

# Views & Reviews

## ARTS AND LITERATURE VIEWS AND REVIEWS

### ALL YOU CAN EAT: HOW HUNGRY IS AMERICA?

BY JOEL BERG

SEVEN STORIES PRESS, 320 PAGES

Reviewed by Nick Richardson

Social justice advocates have—let's face it—been known to exaggerate. They can overstate the nature and severity of their target injustice, demonize those who disagree with them, and immoderately praise their heroes. When they do, they invariably bore their friends, remain unheard by the uncommitted, and get pushed aside by their opponents.

In the case of *All You Can Eat*, there's no doubt where Joel Berg is coming from. He's no journalist coolly analyzing an issue from outside, but a committed advocate for social change. Berg worked on anti-hunger initiatives in the Clinton administration, and is now the executive director of the New York City Coalition Against Hunger. In a book subtitled *How Hungry is America?*, you would expect him to make a powerful statement of the continued existence of hunger in American society, and a passionate claim for the need to do more about it. Joel Berg does both of those things. But, fortunately for the readability of his book, he also shuns hyperbole.

Instead, he lets the grim facts—that 12.6 million American children and 22.9 American adults are needlessly hungry—speak for themselves. Particularly in the book's early pages, he is almost emollient in his treatment of those who have obstructed progress, dismantled or enfeebled the progress already made, or tried to fiddle the numbers and the terminology to obfuscate the scale of the problem. He tells us about those things, but betrays relatively little in the way of personal feeling toward the perpetrators. He gives credit where it is due—Bob Dole (in his earlier years) is one recipient of kudos whom I could not previously have identified—and does not hesitate to point the finger at those who could have done more, such as the Congressional Democrats whose failure of leadership on the issue has been so abject.

Above all, Berg does not reduce his argument to absurdity by claiming that people in the United States now risk starving to death as they did, in some communities, as recently as the 1960s. Instead he convincingly argues that in the richest country in the world, we should be setting an altogether higher bar than that—and should be ashamed to settle for anything less.

In the first and much longer of *All You Can Eat*'s two sections, Berg provides a very readable survey and analysis of the complex history, nature, causes and consequences of American hunger. He may accept that thanks to the “tattered (but still existing) federal hunger safety net” hunger in the United States does not amount to starvation, but he offers an array of evidence for why it is a real and major

problem for the 35.5 million Americans that the USDA categorizes as either “food insecure” or having “very low food security”—and why it is so difficult, once in its grip, to escape it. He also makes it clear that the ideologically-motivated emasculatation of federal hunger programs under President Reagan, the two Presidents Bush and the Newt Gingrich Congress ensured that those programs—created by the unlikely combination of Richard Nixon and George McGovern—did not do what they might easily have done by the end of the 1970s, and achieve the eradication of hunger in the United States.

Berg believes in food stamps. He argues that the Food Stamp Program, which reaches only a fraction of those who need or are entitled to it, is not only effective when it does reach them, but also acts as a reward and incentive to the working poor to stay in work. He also demolishes the canard that people on food stamps live off the fat of the land with his description of a week during which he fed himself on \$28.30—the average food stamp allotment at the time in New York City. He explains how the epidemic of obesity in America is a symptom of hunger and lousy nutrition. He examines the relationship of hunger to poverty (the two are inextricably linked, but their interaction is not simple), the effects of the welfare reform carried out under the Clinton administration of which he was part (good in parts, bad in others), and he points to the barely disguised racial prejudice that has fuelled and continues to fuel miserly public policy toward the poor. He explains why, for all the wonderful work that they do, charities cannot eradicate hunger, and why federal programs can (charities are less efficient, and their net efforts are, and are doomed always to be, minuscule compared even to existing federal programs). And he observes that religious organizations in some cases unfortunately act as enablers of the status quo—and observes that “many...teach their congregations (either consciously or subconsciously) that hunger is an inevitable part of both human history and God's will and—while it should be ameliorated with charitable acts—it can't really be eliminated.”

In the second section of *All You Can Eat*, Berg offers his plan for eradicating hunger in the United States once and for all. The core of this plan is the

argument that federal government programs, already effective so far as they go, are not only the most desirable and only effective solution, but one that we as a nation could easily afford. He estimates that a 41 percent increase in spending on the federal hunger safety net could eliminate food insecurity in America. This, he observes, is the equivalent of six percent of President George W. Bush's tax cuts, three months of war in Iraq, or a year of agribusiness subsidies. It would, he writes, “repay the nation many times over through increased educational performance, reduced health care spending, and increased worker productivity.” Among his other proposals are universal non-means-tested school meals, including in-classroom breakfasts which have been shown not only to reduce hunger, but to raise school attendance and student performance. He also calls on religious organizations—“religious leaders,” he writes, “make particularly compelling advocates”—to fight for better public policies and also to provide technical assistance to pantries and soup kitchens that try to “provide self-sufficiency-boosting services beyond food.” As an example, he cites the successful 2004 Feed the

Solution joint initiative between the Episcopal Diocese of New York, the Trinity Church Grants Program, the Cathedral Church of St. John the Divine and the New York Coalition Against Hunger.

The energy of *All You Can Eat* resides in the chapters dedicated to hunger and how to eradicate it. It is here (the overwhelming bulk of the book) that the author's knowledge, expertise and passion shine through, and where his marshalling of facts and arguments is at its most engaging and convincing. The book's tail end—more concerned with issues of organization for effective advocacy—fades away somewhat into

broad statements of problems and vaguer, less practically applicable, recipes for their solution. But by then Berg has said what he set out to say—that hunger is undeniably among us, that it is miserable and debilitating for those who experience it, a cause of shame to the rest of us, and that the thoroughly affordable and practicable solution to it lies primarily in improvement and expansion of federal anti-hunger programs.

*Richardson is communications officer for the diocese.*

