Contemporary Affairs

THE HUNGRY GENE: The Science of Fat and the Future of Thin.
By Ellen Ruppel Shell. Atlantic Monthly Press. 294 pp. $25

In the Gilded Age, when working people spent as much as 60 percent of their wages on food, obesity was a disorder of the wealthy, a side effect of success. Now, like many other comforts and privileges of the rich, weight gain has been democratized. Technology has driven down food prices and, like a team of efficient servants, removed from our lives the need for even minimal physical exertion. As a result, the United States is gripped by an epidemic of obesity that, according to a RAND Corporation study, constitutes a graver public-health problem than smoking, alcohol abuse, and poverty combined.

If it's any consolation, we're not alone. Other advanced countries are getting fatter too. Obesity is even spreading to the Third World, where the burgeoning middle classes enjoy chowing down and loafing as much as we do. "Obesity rates in urban areas of China have quadrupled in the past decade and nearly one in five Chinese are overweight," writes Shell, a science journalist who teaches at Boston University.

The Hungry Gene takes us on a fascinating worldwide inquiry into the biological and social roots of the obesity epidemic. Shell is a gifted writer and observer with a fine mastery of her subject, and her book is chock full of wonderful characterizations, rich ironies, and horrifying facts. Who knew that 60 percent of fast food sold in this country is dispensed through drive-up windows? Or that we drink more soda than coffee and tap water combined? Or that annual per capita consumption of sugar and other caloric sweeteners has increased by 32 pounds since 1970? Or that fat people actually have *faster*-than-average metabolisms?

Shell makes a charming and sympathetic guide, but one quibbles with some of her assertions. She errs, for instance, in suggesting that Americans have only the illusion of food choice (as in "with pickle or without?"). Exotic ethnic restaurants have cropped up all over the land, and supermarkets even in small towns now stock fresh produce year round, as well as an array of ethnic foods. In fact, Americans have more healthy food choices than ever before. The bigger problem is that *The Hungry Gene* spends an awful lot of time barking up the wrong tree. Our genes, after all, haven't changed much in a generation, but our body mass index sure has. The issue is simple: People are getting fatter because we can afford too much fattening food, it's too easily eaten, and we spend too much time on our duffs.

Someday we'll probably develop a biochemical solution to the peculiarly modern problem of overnourishment. Maybe this miracle substance will even be cooked into foods, the way niacin came to be baked into commercial breads, eliminating the problem of pellagra. In the interim, perhaps the war on smoking offers worthwhile lessons. Education, taxes, lawsuits, and social stigma have all helped put tobacco on the run. Someday these weapons might have the same effect on Coke and Cheez-Doodles.

—Daniel Akst

AUTHENTIC HAPPINESS: Using the New Positive Psychology to Realize Your Potential for Lasting Fulfillment.
By Martin E. P. Seligman. Free Press. 321 pp. $26

It's an irony of inspirational literature that the dour skeptics and depressives who are arguably most in need of uplift scoff at books that presume to chart the way to good cheer. But Seligman, a professor of psychology at the University of Pennsylvania, aims to galvanize just that grumpy clientele with *Authentic Happiness*, a guide that portrays the pursuit of hope and happiness as a serious, rigorous mission rather than a frivolous illusion or mere feel-goodism.

The author of *Learned Optimism* (1991) brings two unusual credentials to the task. First, he is a scientist—a cognitive psychologist who has been a pioneer in bringing "hope into the laboratory . . . [to] dissect it in order to understand how it works." Second, he claims to be (or to have been) a "dyed-in-the-wool pessimist" who spent "50 years enduring most-