



Fat Land

Greg Critser

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In this astonishing expose, journalist Greg Critser looks beyond the sensational headlines to reveal why nearly 60 percent of Americans are now overweight. Critser's sharp-eyed reportage and sharp-tongued analysis make for a disarmingly funny and truly alarming book. Critser investigates the many factors of American life -- from supersize to Super Mario, from high-fructose corn syrup to the high cost of physical education in schools -- that have converged and conspired to make us some of the fattest people on the planet. He also explains why pediatricians are treating conditions rarely before noticed in children, why Type 2 diabetes is on the rise, and how agribusiness has unwittingly altered the American diet.

Fat Land Details

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Author : Greg Critser

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From Reader Review Fat Land for online ebook

Bookguide says

I read this many years ago, and have been telling people about it ever since because it's amazing how many people don't know why America had an epidemic of obesity first. Ten years ago, everyone in Europe was laughing at fat Americans, blaming the epidemic on their super-sized portions and assuming lazy people just ate too much fast food. Now the same thing is happening, firstly in the UK and now in the rest of Europe. Many people are mystified. The answer has been around for years, but the focus on low fat food and exercise has obscured it, and Greg Critser's book hasn't achieved the popularity it deserves.

The answer is simple: the American government made commercial deals with the palm oil industry in Malaysia and developed High Fructose Corn Syrup (HFCS) using the corn grown in the industrial-scale farms of the USA. Both these substances are cheap, increase shelf life of food and both cause obesity. In the UK, the food industry adopted them later, and lo and behold, the nation's weight increased. The same thing is now happening in Europe. The reason nobody has noticed is that palm oil can be labelled as vegetable oil which we have been conditioned to think is more healthy than butter, so consumers are unable to tell if products contain palm oil. High Fructose Corn Syrup is usually labelled as glucose-fructose syrup in the EU. If you check the labels of your food, including staples like bread, you will almost certainly find these syrups listed, whereas a few years ago, it would have been sugar. This is why diets which emphasise 'clean eating', home cooking, reduction in processed carbohydrates and low fat proteins are so effective; they cut out the processed food which has been tainted by the food industry's adoption of these ingredients. Back in the 1960s, '70s and '80s, when I was growing up, I ate home-baked cake with butter icing every day, had half a Mars Bar every day at lunchtime, ate normal cooked meals in the evening and was never overweight. My mother cooked everything from scratch, including burgers, fishcakes and roasts, and all using butter, sugar and full milk. We are all victims of the food industry's powerful lobby. It's time the people were given back the right to food which doesn't make them ill.

Rant prompted by a friend sharing this Guardian article: <http://www.theguardian.com/business/2...>

Jack Blanchard says

Greg Critser's *Fat Land* was an informative novel, but lacked creativity and excitement to keep the reader focused and interested. The novel was all about the growth of obesity as an epidemic in the United States. There were some interesting focuses that the book addressed. However, it was boring to read because there were a plethora of statistics and historical references rather than in depth commentary and opinions about the issue.

The book talked about the decline of physical education as part of the problem. The physical fitness tests that students have come to despise were at one time much more intense. They included such tasks as the pull ups test, push ups test, and timed mile. As we have gotten away from those exams, the author claims that students have begun to feel that they have to do less to be considered fit. In addition, it mentioned the increase of time spent watching TV rather than exercising was described in detail. Obviously, sitting around in front of the television is less healthy than taking a run, and the amount of people doing this was continuously increasing. Finally, the other main point made in the novel was the growth of the fast food industry. This created an inexpensive, simple, and convenient way to feed a family. Naturally, individuals started to eat a lot of fast food for this reason. However, the food itself was processed, unhealthy, and the

portions became extremely large.

One of my favorite parts about this novel is how the author does not attribute the increasing obesity of our country to one factor. It seems as if people are searching for one solution to the problem, but Critser is intelligent in addressing various factors that need to be improved upon in order to create a healthier America. However, so much of the information in this book is common sense. People know that fast food is bad and that physical education is not what it used to be. Also, most individuals are aware that they spent too much time watching television. Nothing written was groundbreaking information, and it was not presented in a way that made the reader enjoy the novel. I would not recommend this novel to anyone else, for although it is factual, it lacks interesting details.

