



Chew on This: Everything You Don't Want to Know About Fast Food

**Author Program In-depth Interview
Insights Beyond the Movie
with Eric Schlosser and Charles Wilson**

***Chew on This* creators Eric Schlosser and Charles Wilson, interviewed in New York City on February 20 and 21, 2007.**

TEACHINGBOOKS: *Fast Food Nation*, a nonfiction book by Eric Schlosser, and its middle school-level companion, *Chew on This: Everything You Don't Want to Know About Fast Food*, co-written by Eric Schlosser and Charles Wilson, reveal behind-the-scenes information about the fast food industry, including facts about nutrition, economics, marketing strategies, working conditions, animal treatment and more. *Fast Food Nation* came out first. Eric, how did you come to write it?

ERIC SCHLOSSER: *Fast Food Nation* started as an assignment for *Rolling Stone* magazine. The editors wanted to know what was going on behind the counter at fast food restaurants and where all the food was coming from. I wasn't sure I wanted the assignment, because I liked fast food, and I didn't want to write anything that was looking down on it.

I went into the library and read about fast food and became amazed by all the stuff I didn't know. I learned that there is a whole world behind the counter that, it seemed to me, has been deliberately hidden from the public. So, I wrote a big article about it for *Rolling Stone* magazine. Then, I decided there was much more that I wanted to investigate, so I expanded that into a book — *Fast Food Nation*.

Charles Wilson worked as the fact checker on *Fast Food Nation*. He went through the manuscript, making sure everything was correct so none of the companies could sue.

TEACHINGBOOKS: How did *Chew on This*, a book that encourages students to ponder their food choices, emerge from *Fast Food Nation*?

CHARLES WILSON: *Chew on This* came about after the paperback of *Fast Food Nation* came out. I was talking to a children's book editor, and she wondered whether this book could be re-imagined for younger people. These were the people that are being affected the most by the fast food industry — in its health consequences and by providing most of the fast food labor force.

We knew that people in high school were reading *Fast Food Nation*, but we wondered whether we could extend the audience even further — could we bring it to middle school students. We wanted to sort of re-imagine the book in a way that young people could relate to. I brought the idea to Eric, and he very generously asked me if I would participate and write it with him.

ERIC SCHLOSSER: We took some of the information from *Fast Food Nation* and some new information and put it together in a way that was accessible to kids around 11 and 12 years old.

TEACHINGBOOKS: How would you describe *Chew on This*?

ERIC SCHLOSSER: *Chew on This* takes an ordinary meal that kids eat all the time without thinking about it — hamburgers, French fries, a shake — and really examines all the implications. It is a book that tells you what you're eating when you go to a fast food restaurant, as well as where it comes from, how it's made, what it does to your body when you eat this food, and what it's doing to the society all around you.

Chew on This is meant to get kids thinking about how they're being targeted and marketed to, the consequences of being a part of this food culture, the consequences for their own bodies, and the consequences for society.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What do you see as the importance of this book for students?

ERIC SCHLOSSER: I think there could hardly be a more important subject than health and nutrition. In *Chew on This*, Chuck and I didn't want to preach to kids. We didn't tell set out to tell them what to eat or to scold them. We just wanted to provide information to them so that they could make their own decisions and be empowered by this knowledge.

The book treats kids with respect and respects their intelligence. The aim of *Chew on This* is similar to the aim of everything I write: make the reader think and provoke them into questioning what's going on in the world and then come to their own conclusions and, ultimately, make their own decisions.

CHARLES WILSON: *Chew on This* came out of the desire to make kids aware of what they were eating, especially at a time when we know that one out of every three kids born in 2000 is expected to develop Type 2 diabetes, as high as two out of every three kids among certain ethnic groups. This is a public health disaster waiting to happen. The more that we could let kids know, in a very straightforward way, where their food is coming from, we might be able to help them make good choices for themselves.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What is your hope for students as a result of reading *Chew on This*?

ERIC SCHLOSSER: One result of a student reading *Chew on This* and then taking action is being more aware of the choices they make and maybe changing their own diet, in the simplest way, like drinking less soda.

