

WRITERS MOSAIC

Fiction Prescriptions: Food

Ella Berthoud and Isabelle Dupuy

[Intro music]

Ella Berthoud (EB): Welcome to our new episode of *Fiction Prescriptions*. I'm Ella Berthoud, and I'm a bibliotherapist.

Isabelle Dupuy (ID): And I'm Isabelle Dupuy, and I'm a writer. Today, we're going to talk about food. Ella, how was your relationship with food when you were young? What are your earliest memories of you and food?

EB: So, I have a pretty bizarre food childhood. My parents were diplomats, so they were constantly cooking amazing feasts which were very complicated. And my mum loved cooking. And she would go into the kitchen for days on end and create amazing

[missing words] which were often themed. So, she'd have a theme of a member of the royal family or a colour theme, and she'd create all these piles of meringues that had swirly rainbow colours in them. And I would be her assistant, as I was the only girl – one of four kids, three brothers – and we lived in a sexist world. And so, I would be assisting her making these incredible foods. And so, I thought it was really normal to be making really complex meals all the time. And it was only really when I left home that I started constantly trying to cook for all my friends with these very extravagant recipes that I realised, *oh, this is not actually normal*. So, it was quite strange. How about you? What about your earliest childhood food memories?

ID: Well, I grew up in Haiti. And in Haiti, one of the funny things was that we had American television. To be honest, it was often half pirated. But we had American commercials on TV. And of course, we grew up eating Haitian food. The food is very good in Haiti. It's probably the best Caribbean food. It's a good mixture of Caribbean, African, French tradition. A lot of respect for food. But I was fascinated by commercials for McDonalds and Burger King, where they'd show you these flaming burgers on some grill. And they were not in Haiti. So, I remember that the first time I finally made it out of Haiti, when I was 11, and I went to Montreal, I was dying to go eat at McDonalds. And when my aunt took me there, I ate everything: I ate a Big Mac, I ate a milkshake, I

ate fries, I ate, I don't know, probably a, how do you call it, a Filet-O-Fish, and all these things. And I thought it was the best meal ever, and I was very happy.

EB: We were also talking about food memories from fiction. Because I have a very intense memory from the first novel I ever read to myself, which was *The Hundred and One Dalmatians* by Dodie Smith. And in that book, the dogs are on their way, the dog couple are on their way to look for their puppies, their stolen puppies, and they come to a posh country house. And in that posh country house, there's an old gentleman, who toasts toast on a stick, and he's doing it for himself, and then he puts butter on it and eats it. And they're sitting behind him, behind his chair, unknown to him, salivating. And I really remember salivating when I was reading that book, and I became obsessed with hot buttered toast. And the old gentleman does give the hot buttered toast to the dogs, and it's a really lovely scene. And I have a lot of intense food memories from childhood books. You said you don't so much.

ID: Well, I was thinking about it, and actually, I remember, I mean, this is a very generic one as well, but reading a lot of *Asterix*, and the Feast at the end of each *Asterix and Obelix* adventure, which features a roast boar and a huge—

EB: Yeah, very carnivorous

ID: [Inaudible] of food and potatoes and everything. And the potatoes, the vegetables didn't really attract me, but the roast boar always interested me. And in Haiti, we do eat a lot of pork. Not cooked like that, more either shredded or cut in small pieces and fried. But I always loved pork from there.

EB: Yes, I remember drooling over that feast as well [laughs]. Also, *Tarzan*, I just have to mention.

ID: Yeah, I can't believe you found food in *Tarzan* [laughs].

EB: *Tarzan* came up in a previous podcast. And I remember Tarzan eating cooked meat for the first time when he meets other humans [ID laughs]. And I remember, again, salivating over the cooked meat.

ID: Yeah, a bit about, exactly, a nice barbecued piece of meat or a nice fried piece of meat is a very, yeah, suggestive thing.

EB: Yes.

