Food for Thought

Contemporary Social Notions About Food in Shriver’s Big Brother, Harris’ Chocolat and Gilbert’s Eat, Pray, Love
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Pia van Duyn
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# Table of Contents

Acknowledgements .......................................................................................................................... 2  
Table of Contents ............................................................................................................................ 3  
Introduction ...................................................................................................................................... 4  
Chapter One: Food and the Body in *Big Brother* .......................................................................... 8  
Chapter Two: Food and Power in *Chocolat* .................................................................................. 18  
Chapter Three: Food and Emotion in *Eat, Pray, Love* .................................................................. 27  
Conclusion ....................................................................................................................................... 33  
Works cited ...................................................................................................................................... 36
Introduction

Food intersects with all aspects of human existence. Food is much more than simply a need to survive. All eating is a ritual activity, especially when people eat together, because there are many rules to be adhered to. There are specific types of food for specific purposes. Christmas dinner differs greatly from Easter dinner, for example, and food eaten on a date differs from food eaten during a football game. The rituals also differ from country to country, or even ethnic group to ethnic group. Because there is such diversity, but also because it is such a great aspect of our daily lives, it is logical that food and eating often occur in literature. Novels provide a channel for expression by reflecting and commenting on issues of social, cultural and ethnic affiliation. The major significances of eating are not biological but socially symbolical. Food and eating are essential to self-identity and are instrumental in the definition of family, class, and ethnicity. In this way, food can tell its whole own story in literature. For this thesis, I have looked at how contemporary literary texts reflect social notions about food and eating and how the texts comment on these notions.

To research this, I chose three novels. Lionel Shriver’s Big Brother, Joanne Harris’ Chocolat, and Elizabeth Gilbert’s Eat, Pray, Love are books that reflect western society’s notions about food and eating. I contemplated using Anthony Bourdain’s Bone in the Throat and Kate Christensen’s The Great Man as well, but these novels limit themselves more to descriptions on for example, how to cook a lobster, instead of reflecting significant symbolical food practices. The three chosen novels use the theme of food to comment on the modern social notions related to body-image and self-identity, gender, power and control, religion, relationships, and emotion.

Lionel Shriver (1957) is an American journalist and author living in England. In July 2005, Shriver began writing a column for The Guardian, in which she has shared her opinions on contemporary society and social issues. She is best known for her novel We Need to Talk About Kevin which is a thriller and close study of maternal ambivalence. The book created much controversy. Shriver's book So Much for That, was released March 2, 2010. In this novel, Shriver presents a biting criticism of the US health care system. After that came her most recent novel, Big Brother: A Novel, which was inspired by the morbid obesity of one of her brothers, and was published in 2013. Shriver is a writer with strong opinions that are reflected in most of her work. Big Brother is a critique on American’s relationship with food, that American society no longer knows how to eat and thereby jeopardizes their health.
What makes *Big Brother* interesting is that it is written from the perspective of a woman who has a very obese brother. Not only are (American) women very concerned about their body image, Shriver has based the novel partly on herself and therefore knows what it is like to have a brother who is so unhealthy. Readers can really identify with Pandora. Her behavior and thoughts are recognizable to men as well as women. *Big Brother* is not (yet) as popular as *Chocolat* and *Eat, Pray, Love* but the title obviously makes a reference to George Orwell’s 1984. Edison is Pandora’s big brother, physically and age-wise. Society is Edison’s Big Brother because society sees and judges everything he does.

Joanne Michèle Sylvie Harris (1964) is an acclaimed British author, famous for writing the award-winning novel *Chocolat* in 1999. Since then, all Harris's books have been UK bestsellers. Her wide-ranging choice of subject matter means that her work often defies categorization, and she has a predilection for difficult or challenging issues such as mother/child relationships, the resonance of food, magic and religion, and the outsider in the community. She has spoken out against entrenched sexism in the literary field, and has a blog where she gives her opinion on contemporary subjects. Joanne Harris is a diverse writer who has been labelled as “a foodie writer, a French writer, a writer of magical realism, (and) a writer of modern fairytales” (Harris Website). Within several of her novels, Harris explores the conflict between religion and the occult. In particular, she demonstrates the way in which religion can be used for negative purposes and the way occultism can represent its positive, more open-minded counterpart — discussing her stance on religion and magic, she states that, “Historically it’s about the systematic suppression of indigenous beliefs by the early Christian church” (Harris Website). Harris uses chocolate as a way for the characters to oppose the Church. She started writing *Chocolat* after she became a mother and that this is the reason the mother/daughter theme is important in her book (Harris Website). Because of the many strong female figures in the novel, I decided to research how food and power are related.

Elizabeth M. Gilbert (1969) is an American author, essayist, short story writer, biographer, novelist and memoirist. She is best known for her 2006 memoir, *Eat, Pray, Love*, a chronicle of her year of "spiritual and personal exploration" spent traveling abroad. She financed her world travel for the book with a $200,000 publisher's advance after pitching the concept in a book proposal. While Gilbert does mention some contemporary issues in her novels and on her blog, she does this decidedly less than the other two authors. Where they focus on society, Gilbert
focusses on individuals and their “Self”. Her work is largely about how to find inner peace and happiness. Food and well-being as a social topic is hugely interesting to contemporary readers. Self-discovery through meditation and spiritual awareness is a hot item at the moment as evidenced by the popularity of this memoir and for example yoga classes.

The novel, *Big Brother*, tells the story of Pandora, who decides to take in her brother, Edison, when he is down on his luck. However, when he gets off the plane from New York, Pandora does not recognize him. He has gained hundreds of pounds. During his stay, Edison’s diet and attitude strain the relationship between Pandora and her husband Fletcher. In part II, Pandora decides she and Edison will lose weight together. The novel examines aspects of obesity, (over)eating, and how these influence our relationships.

Set between Shrove Tuesday and Easter Monday, *Chocolat* tells the story of Vianne Rocher who arrives with her daughter, Anouk, in Lansquenet-sous-Tannes. This is an old-fashioned village in rural France where it appears time has stood still. Vianne opens a *chocolaterie* across the church to which the priest, Francis Reynaud, objects because Lent has just started and the villagers should be fasting. As the novel progresses, the conflict between Reynaud and Vianne grows while Vianne starts making friends with villagers through her irresistible chocolates and warm personality. Her announcement of a chocolate festival on Easter is the last straw for Reynaud and he tries to get rid of her.

*Eat, Pray, Love* is the memoir of Liz, who has everything an ambitious, well-educated woman could wish for: a husband, a house, and a successful career. However instead of being happy, she feels swamped by panic, depression, and confusion. She decides to upend her life by divorcing her husband and going in search of the things she misses: pleasure, devotion, and a way to combine the two. The novel is divided into three parts that describe her journey. In *Eat*, Liz discovers the *dolce vita* in Italy through food. In *Pray*, she practices devotion by meditating in an Indian ashram. In *Love*, she visits an Indonesian medicine man who teaches her how to combine devotion and pleasure, and she ultimately finds love again.

