

Ellen Bayer

What's in it for the Lobster?

Richard J. King, *Lobster*. London: Reaktion, 2011. 216 pp. \$19.95.

Elisabeth Townsend, *Lobster: A Global History*. London: Reaktion, 2011. 144 pp. \$15.95.

On a recent trip up the Downeast coast of Maine, I was bombarded by signs advertizing lobster shacks —“eat-in or packed for travel!” A particular favorite presents a red



Photo by Ellen Bayer

lobster, sipping a martini, apparently delighted to find himself in a cauldron of boiling water. While I had no desire to eat them, the creatures themselves intrigued me. A boat tour of Frenchman Bay with a naturalist offered some basic insights, and it was with this rudimentary knowledge of lobsters and lobstermen that I approached Richard J. King's contribution to Reaktion's "Animal" series, *Lobster*, in an attempt to understand them from a

perspective other than that of culinary delight.

The first chapter "What is a Lobster?" certainly reinforces King's claim that an answer to the question remains elusive. He notes that, "No clear-cut definition of lobster exists for biologists or linguists" (16). King offers some relative constants in the anatomy of what we refer to as "lobsters," introduces several of the predominant species from around the globe, and provides brief descriptions of some behaviors. Given his predominantly Western audience, King narrows his focus to the clawed lobsters found primarily in the Gulf of Maine and northern Europe. While this does keep the text focused, it comes at the expense of any in-depth discussion of lobsters' importance in non-Western cultures. King's main objective is "to examine if there is indeed something special about our perception of the lobster" from a variety of perspectives, from fishermen's to filmmakers' (21). King's work ultimately seems to suggest, though, that no matter from which perspective one views the lobster, all human perceptions of him are inextricably linked to the lobster's use value.

In Chapter Two, titled "Dissecting a Bug," King provides a more developed discussion of some defining biological characteristics of lobsters, including their anatomy, coloration, feeding and mating habits, moulting, and movements. Unfortunately, King

uses the vivisection of a live lobster as a framing device. He enlists Professor John Geller, a marine biologist at Moss Landing Marine Laboratories in Monterey, California, to vivisect two lobsters that King has purchased from a local fish market. As Professor Geller prepares to make his first incision into the living female lobster, King reflects fleetingly on the ethics of the matter, which struck me more as a way to get past an obligatory topic than as demonstrating any real concern for the ethics of the act itself, and the timing of the question seems a bit after the fact. Additionally, King's use of the term "dissection" whitewashes the situation; he fails to acknowledge that this is indeed a vivisection. King seems to intend the operation as a tidy narrative structure for presenting the lobster anatomy, but it is completely unnecessary. Given that Geller has "led dissections of hundreds of lobsters, crayfish, crabs, and other marine invertebrates for thousands of students of marine biology" (22), he could easily have drawn on his experience to describe a lobster's biological structure. King later offers to boil the animals for Geller, justifying the vivisection, I suppose, by putting the carcass to "good use." King also regrettably chooses impersonal pronouns when referring to this individual lobster: "Geller put the *female* lobster he planned to dissect on *its* belly with *its* tail toward him, the 'Wild Canada' bands remaining around *its* claws" (31, emphasis mine), which reveals her role as an object — not an subject in her own right. She serves as the biological "lobster" in the abstract, and is then served for dinner. The disconnect between human and lobster here, and King's failure to acknowledge or explore it, is the most problematic aspect of the text.

I found King's use of St. Andrews, Scotland, for his narrative frame in Chapter Three, "Ancient, Giant, and Plentiful," much more palatable, as he guides us through the lobstering landmarks of the village to introduce the historical relationship between humans and lobsters. This frame nicely segues into a brief overview of archeological finds, which indicate that, "Humans have been using shelled marine creatures for food or bait as long as our ancestors have been sitting heavy-browed around a campfire" (55). King presents a solid range of visual and written texts, from a temple carving in Egypt to the *Guinness Book of World Records*, illustrating historical human relationships with the lobster, and goes on to introduce the first major lobster industry, begun in Norway (as per request of the Dutch) in the 17th century. This offers a nice transition to Chapter Four, "Building a Better Lobster Trap," in which he outlines the rise of the global lobster industry, with a particular emphasis on North America and Europe. King provides an informative overview of the trapping methods, industry regulations, and improved technologies that have shaped the lobster industry, and offers helpful commentary on the strengths and weaknesses of these aspects of the industry.