ID: And so, from there, we're going to start today with a poem, which is also about recollection of early years and food. And this is by Nikki Giovanni, a very famous African American poet, who passed two years ago. Her most famous poem is called 'Nikki-Rosa', which is about also about her childhood and about how she was hoping that no white biographer, American, would write about her childhood because they wouldn't understand that Black wealth is Black love. And so, about her childhood, was not rich at all, actually quite poor, and yet very happy. And this one is called 'Bay Leaves'.

[ID reads 'Bay Leaves' by Nikki Giovanni]

I watched Mommy

Cook

Though I cooked

With Grandmother

With Grandmother I learned

To pluck chickens

Peel carrots

Turn chittlins inside out

Scrub pig feet

With Mommy I watched

leftovers for stew

Or vegetable soup

Great northern beans

Mixed collard turnips and mustard greens

Garlic cloves Bay Leaves

Very beautifully green

Stiff so fresh

With just a pinch of salt

Not everything together

All the time but all the time

Keeping everything

I make my own

Frontier soup in a crock pot

I make my own ice cream with a pinch of salt

And everything else

With garlic

But fresh Bay Leaves

Are only for very special

Ox Tails'

EB: That's a really lovely poem.

ID: And I love oxtail.

EB: Really?

ID: That's one of my favourite foods.

EB: Wow. So, what does that poem mean to you? What does it evoke?

ID: I think that this poem is also about a lady who is thinking back to her childhood and the spices and the small things, like bay leaves, a pinch of salt, it's very small things, but also something significant, which is that she watched her mother save food, but she cooked with her grandmother.

EB: Yes.

ID: And that tells you a lot about her family and about how she grew up. And I think the relationship between women, cooking, and food is a very potent one, very important one, and one that we find in literature quite often. So, we're going to start with our first book, *Ella*.

EB: *Like Water for Chocolate* by Laura Esquivel, which is a fantastic novel, which we both read in our younger days and we both re-read for this podcast, which has been a really interesting experience because it's a book about a young woman who is in love with Pedro, she's called Tita, and she is doomed to not marry him because she's been told by her mother that she must look after her mother until her mother's dying day, and her fate is to remain unmarried.

ID: Because she's the last born—

EB: Yes.

ID: —girl.

EB: In a matriarchal society. And she is an incredible cook, Tita. And she pours all her emotions into the food that she cooks. So, throughout the book, it's done in months,

each chapter is a month of her life, and each chapter describes a particular recipe, where we go into great detail about what she cooks and how she cooks it. And they're often quite extravagant, a bit like the ones that I used to make with my mum, because they have 17 eggs and 20 quails and 8 pounds of butter, etc. So, they're very rich and creamy and delicious, and they're all often created from scratch. And Tita pours all her emotions into this book—sorry, into the food, which then other people eat, and they take on, they feel the emotions that she is putting into the food. This is from one of the scenes which is from 'March', so it's the third chapter of the novel. And it's about one of her sisters, called Gertrudis, and this is her moment when something magical happens to her because of food.

[EB reads from *Like Water for Chocolate* by Laura Esquivel]

The only thing that kept her going was the image of the refreshing shower ahead of her, but unfortunately she was never able to enjoy it, because the drops that fell from the shower never made it to her body: they evaporated before they reached her. Her body was giving off so much heat that the wooden walls began to split and burst into flame.

Terrified, she thought she would be burnt to death, and she ran out of the little enclosure just as she was, completely naked.

By then the scent of roses given off by her body had travelled a long, long way. All the way to town, where the rebel forces and the federal troops were engaged in a fierce battle. One man stood head and shoulders above the others for his valor; it was the rebel who Gertrudis had seen in the plaza in Piedras Negros the week before.

A pink cloud floated towards him, wrapped itself around him, and made him set out at a gallop towards Mama Elena's ranch. Juan – for that was the soldier's name – abandoned the field of battle, leaving an enemy soldier not quite dead, without knowing why he did so.

A higher power was controlling his actions. He was moved by a strong urge to arrive as quickly as possible at a meeting with someone unknown in some undetermined place. But it wasn't hard to find. The aroma from Gertrudis' body guided him. He got there just in time to find her racing through the field. Then he knew why he'd been drawn there.

This woman desperately needed a man to quench the red-hot fire that was raging inside her.'

