

Samira Kawash, *Candy: A Century of Panic and Pleasure* (New York: Faber and Faber, 2013). viii + 402 pp., illus. ISBN 9780865477568. \$31.50.

Rita Neyer, University of Alberta

Candy has a long and contested history. Over the last two hundred years, its main ingredient, sugar, changed from luxury item to inexpensive fuel for the hard working lower classes to demonized health issue. Rational arguments have long since turned into an ideological fight. The detrimental effects of addictive, hyper-processed sugar products that pave the way to obesity and diabetes dominate contemporary discussion. A phalanx of angry parents, health organizations and governmental institutions has united to herald the last hours of sugar and to fight a war against gluttony.

Driven by both professional curiosity and parental concern about sugar, Samira Kawash, herself a professor emerita for Women and Gender Studies at Rutgers University (and holding degrees in Literature as well as Political Sciences and Economics), investigates in great depth the history of candy from the middle of the 19th century until today. The book's fifteen short chapters, with titles such as "Evil or Just Misunderstood," "Becoming Food," or "Treat or Trick," cater directly to the audience's curiosity, although a further division into topical parts would have been convenient for academic purposes. The introductory chapter is followed by a trilogy on the beginnings of candy manufacturing. Chapters five to nine focus on candy's golden years in the first half of the 20th century, when sugar was medically recommended to keep you warm in winter and candy was valued as a cooking ingredient or 'Fighting Food' for America's soldiers. The long way down to a demonized anti-food is portrayed in chapters ten to fourteen: cavities and junk

food, diets and fortified nutrients represent the ambivalence with which a science-indoctrinated and media-controlled society met sweet cravings. Kawash's final chapter is—thankfully—“In Defense of Candy,” and is the print equivalent of comfort food.

Overall, this concoction of primary resources, political statements, and scientific analyses leaves behind a bitter taste. Current discussions on the value of sweets revolve around scientific doctrine vs. commercial resourcefulness, but what is most surprising is how far back the manipulative efforts in order to control candy consumption go on both sides. Over more than the last hundred years, and driven by national interests as well as commercial success, consumers have turned into the food industries' puppets, and the strings are made of Twizzlers.

However, the public perception of candy was a product not only of popular taste preferences, but mainly of changing economic and political interests, and that is where Kawash's argument starts. In an attempt to trace the role of candy through war, economic crises, prohibition, and several popular health trends, the author digs her way through journals, magazines, chocolate wrappers, cookbooks, newspaper commercials, and archives. Contemporary scientific publications, legislative texts, and chemical analyses mark the milestones of candy history, while carefully selected graphics underline the author's arguments visually. Despite its topicality and seriousness, the book's style is engaging and light. Strategically placed quotes such as “Do you eat enough candy?” effortlessly unmask the dichotomy between old and new understandings of sugar. Intended for a broad audience, the author provides a high density of surprising facts wrapped in appealing language and serves it with a cold side of thorough insights. The book works on both the popular and the scientific level without drifting off into shallowness or patronizing demeanor. In a striking example, Kawash

depicts the success story of the calorie. Introduced in the late 1800s as an objective and easy means for ‘the people’ to deduce the energetic and not nutritious (!) value of various foodstuffs, it had turned into the ultimate denominator of food quality by the early 1900s. The more calories you could get for your money, the better, and sugar was the cheapest and most condensed form they could take in. A few decades and two world wars later, the appeal of calories turned into a disadvantage, and what had once been sought after now had to be avoided by means of diets and figure preserving products—a trend that in variations is still alive today.

Kawash gives many other examples like these, but what she describes—and criticizes—most scathingly is the concept of Nutritionism. On a scientific level, this term signifies the belief that foods can be processed and combined in an advantageous way according to their ‘elements’ (carbohydrates, protein, fiber, etc.). On a metaphorical level, it is yet another manifestation of humanity’s self-attested superiority over nature. By breaking down food into its elementary components and reassembling them into ever better products, humankind is capable of enhancing and overcoming (human) nature. Candy as food’s most highly processed form is the epitome of this dietary omnipotence. The criticism does not stop at the gates of politics and financial interests. Leading the reader through almost two centuries of American confection making, Kawash uncovers the hidden and forgotten sides of sweets: fights over definitions, ever improving substitute products, shortages and overproduction. The religious reasoning behind the bland taste of cornflakes and graham crackers is as much part of the story as sexist chocolate sales strategies or large-scale experiments on mentally ill people in the name of dentistry. It soon becomes clear that candy—the brick and mortar of dreams—is uncomfortably prone to political

intrigues and monetary considerations. Greed for candy yields in favor of candy for greed, and the result is a vexingly successful deconstruction of childhood fantasies.

The strongest aspect of the book is the ease with which Kawash approaches the topic without hiding the grayscale reality behind the rainbow-coloured curtain. The author shows refreshingly little reluctance to use chemical formulas and scientific explanations, and her comprehensible writing style alleviates the burden of technical terminology. Remarkably, Kawash also keeps her exemplary intersectional and interdisciplinary approach upright throughout the book while avoiding excessive moralizing.

Unfortunately, the book's well-intentioned yet unimaginative conclusion in the last chapter (a C-major variation of "Listen to your heart") does not entirely live up to the acumen demonstrated in the first fourteen chapters. This is, however, a negligible flaw in the face of the more emphatic results. While it would be justified to interpret *Candy* as a critical work on consumerism and the distorted relation to food it has created over the last century, it goes far beyond that. Beneath its sugarcoated surface (perfectly illustrated by the explosion of sweets on the cover), the book sings powerful praise of critical thinking and encourages people to judge their personal physical and mental well-being by means of self-reflection rather than through authoritative indoctrination. By means of catchy examples—and unlike the food industry when faced with obesity or cavities—, Kawash offers actual backup for the fight against the imminent danger of a consumerist society: skeptical, logical, informed thinking, and occasionally a handful of sweets.