



As They Were

M.F.K. Fisher

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This marvelous collection of autobiographical essays by the celebrated, much-adored Fisher covers her life, family, food and adventures.

As They Were Details

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Memoir

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Wendy says

Started reading this in front of the fire, glass of inexpensive champagne in hand, on New Year's Eve (2 little kids...not going out.) I almost wept at knowing I could not time-travel my way back to 1939 Marcel's restaurant in L.A. or to the 3 chalets along Lake Geneva she described from the 1940s. Still worse was the meal she ate at a converted mill in...what was the town in Alsace (?), with the over-eager waitress and the semi-retired master chef. I had never in my life craved terrine de campagne and a glass of marc until that moment. What IS marc, anyway?? I look forward to savoring (!!) Fisher's other books over the years. The art of pairing aperatif and hors d'oeuvre will not die as long as I can help it!

Jenny (Reading Envy) says

M.F.K. Fisher only came on my radar this year, and I didn't pick her up to read until I heard part of her essay about canning, and her earliest memory of jam-skin. She is one of the great foremothers of food writing, in fact there is even an award named after her for excellence in culinary writing.

I'm not sure this was the book to start with, as she is best known for *The Art of Eating: 50th Anniversary Edition* and *The Gastronomical Me*. This book is a collection of essays spanning 1941-1980, of memories and food in places she has lived around the world. Most of them have prefaces written later to give some context. Some of the instances detail places and even food that just doesn't exist in the same way anymore, and it was a great nostalgia read on Thanksgiving day.

(Warning: this book will make you hungry!)

Favorites:

I Was Really Very Hungry about a trip to a restaurant in northern Burgundy when a somewhat manic waitress gives her the best meal of her life, stuffs her to the gills. It is almost unbelievable, but the food!

The First Cafe details her first visit to a fine dining establishment at the age of 6, Marcel's in Los Angeles (in 1914.) She recalls the details that have never left her memory and talks about taking her own daughter to a similar place. "...She is whatever tender creature can thus begin the long nibbling through the invisible tunnel of the world."

Two Kitchens in Provence transports to a very specific moment in time from when she picked up her family and relocated to France for a while. It's like Julia Child without the political connections, even more embedded in the local life.

About Looking Alone At a Place is probably my favorite essay, about living in Arles, alone, in the off-season where a tourist is not exactly welcome. So much detail, so much place.

Dutch Freighter talks about life and food for people who travel on freighters. I don't know of anyone who has ever done this, so I'm guessing this is a pre-World War II phenomenon. The Fishers traveled from Marseille to Los Angeles on one in 1932, but also took shorter trips. The description of Dutch freighter food, from hodgepodge to Goudaspritses to Nassi Goreng (obviously a food from the Dutch empire) was fascinating, but to me reading in 2014, it also felt... lost.

ETA: This book was discussed on Episode 017 of the Reading Envy Podcast.

Ellen says

This book is a group of essays, written over a long time span, 1940's - 1980's. I found the quality uneven, some writing drew me into the time and place being written about. Other stories were strangely sterile and cold. A few pieces were personal experiences that for some reason the author wrote in the third person, with herself a character with a fictitious name. She seems very odd, detached from the world she is writing about, as she herself says, she felt "invisible".

Often she mentions sound as a dominant feature of the time and place she is describing. In some of the strange essays the author seems almost mentally ill.

I have read and loved many other works by MFK Fisher. This book not so much. I mostly felt uneasy, not happily enjoying her excellent writing as with everything else I have read by her.

Erica Harmon says

I've always thought to myself that I'd like M.F.K. Fisher, but never made it a priority. A coworker brought in her copy and lent it to me after a conversation about food and food writing the previous week, and surprised by her thoughtfulness (and a reading slump), immediately started reading it.

I especially loved the section on traveling on freight ships and was surprised more than once (I didn't learn) by her frank observations about sex and race (particularly in that section). I kept expecting to be embarrassed but I never was. That her essays took place over the course of a life time gave the collection a sense of dramatic proportion even as the individual essays were often modest in scope. I can't wait to read one of fishers famous foodie books.

Dvora says

M.F.K. Fisher is one of my favorite authors and probably my favorite food author. I read this some years ago, in fact probably more than once. One of the pieces is my all-time favorite piece related to food. "I Was Really Very Hungry" is about the waitress in a small country inn where Fisher went once alone to have lunch. Whereas Fisher is passionate about food, this waitress was obsessed about the perfection of a meal. Five stars for that story alone!