ID: This book is a wonderful book. Ella will talk about the ending in a second. But the thing that's interesting about it is that it's about a matriarchal society. So, this is Mexico at the turn of the 20th century, where politically it is quite in upheaval. And it's also about these women who are surviving on their own. There's no men. The men are either dead or gone. And they do everything themselves. They own land, and they're able to grow everything themselves, from the ingredients to actually make matches. I mean, it's quite extraordinary when you hear about everything they can do. How to keep eggs over a season, keep them fresh, all kinds of—

EB: Lots of useful information, like ways of burying eggs.

ID: Lots of useful information. Yes, and also how to cook beans with baking powder, which is something I knew from my own childhood as well, to keep the color. But really, what comes through is also the cruelty of women towards each other. It's like, why would a mother want her daughter to never know love and to keep her? Is it a way of protecting her from something? Or is it because of the mother's own disappointment in love, and then she's been turned barren? I mean, it's about the harshness of life and what it does to women in such a society.

We're going to talk after this book about another book, which is quite similar to it, called *Cécé*, which is a Haitian book, contemporary book from 2020. But what happens when women like this, who had land, were able to grow their food, and have a level of independence, of course, they always yearned for love and yearned for a man, to people like this who moved to the city with nothing, because of erosion, because of changing laws in terms of ownership, because of wars and civil wars, end up in the city with nothing? And what happens to them then, because what held them together was that whole process of feeding themselves, their families, their workers on the ranch? That was not just about food; it was about a whole life. And that life was about discipline, was about obeying orders. You had to obey the mother. And what happens if you don't? And the fear of the mother. And at the same time, the mother being an incomplete being because her love has been torn from her because of racist reasons. She's not allowed to be with the man that she loved.

EB: Yes, I think the mother's being just entirely selfish, personally. She just wants a slave to draw her bath every morning. So, there's a lot of detail about how she makes Tita serve her and pamper her, and really, she's a bit of a glorified servant. So, I think it's interesting that you're wondering if it might be partly to do with her, the mother, getting revenge on masculinity in a way or deprived femininity as well.

ID: And then it goes into the food.

EB: Yeah, exactly.

ID: And then the food becomes the receptor for all that sensuous—for all those senses that are being starved.

EB: Yes.

ID: The end of this book is very romantic. And when we were young, we thought, *oh my God, this is the best ending ever.*

EB: Yes, and we were talking about how, going back to the book as older people, we had a completely different view of the ending and were actually really disappointed and rather sad about the ending. But when we both read it as younger women, we thought, *oh, it's so romantic and so lovely, and isn't it appropriate that it ended like that.* We won't give it away.

ID: Because the point is, again, about this patriarchy and these women who have so much desire in them, but at the same time, so much naivete, in a way, about men and life, that that's why the ending doesn't work anymore. Because you think, now we've learned, you know what a good relationship should be.

EB: Yes.

ID: But in this book, it doesn't happen.

EB: That's true. But I must say, as a fiction prescription, I still think it's brilliant for anyone that is experiencing unrequited love in any form.

ID: Yes. And who wants to express their love in ways other than just speech or action. This is done through food.

EB: Yes.

ID: And it's an amazing—and food as a communication tool. Because you know how—I mean, my father is like this, for example. He communicates through food. My father is an amazing cook, and that's how he expresses his love for us, is through food.

EB: So, you said it very much related in some of the ways that food is discussed.

ID: Yes, so this is a perversion of food, actually. So, *Cécé* is highly recommended, it's gripping. So, it's a story of a young girl, and she also grows up with her grandmother because her mother dies when she's two years old. And her grandmother has a food shop. Let's call it counter, a takeaway counter, in the slum in Haiti, in Port-au-Prince. The slum in this story is called the Cité of Divine Power. And the grandmother's been living there forever. She was one of the first residents. It was just a barren land, not far from the sea, around the harbor of Port-au-Prince. And she built her house there. She wasn't even sure if she owned the land, but she thought she did. And there was nobody around for 500 metres around her. And then suddenly, all these people came from the countryside because they had gone bust, for the reasons I had explained earlier. And suddenly, the government took no notice, no interest in what was going on there. And so, this city mushroomed out of nothing, with no running water, no electricity, no infrastructure whatsoever, just a couple of little alleyways in between the shacks to link the different corners to each other, no trees. And so, people live there in a state of, yeah, it's dirty, it smells, it's noisy, and it's run by gangs. And the piece I want to read is about the grandmother having a problem, because at some point,

sometimes they had electricity, sometimes they don't. How does she keep her food fresh for her takeaway, which is her livelihood?