Through a close reading of these three novels I analyze how the writers use food in their novels to reflect contemporary social notions. I focus on what food does to body image, how food is used to create power, and how food influences emotions, while keeping in mind other factors such as gender, religion, and relationships. I contextualize these themes by using research data from social studies and reviews of the novels. I chose to use research of social studies as my
methodology because the theme of food calls for this. Literary criticism has not focused as much on food, and therefore, this must be researched through different sources. The growing realization in psychology that food is not just a matter of nourishment results in interesting research data that can be applied in a thesis that reflects on social notions.

In Chapter One I discuss the theme of body image which is most visible in Lionel Shriver’s *Big Brother*. The novel shows the large impact that one’s physical body has on their position in society. In Chapter Two I discuss power in Joanne Harris’ *Chocolat*. Opposition is a recurrent theme in this novel. It is interesting to examine the dependence of food for each character and what food does to their position. In Chapter Three I discuss emotion in Elizabeth Gilbert’s *Eat, Pray, Love*. The writer has a strong belief about the influence of food and eating on personal identity and well-being.
Chapter One: Food and the Body in *Big Brother*

Contemporary literature can reflect many of society’s current issues with body image, identity, appearance and self-esteem through the overarching theme: food. The way in which characters engage with food influences their lives and relationships. The sibling bond between Pandora, the narrator, and Edison in Shriver’s *Big Brother* is depicted through their struggles with food and food-related concerns. Her shock when she finds out how big he has become, the impact it has on her entire family, her quest to help him lose weight, and the final result.

While *Big Brother*, with its variety of characters, shows diverse views on body image, the three main characters would all like to reach one goal: the thin ideal. And they are very focused on it. Pandora has thoughts on body image that are down to earth. She recognizes that she is influenced by society’s views on the ideal body because she judges herself and other people by their body like society does. She tries to think differently on the subject because she realizes that these thoughts are not helpful in any way. However, she remains unsatisfied with her body. At the beginning of the novel, she is somewhat preoccupied with her weight, such as thinking of a second stuffed pepper or eating coconut layer cake, but as the story continues she labels herself more frequently as fat, despite her average figure. She decides that she will lose weight alongside Edison. Fletcher, Pandora’s husband, is a health nut, always eating “beige” food and spending a lot of time exercising, and he becomes even stricter in his regime after Edison arrives. While Edison does not care for his weight at first, once he gets the hang of losing it, the process of becoming thin is what drives him. All three characters have very different body types, but they all have the same thing in common: they do not have their ideal weight and reaching that ideal weight is the purpose in their lives. In her review, Friedell points out that Shriver indeed seems to have an obsession with her characters’ weight (n. pag). It is the only part of their appearance that is described in great detail which puts a lot of emphasis on this aspect. So much so that their other characteristics are very much pushed towards the background. With this, the novel signals the importance society places on what your body looks like before it places importance on other talents, such as being a great jazz pianist, a builder of beautiful furniture, or a successful business woman, and that striving for the ideal body is the main purpose of life.

The confrontation with her brother’s massive weight forces Pandora to reflect on her own weight and increases her dissatisfaction, which can be a reflection of how an individual in society reacts to being confronted with an obese person’s weight. Being confronted with someone else’s
weight makes us more conscious of our own. This is a recurring theme throughout the novel, mostly because Edison’s weight is always so explicitly mentioned. Before Pandora even recognizes the obese person in the wheelchair as her brother, we are already well-informed about the insecurities she has with her body. Fletcher is also affected by Edison’s weight. “Following Edison’s arrival, my husband’s fare had grown even more viciously nutritious”, mentions Pandora, obsessive to the point of even refusing her “amuse-bouche” (104). Evidence suggests that “body image is malleable rather than static” (Bair et al. 275), which was the conclusion of an experiment where women were shown pictures of models with different sizes to see whether their body image was influenced. Women who were shown pictures of average-sized models chose a heavier ideal body than the women who were shown pictures of thinner models (280).

The novel reflects the social notion that a person’s self-image is not always what society sees of that person. Pandora explains this well because even though she does not identify with her body, she realizes that whatever she might think of herself, it does not influence the way other people see her. Pandora’s picture is on the cover of a magazine and many people will see her. She recognizes that everyone will have an opinion on her looks. “You may not recognize your heavy thighs, your cornflower eyes, but they do, and competent interface with the rest of the world involves manipulating that irrelevant, arbitrary, not-you image to the maximum extent” (146). This is also demonstrated by the way Fletcher still thinks of her as beautiful and is much less worried about her weight than about his own, even though Pandora was convinced he found her disgusting. She thinks that because Edison’s weight disgusts Fletcher, her weight must also disgust him. However, Fletcher reassures her that he admires her and her success, and loves her as his wife. Bair et al. mention that “[a]ccording to the socio-cultural theory of body image, ‘normative body ideals’ (i.e. what other people think is most attractive or desirable) are communicated through the mass media and are frequently reinforced by peers and family along with the implicit messages that meeting these standards will lead to acceptance and success” (Bair et al. 275). Shriver reflects on this notion and criticizes that society will see and judge the body of a person while they do not know how this person feels about their body themselves. However, Shriver uses Pandora to reflect feelings that women might have.

Pandora is the embodiment of the average American female and pinpoints the general feelings American women have about their bodies and how others see their bodies. It is generally accepted that most women have experienced body dissatisfaction at some point in their lives,
which often influences their food intake. Pandora feels that most of her time is spent thinking about food, switching between indulging and guilt. She recognizes this in other women: “Surely on some unconscious, high-frequency level other people could hear the squeal of this humiliating hamster wheel in my head, a piercing shrill that emitted from every other woman I passed in the aisles of Hy-Vee” (14). Blashill (1) states that while femininity has been largely defined as the possession of expressive traits such as empathy, nurturance, and sensitivity, masculinity means possession of instrumental traits such as autonomy, dominance, and assertiveness. In 1997, a study showed that women with higher levels of eating pathology had higher expressiveness and lower instrumental scores. This leads to the femininity hypothesis (Blashill 2), which is also a general cultural notion in the period of the end of the 20th century and start of the 21st century: “[S]tereotypically feminine personality traits such as passivity, dependence, and unassertiveness are related to a desire to seek approval by others, and thus lead to poor self-esteem” (2). This hypothesis is not surprising, considering that “North American women’s ideal body weight is, on average, between thirteen and nineteen percent below their ‘normal’ or medically ideal weight, suggesting that women’s body ideals do not seem to be determined by medical recommendations for maximizing health as much as by perceptions of what is socially desirable” (Bair et al. 275). Adapting their food intake is a common thing women change in order to reach a goal weight that is socially desirable, according to themselves, and this has more consequences than solely changing their body.