There's a real strong link today between soda consumption and obesity among children. That's just one kind of an example. Kids have no idea when they're drinking soda what they're really drinking, and a lot of them are stunned when they learn that drinking a Big Gulp is like taking a big jar of sugar and just pouring it down. There are 50 teaspoons of sugar in a 64-ounce Big Gulp.

We didn't set out to tell kids to never have any soda, but we went beneath the surface and showed them what the implications are. The purpose of the book ultimately is to raise awareness. And if the kids can make changes on the basis of that, then all the better.

I hope that *Chew on This* does helps kids make the connection between choices they make now and their future health — make the right choices now so they don't pay for wrong choices later on. In *Chew on This*, we talk a lot about sustainable agriculture and what kind of practices on the land you can do for generations. There's also a sustainable lifestyle — what kind of habits are you going to develop young that you can have for the rest of your life.

Another theme in *Chew on This* is the ripple effect of each fast food purchase. When you go into a fast food restaurant, you may just think about how good your meal tastes while you're eating it. But you're not thinking about all the consequences that come from that one purchase —

the consequences for your body, the consequences for supporting this company and how it's treating its workers, all the way back to the farm where the potatoes were grown, or the ranch where the cattle were raised. So, one of the aims of the book is to show kids how they're connected, and how we're all connected by this system.

CHARLES WILSON: Eric and I both believe in the idea that one person can change the world by their individual choices. In *Chew on This*, we share the story of the 12-year-old girl who stands up against her school administrators to get the soda machine out of her school. We hope that other kids would be encouraged to take similar actions and realize that just because all the other kids think a certain way or take for granted that we have junk food in our schools, doesn't mean they can't stand up against it. We try to reward this sort of initiative and individual thinking in the book. We hope to encourage readers to take action.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What applications do you see for *Chew on This* in the schools?

ERIC SCHLOSSER: We deliberately wrote *Chew on This* in a way that it covers many different subjects. There are aspects of nutrition in it. There are parts about the impact on the environment. There are parts that try to explain some economic principles to kids. So hopefully in looking at this one industry and this one product from many points of view, we've produced a book that can stimulate many different kinds of conversations on many different subjects.

Students can do experiments and investigate for themselves what's going on in restaurants, in our food system, and begin a process of learning. I don't believe that this book is the final word on any of these subjects, and I hope that kids who read the book will take it upon themselves to read more and investigate more on any part of the book that they find interesting.

CHARLES WILSON: We hope a book like *Chew on This* can appeal across curricula, not just to a health teacher, but also to someone in social sciences, and someone who's teaching history.

The early parts of the book discuss the history of the industry and consider how post-World War II America's development of the highway system changed how our communities were oriented.

A lot of the latter part of book talks about the health effects of fast food. We take a tour of the human body, and we show the effects that fast food can have on your aorta, on your heart, on your spine, on your liver, on your kidneys. All of that is useful for health units.

We also envision the workers in the cafeteria being included in the curricular dialog; they might be invited to talk to the kids about how they make their purchasing decisions and run the kitchens. We want to create an interaction where kids can speak directly to decision makers about what they want in the cafeteria and what kind of food they would like to see. We hope that *Chew on This* fosters that sort of communication throughout the whole school.

We hope that if kids read this book in a school setting that they don't just take in the information at face value, but that they invite farmers and owners of fast food restaurants into the school.

TEACHINGBOOKS: How did you start working together? Please describe your collaboration.

CHARLES WILSON: I had just moved to New York, and I was looking for work that was meaningful. I interviewed at *The New Yorker* and was told about Eric and his need for someone to research the fast food book he was writing [*Fast Food Nation*].

At the time, I thought, "I don't eat fast food. This is not a topic that is interesting to me." Then I met Eric, and I found him extremely warm and generous. I read *Fast Food Nation*, and I

thought it was one of the most remarkable things I had read. So for four months, Eric had me pretend I was a meatpacking executive going through his book, chapter-by-chapter, and attacking everything I could find to factually attack.

Eric was very transparent about this whole process. He showed me all of his files — huge filing cabinets full of original and archival research. He encouraged me to call anybody and challenge him on anything. I respected that as a journalist.