[ID reads from *Cécé* by Emmelie Prophète]

Bethlehem was the closest cité to Divine Power, an enemy territory, at one time worth a short-lived alliance between [missing name] and Freddie. But now the neighborhoods kept their distance, and everyone carried a weapon, sleeves as they called them. Gang members killed each other, often on outrageous pretexts. One of the bloodiest face-offs happened because Fanfan le Sauvage has started a rumor that all the members of [missing name] gang were queer. For them, it was the worst insult possible. Even queers were against queerness. They were, in fact, the most vehement radical in their opposition.

The inhabitants of the two cités had gone almost two weeks stuck inside their homes. [Missing name], [that's the grandmother], had had to throw the pork she had bought for her business to the dogs. God only knows how long she tried to hold on to it, insisting that if she added enough spice, customers might still notice it was a little rank but would resign

themselves to it. It wouldn't be the first time, and she'd compensate with larger portions at the same price.

After eight days, [missing name] called on the phone to ask if there was a corpse in the house. [Missing name] had been so annoyed that she was about to explain to him how certain body parts of the living can give off bad smells too and that he should check out his own home, but changed her mind. The smell was starting to bother her as well. She boiled the meat inside the bedroom, and we ate of it as much as we could. [Missing name] and I both got sick. By day 12, the meat had become crumbly, inedible.'

EB: Ew, that's grim, isn't it?

ID: Yeah, so it's like the opposite of *Like Water for Chocolate*, where the food is so delicious, so fresh, so organic, it's all been grown with enormous amounts of labour and love. And here, the labour is there and the love is there, but the circumstances are so horrible that this is the perversion that happens and the food is rotten. You have to eat this rotten food. She keeps spicing to see if it will hide it. And now it's really just—and they've lost their income now for a number of days.

EB: And there's a lot of descriptions of cadavers in the street and dead bodies and rats.

ID: It's a very hard book, but it's gripping. You cannot put it down. And the main character is so—her name is Cécé, she is so compelling. She's a young girl, she's only 12. She's small for her age from malnutrition and from her mother having been a junkie during her pregnancy. And yet, she's so full of life, she's fiery, she's feisty, she's fighting, she makes friends with the gang leaders so she can survive. And so, in spite of all the horrible circumstances here, and through the food you see how horrible it is, you still get hope that something may crack through.

EB: Yes, and she's laughing in her bed while listening to the gunfire outside. She's a real great spirit. And I think as a fiction prescription, it's a really good example of surviving against all odds in the worst, awful circumstances.

ID: Seriously, how life always tries to shine through.

EB: Yeah, and it is a really good read.

ID: Because it's really bad circumstances.

EB: Yeah, unbelievable.

ID: And unfortunately, Haiti—I mean, this book is about five, six years old, and Haiti has not yet improved.

EB: No.

ID: But the good news is that Haiti, just as a side comment, is in the World Cup.

EB: Yay!

ID: First time in 52 years. And there is a match against Scotland.

EB: Wow.

ID: And there will be a chance for a lot of Haitian food in London.

EB: Excellent. Yeah, it's a very eye-opening novel, that one. So, moving on to a different kind of hunger and thirst and attitude to food, this is Clare Fuller's latest novel, *Hunger*

and Thirst, which is a fascinating novel about a young girl who's brought up in care. And she, from a very early age, has an intense relationship with starvation because her mother dies in awful circumstance, and during the period that her mother dies, Ursula, as she's named, is stuck with nothing to eat for a long period, and she's reduced to eating flies.

ID: Oh, wow.

