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POLLAN, MICHAEL

Nicolas Larchet

An author, journalist, editor, educator and professor of journalism, Michael Pollan is one of the most eloquent champions of the contemporary food reform movement. For the last twenty years, he has been advocating for a more diversified, localized and sustainable food system through his writings and public speaking. His 2006 bestseller, *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, has been referred to as “the bible of the sustainable food movement”. He himself describes his work as “writing about the places where nature and culture intersect: on our plates, in our farms and gardens, and in the built environment.” Pollan’s work builds on a long tradition of nature writers in American literature. He has most notoriously discussed transcendentalists Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson, and has invited comparisons with environmentalists Rachel Carson and Frances Moore Lappé. His food activism equally links him to health reformer Jerome I. Rodale of *Organic Gardening and Farming* magazine.

One of four children, Pollan was born in 1955 on Long Island, New York, to Corky and Stephen Pollan. He grew up in Syosset, an affluent town on the North Shore of Long Island, not far from the model suburban community of Levittown. His mother was a columnist for *New York* magazine and the style director for *Gourmet* magazine until it folded in 2009. His father is a consultant, professional coach, financial adviser, career counsellor and attorney. He has written and co-authored many motivational and self-help books, such as *It's All in Your Head: Thinking Your Way to Happiness* (2005) and more recently *Workscripts: Perfect Phrases for High-Stakes Conversations* (2011). Michael Pollan has collaborated with his father on *The Field Guide to Home Buying in America* (1988), co-authored with Mark Levine.

Pollan majored in English at Bennington College, Vermont, and studied English literature for a year at Oxford University in England. After his graduation in 1977, he became assistant editor for the short-lived independent newspaper *Politics and Other Human Interests*. He then worked for a few years as a TV producer and earned a master’s degree in English from Columbia University in 1981. He was hired as a senior editor for the journal *Channels of Communications* before joining the staff of *Harper's* in 1983. Pollan got most of his training as a journalist at *Harper's*. He started as a senior editor and was promoted to executive editor two years later, before reducing his duties in 1995, serving as a contributing editor until 2003. Since 1995 he has been a contributing writer at the *New York Times Magazine*. In 2003, Pollan was appointed Knight Professor of Science and Environmental Journalism at the University of California at Berkeley.

“Growing food has been my atavism of choice since I was ten years old, when I planted a ‘farm’ in my parent’s suburban yard”, recalled Pollan in *The Omnivore’s Dilemma*. While studying at Bennington, he met landscape painter Judith Belzer, who was to become his wife. In 1983 together they acquired a five-acre abandoned dairy farm near Cornwall, Connecticut. Pollan first recounted his gardening experience in a 1987 essay for *Harper’s*, “Cultivating Virtue: Compost and Its Moral Imperatives”, which was reproduced later that year in Rodale’s *Organic Gardening*, exposing his thoughts on the pursuit of a Jeffersonian agrarian ideal. His first book, *Second Nature: A Gardener’s Education* (1991) dealt with his efforts at growing food in the rocky soil of his Connecticut farm, invoking Thoreau and Emerson – it was dubbed by its editor as “a modern *Walden*.” Pollan notably argued here that the soil benefits of compost “don’t account for the halo of righteousness that has come to hover over compost and those who make it.” In *A Place of My Own: The Education of an Amateur Builder* (1997) Pollan wrote about his decision to build from the ground up a hut he calls “a shelter for daydreams”, detailing the building process and meditating on the lessons to be learned from it, once again engaging with Thoreau. *The Botany of Desire: A Plant’s-Eye View of the World* (2001) examined world history from the vantage point of four plants, relating the way they have “domesticated” mankind through the exploitation of human desires: apples (desire for sweetness), tulips (beauty), cannabis (intoxication), and potatoes (control).

Pollan rose to prominence with *The Omnivore’s Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals* (2006), a *New York Times* bestseller that won the James Beard Award. The book opens with a diagnosis of America’s “national eating disorder”, followed by three sections, each detailing a food chain associated with an element of the natural world. In the first section Pollan focuses on corn to explore the “Industrial” food chain, denouncing the overuse of subsidized corn from cattle feeding through high fructose corn syrup, ultimately to be put into the chicken nugget of a McDonalds meal that the author eats behind the wheel. In the second section, dealing with the “Pastoral” chain and focusing on the issue of grass, Pollan follows two meals. The first one, called “industrial organic”, is made of products bought at the local Whole Foods, which he confronts with a more sustainable meal coming from small organic farms such as Joel Salatin’s Polyface Farm in Virginia. Recalling the way he slaughtered a hen at the Polyface Farm, Pollan muses : “It seemed to me not too much to ask for a meat eater, which I was then and still am, that at least once in his life he take some direct responsibility for the killing on which his meat-eating depends.” The last section is dedicated to the “Personal” chain, centered on the forest and its resources. We follow the author in his quest for “the perfect meal”, entirely made of food he hunted (a feral pig), gathered (morels, berries) and grew himself (fava beans, lettuce). The author concludes that the fast food and the hunter-gatherer meals are “equally unreal and equally

unsustainable”. Pollan’s next two books, *In Defense of Food: An Eater’s Manifesto* (2008) and *Food Rules: An Eater’s Manual* (2009), were designed to help his readers navigate through contradictory nutrition advice. Here he criticizes what he calls “nutritionism” (the assumption “that the key to understanding food is indeed the nutrient”) and proposes a healthy and sustainable diet summed up by the mantra “Eat food. Not too much. Mostly plants.” Pollan was featured in the documentary *King Corn* (2007) and narrated *Food, Inc* (2008) with muckraking journalist Eric Schlosser, denouncing America’s corporate controlled food industry. Together with the likes of Eric Schlosser and celebrity chef Alice Waters, Michael Pollan is a member of Slow Food USA.

While Pollan has been praised for his ability to eloquently convey scientific information and ethical considerations with a rare sensitivity, he has faced criticism from a variety of perspectives. *Eating Animals* author Jonathan Safran Foer has criticized Pollan for not considering vegetarianism or veganism as viable options. Others have attacked Pollan on scientific grounds: economists claimed he gave a simplistic account of factory farming costs and failed to grasp the interconnectedness of markets, while biologists and nutritionists have denounced Pollan’s bias against agricultural and nutrition sciences. Last but not least, social critics like Julie Guthman have pointed out Pollan’s self-indulgence in his denial of growing class disparities in food choices, as well as his tendency to conflate political engagement with consumer action, finding solace in the belief that one can contribute to making the world a better place while satisfying his palate.

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