So, out of what began as a situation of manufactured animosity turned to a good friendship. That's how our later collaboration developed.

Writing *Chew on This* was a very scary enterprise for me. I was being brought into a project that was based on a very, very successful book — *Fast Food Nation* — that had reached an incredibly wide audience. I knew that our book would be judged against its quality and content. As a young journalist, it was a great opportunity. Eric's been an incredible mentor to me.

TEACHINGBOOKS: How did you land on your title, *Chew on This*?

CHARLES WILSON: We wanted to call it *Chew on This* because it had a lot of different connotations, including and mostly, "Think about it — and think deeply." We hope with a book like ours can get kids to chew on the idea that there is a darker part of the fast food story that's not being told in advertisements and packaging. And so we hope, if they begin to look at the fast food industry that way, they can also realize that a lot of what they're being told is not the full story, and that they should look deeper for themselves.

Our subtitle is *Everything You Don't Want to Know About Fast Food*, and this is the side of the fast food industry told in our book that the fast food industry will never tell you itself.

There are a lot of gross things in our book, and probably a lot of it is stuff that kids might not want to know. They may want to blissfully eat fast food in peace and not be disturbed by it. But I think after kids have read it, often they're really grateful for the knowledge as well. So hopefully they're glad to know it when they're finished.

ERIC SCHLOSSER: The title *Chew on This* pretty much tells you what the point of the book is. The title isn't "Do this" or "Don't do this," it's *Chew on This*. It's trying to make the reader think, and then the reader can come to his own or her own conclusions.

And the subtitle, *Everything You Don't Want to Know About Fast Food*, well, it's the truth. It's trying to tell you the reality behind the counter, the reality behind the marketing, and give a different point of view from the kind that you find in the commercials that are constantly being broadcast on TV and aimed at kids.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What is it like to write a nonfiction piece?

CHARLES WILSON: One of Eric's teachers, [Pulitzer Prize-winning author] John McPhee, told him that putting together a nonfiction book is sort of like building an iceberg in that 95% of the work is underwater. You don't see it, and the part that you actually see is this little bit sticking out of the top. And ideally, that's how a nonfiction book should be put together. That's sort of what we aimed for when we wrote *Chew on This*.

If you looked at our notes and all the background that we assembled to compile this book, it's reams and reams of paper and scientific studies. We talked to a lot of scientists and different people who never made it into the book, just so that we felt we had a really solid grounding on the topics that we were talking about.

We subscribed to magazines that most people would never read, like *Meat and Poultry* magazine, and in the National Restaurant Association's magazine because in those sort of

publications, you get insider talk about what's really happening in the industry. We did lots of background research, then we figured out how to distill the information in a way that would be friendly for young readers. We tried to ground everything in the stories of individual people, and convey our facts and our information through the broader framework of those stories.

ERIC SCHLOSSER: All the books of nonfiction that I've written, including *Chew on This*, are a combination of different kinds of writing. And I can't tell you how much I love my job. I mean, basically, I'm a perpetual student. I start by finding a subject I really don't know very much, but that I'm curious about. I learn about it through books in a library, by doing interviews with people who know a lot about the subject, and by going out on my own and seeing for myself what's happening.

The process of putting a book like *Chew on This* together, for me, is a process of learning and discovery. In a way, it's like what a student does when he or she writes a paper at school. This is just a very long paper.

Point of view is present in anything I write, but I really try to let the subject and facts speak for themselves. I think two different people can read one of my books and come away with completely different opinions on the subject. I hope they just read from the beginning to the end and be made to think about the subject. Then they can come to their own conclusions.

I've written about illegal immigrants in the United States; I spent a year following migrant farm workers as they were harvesting. I've written about our criminal justice system, and how it treats the victims of crime. I've been working for years now on a book about prisons in America, and I've been going into prisons and traveling around the country and seeing what's going on.

I've tried to write about subjects that I feel the mainstream media isn't doing a very good job of reporting that I think are important. As an investigative reporter, I'm trying to uncover things and expose them to create a dialogue.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What suggestions do you have for students interested in writing nonfiction?