EB: Such is her desperation, in Morocco, because they're staying in a boarding house, and she gets stuck in this little bathroom. So, the flies are a theme that go on through the book in a very interesting way. It's quite a dark, Gothic novel where mysterious and strange things happen. It's quite ghostly. But Ursula becomes a highly successful artist. She renames herself Usha because she needs to escape the events of the past. And we know from the beginning that she was involved in a murder. And there's a documentary film being made about that murder, which is called *Dark Descent*.

ID: Oh, it's a real murder that happened?

EB: No.

ID: Okay, this is in the book.

EB: It's fiction.

ID: Okay.

EB: Yeah, so, that is a parallel story that's running through the book that we're discovering what we find out through the documentary, which is about her life. So, it's very cleverly put together as a plot, and it's an absolute gripper that keeps you awake all night.

ID: And the hunger, is it also like a metaphysical hunger, I guess?

EB: Yeah, so it's a hunger for love and for success, really, because she's come from this very terrible background with absolutely nothing and no hope. But she realises, as a teenager, that she has an amazing skill for sculpture, and she starts carving things in the backyard of this place where she's squatting. And one of the sculptures created by Ursula is called 'The Lithopedion', and it's a sculpture of a giant bear with a calcified foetus inside it. And the foetus is actually a human foetus in this sculpture. But it refers to this terrible phenomenon of lithopedia, a medical condition, where a baby in the

womb calcifies, and it gets more and more layers of calcium around it until it's effectively a stone baby. And some people it's happened to, and they've actually discovered the baby 30 or 40 years later still in the womb. Honestly, it's a real thing. So, it's not so much food as creativity calcified, you could say. Very interesting. So, I do think this book is all about different kinds of nourishment, not directly food. There are interesting meals within the book, and Ursula is just constantly hungry in the book, and she eats a lot of toast, actually. So, it's not a book that's celebrating food, but it's a book that's about hunger and other forms of nourishment.

ID: Interesting.

EB: From there, we were going to move to—

ID: More murder and food [laughs].

EB: More murder and darkness in food. So, *The Debt to Pleasure* by John Lanchester, which is a fantastic book. And he's got a new book out at the moment called *Look What You Made Me Do*, which I haven't read yet, but it looks great. So, *The Debt to Pleasure* is shown as if it's a recipe book. So, the introduction is the narrator, who's called Tarquin Winot, who is writing this supposed recipe book about all his favorite recipes. But he's

a very long winded and diversionary writer, who keeps going off into different themes. And a bit like *Like Water for Chocolate*, it's written in, not months, but seasons. So, we start in winter, then we have spring, summer, autumn. And the book follows Tarquin on his journey to France. We keep getting memories of what has happened to him in his life and the way that his recipes reflect on what happened in his life. And we slowly realised that he is a very unreliable narrator, and all these wonderful recipes that he's creating, which are traditional recipes but things like omelettes and roast dishes and shepherd's pie, etc., often have a bit of a sinister side to them. And it slowly becomes clear that there's been a few murders in his life, which are probably related to the food. And it's all moving towards a dramatic conclusion. And it's a really fun read. I loved it because it's actually very funny. I found it completely gripping. It is one of those books where it keeps weaving into different stories, but you're just hooked by the cleverness of his descriptions and language and the recipes which are in there too.

ID: The poison is mushrooms, isn't it?

EB: Yes.

ID: Very interesting. It's interesting also, as a comment between such a story and this one, because—and *Cécé* as well, which is the very different take between men and

women and recipes and what they mean. So, for example, I think when we talk about *Like Water for Chocolate* and *Cécé*, where you have these omnipresent and omnipowerful older women, who are oppressing the younger women, forcing them to find a way of expressing themselves through food, for example, and what does that have to do with feminism? And how does feminism penetrate such a space? Whereas with the men, you see, it's much more direct. It's more like, okay, this is a tool that we can use for various—for seduction, for killing. Whereas with the women, you do wonder, why did feminism try to actually get you out of the kitchen so hard, so much?

EB: Yeah, that's an interesting question.

