



The Hawaiian Crow is an endangered species.

ial services they performed on city streets.” But attitudes changed with the Great Fire of London in 1666, when crows and ravens feasted on charred bodies. King Charles II authorized the birds’ extermination, and the one-time model citizens became despised enemies.

Europeans brought this contempt to the New World, and it persists to this day. Crows are the sort of vermin we can freely slaughter. They’re never out of season; there *is* no season. As Marzluff and Angell point out, a crow hunt entails no respect or admiration—hunters don’t eat their corvid prey, or stuff and display the trophies. In the 1930s and ’40s, “fearful of disease, convinced of [crows’] negative effects on game and grain, and annoyed by their noise,” government workers in many states dynamited roosts, killing 26,000 crows in a single night in Oklahoma and 328,000 in a winter in Illinois.

Certainly the crow diet—including garbage, corn, and baby birds—strikes us as uncongenial. Marzluff and Angell, however, remind us that scavengers help reduce the spread of disease, claim that raccoons and snakes devour far more songbirds than crows do, and point out that crows eat insect pests too. (Crows also eat sparrows’ eggs and young, to the delight of some people and the dismay of others.)

Despite our best efforts, the American crow population is on the increase. Marzluff and Angell suggest that we’re ultimately responsible, through our alterations of the landscape. Crows thrive on cleared agricultural land, in suburbs, and in cities. (Ravens, which need wilderness, are in decline.) The more trash we create, the more crows have to pick over. They’re thus both effect and symbol of our crowded, noisy, wasteful urban habitats, speckled with landfills and Dumpsters.

But Marzluff and Angell explain that it’s relatively easy to evict backyard crows and usher in songbirds instead, just by careful planting. Crows love to socialize on open lawns, whereas songbirds prefer rustling around in dense shrubbery. “Our studies suggest that small lawns, less than about a quarter of an acre . . . , surrounded by trees and shrubs, though still used by robins, towhees, juncos, sparrows, and small children, are rarely used by crows.” And, of course, native shrubs and smaller lawns also reduce the need for pesticides, herbicides, and watering.

What a pleasure to learn that the tools for change are as close as the gardening trug. Maybe we can transform our small portions of the natural world into habitats not just for songbirds but for the selves we wish to be: intelligent, resourceful, responsible citizens.

—ROXANA ROBINSON

TERRORS OF THE TABLE:

The Curious History of Nutrition.

By Walter Gratzer. Oxford Univ. Press. 304 pp. \$30

We are what we eat.

Right?

As readers of this exhaustive (and exhausting) historical survey must conclude, the science behind that simple proposition remains speculative and incomplete. Over the past two centuries, so many fine researchers were showered with honors and titles and awards for getting the science totally wrong. One hundred years from now, people will look back on our nutritional pieties and marvel: They thought red meat was bad for you? They forced themselves to drink soymilk?

Gratzer, an emeritus professor at Kings College, London, loves human folly. His other books, *The Undergrowth of Science: Delusion, Self-Deception, and Human Frailty* (2000) and *The Oxford Book of Scientific Anecdotes* (2002), lead naturally to this volume, which follows the trail of mostly wrong ideas from the 18th century to the present, with a nod to the Greeks and Romans. Gratzer is justifiably fascinated by the cranks and crackpots who profited wildly from poisonous or useless elixirs, and by the earnest scientists who sacrificed their health and sanity—and the health and sanity of others—to better understand our nutritional needs. Take the 18th-century Italian abbot Lazzaro Spallanzani, who, for three days at a stretch, would hold tubes of minced meat and animals' gastric juices under his armpits, to simulate digestion.

My favorite crackpot—American, naturally—was Horace Fletcher, the Great Masticator, who launched a fad that swept the United States and Europe at the turn of the 20th century: Chew each bite 32 times, he proclaimed, and you will enjoy perfect health. “Chewing parties became popular in fashionable circles,” writes Gratzer. “These ‘munchcons,’ in which the participants were enjoined to chew with their heads low over the plate so that the tongue could hang down, were often coordinated by a conductor, who timed the mastication of each mouthful and rang a bell or struck a gong when the moment came to swallow.”

Among Fletcher's followers was Henry James—no wonder he chewed over everything so endlessly in his prose.

Though Gratzer appears more interested in anecdotes than in theory, you can't read this book without spotting a theme: We blame psychology and environment for everything, until science comes up with the real cause. Scurvy, blight of the 18th-century sailor, was attributed to low morale, bad air, and all kinds of other folderol, until it was finally proved to be a vitamin C deficiency. Gratzer's chapter on scurvy is especially painful to read, because doctors came so close, so many times, to understanding the disease, only to be thrown off the trail by making one false move, such as boiling lemon juice so it would keep better on long voyages, which sapped it of vitamin C.

Though our scientific knowledge has grown, the human body remains a vastly complex machine, making us prey to all kinds of dietary come-ons, along with what Gratzer calls “the higher quackery” of the pharmaceutical industry. Do we need anti-cholesterol drugs? Are we getting fatter because of what we eat, or are we eating more because we're getting fat from some other cause? Is too much salt bad? “People have such fear of food,” I heard Julia Child exclaim in a radio interview in 1992. Warning: This entertainingly scary book, especially the chapters on additives then and now, should make us all afraid.

—A. J. LOFTIN

CONTEMPORARY AFFAIRS

*CHASING THE RODEO:
On Wild Rides and Big Dreams,
Broken Hearts and Broken Bones,
and One Man's Search for the West.*

By W. K. Stratton. Harcourt.
326 pp. \$25

Decades after his parents met at a rodeo in Guthrie, Oklahoma, and had a brief fling, W. K. Stratton sets out to explore the world of his father, whom he never laid eyes on. All he knows is that Cowboy Don, as his father was known, was a “rodeo bum,” the sort of man who wrangles stock and pitches hay and then blows his cash to enter rodeo events he never wins.

The quest to comprehend his father is awkwardly saddled to the book's feature attraction: the rodeos Stratton himself attends, from the mega-sized Cheyenne Frontier Days in Wyoming, to an event in tiny Leakey, Texas, where kids ride sheep in a “mutton bustin'” competition. As he tours the country's arenas, he struggles to define the authentic spirit of the rodeo and to reconcile its hardscrabble past with its glitzy future, at least as envisioned by corporate sponsors and PR spinmeisters. In Cheyenne, bulls and riders are nearly upstaged by pyrotechnic explosions and throbbing techno—yes, techno—music.