CHARLES WILSON: I like to say to young people who are beginning to consider writing nonfiction that nonfiction books and articles can have a profound effect on how people think and how they view the world. One of the books that I read as a young person that had the most effect on me was Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*. She stood up against some major powers in the chemical industry and revealed that pesticides and other chemicals that we were using have bad effects on our ecosystem. She was savagely attacked for it, but she also helped found the modern environmental movement. She stood courageously up to her attackers.

With nonfiction, you can really start a conversation in this society and begin to have people look at the world in a new way. It's a slow-moving process, but ideas are one of the most profound things that we have in a culture, and ideas and words can change the world. The more articulately you are able to express your ideas, the more power you can have. I write nonfiction out of the belief that it can change both people's thinking and the world. Students should know that everything they write and say has that possibility as well.

TEACHINGBOOKS: *Fast Food Nation* is often discussed in the same sentence as Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*. What is your reaction to that?

ERIC SCHLOSSER: 2006 marked the 100th anniversary of the publication of *The Jungle* by Upton Sinclair. It's probably one of the most important novels ever published in the United States. It is tragic that a 100-year-old book could still feel so relevant today. *The Jungle* is about the total mistreatment of meat packing workers in the slaughterhouses of Chicago. Things got better in

the decades after *The Jungle* was published, but then in the 1980s, they really began to get worse again.

There are some similarities between *Fast Food Nation* and *The Jungle*. And in *Chew on This* we talk about how immigrant meat-packing workers are being terribly abused in ways that Upton Sinclair would have recognized. It's unfortunate that history is repeating itself in this way.

One of the difference between *Fast Food Nation* and *The Jungle* is *The Jungle* is a novel and *Fast Food Nation* is nonfiction. It's a work of reporting, and I don't think it will have the lasting impact that *The Jungle* did, but has some similarity of theme and subject matter.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Please describe a typical workday.

CHARLES WILSON: When I was working on *Chew on This*, a typical workday was to get all my notes together the night before, and organize myself, then rise around 8:00, and write for two or three hours. That was the ideal. Occasionally, I would write late at night.

ERIC SCHLOSSER: A typical workday for me is getting up at about 5:00, 5:15 in the morning, getting some coffee or tea as quickly as possible, and then getting to my desk. And ideally, I'll start writing around 5:30, 5:45, and I'll write for three, four hours, and then I'll take a break, and read over what I write. Maybe about lunchtime, I'll go exercise or get out into the day. Then I'll either read over what I wrote the day before and quit work around 3:00 or 4:00 in the afternoon and spend some time with my kids.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What do you do when you get stuck?

CHARLES WILSON: I run a lot, so when I get stuck, I tend to go for a long run. It's a good way to clear my mind. Often, ideas come to me and conflicts resolve themselves when I'm running.

ERIC SCHLOSSER: Years ago when I got stuck, I'd start twirling my hair. That's not possible anymore. I can't prove the relationship between writing and hair loss, but I think I pulled out a fair amount trying to work on certain sentences.

I find that one of the most important things, as a writer, is to just show up — to just stay in the chair and fight through the difficult patches. As long as you're at the desk, and you're willing to fight it out, eventually the right words will come.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What do you like to tell students?

CHARLES WILSON: I like to tell students that the way that the adults around them have created the world is not the world that they have to live in. They can start the process of change right now by the choices that they make.

And I tell young people to question everything — what your teachers tell you, what your parents tell you, the things that you believe without knowing why. Still show respect to all people, but at the same time think through everything for yourself. Do not to accept inherited wisdom as something that's actually wise or inevitable. A lot of the ways that the world is now is through a slow, steady stream of individual decisions that people made over time, and some of those were not good decisions. The way you change it is by making small decisions in your everyday life.

ERIC SCHLOSSER: I really like visiting schools, but what I tell students isn't anywhere near as interesting to me as what they tell me. During my school visits, I really enjoy the feedback I get from them much more than anything I might tell say to them.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What did you learn most from writing *Fast Food Nation* and *Chew on This*?