While on the one hand Big Brother demonstrates that the thin ideal is more demanding for women, on the other hand it demonstrates that when men are affected by the thin ideal, it has a more negative impact on them. In the first few pages of Big Brother, Fletcher is described as a masculine character. By getting up before the crack of dawn to do his job, he puts on a show for his wife by displaying control, assertiveness, and pursuit of status. Fletcher likes to be very much in control. Not only of himself, as evidenced by his control over his physique, but also when he tries to impose his will on his children and Edison. However, Pandora is the main provider of the family and this dependency undermines his masculinity. Edison’s lack of control makes Fletcher furious and his own lack of control over the situation of Edison living in his house causes him to be even stricter in his diet and exercise. He will not eat anything that he considers unhealthy. This seeming fear of any unhealthy food can be seen as eating pathology. His quest for losing body fat and exercising excessively consists of body and muscle dissatisfaction. Fletcher’s situation is
congruent with the masculinity hypothesis mentioned by Blashill. The masculinity hypothesis states that masculinity, not femininity, serves as an important variable in eating pathology, body dissatisfaction, and muscle dissatisfaction. Blashill summarizes that there are “some incongruent findings but it appears as though instrumentality has not been positively associated with eating pathology, and in some cases has been found to be a protective factor. Conversely, expressivity typically is found to be positively associated with eating pathology” (4). Men who display expressiveness manifest a gender atypical orientation and are thus negatively evaluated in comparison to their typical gender counterparts. Stigma associated with being gender atypical may increase general psychological distress. So while “masculinity displayed a significant negative relationship with eating pathology” (8), meaning it is a protective factor in regard to eating pathology, and (only) stereotypical male traits buffer men from body dissatisfaction, aspects of masculinity, such as placing emphasis on winning, emotional control, risk-taking, violence, dominance, power over women, and pursuit of status, seem to place men at risk for higher levels of muscle dissatisfaction. This creates a duality of constructs where there is a cross-over relationship: trait-based measures of masculinity showed a negative relationship with muscle dissatisfaction, while multidimensional measures showed a positive relationship. The thin ideal has a more negative effect on Fletcher than on Pandora because besides an eating pathology, Fletcher experiences increased general psychological distress by being gender atypical, which does not happen for Pandora.

Pandora’s conflicted attitude towards the female thin ideal demonstrates the social notion that it is expected for women to adhere to the social norm but also that women are used to this expectation. For women, the thin ideal is constantly reinforced through media images. Thin, leggy models without a gram of extra fat grace billboards and fashion magazines. Stars in film and television barely ever weigh more than seventy kilos. This helps create the false notion that only thin women are beautiful. “After exposure to advertisements with thin models, women reported higher levels of body dissatisfaction than those exposed to average-sized models” (Bair et al. 276). The thin ideal is also reinforced during everyday conversations that degrade one’s body, weight, size, and shape.

“These frequent and socially acceptable [ … ] conversations appear to center around five basic themes [ … ]: self-comparison to ideal eating and exercise habits, fears of becoming overweight, comparing one’s eating and exercise habits
to others, strategies for replacing meals and building muscle, and most commonly, the evaluation of others’ appearance who are absent from the conversation” (Compeau and Ambwani 451).

Pandora specifically mentions that whenever she looks at pictures of herself, she mostly looks at her weight and she prefers the ones where she is “gaunt […] a badge of nobility” (144). She also does not seem to care very much that her views are rather distorted. She recognizes it but does not seem overly troubled. The message women receive from society is that they probably should be losing weight whether they are overweight or not. This hype contributes to what Counihan calls the female fat obsession. In her review essay, she compares five books on being fat, thin, and female in the US, and “all six authors view obesity and skeletal anorexia as two versions of the same obsession” (Counihan Fat, Thin 155). Shriver criticizes that women are not troubled by the fact that their views are distorted by specifically showing how ridiculous it is that women would prefer to look gaunt because the media tells them that is the ideal.

The novel reflects what contemporary American society thinks of obese people and as a result of this, how they are treated. Pandora’s family home is a mini reconstruction of the real world where most people look with horror and disgust at an obese person and only the most pure and innocent, in this case Cody, her stepdaughter, can see past the size and look at the person behind it. While the family is having dinner and discussing her stepson Tanner’s plans for college, it is mentioned that not having an education marks you as lost. Tanner mutters: “Know what else marks you as the ‘slave-class’?” (118) while looking in Edison’s direction. According to Piatti-Farnell, “eating is always a ritual activity […] how food categories construct social boundaries, dictating rules of consumption that expose markers of class, gender and race” (13). This coincides with Myers and Rosen statement that “[o]bese people are more likely to be of lower socioeconomic status and to decrease in socioeconomic status over time” (221). Because they “are less likely to be admitted to college or to have their education funded” (Myers and Rosen 221), it can turn into a vicious cycle where the obese become less educated and in turn become more obese. In everyday life, obese people often have to deal with anti-fat bias or stigmatization. One aim of Myers and Rosen’s study was to provide a comprehensive list of common stigmatizing experiences faced by obese persons, which includes “job discrimination, social exclusion, exploitation by the diet and fitness industry, denial of health benefits, trouble finding clothing, mistreatment by doctors, and public ridicule” (221). The way Edison eats sets
him apart from the family, and thus society. A notion of contemporary society is that when someone is excluded, they do not have to be treated as though they are equal to the people in the society.

The novel reflects the contemporary assumption that next to being ‘big-boned’, obese people are also ‘thick-skinned’. The number of characters who have hardly any filters when it comes to expressing their thoughts on obesity and obese individuals is shocking but not surprising. A striking example of public ridicule occurs in *Big Brother* before we have even met Edison. Pandora arrives at the airport to pick up her brother when she overhears a conversation between two people about a very fat passenger who sat next to them on a plane and square-bottomed Americans in general. Comments include “They should really charge double, and leave the next seat empty”, “next time they try to charge me extra because one pair of shoes has pushed me over twenty-six pounds, I’m going to offer to eat them”, and “What ‘normal’ people? Look around you” (35). The two conversationists are not at all concerned about being overheard. According to Myers and Rosen,

> “Unlike racial prejudice, society freely expresses prejudicial attitudes towards obese people, justifying these attitudes on the grounds that weight is controllable. Thus, obese people may be more likely than other minority groups to encounter overt hostility and discrimination. Negative stereotypes of obese people include the views that they are ugly, morally and emotionally impaired, asexual, discontented, weak-willed and unlikable” (221).

The novel clearly shows this as a criticism of a current issue by making the reader empathize with Edison.