Adam says

Want to know why America is fat? This book will tell you. Since I have read this book, I have eaten McDonald's once in the last year or so (and that was because I was drunk). Very interesting to see how much the country has changed in 60 years since the war. The book starts there, how with budget cuts to the P.E. department and importing cheap (and very fattening) substitutes for homegrown goods can really cause a whole nation to pack on the pounds.

Krista the Krazy Kataloguer says

When this book first came out in 2003, it was an eye-opener, and I can see why. Critser traces the roots of how so many Americans became so obese, and it's a complicated maze of changing diet fads, changing child-rearing ideas, fast food conniving, school lunch deterioration, families who don't have time to sit down to a meal or who eat out all the time, the invention of high-fructose corn syrup, food politics, a bit of genetics, and more. I have to admit, I'm one of the obese, though I've been losing weight and keeping it off for the past 2 years. I learned a LOT from this book. For years obesity was seen as a self-esteem issue rather than a health issue. The solution, as Critser says, will not come easily because, "A culture that condones obesity, whether consciously or unconsciously, undermines any attempts to convince people to pare down." (p. 149). Do you know why high-fructose corn syrup is so prevalent in foods today, even those that don't really need sweetening? Because it is not only 6 times sweeter than sugar and cheaper than sugar, but it also has preservative properties, prolonging shelf-life and mouth feel. Prior to the '80s, type 2 diabetes was almost exclusively an adult disease, but now children are increasingly diagnosed with it. I read a book recently about an Israeli girl's 2 years in the Israeli army, which is mandatory for boys and girls when they graduate from high school and before they enter college. If they instituted such a thing here in the U.S., how many of our high school graduates would be physically unfit to serve? This book gave me so much to think about, and would be a great book discussion book--if you could get people to talk about it.

Missjgray says

This interesting and well-written book does more than the usual, "Fast food is evil" ranting. Critser says hard things about fast food and the processing of it, but this book is most interesting and valuable for the other reasons he discusses (with an amazing number of footnotes) for the putting and keeping on of American poundage.

Critser writes with a great deal of genuine interest and compassion. He makes a solid case for the lower classes and minority groups which he says are at the greatest risk of disease and poor health. Things like the suburbs, private schools, removal of PE from high school, un-healthy food costing less than actually healthy food, etc.

Very eye opening and motivating.

Nic says

I read this after "Fast Food Nation" and it's a great companion piece. I learned things I hadn't known about how US foreign policy under Nixon is responsible for two common ingredients in the American diet: hydrogenated palm oil and high fructose corn syrup. I love learning about history that took place during my childhood that I was unaware of, like astonishing inflation in the price of food in the 70s. Who knew?

I assert that it is impossible to read this book without changing your diet. My boyfriend calls me the HFCS Nazi because I am always reading labels, trying to choose products with real beet or cane sugar (like Izze sodas).

This book is not as reader-friendly as fast food nation, but because it limits its scope to two food additives, it's pretty easy to digest (pun intended!)

Sara says

There were some good points made in this book about the childhood obesity epidemic in the United States. I enjoyed the first half of the book more so than the second half. The first half discussed the history of our food supply and key players in this history, plus a lot about how child rearing changed during the last generation. This book states the obvious many times but at the beginning of the book, I was still intrigued enough to keep reading.

The second half of the book is more technical, deals with diabetes and other health issues, plus the author has some suggestions on how to solve some of our problems. I was not as entertained toward the end.

Considering the book has been around for many years, I am interested in reading a more up to date book. I think there are some things that have changed, maybe for the good, maybe not.

I know at one point, probably during a chapter on excessive, needless snacking, I just had the urge to go open a bag of chips and dig in. And I did! But, a couple chapters later, probably during a chapter describing our lazy attitudes and inability to get off our butts, I got motivated and had to stop and get on the treadmill for half an hour. So in some ways, this book was an interactive book!

Katie says

I don't understand where I got on this kick with these industry-expose books, I seem to find them utterly fascinating, even if they're about something I already know. I guess it's the exact why and how and history of

what we all know to be true that holds the draw for me. I already knew the funeral industry was a scam, but seeing exactly how the ruse is perpetuated in Mitfords' "The American Way Of Death" kept me chewing until the very last page.

