he'd parked at the shops but we were sitting having a conversation, What do you think of Lucy for a girl's name? Oh yes, I like that, he said, and so there we were. Never any question, and fortunately as soon as we looked at her we knew she was a Lucy. Lucy Beatrice. When she was born one of the nuns in Graham's class pointed out we'd named her after two child martyrs.

Thus are the narratives of a life made.

Anyway, Cosmo got its run, as the name of my spouse in *Eat My Words*, and then in *Cockles of the Heart*. And several dedications in books. But by this time Graham didn't much care for being Cosmo. Was quite grumpy about it in fact. Cosmo somehow became something he was offended by. Thought he was an awful ponce, instead of being an appellation he could hide behind. So now as I write he is himself, Graham, and I don't know what he would think of that. Like everything else, now he has died, I have to make the choice, make the decision. I can think about what he might have wanted, but it is I who have to work it out, finally, on my own.

I've been thinking too about Cosmo, and have only recently worked out what made Graham uncomfortable. It was my book *The Fog Garden* that clarified it for me. This is a novel, it owes a lot to the events of my life but it is still a work of fiction. I needed fiction to be frank in a way I never could have been in a memoir. The main character is a woman called Clare, who is very like me but isn't me. I think Graham thought that Cosmo was not him, he was a character in a book, very like him but other, not somebody he liked particularly. I don't think anything can be done about this; whenever a person is put in a book, however truthfully his story is told, he still somehow becomes a character, not himself. That goes for the most strict of biographies. I wish I'd realised at the time, and could have reassured Graham that this was a simple literary phenomenon.

I knew I wanted *Eat My Words* to be a book about food, not just recipes but stories, the kind of thing readers could enjoy without feeling it was mainly a catalogue of recipes they were failing to cook; food as idea and history and travel and above all words. But it wasn't till it came back from the printer, a real book, between covers, not a manuscript, that I realised it was also an autobiography. A lot of writers don't know what their book's about until it comes in this finished form, the form that others will read; then they go through it and think, Oh, so that's what I was doing. This may sound a bit fey and even ditsy, but it is part of the mysterious process of writing books.

It isn't a straightforward chronological autobiography, but my life is the spine of it, the skeleton, what gives its flesh shape and holds it together. And all cooks know that meat tastes better on the bone. That's where the real flavour comes from.

This book isn't *Eat My Words*. It is another set of stories of my life in food, and travel, and especially gardens, these nourishing spaces that we like to surround ourselves with. I am older now, and sadder. That married life which began with such shyly burgeoning hopes ended in