*Big Brother* tries to make the reader more aware of the stigmatization of obese people and makes Pandora try to change our mind about thinking of obese people as fat, lazy, unsuccessful, etc. However, the novel ultimately fails in doing this because it has made the one obese character a sum of all the stereotypes that society accuses them of. Pandora is obviously struggling with her ideas about fat and fat people. She does not want other people to say or think hurtful thing about Edison; “I was dismayed that my brother’s size seemed to be all that people saw. I wanted to object, But his mind is not fat, his soul is not fat, his past is not fat, and his piano playing isn’t fat, either” (94) but subconsciously, she is also prejudiced when she mentions “I felt conflicted. I wanted to feel proud of my brother; I also wanted Edison to behave as piggishly as possible, the
better to demonstrate to Oliver [a friend and colleague of Pandora] what we’d been putting up with” (114). She does see her obese brother as less of a person than he was before he put on so much weight. “It was now less physically natural to look up to my brother” (38).

Fletcher is the one who accuses Edison of all the cliché traits that society attributes to obese people, behind his back but also to his face. In the novel, Edison does display these traits, although they are shown through examples and not through direct mention. For example, he eats half of a complete family meal, he does not have a job, and he sleeps late. At first glance, these examples are not very condemning but subconsciously the narrator, in this case Pandora, is creating an image of a stereotypical obese person. The way he is described leaves Edison as a rather one-dimensional character. If you take away his obesity, there is not much left of him.

Foster, Willett and Seymenliyska agree that Edison is “an especially flat character” and that besides his obesity, he is only known for being a “jazz cat”. So on the one hand, Edison displays all the stereotypical obese characteristics and on the other hand, he has no great redeeming qualities. The novel fails to make a strong case for reducing stigmatization. The most it does is induce pity, for instance when he tells Pandora how he lost his piano because of his obesity.

*Big Brother* demonstrates many ways in which food can be used to create bonds, but also to deny bonds. The obesity stigmatization Edison experiences results in loss of bonds, which is reinforced through different eating patterns. Fletcher’s refusal to eat Edison’s calorie-rich chili or five-cheese lasagna and making his own “special little fish and his special little rice” demonstrates not only his wish to distance himself from anything to do with Edison, whom he dislikes, but also to distance himself from the group of unhealthy and obese people. It is illustrated the other way around as well. When Fletcher serves his “viciously nutritious” bulgur and quinoa, he cannot “stop Edison from adding butter to the grains, or burying his tempeh in pepper jack; my brother was a guest, and a grown-up” (105). According to Wood, “‘the giving and receiving of food is never a neutral act but affords opportunities for host and guest to demonstrate appropriate behaviour as benefits their roles’” (qtd. in Piatti-Farnell 118). Neither Fletcher nor Edison are living up to their roles. This creates strife for Pandora, who is caught between her husband on the one hand and her brother on the other. The novel reflects how food can be a source of conflict.

The theme of the sibling bond in *Big Brother* is exploited by using it as an instrument to create a situation where two individuals can lose weight by not being able to give up on each
other. The loss of a sibling bond hurts more than having to lose weight or losing your dignity in society because a sibling is always supposed to be there for you. Pandora chooses to put her brother above whatever society may think about them living together to lose weight. Fletcher cannot understand why she does this because he does not have any siblings. He sees the husband-wife bond as a more important family bond. For Pandora, the sibling bond has no limitations. She believes that Edison cannot lose weight on his own and that is why she becomes his coach. The novel comments on the belief that successful dieting is hardly ever done alone and that one needs a personal trainer to be able to lose weight. In recent years, television has shown many weight loss competitions and followed obese people losing weight. These people can only succeed in losing weight when someone helps them. In part III, Pandora tells us that the whole weight loss journey did not take place because she was not brave enough to help her brother. However, Edison never tried to lose weight on his own and this confirms the modern idea that an obese individual may need help to get started with dieting.

Big Brother reflects that people who have no control over their lives (or a specific aspect of it) turn to food in order to have some semblance of control. Pandora has let her control of food slip a little. When she ran her catering business and continually in control of food, she was “pretty thin” (13). With her success at her new business, that makes talking dolls, she has less control over food, sits in an office chair all day, and has gained a few pounds as a result. In part II, Pandora and Edison have to take control of their food intake in order to lose weight. They do this by banning food and resorting to living on four envelopes of “Upchuck” a day. After a few months they have lost weight but coming off the packets and going back to solid food proves to be a real struggle for their control. Pandora is forced to start eating again by Oliver after 4 months of packets. “My first reaction to sitting down to a meal was panic” (292). She describes how she is not alone in that panic, as evidenced by “the frenzy all over the Internet”: from advice on how to eat and what not to eat, to “BigPeopleDating.com”, to news on preteens with eating disorders. “We no longer knew how to eat” (292). People have essentially lost control over food. Oliver makes a point when he states that “exercising control is not the same thing as being in control. It’s the opposite. When you’re really in hand, there’s only doing what you want. There aren’t two of you” (353). Because Fletcher’s carpentry runs at a loss, he cannot provide for his family, so he turns to food in order to assert control. We will see in Chapter 2 that Reynaud in Chocolat also turns to food because he lacks control in other areas. A real life example could be anorexic
people who, in order to have a semblance of control in their lives, can only turn to food but, in
return, are the ones controlled by food (Counihan 157). This is also congruent with Cline, who
states that “women control food because they cannot control their lives more broadly” (qtd. in
Piatti-Farnell 153). Being dependent on someone is an expressive trait according to Blashill. So
in Big Brother, it is reflected that people who have no control over their lives, often because they
possess feminine traits and try to control food instead.

Big Brother draws attention to the fact that our society believes that as far as addictions
go, an addiction to food is considered far less dangerous than an addiction to, say, heroin or
alcohol. But the story demonstrates that food addiction is a serious affliction, too. The indirect
causes of death by obesity have not been as highlighted as they should have been, especially in
schools. When Edison was using drugs, this was not accepted by his girlfriend at the time, the
mother of his child. Fletcher also had a girlfriend who was addicted to drugs and he did not
accept the drug abuse of the mother of his children, either. There is a clear line which cannot be
crossed when it comes to drugs. However, where do you draw the line when it comes to food?
Edison is a person who has lost control of his life and he has an “addictive personality” (234). In
part II, he tells Pandora how he ended up in a downward spiral. He had tried heroin and alcohol,
after that, an extra slice of pizza seemed hardly dangerous. But his life has always revolved
around an addiction to something. He has lost everything in life and when he is no longer allowed
to eat, he realizes he has no control. Not eating gives him back that semblance of control. When
Pandora tries to get him to return back to ‘normal’ food, he point-blank refuses, out of fear of
losing control. When he is forced, however, he finds control again in weighing and measuring
every morsel that passes his lips. There is safety in numbers. Oliver sees the danger. “This whole
project. With you. It’s everything he lives for. It’s the latest heroin. […] He is not in control of
himself. He’s only in control of the control. Once the controls are lifted, he’s in control of
nothing” (353). While drugs are dangerous, it was not the drugs that were Edison’s downfall but
the food, and the dangers of overeating should not be underestimated.

