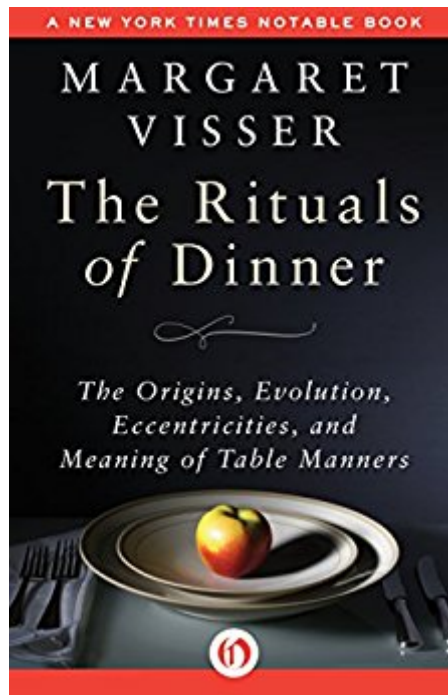


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The Rituals Of Dinner: The Origins, Evolution, Eccentricities, And Meaning Of Table Manners



Synopsis

“The book progresses like a feast. Read it, because you’ll never look at a table knife the same way again.” *The New York Times Book Review* This award-winning work by Margaret Visser is a wry and remarkable exploration of the way we eat. Solidifying her standing as a preeminent observer and scholar of everyday life, Visser takes on the sweeping history of table manners, from the civilizations of ancient Greece and medieval Europe to the ancient Ainu people of Japan and the cannibalism of the South Pacific. She writes of the development of mealtime manners across societies, the surprising origins of tableware, and the many cultural idiosyncrasies that surround the preparation and consumption of food. Blending folklore, sociology, history, and humor, *The Rituals of Dinner* is a feast of beguiling fact and observation on the origins and evolution of one of our most primal rituals: the meal.

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Customer Reviews

Margaret Visser writes on this quotidian activity with astonishing erudition. Her survey of our eating habits is global, spanning numerous societies, and she draws from all periods of our historical

development. (There are roughly a thousand entries in her bibliography.) She reminds me of Simone de Beauvoir, whose also has a humbling erudition, and who used it to address the subject of woman's role in society, as well as aging. Visser draws the reader in with the antithesis of the Emily Post approach; she details the cannibalistic practices of the Aztecs, as they were first revealed (and experienced) by Spanish explorers / conquistadors. The author devotes the first couple of chapters to our acculturation, drawing lessons from how monkeys learn to wash potatoes. She points out that children are "brought up," a passive construction, and taught the norms of social behavior. For some small segments of society, it is a never ending process; there "manners" are what set them apart from others, and re-enforce their power; others continue to try to break into society (p 69). Power relations surrounding food are just one of the recurring themes in this book. Consider: "In the modern world, where openly stratified hierarchy is an affront to the egalitarian myth, people are rarely permitted to display naked social ambition; snobbery must go decently disguised as creativity, free choice, good taste, and so forth. (p. 100). In the postscript she ruminates on the concept of "no time" in society today, and says: "Powerful people love impressing upon those needing their services that they have trouble finding time 'to fit them in': making others wait because one's own time is more precious than theirs is one of the great hallmarks of desirability and success (p. 353).

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