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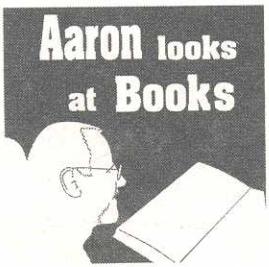
Arts and Entertainment

New and notable nonfiction

By AARON HOWARD

"Teenage Waistland"
Abby Ellin (Public Affairs)

"I grew up in a white, upper-middle-class Jewish household," author Abby Ellin writes. "Maybe it was preordained that my drug of choice would be edible food."



Food is a bond that connects people: the sharing of it, the preparation and the food-related decisions one makes are intimate parts of one's identity. In our thin-obsessed, fat-saturated culture, food issues have become battlefields between parents and adolescents. Although experts cannot tell us definitively why so many kids are overweight, Ellin believes that psychological and emotional factors often cause overeating in young people. Drawing from her own experiences, particularly six years as a camper and counselor at fat camps where most of the staff and campers are Jewish, Ellin describes emotional overeating or eating as a way to regulate anxiety and unpleasant feelings in young people.

Food also can be an addiction, especially the addiction to carbohydrates; sugar and starch-based foods. Ellin writes about the research of Dr. Gene-Jack Wang, who studied the brain metabolism of 12 young people through PET scans. After fasting a day, the subjects were exposed to images and smells of their favorite foods. It's not surprising that food presentation to a fasting person caused significant brain metabolism. But it may be significant that those areas of the brain most affected were in the superior temporal, anterior insula and orbitofrontal cortices – the areas of the brain associated with addiction. Given the constant exposure (stimuli) to fast foods and sugars on television, one wonders if advertisers aren't creating an epidemic of Pavlovian responses to food in our young people.

Food addiction and overconsumption also run in families. While some parents model bad food choices, other parents use food to club their kids over the head with. Anybody who is a parent knows you can't win when you try to argue with your kid about food.

It is becoming common for teenagers to undergo gastric bypass and banded gastroplasty operations. When are we going to start thinking of obesity as a disease? Obesity itself – not the insulin-dependent diabetes, bad backs, hypertension and the rest of the symptoms to which being obese leads? Or is fat acceptance (be fat, fit and happy!) the answer? "The problem is the world doesn't work that way," Ellin answers. Clearly, diets and willpower are not the solution.

If your kid is overweight, don't shame her/him, Ellin says. Support and respect your children, even when they fall off the wagon. Focus on the things you love about your kids, not the fat. The weight issue is emotional. Maybe it's the parents' anxieties that are keeping kids fat!