As I have demonstrated in this chapter, Big Brother shows the way in which
contemporary American society stigmatizes obese people. Shriver criticizes this stigmatization by
making Pandora, as the narrator, reflect on these stigmatizations and disagree with them. This
message is the most important one in the novel and makes the reader also reflect on
stigmatization, however, the novel undermines its critique by making Edison a character who
embodies all prejudices against obese people. Despite the sibling bond between Edison and Pandora, prejudices remain. The stigmatization on obesity is fed by the media, who reinforces the thin ideal in everyday life. The contemporary society is influenced by this and the novel demonstrates that gender does not play a significant role in whether people are affected by the thin ideal, because everyone is affected.

Obesity and food are obviously linked. The novel reflects that control over food is important for everyone, but food can be an addiction for obese people. The problem of an addiction is that there is no simple solution. Even though whole families can be affected, they cannot easily help their loved one overcome an addiction. Shriver has experienced how difficult this is herself and how she is still struggling with her emotions about losing her own brother. By criticizing how obese people are treated, she shows her regret about how she failed to help her brother. “I pay every day” (404).
Chapter Two: Food and Power in Chocolat

Chocolat is set in an earlier period than Big Brother. It seems to be set in a fairytale-like period because of the importance of religion and the power of the priest, but it must be set after the 1960s because Josephine, Vianne’s friend, goes out for microwave pizzas (89). The first microwave ovens that could be used in the home date from around 1967 but in the villagers in Chocolat are not likely to be trendsetters. Also, a free, unmarried existence like Vianne lives would have been scandalous before the early 20th century. Harris herself lived in a comparable French village during her childhood and the notions that the novel reflects are less contemporary than in Big Brother. Chocolat is about the rise of an independent woman tries to break tradition. Food is her instrument to achieve her goals.

One of the most striking differences between Big Brother and Chocolat is the purpose of food. In Big Brother, food is considered a substance that changes the body. Overeating can cause weight gain and eating less can cause weight loss. In Chocolat, specifically chocolate as a special food, is a substance that enriches your life by helping to create friendship and love. I will demonstrate this throughout the chapter. While eating a large amount of chocolate can cause weight gain, this is not the issue in the book.

In Chocolat, characters who experience body dissatisfaction barely occur. Chocolat seems to be set in a world where how you look is not as important as how you behave. The theme of body image is not considered important, or at least it is barely ever mentioned. However the few times it is mentioned, it reflects that no matter how deeply we are situated in a fairytale, there is always the unconscious undercurrent that emphasizes body image of which all women are at least sometimes aware. Vianne’s mother is one character who is dissatisfied with her weight. “‘It’s a good thing we don’t have the money,’ she would say to me. ‘Otherwise you'd get fat as a pig.’ Poor Mother. When cancer had eaten away the best of her, she was still vain enough to rejoice at the lost weight.” (146). Also Caro Clairmont, a villager, mentions during confession that she is unhappy about her recent weight gain: “[T]hough if there's anyone who should give up chocolates…” (11). The mention of body dissatisfaction is a contemporary issue, so even though the story has a fairytale ambiance, it hints that the importance of body image already exists.

The main theme of the book is opposition. The two first person perspectives of Reynaud and Vianne characterize the different oppositions. Gender is more important in this novel than in Big Brother, so I will demonstrate the importance of the opposition between masculinity and
femininity. The character of the priest versus the character of the independent woman, who considers herself witchlike (14), demands exploration of religion versus magic or spirituality, and also Lent versus indulgence. Willard agrees with the importance of opposition in the novel in her review (n. pag). The next paragraphs will demonstrate how the novel reflects on these themes.

The opposition between masculinity and femininity is shown through the way Reynaud and Vianne stand directly across from each other as Father and mother, which is ironic because the Father does not have children (he is a religious Father) and the mother has a daughter but she does not have the same stereotypical mother-role that the other mothers in the village have. Reynaud sees himself as the shepherd to his flock. Reynaud: “The erring lamb returns to the fold, pere. By instinct. She is a brief diversion for them, that's all. But in the end they always revert to type. I do not fool myself that they do it out of any great feeling of contrition or spirituality - sheep are no great thinkers - but their instincts, bred in them from the cradle, are sound. Their feet bring them home, even when their minds have wandered” (133). Vianne is a single, unmarried female with a lot of self-confidence. Vianne as a mother fulfills a nurturing role. In the first place to Anouk, but also to her customers and friends. She helps Armande, an eccentric woman, to reunite with her grandson and she helps Josephine to leave her husband.

The novel criticizes the old-fashioned notion that mothers should be married to a husband. “Patriarchy […] likes its mother figures benign, but impotent.” (Sceats 26). But Vianne is a woman who is very capable and independent. She proves that a woman does not need a husband in order to survive in society. Like in an old-fashioned society, in Lansquenet-sous-Tannes, the village people frown upon an empowered woman. The other mother figures are suspicious of Vianne. Caro Clairmont is curious at first but then warns her friends to stay away from the chocolaterie, and the schoolteacher, Joline Drou, tells her son, Jeannot, that he cannot play with Anouk any longer because she supposedly is ‘a bad influence’. The villagers feel that in order for Vianne to fit in, she must be like them: a normal woman with a child and a husband. The old-fashioned notion is criticized because food is what makes it possible for Vianne to be independent and win against Reynaud. In the old-fashioned notion, mothers provided the food but in Chocolat, food provides independence.

The opposition between spirituality and religion of the Roman Catholic Church is shown through the way Vianne and Reynaud use food as an instrument. Vianne is shown as a witch and witches were known to seduce people to indulge. She is one of the few villagers who does not
attend church. This puts Vianne and Reynaud directly across from each other. Vianne uses chocolate as a magical instrument: “Scrying with chocolate is a difficult business. The visions are unclear” (26). And uses chocolate to unify the people. Reynaud uses the abstention of food as an instrument to make the villagers aware of the suffering of Christ. “I am cleansed, pere, cleansed. I only wish I could do more. This is not suffering. This is not penance. I sometimes feel that if I could only show them the right example, if it could be me on that cross bleeding, suffering…” (28). “Historically, this practice [of Lent] was meant to help unify people who could afford meat with poor people who couldn't” (Christian Holidays n. pag). Fasting is a discipline for one’s spiritual growth. The focus is self-examination and self-denial and that one should be able to live not only on bread but also the word of God (Deuteronomy 8:3). Reynaud fails in unifying the villagers and, ultimately, in self-discipline. Vianne’s chocolate is the main reason. In the conflict between spirituality and religion, spirituality wins because food can seduce the people and fasting cannot.

