

# LIVING OFF THE FAT OF THE LAND

*The only people benefiting from diet books are the authors*

BY MICHAEL FUMENTO

**T**HE AMERICAN DIETER SURELY HATH no greater enemy than the American diet book. Like modern-day Ponce de Leons, tens of millions of Americans scour the landscape looking for the miraculous fountain. Each time they plunk down the \$22.95, they think they may have found it. Each author is like Lucy holding the football for Charlie Brown. She swears that this time she won't pull it away. Like poor Charlie Brown, the dieter finds herself sore and bedazzled. But Charlie Brown knows Lucy is to blame for his failure, while the dieter tends to blame herself. After all, the book sold a million copies. It must have helped a lot of people, why not her? Of course, that's just what the other million purchasers are telling themselves. Which is why after more than 30 years of best-selling diet books, Americans are fatter than ever and yet diet books continue to be best-sellers. In fact, sales figures for diet books, videos, and audio cassettes are projected to jump from about \$600 million in 1996 to over \$1 billion by the end of the century.

For any of you hoping to cash in on the diet-book craze, here's the formula for writing a best-seller:

- Be fat.
- Lose weight.
- Pretend that having lost the fat you are now an expert in the area.
- Come up with a gimmick that distinguishes your book slightly from previous diet books.
- Intersperse anecdotes from formerly fat people cured by your formula. Slap a slew of recipes or a

fat-counter guide onto the back so your 15,000-word article now has the heft of a 75,000-word book.

- Keep the weight off long enough for the book tour and the appearances on the "Good Morning America" and "Today" shows.
- And—most important—don't forget to offer your readers something for nothing.

Whatever you do, don't tell people they have to eat less than they want to. In fact, if you want a really successful book, tell them that what they believe to be their vices are actually good for them and that if they indulge even more, they'll weigh less. This something-for-nothing promise is often in the titles themselves, like *How to Become Naturally Thin by Eating More*, the best-selling *Eat More, Weigh Less*, and the subtitle of the best-selling *Lean Bodies*, which is *The Revolutionary Approach to Losing Bodyfat by Increasing Calories*. One cover strains so far to convince the reader to do nothing uncomfortable that it carries the contradictory title of *Fight Fat and Win: How to Eat a Low-Fat Diet Without Changing Your Lifestyle*. Presumably if your lifestyle already included a low-fat diet, you wouldn't have any use for this book, but never mind.

Other books don't have a something-for-nothing promise in their titles, but it certainly appears in their pages or otherwise on their covers. Susan Powter in *Stop the Insanity!* says on the cover that the key to being skinny is to "eat, breathe, move," albeit in the right ways. What could be finer than breathing off pounds? Barry Sears and Bill Lawren's *The Zone* says right on the back: "You can burn more fat by watching TV than by exercising." Could that be why they've sold over 400,000 books? Between *The Zone* and *Lean Bodies* it appears we'd be a nation of beanpoles if we just watched TV 12 hours a day and ate potato chips the entire time.

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In the “give ’em what they want to hear” world of diet books, nothing is too ludicrous. How about a book saying you can lose weight through eating chocolate? It’s been done. Twice. Nineteen-ninety-five saw the publication of *The Chocolate Lovers’ Diet* and Debra Waterhouse’s *Why Women Need Chocolate*, which is a strange thing to say about something that most of the world’s population wasn’t exposed to until the 17th century. The only problem, of course, is these diets don’t work. Yet it is a common theme in diet books that the reader, no matter how obese, is already pretty much doing everything correctly. He or she just needs to tweak his or her habits a bit.

Probably the ultimate in diet books catering to wishful thinking is Debbie Johnson’s 1994 *How to Think Yourself Thin*. In it Johnson provides such valuable advice as: “The subconscious is an extremely powerful a vehicle [sic] within us which can easily control the body’s weight.” Right, if it’s so darned easy, how come so many of us are so darned fat? The book is accompanied by such illustrations as a woman eating a thick wedge of layer cake telling herself, “Everything I eat turns to energy.” So many people bought Johnson’s line—and her book—that in 1996 it was picked up and republished by a major New York publishing house, Hyperion. These are the same folks who brought us *Why Women Need Chocolate*. They ought to package the two together with an accompanying advertisement that a woman can lose weight very quickly if she thinks thin thoughts while popping Hershey bars and truffles.