Chapter Five, “To Boil or Not to Boil,” considers the edible lobster from the time of the Romans to contemporary lobster festivals, offering evidence from a variety of sources spanning many historical periods and genres, including classical texts, fiction, cookbooks, historical publications, poetry, painting, and film. At times this feels almost collage-like, and I would have liked King to engage more with these materials. Of course, a chapter of this title cannot avoid addressing the problem of preparing the lobster for consumption. As King notes, lobster is the one of the last animals that humans even now kill at home. He describes the standard methods of killing and which tastes best, then considers which might be more humane. He notes in passing that people are often troubled by the moral question of whether it is right to boil lobsters alive; he suggests that the jury remains out on whether they experience pain or not. Since these are the big questions for consumers in regards to lobsters, King surely should have explored them further. I wanted to know more about the research on lobster suffering that he mentions. How do they react to different methods of killing? What are the competing scientific and philosophical thoughts on these reactions? How do humans negotiate this moral problem when they eat or cook lobster? King concludes with a quote from David Foster Wallace that suggests in the end one must rely on one’s individual conscience, but this does not satisfactorily address a most significant aspect of the human/lobster relationship.

King’s passion for his subject rings clear in Chapter Six, “Lobster Tales,” and his expertise in the Literature of the Sea and genuine love for lobsters in literature and art are apparent. He has great fun helping the reader to stock her own personal lobster library. He observes that lobster tales tend to fall into three categories — lobster as undersea creature, lobster as prize, and lobster as symbol — and he examines several examples of each here, with his reading of George Mackay Brown’s poem, “Lobster,” being particularly insightful. Some of the other texts could have benefited from similar close (yet brief) analysis. King laments that in literature and the arts we see “our crustacean heroes in a vital, albeit supporting role” (131). It seems to me that this might also sum up lobsters’ role in all of their interactions with humans.

The final chapter, “Feelers,” is a nice send-off that briefly considers our future with the lobster by taking an around-the-world look at current lobster/human intersections. It sums up the significant themes, or lessons, of King’s lobster study, and the chapter serves as a nice bookend to the first chapter, reinforcing that we still have much to learn about the crustacean, and that our relationship with and perception continually change. While King does emphasize the difficulty of defining the lobster, I nevertheless expected a more developed discussion of lobsters themselves. Like Jacob Bull’s

sentiment in his review of Reaktion's *Salmon*,¹ I wanted to hear more about the animal lobster beyond its use-value to humans. Granted, the stated objective of the "Animal" series is, "to explore the historical significance and impact *on humans* of a wide range of animals,"² and perhaps the large number of different species makes blanket statements about lobsters difficult, but King nevertheless misses some opportunities to elaborate on the lives of lobsters outside of their places in human history. I wanted to hear these stories, too.

The images incorporated into the text — of which there is a generous amount — deserve praise, both in terms of their smooth and effective integration and as complements to the written text. I did feel that some topics mentioned in captions merited a fuller treatment in the body of the text (such as, for example, the gloss over women's apparently significant role in the lobster cannery industry), but overall, the images work as a helpful supplement to the written text and are an aesthetic treat to boot.

Elisabeth Townsend's *Lobster: A Global History* opens with an introduction of the same title as King's first chapter "What is a Lobster?" but the similarity ends there. While she does provide some detailed information about three types — clawed, spiny, and slippered — she introduces these species by posing the question, "But which should you eat?" Thus, information regarding where and how humans consume lobsters guides Townsend's overview of each species. Townsend's book is part of Reaktion's "Edible" series, and, true to the objective of the series, it is through the narrow lens of the history of lobsters as edible objects that she approaches them. It is perhaps unfair, then, to criticize Townsend for supplying what readers of this series expect, but I nevertheless felt disappointed that the lobster never broke out of his role as food-item here. Townsend's use of gendered pronouns for referring to a specific, named, female lobster in the introductory chapter was a refreshing contrast to King, but she unfortunately abandons this in the rest of the book. Townsend also expresses her concern that new technology designed to kill lobsters more quickly and humanely than current standard methods of boiling or slicing live lobsters will divorce us "from the primal experience of killing our dinner," which puts us "in danger of losing the connection between the food we ingest and its origin" (8).³ While it's true that most humans are dangerously disconnected from the food they eat, ultimately Townsend's principal worry stems from the possibility that, "The idyllic experience of eating a freshly boiled lobster on a coastal dock may become extinct" (8).