The opposition between indulgence and abstention is also shown through the way Vianne and Reynaud use food as an instrument. Eating chocolate is the exact opposite of fasting. Not only does eating chocolate mean one is not abstaining from food, it also means that one is eating for the sake of enjoyment. Chocolate has a low nutritional value health-wise but can be greatly enjoyable. The book is set during Lent and since the purpose of this fasting period is self-examination and self-denial, eating chocolate does not have a place during this time. It is, therefore, ironic that Vianne comes to the village with her chocolate precisely at the beginning of Lent. But Vianne has different beliefs than the Christian ones. She mentions “I believe being happy is the only important thing” (88), after talking with her friend Guillaume about good and bad Christians versus good and bad people. This scene illustrates the different beliefs that Vianne and Reynaud have. He thinks she is a bad Christian because she does not go to church and he is suspicious about her possible witchcraft. He sees himself as a good Christian because he suffers as Christ did. Vianne judges people differently; not by what they can do for her or her institution, but by how she can help them and how they help others. By selling people chocolate, Vianne helps them to become happy. By forcing people to fast, Reynaud just imposes his own will on them. The idea that being happy is the most important thing is a hedonistic one. While it is obviously not possible to constantly be happy, happiness is an important part of life.
The novel contains the rather fairytale-like message that kindness, intuition, and empathy wins from rigidity, control, and adherence to rules. The conflict shows there is an issue of power between two leaders. The woman uses food as a weapon against the Father who uses the tradition of religion. Vianne uses chocolate to battle against the religious villagers’ fear of going to Hell if you sin by not practicing Lent. Vianne also battles Reynaud because he represents the Black Man whom she fears. In the novel, the Black Man is a personification of Death. He appears more than once in the novel: on the tarot cards and as another priest who wishes to separate Vianne from her mother when she was younger. Death has eventually separated Vianne from her mother. The village is torn between choosing indulgence and fear. The feminine and the magical wins and patriarchy lost a battle.

The importance of happiness as a part of life is emphasized by the fact that Chocolat reflects the contemporary notion that chocolate is an indulgence, but that indulgence is necessary. Eating chocolate makes people happy which Desmet and Schifferstein have researched: “sweet [food] […] was mainly associated with happiness and surprise” (291). The village is divided into two groups. Vianne’s clients are happier and kinder people than those who follow Reynaud and do not indulge in her shop. The villagers might think they are divided by moral principles, but the division is reinforced by whether they eat chocolate. Experts agree that

[s]ince cooking is a civilised practice, its application – and the different types of food to which it is applied– can become a marker of cultural belonging. Deborah Lupton argues that ‘food is instrumental in marking differences between cultures, serving to strengthen group identity […] sharing the act of eating brings people into the same community’. Eating the same food becomes symbolically important for cultural identification; choosing to eat certain foods rather than others represents human beings’ acknowledgement of their belonging – or wish to belong – to a particular cultural faction. The act of eating, therefore, serves an important means through which social and ethnic exclusion or inclusion is perpetrated. Nick Fiddes reminds us that ‘the food we select reflect our thought, including our conception of our actual or desired way of life and our perceptions of the food choice of people with whom we wish to identify. We eat nothing but as part of our culture’. (qtd. in Piatti-Farnell 12)
In the end, the two groups are reunited through a festival where everyone enjoys chocolate together. This shows that being happy and sharing food is a more unifying practice than observing rigid, institutional practices. It is not a specifically modern notion but it does show the novel’s critique on rigid traditions. The fact that indulgence wins makes the novel an advocate for a hedonistic society.

According to the author herself, Chocolat is not a criticism on the Church, however it could be seen as a criticism against institutions that deny us pleasure in life. The way Reynaud is characterized in the novel is not as a nice priest and the reputation of the Church does not benefit from it. His rigidness to the religious traditions, the way he forces the villagers to take part in these traditions, his incomprehension of the woman who will not follow his ideas are proof of this. On the other hand, there are events in the novel that are comparable with Christian events. Armande, the oldest woman in the village, celebrates her birthday and her planned death with a feast on Good Friday. This corresponds to The Last Supper. In the novel, when there is a death, directly afterwards, there is also new life. For example, the death of Vianne’s mother, precedes the birth of Anouk; a dog dies and the owner almost directly receives a new puppy; and after Armande dies, Vianne becomes pregnant again. This can correspond to the death of Jesus and his Resurrection. These events show that the Church is not criticized but its traditions and that Harris is open to stories of Christianity and less rigid traditions.

Chocolat reflects the modern notion that strong, spiritual women place a lot of emphasis on their roles as mothers of daughters and daughters of mothers. Contemporary mothers are concerned for their daughters and how they grow up in a world where not only family and a close community influence them but also the media, for example. They want their daughters to become strong, independent and successful women. Growing up is difficult and daughters look up to their mothers who must set the right example. Vianne sets a good example for Anouk because she is very independent, a trait she has from her own mother. However, on the other hand she is also worried that Anouk is not getting the stability she needs and wants because they move around often. She knows how Anouk might be feeling because Vianne herself felt that way when she was younger and travelling with her mother. Sceats mentions that

[t]he modern world manifests an overwhelming human yearning for wholeness, oneness or integrity, a yearning apparent in oral appetites, sexual desire, religious fervour, physical hunger, ‘back to the womb’ impulses, death wishes. […] Its
most literal manifestation, perhaps, is in deep, often unacknowledged longing to be reunited with the maternal figure, a fantasised return to the status of wholly fulfilled infant at the breast, or even in utero. This might almost be said to be the ur-longing, a desire to be reunited with the block off which we are a chip. […] female protagonists struggle with all that might separate them from the maternal bond: men, social convention, betrayal, external controls, their own ambition, their mothers themselves. It is as part of that struggle that they sometimes revisit attachments to the maternal, discovering their own independent physicality through sensuous relationships with food and its preparation, as well as in relation to religion, culture, men and, above all, with other women past and present. (9) Vianne feels this longing to be close to her mother, manifested literally through the wind who keeps telling her to move, but the struggle that keeps them apart is death. The novel, while it reads almost like a fairytale, sometimes seeks to remind the reader of the reality. It shows that even the ‘good’ characters have flaws that make them human. For example, Vianne is a loving mother and caring friend but she mostly feeds her daughter chocolate croissants and can be very overbearing, like when she convinces the gypsy, Roux, to be her friend.

*Chocolat* expresses the spiritual notion that giving is more fulfilling than denying. While Vianne is individually powerful, she is also somewhat dependent on society because they must buy her wares to provide her income. She takes matters into her own hands by appealing to her customers’ personality and giving them their favorite chocolates. From a mother’s perspective, this giving of food is congruent with giving love, affection. She has to feed Anouk but what she feeds her is fancy chocolate. Vianne is aware of this congruence and actually uses it manipulatively on her customers, although only out of good intentions. She derives as much satisfaction out of her kindness as the recipients “I want to give, to make people happy; surely that can do no harm” (56), and gains not only customers but also friends. As mentioned in Chapter One, the giving and receiving of food is not a neutral act but Vianne and most of her customers demonstrate the appropriate behavior; Vianne by initiating a bond and the recipient by choosing to trust her food. Reynaud, on the other, denies gifts.