I was studying the weight-loss books in a store recently when something struck me. Why is it that so many have pictures of the authors on the cover? There they are, smiling at you. Debra Waterhouse’s *Outsmarting the Female Fat Cell* has photos of her on both the front and back. What’s going on here?

First, the picture shows that the author is slim. It conveys the message, “I’m thin and so can you be if you read this book.” But more than that, we tend to put more trust in people we can see. And diet-book authors need all the trust they can get because it’s usually all they have to offer. Almost none of their books contain notes, for example. One diet book I found contained a huge bibliography, but upon inspection it became obvious that this was the old high-school trick of slapping a thick bibliography onto a text to make it look heavily researched when actually the bibliography has nothing to do with what’s written. Occasionally a weight-loss book will refer to a couple of medical journal articles, yet I have identified well over 1,000 important articles on obesity from 1984 to the present, with thousands more of lesser importance. Building a thesis or a book

around just a couple of these is simply nonsense.

Likewise, “miracle” weight-loss books are virtually devoid of endorsements by experts in the weight-loss field. When an editor at HarperCollins told *Publisher’s Weekly* “endorsements matter,” she should have explained how HarperCollins sold more than 400,000 copies of *The Zone* without having any. For that matter neither did *Stop the Insanity!*, *Fit for Life*, *Dr. Atkins’ Diet Revolution*, *The Complete Scarsdale Medical Diet*, *The Carbohydrate Addict’s Diet*, or *The Rotation Diet*—each a mega-seller—carry any endorsements.

People with good medical reputations do not risk them by endorsing dumb books, but dumb books with good sales pitches will outsell smart books with good endorsements every day of the week.

### A History of Fat Quacks

The first diet guru, appearing more than a century ago, was William Banting, who actually got his diet from the British ear surgeon William Harvey. Banting lost weight on it and later published the diet as *Banting’s Letter on Corpulence*. Since Banting’s background wasn’t in health, but rather he was an undertaker, this established the precedent that diet gurus need know nothing about nutrition or physiology.

The first heavily marketed diet plan was that of Romanian-born gynecologist Herman Taller. The title of his 1961 book, *Calories Don’t Count*, introduced into popular parlance a phrase that continues to wreak havoc to this very day. Naturally, it was one many dieters wanted to hear, and so 2 million of them rushed out to buy it. Taller agreed with most diet book authors today that “all calories are not the same.” But whereas today the diet gurus say it’s the fat calories that will do you in, Taller blamed the carbohydrate ones. He divided all foods into two groups—the first “good,” regardless of caloric content, and the second “bad,” regardless of calories. He then warned the reader that while “You do not have to count calories,” you should not “eat *any* of the foods that are not permitted.” His list of impermissible foods included essentially all carbohydrates and refined sugars. He then went on to encourage readers to consume unsaturated fats (those that are not hard at room temperature, like cooking oil). “When you eat large quantities of unsaturated fats,” he explained, “you set in motion a happy cycle. You *stimulate* body production of certain hormones which work to release fats stored around the body. You *limit* the production of insulin, a substance which seems to prevent the release of stored fat. And you change the character of your fat. The hard, tough fat, difficult for the body to utilize, softens.” All nonsense,

you say? Sure, but Taller sold 2 million books.

Such a successful formula was sure to inspire imitators, and indeed many of them were successful as well. They included the *Air Force Diet Book* (neither developed by nor endorsed by the Air Force); *The Drinking Man's Diet*; Irwin Stillman's *The Doctor's Quick Weight-Loss Diet* and its companion volume, *Doctor's Inches-Off Diet*; and *Dr. Atkins' Diet Revolution*. All offered readers essentially the same high-protein, low-carbohydrate diets. Psychiatrist Richard Mackarness, in a 1962 book called *Eat Fat and Grow Slim*, actually urged readers to gorge themselves on fat. "Eggs, fish, meat are the stand-bys," he wrote. "You can eat as much as you like of these, preferably sautéed in butter or cooking oils or deep fried in fat, BUT WITH NO FLOUR, BATTER, OR BREAD CRUMBS."

High-protein, low-carbohydrate diets work in the short run for several reasons. First, they greatly restrict your choices. Most Americans get half their calories from carbohydrates. Give people menus that reduce their access to that half and they will be hard pressed to make up the calories from fat and protein. In essence, then, you're probably restricting their calorie intake. Restricting calorie intake does result in weight loss.

