

Food and evil

By Vicky Allan

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Joanna Blythman knows what it is to feel like a zombie. As undercover research for her book, *Shopped: The Shocking Power Of British Supermarkets*, she worked for a week on the check-outs of a Scottish branch of Tesco. During those long, monotonous shifts under the striplights, packing and scanning, she would reach a state of trance-like boredom, “spaced out, as though dulled by drugs”. She recalls the experience as we queue at the check-out of a different supermarket, trolley sparsely piled with toilet rolls – the few items she can bring herself to buy in the place. It’s the endless repetition of the script, “Have you got a Clubcard?”, the humiliation of having to call someone to your cashdesk because you wanted to go to the toilet, the dehydration, the absence of daylight and fresh air, the “discordant symphony of repeat beeping”. “I really feel for them,” she says, as we queue, gazing along the rows of Stepfordian figures, mechanically lifting and swiping. “You become like a robot. You can’t help it, this is what the place does to you.”

Shopped is an emotive and bitter attack on our supermarket culture – its depletion of our town centres, its steady edging out of independent stores, its savage treatment of suppliers, its effect on our diet and knowledge of food, its impact on the way we spend our leisure time. The book started out as an attempt to “catalogue in human terms the consequences of our 30-year love affair with supermarkets”, a desire to “form a picture of supermarkets from the bottom up – and from many angles”. But this is a far from dispassionate book. It’s angry and indignant, each page bristling with disquieting facts and figures. Supermarkets control 80% of what we eat. The number of independent grocers in the UK has fallen from 116,000 in 1961 to only 20,900 in 1997. A 1998 report recorded that every superstore opening resulted in a net loss of 276 full-time jobs.

The book is also a quiet manifesto for another type of lifestyle. Blythman’s critique isn’t just about where we shop or what we eat, but how we spend our days. So you don’t think you have time to trawl around local independent shops? You can’t spare half an hour to cook a meal? “Food is important. It’s a major cultural thing, and it’s about nurture. I’m unhappy to see it devalued. If people say, ‘I haven’t time to cook’, I am to an extent unsympathetic. What else are they doing in your lives that’s so important? We’re all workaholics. We work ridiculously long hours, compared with other Europeans. We

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haven't time to cook; we buy ready meals which are unhealthy, boring and don't nurture us. It's all part of a modern lifestyle which conspires to make us less happy."

In America there is a growing backlash against Wal-Mart, the world's biggest retailer, and its strategy of building out-of-town stores that vacuum business from town centres. Teresa Heinz Kerry, the wife of presidential hopeful John Kerry, recently complained that the company "destroys communities"; Naomi Klein in *No Logo* devoted a section to the store's expansion strategies; and recently, following local protest, Wal-Mart lost a battle to set up a branch in a Los Angeles suburb. As Blythman points out: "Posters appeared in independent shop windows reading 'Save Our Community From Wal-Mart'. But here in Britain, we still seem entranced, mesmerised by the long, colourful aisles, the promise of infinite variety and potential, the lure of perma-freshness and cosmetic perfection. For every £8 spent in Britain, £1 is spent in Tesco."

Each of the big four, Asda/Wal-Mart, Tesco, Sainsbury's and Safeway, are almost as bad as each other, says Blythman. If she has to visit one, she will opt for Sainsbury's or "send my husband". She prefers to take a circuit of local independent stores: Eddie's Chinese fish monger, Global Fruits newsagent, the farmer's market every other Saturday. This, she points out, takes her about two hours – not much longer than going to the supermarket, and infinitely more pleasurable. Even standing outside the store in the Craiglockhart area of Edinburgh (Blythman's nearest supermarket), she seems a little drained and twitchy. She remembers this area as a "lush, green part of town", now taken over by "concrete sprawl". Supermarkets, she says are like mini neutron bombs, sucking the lifeblood out of surrounding communities and turning vibrant shopping parades into strings of charity shops and estate agents.

I have to confess I am a supermarket shopper. Raised by a woman who prided herself on her ability to eke out the most for her five children from the reduced sell-by-date section, I had my education by shopping in the aisles of a Co-op. While my father, a farmer, was plumping up sheep on swedes and tumbling towards bankruptcy, my mother was a conspirator in what Blythman considers to have been the depletion of our agricultural and horticultural riches. Lured by promises of "choice" and "convenience", by "buy-one-get-one-free" special offers, she was one of the many who fell for the supermarket promise. In the process, the knowledge of generations has been lost. We no longer know what a good piece of meat looks like, or how to seek out a truly fresh melon.

Among my own 20 to 35-year-old age group, she writes, that is particularly marked. Here is a generation that, surveys show, doesn't know the difference between a loin and a brisket. *Mea culpa*. Despite growing up on a farm, I have only the dimmest memory of what might be in season: strawberries around Wimbledon, oranges at Christmas, or anything you like

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in a supermarket any time of the year. “It’s part of the de-skilling,” says Blythman. “It’s like food is fuel. If you need to fill up a car, go to a petrol station; buy food, go to a supermarket. There’s been an erosion of knowledge over the last 30 years.”

First stop, fruit and vegetables. Blythman picks up a packet of organic apples from New Zealand – she is, she says, “cherry-picking” and this is all she wants from this section. In the next tray, she points out the “kids’ packs”, extra small apples for children. “Usually,” she says, “when it’s packaged for kids, it works out more expensive.” The marketing of “children’s food” is a major issue. “I was shocked by the healthy eating claims on the children’s foodstuffs, the squirtable bottles of toffee sauce that were in the Waitrose healthy food for children range. How can they get away with that?”