ID: Because in these stories, the women are independent. They have to be. No one's going to support them. And the only way they're independent is by being in the kitchen. *Cécé* case, the grandmother, because that's how she makes her living; Tita's case here is because that is her only way of self-expression and she's required to do it for her family. And the kitchen also in *Like Water for Chocolate* becomes a laboratory for remedies. That is also where there's a character whose grandmother is a native Indian, and that's where she discovers herbs, she tries to develop remedies for disease and for illnesses. So, I think that that's an interesting question of why did feminism ultimately try to take the women out of the kitchen? What was the point in that? To

accomplish what exactly? Was it to break women's power, actually? Because that was an area that women already controlled, to gain a power that maybe was not so clear. I don't know. It's an interesting question I think that food has a lot to do with.

EB: Absolutely. And in the John Lanchester novel, there's a very male approach to food, which is being a show-off. He's an absolute show-off, this Tarquin. And also, he's not only showing off his incredible gastronomic knowledge, he's always mansplaining everything about different types of mushrooms, etc. But also, he's showing off his cleverness in how he manages to get rid of people.

ID: It's not part of a system.

EB: No.

ID: So, the next thing we're going to talk about is *Babette's Feast*, which is a short story by Karen Blixen, very famous Danish author, which again, goes back to that idea of food, women, a system, a community.

EB: Yeah, so it's a wonderful story which has been made into a film, and it's about two sisters.

ID: Is the film good? I can't remember the film.

EB: It is good.

ID: Is it?

EB: Yeah. I recommend it. Okay, so, this is a story about two sisters, who live in a very deprived community in Denmark. And they, in their youth, got many offers of love from suitors, but they both decided to devote themselves to their father and the religious community that he lived in. And one day, they take in a French refugee, who has fled from Paris in 1871 in one of the French revolutions. And it's about this woman that escapes from France, and she goes to stay with the two sisters in Denmark. And they don't know anything about her history, but they take her in out of goodwill, and she becomes their maid. And one day, she miraculously wins the lottery, and everyone imagines that she will go back to France where she came from, but instead she says, 'I just have one wish, and that's to create an incredible French feast, so that I can show you where I come from and what the food is like.' She then creates this absolutely incredible feast, which is full of cooked turtle and oysters and wonderful birds and everything stuffed within other birds. And it's made for this tiny religious community of

only about 20 people. And they're all a bit horrified by the extravagance and feel like, *surely we can't eat all this, it's sinful*. And they all decide, *oh, we're hardly going to eat anything because it's just too luxurious*. But then when they sit down for the feast, they slowly lose their inhibitions and begin to eat. And they begin to experience forgiveness of each other, and all their little petty arguments that they've had over the years disappear, and they give in to the sensuality of the food, and they love it, and everyone comes together in a beautiful, harmonious fashion. And it's just a really gorgeous expression of the great qualities of food bringing people together.

ID: Yes, and it's a wonderful story about the generosity that comes through food, the selflessness, and how it can be an act of pure giving. And how it was interesting because in that community, which was poor and living in a country where winter is quite rough, so they're not used to a lot of lavishness because they don't have a lot of material to be lavish with, and they're quite Protestant, and how this gift that she makes opens their hearts. And the grace in the story is, I think, what makes that story so lasting.

EB: Yes, I think of all the stories and books that we're discussing today, it's the one that's most purely celebratory and joyful in terms of how food can bring everyone together. And as you say, it's a pure, generous gift from the heart. And it turns out that

Babette, who is the heroine, used to be the top chef in a very famous restaurant in Paris; I think it's called the Café Anglais. And everyone realises after the feast that she's blown the entire lottery winnings on this one feast. So, it's just completely an act of generosity. Really lovely story.

ID: Yes, beautiful.

EB: Yeah, and a great fiction prescription for the idea of bringing everyone together, and it makes you want to create incredible feasts and have all your friends around.

ID: It does, because you see that an incredible feast is such a great way of letting go as well, right? You could go into arguments and discussions with your family members forever about whatever disagreements you've had, or you can cook them something amazing and have a good time.

