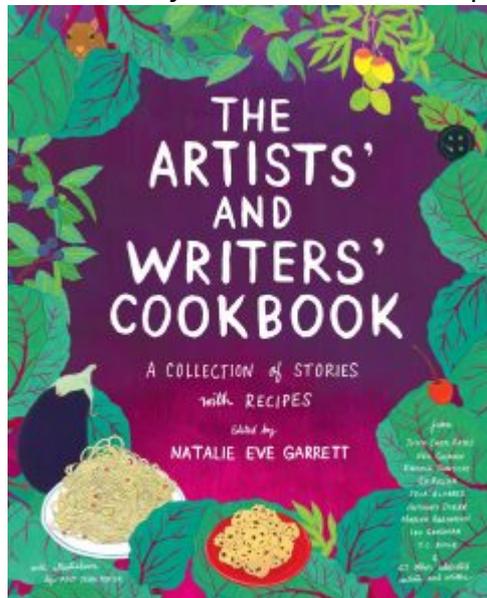


# The Artists' and Writers' Cookbook by Natalie Eve Garrett – A Review

written by Carrie Helms Tippen | February 28, 2017



I teach a course for graduate students in Creative Writing and Food Studies called “The Literary Cookbook.” Not wanting to take anything for granted, I begin every class with a question: “Is there such a thing as literary cookbook?” My students who all want As respond dutifully, “Yes, of course, O Captain, my Captain.” Then the second question I ask is, “What distinguishes a literary cookbook from some other kind of cookbook?”

I have [some ideas](#) about the answer to this question. Smart folks who came before me in this path of literary analysis of recipe texts (Susan Leonardi, [Anne Bower](#), [Janet Theophano](#), [Laura Shapiro](#), to name only a few) have really good answers, too. But our discussions in our course continually circle back to a central question: What is the cookbook *for*?

Any cook knows that there are cookbooks that you use. And there are cookbooks that you *read*.

There’s the book that you go to when you need to know what to do. You want an ingredient list and some instructions you can use. The book practically opens itself to the page you need, the one you always need. In my kitchen, that’s the *King Arthur Flour Baker’s Companion*.

And then there’s the book that you go to when you want to impress. You want to make the thing and make it right, but you also want to perform. You want to tell the story right. You want to lay your culinary capital on the table next to your dish. In my kitchen, that’s Marcella Hazan’s *Essentials of Italian Cooking*.

But then, there’s the book that you don’t intend to use. You go there when you want to dream. You can’t cook these things. You won’t. Your little

kitchen could never sustain such a thing. But you look at the photos and dream. You read the ingredients and instructions, and you [play them in your mind like sheet music](#), imagine them like the script of a play. I feel this way about Sean Brock's *Heritage*.

Then there are the story books. You keep these on the coffee table, at your bedside, anywhere but the kitchen.

Natalie Eve Garrett's [The Artists' and Writers' Cookbook](#) is one of those books that seems born to be read. In fact, Garrett reports in the introduction that the inspiration for this cookbook came from reading. Garrett "stumbled upon" a 1961 cookbook, also called *The Artists' and Writers' Cookbook*, and "couldn't put it down" – the same kind of language we use for our favorite novels. The descriptions of the book and its goals are always phrased with reading first. Its subtitle makes clear that this is "A Collection of Stories with Recipes." Garrett identifies herself as "an artist and writer who loves to cook" who sees a kinship between the messy, daring, sensual nature of cooking, art, and writing: "They all require some measure of vision, revision, faith, and magic, not to mention a high tolerance for disaster. All three also engage the senses, surprise and sustain us, and can be evocative. And, at their best, they can even be transformative."

Garrett's *Artists' and Writers' Cookbook* is not the first or only book of its kind, as Garrett herself points out in the introduction. The 1961 cookbook of the same name is followed in kind by *The Great American Writers' Cookbook* in 1981 and *The New Great American Writers' Cookbook* in 2003. It is also part of another trend in cookbook publishing to refigure famous writers as cooks: Maya Angelou's *Hallelujah! The Welcome Table* (2007) with narratives collected from her many memoirs; *Les Contemplations Gourmandes* by Florian V. Hugo (2011), French chef and descendant of Victor Hugo, pairing the elder's reputation as host and gourmand with the younger's chef ethos; *The Hemingway Cookbook* by Craig Boreth (2012) with recipes to "provide a taste of the food and drink that were most important in the life of Hemingway and the life of his fiction" (xiv). This is to say nothing of the cookbooks borne of fictional worlds: *The Unofficial Harry Potter Cookbook* (Dana Bucholz 2010), *Cooking for Muggles* (Martha Stephenson 2016), *The Potterhead's Unofficial Harry Potter Cookbook* (Martha Stone 2016), and so many more. This class of cookbooks – for readers about writers and writing – makes a strong case for the existence of the genre of literary cookbook.

