

Jeffrey Birkenstein

How Significant Food Makes a Short Story into a Meal

Food and foodways have long been present in short stories, of course, but little critical attention has been paid to this often most fundamental of generic narrative strategies. What I call “Significant Food” in fiction is food used as a significant plot or other substantial literary device, food where the important concomitant cultural signifiers related to nourishment and the table (or, the absence thereof) assume a crucial narrative role. Massimo Montanari writes that this language of food, “[t]his aggregate of conventions, which we shall call ‘grammar,’ informs the food system not as a simple compilation of products and foods, assembled in a more or less casual fashion, but rather as a structure, inside of which each component defines its meaning.”¹

I will explore this meaning/these meanings, then, by focusing on borders, “Significant Food,” and the immigrant experience in contemporary short stories by, among others, Sandra Cisneros, Dagoberto Gilb, and Jhumpa Lahiri. Investigating the liminal space between one culture and the next in which many of the characters of these authors move, I will explore the role that comestibles play in this space. The short story—with its tight, focused narrative, with its limited textual space, with its “now here, now there” movement, with its requirement that but one or two small things (a fork, an earring) carry meaning well beyond their heft—is fertile ground in which to explore the interplay of what might be called a multifaceted immigrant “grammar” of food. Common to many immigrants and non-majority Americans, many of the characters these authors write about seek to meld cultures—the old and the new; the familiar and the foreign—for their own advantage, yes, but often merely for their own survival. While there are many ways to approach this space, I argue that food in these fictions, instead of being merely a background cultural signifier, is often the source of both cultural conflict and/or integration, at once a living history and conduit to the “old world” and an entry point into a new, hybridized culture. As such, food makes meaning, and this meaning makes for a fuller appreciation of these stories.

¹ Massimo Montanari, *Food Is Culture*, trans. by Albert Sonnenfeld (New York: Columbia UP, 2006) 99.