Greg Critser's "Fat Land" is no exception. Aside from Samoa and its immediate neighbors, Americans are the fattest people on the planet. We all know this. We all know that it's a result of too much bad food and too little activity. So what, if anything, is there to write about, much less to fill a couple hundred pages? Plenty, it turns out, and it's all fascinatingly juicy stuff.

The 1970's saw America in a perilous economic position, much like the one we stand in in 2008. In a desperate effort to alleviate the crunch and keep farmers in work and food on the tables, American economists began to redraw the maps on where our foods come from and what goes into them. The introduction of palm oil from overseas and the explosive manufacture of corn syrup at home led to a horrific spike in the amount of sugar, fats and aclories we consumed. The search to stretch the household dollar a little more led to the jumbo packaging we now know....fat, it turns out, IS where it's at, as far as the bottom (no pun intended) line is concerned. Fat isn't merely a moral issue, Critser posits, but a social, economic, governmental and global competition issue.

Peggy says

Well written book. The author writes about several reasons that have brought Americans to the obesity crisis that we face - from politics to school food programs to the way society views fatness throughout the past 30 years. He cites many studies, gives examples of programs that are work and why. I felt guilty for being sedentary while reading the book:-)

Patrick says

Ok, I let this book linger for far too long, partially because of busy times at work. However, everytime I picked it up, I couldn't put it back down. Sure, a lot of the information in this book has been covered in other more popular books and films ("Fast Food Nation," "Super Size Me," etc.) but this is the first book that really looks at how all the external influences overlap.

For example, instead of just blaming the fat problem on fast food, this book also looks at how our diet (what makes up our food) has secretly changed without many of us knowing it, or at least being highly attuned to the changes. Sugar has been replaced by corn syrup, palm and coconut oil has replaced olive oil, more calories are being packed into smaller servings, etc. etc. That, coupled with America's dramatic shift in the work force from blue collar to white collar as well as the decrease in public school funding has all collectively made us more prone to be fat. In other words, Greg Critser lays out, we could seemingly eat the exact same stuff as our thinner grandparents did and end up morbidly obese because our world has rapidly changed around us.

It's a great correlation and really raises the alarms that we need to better understand exactly what it is we are eating and doing and make dramatic changes to counter the effects.

Dave says

In *Fatland*, Crister traces America's obesity epidemic to Richard Nixon. Earl Butz, Nixon's secretary of Agriculture initiated a new free trade policy to reverse declining farm incomes and rising consumer prices. The policy change coincided with Japan pioneering high fructose corn syrup and Malaysia making palm oil commercially viable. These three ingredients made Americans fat.

During the 1980s fast food restaurants discovered customers would pay for value and returned for larger sizes. Fullness became a relative concept as chains super sized servings through the 1990s. And Americans ate it up, increasing the number of meals consumed outside the house.

Here my narrative diverges from Crister. Crister discusses how the government, church, and media all lowered standards to make fat people feel accepted. Unlike the 1950's, fat people were no longer shamed as ugly, unhealthy gluttons. But the casual link between what these institutions say and what people do is dubious. Nancy Regan's "just say no" and the war on drugs didn't stop Americans from using drugs, Catholics get divorced and have abortions despite the church teaching, and the media's condemnation didn't stop Trump from the winning the Electoral College. But truly, each of these three institutions are too diverse to paint with a single brush.

Crister finds additional obesity causes by poverty: poor whites in Appalachia and the rural south, inner city blacks, and new immigrants from Latin America. He finds the last group whipsawed by hunger in their native country and excess in their new.

Crister concludes with some interesting science on how the body will more likely store high fructose corn syrup as fat than glycogen, how obese mothers are more likely to pass on obesity to their children and how Latin American immigrants oxidize fat differently. He further catalogues all the health consequences of obesity from diabetes and heart disease to asthma and acne.

In the end he finds obesity to be a class issue inversely related to socioeconomic status. The educated rich know the cost of excess and the rich shame fat. Crister's own health journey started when someone called him a fatso. Stigma, not media, political, or religious oratory can be effective, but not at the price society pays.