ERIC SCHLOSSER: One of the reasons I was initially reluctant to take the assignment of *Fast Food Nation* from *Rolling Stone* is I didn't want to put down the food that most people in America ate, and I liked it. Fast food is inexpensive, convenient, and it tastes good. I'm all in favor of that. My problem is how heavily processed it is — how full of salt, fat, and sugar it is.

I think it's possible to have food that's healthy, that's good for you to eat, that's also inexpensive. We don't have to have this cheap, unhealthy food being so aggressively promoted. We can have Americans eating affordably and eating in a way that's sustainable. The current fast food that we have is inexpensive when you buy it, but the long-term costs of eating it and the long-term costs to society, are much too high. This cheap food, when you add up all the total costs, is much too expensive.

One of the things that really outrages me that I learned doing the research on this subject is that the federal government has more power to recall a defective stuffed animal who's little glass eye may fall off than to recall contaminated ground beef that could sicken or even kill hundreds if not thousands of people. The meat-packing industry is so powerful that it's managed to prevent the government from having this basic power of recalling a defective product.

TEACHINGBOOKS: *Fast Food Nation* has been widely read and praised. The movie version came out in 2006. Do you foresee a lasting impact on our society from *Fast Food Nation* and *Chew on This*?

CHARLES WILSON: We hope that school administrators will really think hard about whether they want branded fast food in their schools — whether the health cost of selling junk food is worth the revenue. We hope schools can learn from some of the positive examples that we present in the book — programs like Alice Waters' Edible Schoolyard in Berkeley, where food has become an integral part of the education, and young people have the opportunity to be able to actually touch and grow the food that they ultimately eat. We feel this is a very wonderful paradigm that's now being brought to schools throughout this country, and an example of the actions that we hope we'll see in the future.

ERIC SCHLOSSER: In the year since *Fast Food Nation* came out, I've seen some really encouraging trends in the schools. There's been a growing effort to kick soda out of the schools. And governors as different as Arnold Schwarzenegger in California and Mike Huckabee in Arkansas have worked hard to get soda and junk food out of their state schools, which is good.

There's also a growing trend toward having gardens in schools to literally show kids where food comes from by having them grow and prepare their own food. There's also a movement that's bringing farmers into schools and creating relationships between local farms and local cafeterias, so that instead of frozen mystery meat, you have fresh produce that's coming from the area that has a name and a face associated with it.

The obesity epidemic among American children is becoming so bad that I think there's a growing realization across the country that we've got to change what we're feeding our kids and that school may be a really good place to start.

It's not just kids who need to think about this industry and think about the implications of this food. It's their parents as well. I think for real change to happen, it's going to have to come

from the kids, the community, the teachers, the parents, and, we're all part of this fast food nation. We're all connected by the system, and we all have to be a part, I think, of changing it.

Books by Eric Schlosser

- CHEW ON THIS: EVERYTHING YOU DON'T WANT TO KNOW ABOUT FAST FOOD (co-written with Charles Wilson), Houghton Mifflin, 2006
- COGS IN THE GREAT MACHINE, Penguin Putnam, 2005
- FEEDING THE FUTURE: FROM FAT TO FAMINE, HOW TO SOLVE THE WORLD'S FOOD CRISES, House of Anansi Press, 2005
- REEFER MADNESS: SEX, DRUGS, AND CHEAP LABOR IN THE AMERICAN BLACK MARKET, Houghton Mifflin, 2003
- PLEASURES OF SLOW FOOD, THE: CELEBRATING AUTHENTIC TRADITIONS, FLAVORS AND RECIPES (co-written with Corby Kummer and Susie Cushner), Chronicle Books, 2002
- FAST FOOD NATION: THE DARK SIDE OF THE ALL-AMERICAN MEAL, Houghton Mifflin, 2001
- MONKEY WRENCH GANG, THE (co-written with Edward Abbey), J. B. Lippincott, 1975

Books by Charles Wilson

- CHEW ON THIS: EVERYTHING YOU DON'T WANT TO KNOW ABOUT FAST FOOD (co-written with Eric Schlosser), Houghton Mifflin, 2006

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