

**Renée S. Scott, *What Is Eating Latin American Women Writers? Food, Weight and Eating Disorders* (Cambria Press, 2009)**

*What Is Eating Latin American Women Writers?* is a cleverly titled book which will appeal to a broad range of readers who have an interest in not only Latin American studies, but also in sociology, anthropology, health sciences, cultural, literary, screen, and women's studies among other fields. Indeed, this is the audience at which Renée S. Scott's project is directed. In the spirit of audience inclusivity and, of course, maximum readership, a knowledge of the Spanish language is not mandatory as all original titles are conveniently followed by parenthesised English translations and quotations from cited works appear only in English. A strong introduction and conclusion bookend the seven thematically arranged chapters which variously treat historical and contemporary written and cinematic texts. The genesis of the author's book concerning female body image and weight, a project which arose by chance, is detailed in the acknowledgments and stemmed from an unrelated project in the field of Uruguayan women's literature. Scott suggests that while food and cooking are not recent themes in Latin American literature, eating and weight related diseases and illnesses are; thus, Scott's offering is original in that it is the first exploration of food, weight and eating disorders in the literary production of selected women writers across six different countries: Argentina, Chile, Guatemala, Mexico, Puerto Rico, and Uruguay.

The opening chapters, 'Intellectual Appetites' and 'Incorporating the Cookbook' situate the emergence of the theme firmly in the seventeenth century through the contributions of Mexican writer, nun and feminist Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz. Culinary language encompassing that of the kitchen and its utensils is used to articulate gender and intellectual issues from the sixteen hundreds through to the twenty-first century. Scott explores unique texts that integrate recipes into their narrative to produce a fusion of cookbook and novel like that of Laura Esquivel whose full title reads: *Like Water for Chocolate: a Novel In Monthly Instalments with Recipes, Romances and Home Remedies*, and Isabel Allende's *Aphrodite: a Memoir of the Senses*.

The following three chapters challenge the notions of kitchen space and culinary arts as empowering and valuable by addressing the concerns about body image and weight, women and ageing, and extreme eating behaviours. 'Impossible Weight' examines the post 1999 expansion of these topics as literary subjects in new millennium literature. It is in this recent writing that women have turned their attention to 'the exclusion and marginalisation of the round-bodied woman' (10). 'Aging Words' [*sic*] uses the work of Ana María Shua and Rosa Nissán to contemplate weight issues among mature women in the face of society's obsession with youth and thinness. Literary representations of extreme eating such as bingeing and bulimia are discussed in the fifth chapter, 'Disorderly Eating', as are their effects on the people around the sufferers and the subsequent cost to the community. The final two chapters further narrow the focus to concentrate on cultural identity and body image specific to two particular groups of Latin American women. Scott centres

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on the writing of *chicanas*,<sup>1</sup> Mexican-American women, and that of *puertorriqueñas*, Puerto Rican women writers, which both emphasise the rich diversity of Hispanicity and Latina culture. 'Food, Body and the Chicana', considers how chicana authors 'use food to articulate negotiations with their bodies, their languages, and their cultures in order to claim ownership of a space in the vast North American social and literary landscape' (12). One of the texts analysed is Josefina López's play upon which the Home Box Office film *Real Women Have Curves* was based. In the final chapter, 'Puerto Rican Perspectives', Scott analyses and discusses the work of three authors living on either side of the Atlantic: a short story by Mayra Santos Febres from Puerto Rico, and a poetry and prose collection by mother and daughter, Rosario and Aurora Morales, both United States residents. The complex issues of national identity, bilingualism and border-writing are considered here given Puerto Rico's political and historic links with the United States.

*What Is Eating Latin American Women Writers?* draws on an eclectic array of disciplines. The breadth of sources is evident in the fourteen page bibliography which extends from Isabelle Allende and Naomi Wolf to Michel Foucault and Octavio Paz. *What Is Eating Latin American Women Writers?* serves up a limited but dedicated menu of literary cuisine and its associated paraphernalia, jargon, and the social occasions which accompany them. The excellent introduction outlines the structure of Scott's project and remains true to it. She indulges in a somewhat detailed and profound analysis of the fiction and the characters, yet presents it in such a way that the reader is moved to seek out and read several of the lesser known texts of the emerging writing talent.

A trivial and personal annoyance to this well-referenced book is its use of endnotes rather than footnotes which total eight pages. The style of language is at times a little stilted and clunky in parts, perhaps as the result of a direct translation into English from the original manuscript which was written first in Spanish. Not surprisingly, the women writers included in Scott's work deal strictly with female fictional characters only; men are absent. Despite the witty title however it is difficult to put one's finger on what actually *is* eating Latin American women writers; it is, perhaps, more apparent in the characters, though not in the creators of the writing. Overall, the strengths far outweigh the weaknesses. *What Is Eating Latin American Women Writers?* examines the weight, eating habits and literary representations of women across a spectrum of countries, their consequences, and how they affect various cultural processes. The book's interdisciplinary approach makes this a useful and original resource for readers with an academic or general interest alike and running at 127 pages, a compact one too.

## Denise MacLeod

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<sup>1</sup> The word *chicana/o* derives from a Mexican Spanish phonetic alteration corruption of the Spanish word for Mexican, *mejicana/o*.

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