The gift involves a tripartite obligation: to give, to receive, and to repay. Refusal to give or receive is a vast insult that severs relationships. Refusal to repay
signifies inability to do so and loss of face. Giving to others is the basis of power, for recipients are beholden to donors. (Counihan *Prodigious Fasting* 107)

When food is used as a gift, friendship is given in return. *Chocolat* suggests that women can gain control of their lives by gaining control of food, which is slightly different from what happens in *Big Brother*, where control of food reflects only a semblance of control over the characters’ lives. The person, usually the wife, who makes decisions about food in the family could be seen as the one who controls the flow of food. However, “[r]esponsibility is not equivalent to control” according to McIntosh and Zey (141).

Although women are generally held responsible for these roles, men and/or husbands usually control their enactment, for example, by earning the money used to purchase food. As the mother in a family, Vianne is the one who makes the decisions about the acquiring, storing, preserving and preparing of food for family consumption. However, she does not have a husband. Since Vianne earns her own money with her shop, La Celeste Praline Chocolaterie Artisanale, as well as being in control of the family food consumption, she has a position of power. The novel also shows that Josephine regains control of her life by helping out in the *chocolaterie*. Although it could be argued that simply having a business could result in a position of power, the fact Vianne sells food, chocolate, makes it possible for her to unify the villagers. She can be a leader because of food.

Like in *Big Brother*, the novel reflects that abstention is not the same as control. Edison and Pandora deny themselves the pleasure of food by taking “Upchuck” but they are not really in control of food. During Lent, Reynaud has denied himself of every pleasure he could think of. “I have increased the austerity of my Lenten fast, choosing to continue even on the days when a relaxation is permitted” (40). As a result, the smell and sight of chocolate is a larger assault on his senses than if he had been indulging once in a while. The ultimate loss of Reynaud’s control happens in the early morning of Easter. While he plans to go into the *chocolaterie* to destroy chocolate gift boxes to ruin the festival, he is instead seduced by the sight and smell of chocolate. The chocolate causes his loss of control, even though he had not eaten any for a long time. Sceats mentions that while not eating may be seen as an act of self-empowerment, it can also be seen as enslavement. The act is life-denying and a literal form of cannibalism; the body has to consume itself (45). Reynaud’s abstention was meant to be empowering but it turned into enslavement because he was ruled by it. Being enslaved means one is not in control of their life.
The novel gives a contemporary understanding of the word sin, which is that not indulging is a sin but that losing control is. The seven deadly sins, according to Christianity, are examples of loss of control. Reynaud confuses gluttony with indulgence. Gluttony is a loss of control and he thinks the villagers do this while they are actually indulging in food. The difference is that the definition of indulge is to allow oneself to enjoy the pleasure of something (“indulge” OED) and is therefore a personal choice. Indulging does not directly have negative consequences for other people. The novel demonstrates that indulging can have positive consequences for other people, such as unity. Reynaud’s destruction of the chocolaterie could also be considered a sin because he is driven by wrath, which causes him to lose control that ends in gluttony. “I cram chocolates into my mouth at random [...] I can hear myself making sounds as I eat, moaning, keening sounds of ecstasy and despair, as if the pig within has finally found a voice” (153). In his loss of control, he hurts Vianne. The novel suggests that before indulging in food becomes a sin, there must first be a loss of control.

What Oliver warns Pandora for in Big Brother also happens in Chocolat, Edison and Reynaud are not really in control and when the controls are lifted, they succumb to food. Reynaud’s downfall starts when he sees the chocolate figure of a woman who seems to goad him. While eating chocolate figures like bunnies and lambs can be seen as the omnivorous pig at work, eating the woman can be seen as cannibalism and sexual appetite. Reynaud blushes at the chocolates named Nipples of Venus, and like an infant’s first taste of food at its mother’s breast, these are the chocolates he samples first. “Most potent, though, are the images of ingestion that cannibalism evokes, figuring an extreme desire to devour a person, to incorporate someone into oneself, a lust for total possession or a rage for obliteration and supremacy” (Sceats 37). Lust, of course, is also one of the seven deadly sins. By devouring Vianne’s chocolate, Reynaud could be seen as devouring her in a last bid to obliterate and overpower her. In this case, it is an act of destruction. However, Sceats mentions that

[w]ithout going into anthropological detail, it can be said that cannibalistic societies tend to fall into two groups: those who consume their enemies as an act of destruction, and those who consume friends (or enemies) by way of homage. While the first of these takes no account of the effect on the eater (other than the satisfying rage of annihilation), the second group apparently seeks to keep alive something of the person consumed, or even to achieve a transformation, for if you
are what you eat then you become a different individual once you absorb another.

The symbolism is not unlike that of the Christian Eucharist or Mass. (39)
The Easter carillon, marking the beginning of Mass, shakes Reynaud out of his feeding frenzy. He is found, lying in chocolates, by Vianne, and seen by the villagers. The end of his gorging marks his transformation. He becomes human and someone to be pitied, he is no longer the Black Man or someone to fear.

The novel expresses the spiritual notion that choosing your own death is an act of ultimate power. Like Edison does in Big Brother, Armande kills herself “with gluttony” in Chocolat, however, rather than it being the bottom of a downwards spiral as it is for Edison, Armande goes out with a bang. She organizes a ‘last supper’ for her friends with the best foods and, satisfied, dies. It is not actually the gluttony as Reynaud sees it that becomes her death but her own choice which she makes while fully in control.

In the novel, I have demonstrated how the importance of food reflects contemporary notions. Food used as a powerful instrument gives the one who is in control of that food leadership and power. As described through the oppositions the female wins from the male, the spirituality from religion, and indulgence from abstention.
Chapter Three: Food and Emotion in *Eat, Pray, Love*

While *Big Brother* is written from the idea that you cannot get what you need from food, *Chocolat* and *Eat, Pray, Love* are written from the idea that you can. Sometimes food is just what you need. The purpose of food in *Eat, Pray, Love* is again different from *Big Brother* and *Chocolat*. In *Big Brother*, the purpose was to lose weight, in *Chocolat* the purpose was to enrich life, and in *Eat, Pray, Love* the purpose is to gain weight as well as enrich life. For Liz, it is first and foremost important that she regains a healthy weight. She had lost weight because of depression and to change her unhappy lifestyle, she turns to food to restore herself. “I came to Italy pinched and thin. I did not know yet what I deserved. I still maybe don’t fully know what I deserve. But I do know that I have collected myself of late—through the enjoyment of harmless pleasures—into somebody much more intact. The easiest, most fundamentally human way to say it is that I have put on weight” (128). The purpose of food in *Eat, Pray, Love* has a nourishing aspect for the body as well as an enriching aspect for the happiness of life. This is mostly true for the *Eat*-part of the book. In part two, *Pray*, food is only a fuel in order to survive, while praying and meditation is what enriches life. In part three, *Love*, both the nourishing and enriching purpose are important again but are not as much underscored. In this part, everything should be balanced.