Offers and promotions, such as buy-one-get-one-free, are, she says, usually at the cost of the supplier. “What shocked me most in my research was the way supermarkets treated suppliers. I couldn’t believe the stories. Important farming figures told me about the complete hypocrisy of the supermarket dealings, saying one thing and doing another; grown men coming out in tears after interviews with buyers who are such bastards and basically said, “Do this, or you’ll lose your business.”

There are stories in *Shopped* of suppliers being suddenly delisted, seemingly for no reason, of bullying buyers and of farmers turning up at a Tesco Annual General Meeting to challenge chief executive Sir Terry Leahy, whose pay package was £2,838,000. The average farming income, one pointed out, had dropped to £11,000. Blythman tells me too of market gardener Charles Secrett, who – rather than lose business with Sainsbury’s – chiselled his leeks out of the frozen ground.

The meat aisle: a pack of six sirloin steaks for £7.49, red and shiny underneath their cellophane packaging. “These are so cheap, you have to ask what’s going on,” says Blythman. “They can’t possibly be paying the suppliers enough.” Meat, she adds, isn’t meant to be sold this red: vivid scarlet, like a fresh wound. Many cuts should, as any butcher will tell you, be hung for texture and flavour. But as with all things supermarket, it’s not what it tastes like that counts, but ease of transport and sale, and appeal to the customer’s uneducated eye. It is fruits and vegetables harvested “green” and tasteless, cheeses that don’t crumble, ready meals pumped with preservatives.

Blythman has a feel for the poetry of decay and senescence, its place in life’s cycle. Food, she says, has to be treated as a product in flux. “It’s not like being a jeweller, where you just dust the diamond and bring down the security fence at the end of the night. Food is always changing all the time. Cheese, for instance, goes from being underripe to just perfect. The skill in retailing is actually managing that. What the supermarkets do is sort of make it into a foolproof process, where you must sell a cheese within four days, or get rid of it. There’s

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no knowledge, no skill. Everything's pre-manicured to sit on the shelves and look good."

Four years in France offered a glimpse of another way of living. In Strasbourg, she frequented local shops and markets. That was the French way of life. "There was a time," she says, "when I thought supermarket shopping was OK. France provided a vision of another type of shopping and I didn't want to go back. It was like suddenly falling out of love with someone . "

In fact, most European countries have managed to fend off the onslaught, maintaining their independent shop culture alongside the out-of-town stores. Why did it all go so wrong for us? "We never had quite a strong enough food culture," says Blythman. "The Italians, for instance, are very strong on their traditional things. Also, in Britain, people like the idea of cheap food. If you gave some cheap food to the French, they would say, "What's wrong with it?" If someone offered you a cheap car, you'd say, "Why is it cheap?" But if they offered you twice as many eggs as you'd normally get for the same price, you'd say, "Great."

It's not true, says Blythman, that supermarkets are necessarily cheaper than independent stores. "They foster the idea that they give you good value." They might sell bananas, baked beans and white bread for pennies, but they make it up on ready meals, fruits like mangoes and grapes, whose value most of us don't really know, and non-food sales. Even where they do give good value, she adds, it's at someone else's expense. Blythman chronicles, how the baked bean price-cutting war may have led to the closure Nestlé's Crosse and Blackwell's canning operation, because as they said, "we literally could not can fresh air" for the price supermarkets wanted to retail their beans.

Yet supermarkets are at one with our age. They appeared as feminism flourished. They fit with our long working hours, double-income households and "on the hoof" lifestyles. As an ideal, they meld seamlessly with a culture of hassled superwomen, where traditional housework is devalued and office hours prioritised. My own motive for shopping at my local Sainsbury's is convenience. Why waste time trudging round lots of little shops, when you can do it all in one dreary humph? But Blythman thinks supermarkets are exploiting women's lack of time; that the idea of the supermarket as every housewife's guardian angel is bogus.

Shopped pricks a nerve. It's almost impossible to read it and not want to cut up your loyalty card. Blythman gives alternatives; shopping is described as a sensual pleasure, a social process, a creative act. "Where possible," she says, "I support an independent in everything now – whether it's a bike shop or a newsagent. I get milk delivered. There are lots of other options and if you take them, you'll have more pleasure in life, nicer food and you'll spend less money. People in other countries see shopping as a not necessarily unpleasurable part of looking after yourself."

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Away from the aisles, Blythman appears reinvigorated. At her favourite greengrocer, she sniffs a punnet of strawberries, fondles a bunch of purple sprouting broccoli. She hands me an Indian mango. It's soft and mushy, with juice oozing from a blemish in its skin: very different from the fat, blushing Tommy Atkins variety in supermarkets. So tangy and pulpy, it makes me feel I've never really eaten a mango before.

Blythman is optimistic. Eventually these empires of the ready meal will crumble. "I say to myself, who would have ever thought McDonald's was going to get it in the neck? Or Coca-Cola? Or Starbucks? But of course, they're all having problems now. People have turned against them." The protests against Wal-Mart seem to prove her point. "There's no question in my mind," he said, "that Wal-Mart is a phenomenon that will have its day. The bigger they come, the harder they fall."

Shopped: The Shocking Power Of British Supermarkets is published this week by Fourth Estate (£12.99). Joanna Blythman is food critic for the Glasgow-based Sunday Herald, Scotland's leading Sunday newspaper.