I struggled though Crister's USA Today prose. He refers to an actuarial study by MetLife and then later as by Metropolitan Life. He refers to East LA as our Ellis Island, missing the point that Ellis Island was a pass through station in front of a major railroad terminus. Immigrants came through Ellis Island and if they passed they got on train to somewhere else. That's not east LA. He terms Appalachian whites as chronically impoverished, but in the same sentence, he describes inner city blacks as structurally poor when the same endless cycle of poverty equally plagues both groups.

Prose reflects thinking and this is true in Crister's solution to obesity. His solution reflects the have it now thinking that causes obesity and spur fad diets. A better solution has a longer horizon. We need a cultural change. Better education and prosperity can help. Agricultural policy needs to encourage Organic, nutrient rich food farmed sustainably. Food stamps need health guidelines. Junk food taxes should be analogized to the cigarette tax. Obesity is the new smoking. The social stigma will trail the positive agents of change.

Kaila says

The idea of the book was great; explore all of the myriad reasons why Americans have become morbidly obese as a whole and possibly what could be done to prevent this from further damaging future generations. By the time that I got about 100 pages into it the only aspects of the issue that the book had covered were advertising, advertising in schools and school funding. I kept picking the book up and then putting it back down after about five pages when I finally decided to give it up and mail it to the person I promised it to months ago.

Abby says

This book has total false advertising. On the back, it says that "reading this book will take ten pounds right off of you", or something like that. (I probably shouldn't use quotes if I don't actually want to get up off the couch and get the real quote, huh?)

I read this book slowly, over at least a couple months. During that time, I gained at LEAST ten pounds. Yes, I am pregnant. But whatever. I was hoping the book had magic powers that would at least keep me even on the scale.

So, the book was interesting, but not riveting. That's why it took a couple months to finish. It's a big picture, sociological look at why obesity is such an epidemic in America now. (Fun fact: I have a bachelor's degree in sociology! My reason: it was a short major.) The author starts like 60 years ago and goes to our current day. It talks about PE cut from school, high fructose corn syrup, fast food in schools, portion sizes, family dynamics, class differences, blah blah blah... lots of stuff. You can still be healthy and not fat in America nowadays, it's just more work because the whole world is encouraging us to be fat! (Fun fact #2: if you get your body fat tested in your 7th month of pregnancy, the results come back all skewed. I did it today at a Health and Wellness Fair, and it said I had 33% body fat! I am morbidly obese (not)! Funny, huh?)

The chapter talking about diabetes and heart disease and arthritis and cancer and everything... that made me excited to have my baby and drop all this extra weight that's giving me a back ache! In the meantime, it's almost 10:00 and time for my nightly bedtime snack. Tonight I pick: ice cream.

Nicole says

Book lives up to its title, using current stats, empirical data, and lucid explanation as to why America is so massive. Similar to Fast Food Nation, and Spurlock's Supersize Me in intent, Fatland is broader in investigation than the former, less visceral than the latter, and the result is an even-handed account that examines the multiple, often over-lapping factors, many of them political, feeding the fat epidemic.

This book covers the usual subjects--lack of PE in the public schools, sedentary lifestyle, gargantuan portions, etc.--as well as the unusual, less often discussed--the corn lobby's highly lucrative by-product, high fructose corn-syrup, and the gerrymandering of the food pyramid and the not so non-partisan government agency headed by the even less non-partisan presidential appointee who gets to make it.

Some chapters are positively galvanizing they are so convincing, others less so, and it would be more

persuasive if the various chapters (which thematically organize the explanations) were more tightly connected, but loaded with common and not so common sense, and so very, very engaging.

Amy says

Much of the information in this books was redundant and repeated in slightly different form in each chapter. The chapters were far too long, which is how you cram 7 chapters in to over 100 pages, and yet despite being comparatively short the writing is dry and took me a while to plod through. This book is also very left biased (please, nanny government, fix the fat people for me!) and very anti-fat biased despite ample research that it is the sugar and refined grains in our diet, not naturally occurring fats, that are the cause of most of our diet woes. Though this is pointed out in the text a couple times it is negated by equally frequent bashing of saturated fat. For instance, while the book points out that obesity has gone up at the same rate as high fructose corn syrup consumption, the book also encourages a tax on non-skim milk. This despite research from the lauded Nurses Study that shows whole fat milk may be especially beneficial to women during their reproductive years. (See The Fertility Diet and Real Food for Fertility)
