

Good Apples: Behind Every Bite

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home computers over time, have been enjoying a resurgence as an arcade-based enterprise, trading on the nostalgia felt by folks like me longing to recapture their misspent youth. Today's video games still skew heavily toward a male point of view, pushing limits of stylized violence, and offer escape for the disaffected and the displaced. As Kocurek notes, "Video games became a point of articulation for anxieties over economic, cultural and technological changes" (195). This more circumspect conclusion has merit.

Good Apples: Behind Every Bite, by Susan Futrell. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2017. xiv, 252 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$20.00 paperback.

Reviewer Maureen Ogle, an author and historian, lives in Ames. She is the author of *In Meat We Trust: An Unexpected History of Carnivore America* (2013) and *Ambitious Brew: The Story of American Beer* (2006).

Susan Futrell, who grew up in Ames and now lives in Iowa City, realized young that she "love[d] business when it's done right" (5). To that end, she built a career in the "alternative" food system—marketing, sales, distribution—in Iowa and beyond. That work deposited her on the frontlines of the American apple industry and led to the realization that apples are a microcosm of the complexities and contradictions of the nation's "food system."

Futrell's narrative structure in *Good Apples* is standard in contemporary popular nonfiction writing: She opens with an anecdote about her failed effort to buy an Iowa apple orchard that might otherwise be plowed under. (The auction quickly deflated her dream: She'd underestimated, significantly, the property's value.) That's followed by a short history of American agriculture in general and apple culture in particular and then by the bulk of her narrative: tales of orchard owners and farmers' markets, geneticists and breeders, pickers and packers.

Futrell is especially good at detailing the obstacle course that is agriculture/food production in America: If it's not wildfire, drought, and floods, then it's federal and state paperwork, cutthroat competition, corporate farming, and grocery chain clout. And that's just for "regular" apples. Toss organic and local into the equation and making apples becomes exponentially more difficult.

Then there is the apple itself. Futrell learns that an apple worth marketing must offer the illusion, however engineered, of adhering to a platonic ideal: perfect in shape and color; blemish-free; able to endure both shipping and storage and still offer its buyer crisp flavor and texture.

Like everything connected to food, making apples is complicated, messy, and frustrating. Thus her conclusion that agriculture and food production should be treated as a “public good.” Only then can we ensure that small farmers survive and that all of us can afford to eat what we want, whether local, cheap, or somewhere in between.

Americans must abandon their propensity for “civic abdication,” she writes, and embrace consumer-citizenship (217). Citizens must educate themselves about farming methods and technologies and support family farms, extension agents, and public research. “A healthy democracy requires civic responsibility: informed citizens, appreciation of difference, willingness to be good neighbors. Growing apples that feed local communities requires a democracy of taste, diversity, enterprise, science, and civic-mindedness. A democracy of apples” (219).

What Futrell misses is the long history of the American food system. For two centuries, policy, law, and cultural values have enshrined food/agriculture/food production as a “public good.” In fields and factories Americans built a food production system designed to feed masses of people with minimum labor, a system designed to ensure low-cost food (Americans pay less for food than anyone else on the planet) and an income for the men and women who labor in the fields and factories. The end goal? To free citizens from the drudgery of hands-on food production, leaving them free to invent and build; dream, think, and write—leaving them sufficiently well-fed, educated, and leisured to write books about the nation’s flawed food system. And reviews about the flaws in those books.