Chapters One through Three trace lobsters' historical culinary evolution from Stone Age shell heaps to Victorian sauces and on to their contemporary role as main event entrée. Townsend integrates recipes from these historical time periods to illustrate the lobster's rise in popularity with diners, which will appeal mainly to readers with an interest in how those who consumed lobsters in times past perceived and prepared them. Her discussion of new "imitation" lobsters (seafood sold as lobster-like or passed off as lobster) serves as an interesting counterpoint to King's insistence on the difficulty of defining lobsters; Townsend explores this question in terms of the difficulty diners may have in determining whether what they are eating is truly lobster. This is one example of many that illustrates how a focus on the lobster as edible shapes Townsend's treatment of her subject. While both authors tackle similar topics we certainly get two very different "lobsters" from them.⁴

Chapter Four, "Lobster Controversies," looks at a few central lobster-related disputes, but the question of whether or not they feel pain takes center stage. Townsend looks at both sides of the issue in more depth than King does, but like him she reinforces her belief that there is no real consensus in the scientific community regarding this important aspect of lobster/human relations. Both writers seem intent to remain objective on the issue, but I found Townsend's tone, at times, to be more contradictory than objective. This is particularly prevalent in Chapter Five, "Killing and Cooking (Humanely)." The chapter's title suggests that she gives lobsters the benefit of the doubt on the pain-debate, but Townsend sometimes struck me as patronizing toward those who believe, or simply decide to act as if, lobsters can feel pain. Her comments in response to a list of killing methods deemed inhumane by the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (Australia) such as, "So much for steaming on the beach" and "So now what's the poor cook to do? Convince the lobster to jump into the pot to save the cook the distress of killing it," struck me as flippant and insensitive (85). When Townsend informs the reader of the various methods restaurants employ to prepare live lobsters, she concludes, "Most of the techniques are inhumane, assuming that term is relevant to such primitive creatures" (95). Revealingly, the chapter highlights killing methods that will be least traumatic for the cook, and hedges by offering two perspectives that will allow diners to continue to eat lobsters unapologetically: a.) lobsters don't suffer or feel pain anyway, or, b.) there exist humane (guilt-free) methods to kill lobsters.

The final chapter, "The Future of Lobsters," notes historical and contemporary concerns over declines in lobster populations and some of the regulations in place to ensure a sustainable industry. Townsend takes a closer look at farming and restocking attempts

than does King, and details ways in which consumers can make responsible, sustainable choices when purchasing lobster. To her credit, Townsend provides links to more sustainability-related websites than she does to cooking websites. Clearly, though, the ultimate aim of lobster conservation is to ensure that future generations “have the pleasure of eating a lobster” (114), a sentiment more implied than directly stated in King’s text. A selection of historical and contemporary lobster recipes follows the final chapter. Interestingly, the historical recipes make no mention of how to kill the lobsters, save one which instructs the cook to boil only live lobsters, never dead. The contemporary recipes, however, supply what Townsend establishes as the most humane method for killing a lobster (chill/kill/boil), which seems to encourage the reader to err on the side of caution in the pain-debate.

In short, Townsend assumes those who pick up her book enjoy eating lobster, or are at least not opposed to the idea of doing so — admittedly, I fall into neither category — and I suggest that this is the best audience for her work. She laments technologies that disconnect humans from the food they ingest, yet I would argue that Townsend is herself disconnected from the lobster as animal.⁵ Her work does provide lobster-eating readers with information that will help them to make more informed and ethical choices in their consumption. The book is regrettably much less “global” than the title suggests, and Townsend does not offer a rationale for her Western-focus as does King. Readers looking for a more interdisciplinary take on the intersections between humans and lobsters should opt for King’s book. His selection and incorporation of images is superior to Townsend’s text, and his captions more helpful. Unfortunately, neither book grants the lobsters a strong voice of their own, which is particularly lamentable with King, since his text comes from the “Animal” series; thus, readers with an interest in human/animal studies will have to do much reading between the lines.

Notes

1. See *Humanimalia* 1:2, <http://www.depauw.edu/humanimalia/issue02/reviews/bull-salmon.html>
2. “Animal.” *Reactionbooks.co.uk*, 2011. 14 July 2011. <http://reaktionbooks.co.uk/series.html?id=1>. Emphasis mine.
3. Later in Chapter Five, Townsend seems to contradict her earlier lament of new killing technology and cites them as “a step in the right direction” (96).

4. King and Townsend at times even present contradictory information, such as the discussion of the lobster's brain by one marine biologist in King and the insistence by another lobster researcher in Townsend that lobsters do not have brains.

5. Take for example the caption to a photo of a lobster that reads, "The American lobster, nicknamed the Maine lobster, has a pair of dangerous but delicious claws" (89).