Though it is arranged in predictable cookbook chapters (breakfast, soups and salads, pizza and sandwiches, etc) for ease in locating a recipe to use, it is above all a book for readers who cook. The contributors are the *raison d'être*. If we did not know this by the title, subtitle, and the list of notable contributors on the cover, then we know it because their names decorate the inside covers, front and back. That easy-to-use table of contents lists the writer or artist's name before the title of the essay (which like Joyce Carol Oates's "Recipe in Defiance of Grief" may not describe a specific dish). Each recipe is presented at the end of a narrative, much longer than the standard headnote that would accompany a recipe in a chef-centric cookbook.

The recipes themselves often take on a narrative quality, continuing in the voice of the writer. For example, the instructions for Jessica Stoller's "Male Gaze Macarons" advise the reader to preheat the oven and then "Add your best catcall: Hey baby! SexXxXy!! Can I get your number? GOD BLESS YOU. Let me get some of that SUGAR!! Smile for me??" Garrett demonstrates the priority of reading over eating in the introduction when she writes that these "memory-laden recipes...are a pleasure to read and recreate." The next sentence promises, somewhat less enthusiastically, that "Many are delicious too, although the book encompasses the imaginary, the charmingly bizarre-gross, and the almost-disastrous."

You guys. *There are no photographs of food in this book.* Only the charming illustrations of Amy Jean Porter related to the subject of the narrative. Everything about the design and structure of this cookbook reminds us that we are here for the stories and their writers – not for the food. The book tells us what to do with it: *read, read, read.*

As much as this is an *Artists' and Writers' Cookbook*, it is a reader's cookbook most of all. And so, it must be evaluated this way. It cannot be judged on the taste, texture, and presentation of James Franco's peanut butter and jelly sandwich (for which no red-blooded American who can see over a kitchen counter needs a recipe.) Instead, we evaluate the narrative: Franco's essay titled "The Utilitarian, American-Style PB&J: An Artist's Best Friend."

In this light, the cookbook delivers on its promises. The essays are delightful, heartwarming, personal: a glimpse of our favorite artists and writers at home. But more important, I think, is how the intentional focus on story expands what a cookbook can be and do. As a person with a vested interest in cookbooks as documents to be read, I look at *The Artists' and Writers' Cookbook* as a text that challenges the two assumptions at the center of most cookbooks. First, the assumption that a cookbook or recipe is "merely" a usable text, and second, that the voice at the center is an unchallenged authority. The opening lines of "Dinner with Laurel and Rick" from Laurel Nakadate and Rick Moody destroy both of these principles: "Laurel and I can't cook worth a shit, and we rarely spend more than ten minutes in the kitchen, and personally I think that eating is something that you do to avoid starvation, rather than something which should be done out of sybaritic delight or aesthetic bliss." The recipes that follow are "useful" in their way, but the narratives often argue *against* their use for anything but storytelling.

One of the themes my Literary Cookbook class continues to return to is the idea of *usefulness*. Usefulness is itself a problematic criteria for assessing literariness. It's the same criteria that arbitrarily elevates the inscrutable masculine novels of modernism over the didactic fiction of women's reform movements (see Jane Tompkins' "Sentimental Power"). And to say that Garrett's cookbook is literary because it is not useful seems to argue that the inverse is true, too: a useful cookbook is not literary. I would argue that Garrett's book *is* useful in the parlor, even if not in the kitchen. It is part of an ongoing conversation about food and identity, and readers of *The Artists' and Writers' Cookbook* may use the stories in this

book to add to their culinary and cultural capital, using the raw material of stories into their identities – even if they never incorporate “The Utilitarian, American-Style PB&J” into their bodies. Garrett’s contribution, along with the other literary cookbooks of its kind, suggests that cookbooks may indeed have literary aspirations – and that scholars, teachers, and lovers of literature may find much to study, teach, and love here.