EB: Yes, and bring everyone back together through the food. So, one other short story we want to mention is Italo Calvino's *The Distance of the Moon*. Calvino is one of my all-time favourite authors. And this collection, which is called *Cosmicomics*, is so fabulous that I've actually created a series of paintings based on it. So, this story, *The Distance of the Moon*, is about a time when the moon was so close to Earth that people

could put a ladder up to the moon, go up the ladder, and then collect moon milk. And the moon milk, in the story, it's never really described what it tastes like, but it's a magical substance that everyone wants. And it's almost as if the moon represents a motherhood, a beneficent mother giving of herself. And actually—

ID: Or a giant ice cream ball.

EB: Yeah, or a giant boob [laughs].

ID: A giant boob. Yes, yes. That's true too. It made me feel like the moon was like the best vanilla ice cream scoop ever.

EB: Yeah, it is lovely. And everyone, almost, is milking the moon when they go up there. But what's really lovely about the story is it brings everyone together in their shared desire to get to the moon, and they have various difficult ways of getting to the moon. But also, what we both really love about it is the way it's written. So, I'm just going to read a little bit to give you a taste of the beauty of the writing.

[EB reads from *The Distance of the Moon* by Italo Calvino]

The spot where the Moon was lowest, as she went by, was off the Zinc Cliffs. We used to go out with those little rowboats they had in those days, round and flat, made of cork. They held quite a few of us: me, Captain Vhd Vhd, his wife, my deaf cousin, and sometimes little Xlthlx — she was twelve or so at that time. On those nights the water was very calm, so silvery it looked like mercury, and the fish in it, violet-colored, unable to resist the Moon's attraction, rose to the surface, all of them, and so did the octopuses and the saffron medusas. There was always a flight of tiny creatures — little crabs, squid, and even some weeds, light and filmy, and coral plants — that broke from the sea and ended up on the Moon, hanging down from that lime-white ceiling, or else they stayed in midair, a phosphorescent swarm we had to drive off, waving banana leaves at them.'

EB: So lovely. The whole story is full of these incredible images.

ID: The writing is beautiful. And I think a lot of food is interesting in that sense as fiction prescriptions, right? Because food is a different way of communication. It's not writing; it's not literature; the senses you need for food are not the same; it's your taste; it is your eyes, but it is also your taste; it is also your touch. And I think it's always incredible

to find how writers translate food into words. And it varies so much from women to men, from culture to culture. And so, when we find something, I mean, Calvino was beautiful in this, and we thought it would be, yeah.

EB: Yeah, and also it's really interesting to think about how different readers respond to different stories and descriptions about food.

ID: And descriptions about food. And how it relates back to what we think of food. If food is our luxury, our security, our necessity. I mean, it's all these things, right? But it's what actually comes up.

EB: Yes, and for many people, it's their love language, how they create food for people. And I think it does have a huge effect, reading about food, on how you are as a food maker or food giver, because actually, *Babette's Feast* is a story I read quite young, and it made me love all the more that idea of being a beneficent.

ID: And it related you back to your mum too, right? I mean, in terms of knowing what a feast is worth.

EB: Yeah, the eternal feast.

ID: Whereas I had a shock because we were speaking last night with my daughter, and Ella asked her, 'So, what are your memory of your mum's food?' And she said, 'My mum used to basically put a piece of cod in the oven and feed it to us with cream spinach every day.' [Laugh] And I was like, 'That's so not true.'

EB: That's her memory, I know.

ID: And so, exactly, you think [outro music] you don't know how all of this conveys. And hopefully in a couple of years, while she's living on her own and working and eating out of supermarket frozen food, she will come to reconsider her memories.

EB: And hopefully appreciate that cream spinach [both laugh]. Makes me wonder what my kids are going to say about my food.

ID: Thank you so much for listening. This was *Fiction Prescriptions*, our episode about food. Please tune in next time.

EB: Which is going to be all about superstitions.

ID: Very, very exciting.

EB: And we would love you to send in any questions that you might have relating to superstitions in fiction.

ID: Yes, yes. So, I'm Isabelle Dupuy.

EB: And I'm Ella Berthoud. Thank you.

ID: Thank you.

A recording of this interview can be found at writersmosaic.org.uk

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