

Ravenous by Henry Dimbleby and Jemima Lewis

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This is a book that should be read by anyone interested in his or her own health or the survival of humans. That's everyone of course, except those for whom facts don't exist or who are slaves to conspiracy theories, and probably those who are obscenely rich and think they are beyond all dangers. For once the cliché 'tour de force' is entirely appropriate. Its two themes are summed up on page 225. 'We are trying to fight two fires at once: diet-related disease and environmental destruction.'

This densely packed, but very readable, book is made up of topic chapters of about ten pages each. Some have witty titles such as 'Warming meals', 'Boiling the frog', and 'How humanity ate the world'. You must read the book to find out their relevance. I found it best to read one chapter at a time then to pause to digest it (see what I did there!).

Just reading the introduction is horrific enough. The graphic on page 11 shows us that there are now many times more farmed animals bred for food than natural ones. The book covers the whole field of health from the dangers of bad diet, particularly ultra-processed food, to the current alarming changes in the climate. The links between the two are the food industry and farming, particularly meat rearing.

Early on he describes the 'systems approach'. This is a way of thinking about active complex situations including notions such as positive and negative feedback. There is a book, written by John Gall in the 1970's called Systemantics, that he should read. This, like Parkinson's Laws and the Peter Principle, is a deliberately amusing, but terribly true, look at the various systems in the world. The essential messages are, 'the universe fights back' and 'all systems operate in fail mode'. It is no longer in print and is expensive second-hand, but you might find a copy in a library. It is well worth a read. You can read a summary in <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Systemantics>.

Henry Dimbleby comes from a family of sound journalists with father David and grandfather Richard. There is no-one more qualified to write this book. After a successful career in restaurants and food journalism, he led a team creating the UK's National Food Strategy, published in 2020, that drew on the knowledge of a wide range of experts. He was given an MBE for his work on the School Food Plan. The co-author is his wife. The book is rigorous but is not a dry treatise. It has a long section on sources and acknowledgements, which is not there necessarily to be read but as proof of the quality of the information and data. The style is simple but rigorous.

Though there is much to be gloomy about, it is not a gloomy book. He is brutally honest about the ill-effects of farming, inequality and poor diet, but is still optimistic. He does not suggest that we all become vegans, only that we eat less meat and rear it in a way that is not cruel and destructive.

The sections on changes in farming were particularly interesting to me. I have recently researched and written a document on ultra-processed foods that is elsewhere on this site. Much of the book confirmed my ideas but the farming was new to me. I was very impressed by the notion of 'per-plant' farming, where current technology is so advanced that each plant on a farm field can be monitored individually and can be watered, sprayed or fertilised only when necessary. We can move away from the disease-prone mono-culture plantings and have several different plants in one field. He describes methods to adjust the farming systems to help restore the world, including the notion of 'natural capital'. Even small changes can make a big difference. At one point he says, 'If carbon dioxide smelled bad we would have done something about it'.

There is an excellent chapter on appetite. As I explain elsewhere in this website our bodies evolved to cope with times of plenty and starvation. They are not adapted for constant plenty. There is an old joke that says, 'One in three Americans is as heavy as the other two'. Sadly this is no longer true as the majority are now seriously fat, and the UK is close behind. One of his hopes is that the drugs called semaglutides, originally developed for diabetics, will help people who find their appetites difficult to control. The one called Wegovy is the version for fat but otherwise healthy people. I particularly dislike the way comment on over-weight is now thought to be like prejudices against race and gender. Any suggestion that it is unwise is called 'fat shaming', which it profoundly is not. Being fat is dangerous and should not be normalised in the media.

Using the witty phrase, 'you can't outrun a bad diet', he explains that you don't lose weight by exercise. I don't entirely agree with that. Vigorous exercise increases your metabolic rate for days and muscle burns three times as many calories as the same mass of fat. However controlling appetite is the main weight loss technique. He says with exercise you look and feel better so what weight you lose by dieting is likely to stay lost.

My only criticism is that some of the graphics are difficult to understand. Each has a longish caption that tells you what it means but I wouldn't have got the message from the picture, and as a scientist and engineer I am used to reading such things.

I was both delighted and appalled to see a reference to Truss' trade deal with Australia. In her desperation to achieve something - anything - as our briefest Prime Minister in living memory, it seems it is an extremely bad deal, handing everything to the Aussies and allowing threats to our farmers. No surprises there then!

At the end of the book is an appendix entitled 'How to change the food system'. It summarises the National Food Strategy that the author helped to write. Each short section has a footer stating what progress government has made on it. Only one section was said to be 'done'. The other thirteen were not done, on a scale that included, 'no action taken', 'reneged on promise', 'partial' or 'unclear', and 'behind schedule'. Perhaps the surprise is that even one was done. What idiot was it who said we get the government we deserve?