

**SHE DID IT: CULINARY RECONSTRUCTION IN POST-WAR BRITAIN**

*Writing at the kitchen table: the authorized biography of Elizabeth David.* Artemis Cooper, 2002. London: Penguin Books. ISBN 0140263772, 363 pp., £7.99, paper.

Elizabeth David introduced Britain to the diet of the Mediterranean; her legacy is even more salient today, as recent research suggests that such a diet contains a wealth of health-protecting compounds. It is widely accepted that Elizabeth David stirred up a culinary revolution and a small wonder that after her death people were queuing up to buy in on the lifestyle – some lucky person even got the kitchen table.

‘Authorized’ conjures up visions of a book that will not be confrontational, enlighten little and may even err on the side of being rather dull. This is far from the case in *Writing at the kitchen table*. It soon becomes obvious that not only has Artemis Cooper had access to a wealth of information but she also has the ability to pick out the fine detail. This gives the reader real insight into this great cookery legend. However, in exposing David’s strengths of character, Ms Cooper does not seek to suppress this rebel.

She catalogues David’s early, comfortable, middle-class upbringing, tracing her flirtation with the theatre, her somewhat tempestuous romantic life and her travels in wartime Europe: voyages at what was hardly a time for the delicate English rose to sojourn. David was, of course, far from conventional.

This book is all consuming and satiates more than just a foodie’s appetite. Cooper writes well and once engrossed the reader is keen to savour every event, not just the ingredients. To get the most out of this concentrated review of her life, I had to reread it and I was rewarded: the second read allows an even deeper probe into David’s complicated character. One can go off at so many tangents: her forthright love of indigenous ingredients is well documented but it is done with honesty – rocket is used instead of parsley because it was there. The diet was at times limited.

We are made aware of David’s need to compartmentalize her relationships. Cooper tells us that she did not like to mix her friends and rarely did she like her girlfriends’ husbands. There is further insight into Elizabeth David’s personality in the chapter about her husband Tony Andrews. This woman of passion appears to have contented herself with a kind but rather uninspiring choice of husband. Surprisingly, no photographs of the marriage exist. Her marriage of convenience allowed Elizabeth the social confidence (and respectability) to rise above the parapet and indeed the crowd. In highlighting the sociological aspects of this pairing, her relationship with Norman Douglas and other eminent personalities of the time are insightfully put into context.

The book changes tempo in chapters that read as a travel journal. I was captivated by her life in such places as Cairo. Here Cooper documents David's relationships with cooks (Suleiman), writers and the congenial passer-by.

At times the web is tangled. Her return to post-war Britain, where frugal cooking was the order of the day, heralds a new course for the book. David's development as an academic cookery writer proves an interesting path to observe. Her recipes gave no place to quantity or measurement. Such precision had been unimportant in Italy, where the recipes were developed. However, with rationing still in force David's recipes were the antithesis of the British approach to cooking. Some criticism was inevitable.

Cooper unravels a scholarly woman – from the bookworm on board the *Evelyn Hope* who develops into the inspiring author who writes as she cooks with knowing confidence. In the chapter on baking bread, David emerges as an author who is keen to research her subject well.

In writing this book, Artemis Cooper laid herself open to opposition. In writing the life history of a *doyenne* who is survived by influential culinary friends, there is inevitable risk. The joy of this book is that, despite being written in partnership with such people, the observation is clear and not rose coloured.

*Fi Bird*

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#### THE BLESSINGS AND PAINS OF LANGUAGE

*Lost in translation: a life in a new language.* Eva Hoffman 1998. London: Vintage. ISBN 0749390700, 288 pp., £7.99, paper.

*Lost in translation* is the story of Eva Hoffman's shift between worlds, from her birth in Cracow, Poland, to her family's emigration to Canada when she was 13. It evokes the struggles of them all, but Eva in particular, to integrate themselves into the ways of a new continent. A tale of linguistic dispossession, it is Eva's attempt to recapture her experience of losing personal voice and identity through emigration.

In writing this, Eva is both blessed and cursed by the strength of her talents – especially the quality of her mind and ability to remember or recreate in riveting terms the life she left behind. She has an almost Proustian motivation (with less volubility) to locate real meaning in a moment or tiny action. It suffuses the scope and detail of her imagination/memory to fix the reader in different episodes or moments – contentment experienced through sunshine, the impact and sufficiency of memories at 4 years old, the customs, rituals and traditions of agricultural and urban Poland.