Another way they work is that they temporarily suppress the appetite by creating something called "ketosis." Deprived of carbohydrates, the body burns off some fat but also considerable muscle, producing ketones that must be extracted through the kidneys. Between the loss of muscle and the water loss from the kidneys excreting the ketones and the appetite-suppressing effect of ketosis, weight loss comes quickly but little of the weight is from fat. In any event, soon the body rebels against this unhealthy regimen. It adjusts to the ketosis, the hunger returns, and the weight loss stops. But by then the dieter has already told 10 friends how great the book is and they've bought it themselves.

In the meantime, other diet fads have come and gone. One that was dormant for awhile was the one-food or food-group diet. A couple of examples are Joel Herskowitz's 1987 *Popcorn Plus Diet* and Judy Moscovitz's 1986 *Rice Diet Report*. Another is Judy Mazel's million-selling 1981 book, *The Beverly Hills Diet*, which restricted the dieter to exotic fruits such as mangoes and papayas for days at a time. Such a diet would require the average woman to eat about eight pounds of mangoes a day to supply her normal energy requirement. It's hardly surprising that it worked until such inevitable time as the dieter got sick to death of eating exclusively from a menu that looked like it belonged on Carmen Miranda's head. "It's a terrible book," wrote Philip White, director of the American

Medical Association's department of foods and nutrition. "Its effort at medical or scientific backing comes directly from the nineteenth century. There is very little in the book in the way of explanation of nutrition, biology, or digestion that is in fact the truth." In any case, Mazel was back in 1996 with *The New Beverly Hills Diet*. She has no doubt calculated that everyone will forget that her book didn't work 15 years earlier, remembering only that lots of people bought it.

When it comes to diet plans, there's no such thing as something that's too outlandish, though some schemes are just too simple to be made into books. One was the water diet, which prescribed a certain number of glasses a day to "wash away" fat. Sorry, but fat doesn't "wash away." The water diet might work only in that you spend practically half your waking hours drinking and the other half urinating, leaving little time for other activities, including eating.

Food combining is a fad that is still with us. It says that foods eaten in different combinations can somehow fool the body into absorbing fewer calories than the individual foods contain. The king of these fads is Harvey and Marilyn Diamond's *Fit for Life*, the paperback edition of which claims it's "America's All-Time No. One Health and Diet Book" with "Over 3 million copies in print." In it the authors proposed that it does not so much matter what you eat, but when you eat it and in what combination foods are consumed. Their plan includes recommendations such as not eating anything but fruit before noon, and never eating protein at the same time as carbohydrates. (And while you're at it, don't have sex during the full moon, else you conceive a child who becomes a werewolf.) The Diamonds offer nothing but anecdotal evidence to support their claims. "It would be difficult to choose the most ridiculous diet book ever written," writes Stephen Barrett and the editors of *Consumer Reports* in their book *Health Schemes, Scams, and Frauds*, "but surely *Fit for Life* ... would be right up there." William Jarvis, president of the National Council Against Health Fraud, clearly agreed, saying "*Fit for Life* seems unprecedented in the amount of misinformation contained." He added, "Its only socially redeeming feature is that its popularity may alert American educators to their failure to impart the most fundamental knowledge about health and nutrition to the students entrusted to their care."

For every diet there may be some successful adherents. If somebody swears up and down that they lost weight and kept it off with Dr. Quack's Gummi Bear Diet, who am I to argue? But there are no magical formulas with weight loss. If they're offering you something that sounds too good to be true, it is. ●

# Memo of the Month



U.S. Department of Justice

Civil Rights Division

IKP:NDH:RYH  
79-189(4)

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P.O. Box 65310  
Washington, DC 20035-5310

OCT 24 1997

Dr. David J. Garrow  
Emory University Law School  
Atlanta, GA 30322-2770

Dear Dr. Garrow:

This is in further response to your June 28, 1979 and March 9, 1980 Freedom of Information Act requests seeking access to and copies of specific microfilm housed in the John F. Kennedy Library. We apologize for the long delay in responding to you.

In partial response to your request, please find the enclosed documents of the Civil Rights Division dated January, 1961, through December, 1963 of Reel Six (6). We regret the poor quality of some of the copies printed from the microfilm, but these are the best copies available from our files.

Sincerely,

Isabelle Katz Pinzler  
Acting Assistant Attorney General  
Civil Rights Division

By:

  
Nelson D. Hermilla, Chief  
Freedom of Information/Privacy Acts Branch  
Civil Rights Division

Enclosures