I'll leave the five stars because of that and a few of the others and because her writing is so good and the way she invokes place is too. But I was disappointed that I didn't like all the essays as much as maybe I did the first time. But then, who remembers the first time? I vaguely remember reading about Aix before (and since I've been there, enjoyed the visit with her). I've never lived in Arles, but I've visited there many times so I very much enjoyed her description of the people and the place. The people of Arles were unnecessarily cruel to Vincent van Gogh when he lived there. She never mentions anything about that, but she also found them unsympathetic.

Dave says

Most liked the essays on European cuisine, restaurants, shopping, waiters and waitresses, and her experiences on cargo ships.

Linda says

Love her writing.

Erin says

Ok, MFK Fisher is always a sloooooow read for me. I've been working on this book off and on for a few months now because it just doesn't move fast enough to hold my attention for very long. But the writing is so lush and beautiful there is no choice but to just luxuriate in her sentences as you drink it all in. Completely worth taking your time with and savoring. This is a delectable book that showcases some of her best writing and also gives you a lot more insights into her bright, full life.

Raquel says

Some of the most gorgeous prose I have ever encountered.

Blair says

I struggle with how to describe M.F.K. Fisher. There are so many words, but I feel like they are a bit oxymoronic. Sitting down with Fisher is more like sitting down with a friend, vs. a book. I feel like I'm in a conversation and it's warm, fascinating, and highly entertaining. I also feel like a time-traveler - these are worlds and places that I can only see through her eyes. Her Aix was entirely different than my Aix. Then again, I feel like I do when I eat something wholesome - I have this feeling that I've done something really good for myself. There is a calm and strength in her words that permeates me after spending some time with them. But how can that be, when I also get the same sensation I get after eating something decadent and entirely unwholesome? That voluptuous fullness that is slightly guilty, but so totally worth it. Fisher scratches all of my itches at the same time. Anyone interested in food, place, emotions, or wishes to learn how to just be in a moment and absorb it with all your senses will benefit from reading this amazing woman.

Edgar says

MFK Fisher, the famous gastronome (in literary circles anyway) is a master of writing. Her imagery is rich with exquisite and elegant details that draws in and holds onto the audience, whether it's when she's

describing the sumptuous meals she enjoyed (her oeuvre) or recollecting the days of her youth in Southern California her golden years in Northern California, and, of course, her time in France. What's more, there is no flabbiness or overt purpleness in her prose. Despite the breadth of her lexicon, her ideas are succinct. She is to words what Velazquez is to paint, what Monk is to music and what Kurosawa is to film. Highly recommend.

Greta says

I wanted to like this book more than I did. Ms. Fisher is a wonderful writer and her prose is flowing and evocative but somehow her ramblings through the south of France and aboard ship and wherever else she took us on this voyage of food and life was just a bit too mundane for my tastes. One gets the feeling, while reading, that one is there and experiencing what is being written about but when the book is closed at the end one wonders what just happened. It just wasn't really memorable. I gave it three stars for the writing, but I'd give it two for content.

Kate says

An elegant lady, spirited and witty. This was my first encounter with m.f.k. and won't be my last. Mildly appalled I didn't know her sooner. Absolutely never have I enjoyed food writing more. Though I realize "food writing" might be a reductive descriptor. It brings awareness to the significance, sacredness, of food in our lives with a sincere passion for living. I just loved looking at the world through her eyes at a certain time and place. She must've been a bold little lady in her time. And so full of respect and gratitude. I am almost moved to tears each time I read the last sentence in the last story of the collection: "It all proves what I've said before, that I am among the most blessed of women, still permitted to choose." I can't say exactly why. What do I read next?

Stephanie Chambers says

A mixed bag really. There were a lot of good stories about living in France and eating in France! And there were interesting stories about her life and her family. But there were some that just didn't hold my attention.

Mary Beth says

I expected this to be food writing, but it was more memoir. That would have been fine, except that it was such colorless memoir. It felt like the dregs of Fisher's writings that hadn't been published elsewhere. The only essay I thought was really good was the account near the end of experiencing what I would call a panic attack, which was so spot on that it almost made wading through the rest of the book worth it.