The novel, like *Chocolat*, reflects that enjoying comfort food and eating with friends are experiences that brings forth happiness. Eating good food which is prepared with care in an enjoyable environment creates a happier emotional status of the mind. Eating unhealthy junk food can result in obesity and unhappiness, as shown in *Big Brother*. For Liz, the place where she thinks she can find this happiness is Italy, because according to her, Italians have perfected the art of pleasure. By immersing herself in Italian culture and eating their food, she believes she can partake in their pleasure and become happier. Her motivation is that you are what you eat. By eating Italian, you become Italian, and therefore can enjoy the same pleasure.

So Sofie and I have come to Pizzeria da Michele, and these pies we have just ordered -- one for each of us -- are making us lose our minds. I love my pizza so much, in fact, that I have come to believe in my delirium that my pizza might actually love me, in return. I am having a relationship with this pizza, almost an affair. (93)
While Liz eats a lot of pizza and pasta, she also eats a lot of ice cream, which is sweet. This must definitely contribute to her happiness, like in *Chocolat* where the sweet chocolate contributes to the happiness of the villagers. As I demonstrated in Chapter Two, Desmet and Schifferstein found that emotions evoked by food depended largely on the individual and their current state (e.g. hungriness, mood, their fitness level, etc.), and their surroundings. They did find that eating something “sweet […] was mainly associated with happiness and surprise, whereas [eating something] bitter […] was mainly associated with anger and disgust. Salty and sour [foods] were associated with all emotions, reflecting more variable taste associations” (291). Therefore, enjoying food makes a person happier.

*Eat, Pray, Love* illustrates how a person can reflect their surroundings and vice versa. This can boil down to the contemporary notion that you are what you eat. For example, if you eat a fatty, greasy hamburger, you will become fat, but if you eat lean, healthy veggies, you will become healthy and lean. However, it can also apply to people. If you surround yourself with positive people, you can more easily be positive yourself. *Eat, Pray, Love* takes it a step further by implying that if you eat food that happy people eat, you will become happy. However, this can also mean a person loses sight of the self. Liz has mentioned that she is someone who becomes completely immersed in her significant other; she disappears into them. And people around her notice it as well. “Some time after I’d left my husband, I was at a party and a guy I barely knew said to me, ‘You know, you seem like a completely different person, now that you’re with this new boyfriend. You used to look like your husband, but now you look like David. You even dress like him and talk like him. You know how some people look like their dogs? I think maybe you always look like your men’” (79).

The novel reflects that food is directly related to emotional status. The sort of food and the way people eat their food directly refer to the way people stand in their life. Going to Italy and enjoying food there is a way for Liz to overcome her unhappiness. So in *Eat, Pray, Love*, eating has a positive effect on her emotions. In *Big Brother*, Edison’s emotions are also positively influenced by food, however, where food helps Liz achieve her goals, food ruins Edison. Desmet and Schifferstein have researched two types of studies: “[S]tudies that focus on the effects of emotion on eating behaviour versus studies that focus on the effects of eating behaviour on emotion” (290). They found that meals were significantly larger if eaten in positive or negative moods compared to neutral moods, and healthier food was eaten in positive moods compared to
more junk food in negative moods. “Emotion regulation eating implies that a person starts to eat in order to decrease an unpleasant feeling state, also termed ‘mood control eating’ [e.g. break-up ice cream]” (Desmet and Schifferstein 291). The novels reflect that the impact of food on emotion is significant.

*Eat, Pray, Love* reinforces the contemporary idea that a person with a certain social identity should feel emotions that are consistent with this identity. The novel does this by describing the Italians that Liz meets as people who enjoy life very much. Conversely, the people at the Ashram are very serene and tranquil, and their eating habits reflect this by only eating what they physically need. For example, flight attendants have a generally accepted social identity as happy and bubbly. The people who are flight attendants must then have a happy and bubbly identity because if they do not, the clash between their held identity and what they should feel (happy and bubbly) will cause misery. It is not hard to imagine recently divorced people being lonely and depressed. Liz wants to change this so she must not only change her held identity from depressed to happy, but also change her social identity from recently divorced to a social identity that can be congruent with being happy. Coleman and Williams mention that

> [h]istorically, the self has been described as possessing a unique duality: it is both an experiencer and doer, on the one hand, and an object of evaluation and affective responses, on the other […]. Affect, or emotion, as understood in this literature, has typically focused on the self as an object of evaluation leading to emotional outcomes associated with self-esteem. In contrast, contemporary emotion literature focuses on the self as an experiencer or interpreter of situations: stimuli gain emotional impact as they reward or punish the individual […]. The self is considered so crucial to emotion experience that ‘it is impossible to define effective emotional stimuli independent of the subject’ […]. The self is a set of concerns that may be implicated in a conscious or non-conscious assessment, or appraisal, of situations; relevance to the self imbues situations with meaning and emotional impact […]. Emotions function to set priorities among the many goals and stimuli that impinge upon individuals at any given moment […]. In this view, the self-structure is the basis of emotional response, an experiencer that relies upon emotions to guide behavioral tendencies. (Coleman and Williams 43)
They go on to suggest that “[i]ndividuals rely on their social identities to provide social categorization, self-definition, and behavioral guidance […], avoiding activities and objects inconsistent with the held identity […], and approaching those that are consistent” (44). Food in *Eat, Pray, Love* reflects the contemporary modern notion that you are what you eat, physically and emotionally. 

*Eat, Pray, Love*, like *Chocolat*, reflects that modern women are not satisfied following the common Western patriarchal ideas of religion in their quest for spirituality. Liz prays to God, however, she does not find ‘him’ in an American church, but rather in an Ashram in India. Vianne found her spirituality in magic. What does this have to do with food? In the first part of *Eat, Pray, Love*, food is the instrument for Liz to regain herself. In the second part, praying becomes this instrument and food takes a place as only fuel for survival. Liz reflects that this is very different compared to the situation in Italy, but that meditation is also a way for her to find herself and balance in her life. “[m]editation teaches that grief and nuisance are inevitable in this life, but if you can plant yourself in stillness long enough, you will, in time, experience the truth that everything (both uncomfortable and lovely) does eventually pass” (186). In contemporary society, people are incorporating traditions of other religions, as a result of traveling, migration, and worldwide communication. Every person tries to implement these traditions to try and find their self-identity.

The novel, like *Big Brother*, emphasizes American society’s problem with the instant gratification mentality. The problem is that people are more focused on how they feel in the moment. If they do not feel happy, they look towards something that will give them immediate pleasure. This often turns out to be food of the easily accessible kind and is not always conducive to a happy future. This is what happened in *Big Brother*. Food was the only source of happiness for Edison but it did not give him happiness in the long run. The reason that the eating trip to Italy works for Liz is that she did not use food as a source of instant gratification but boyfriends. On her journey, she learns to let go of her instinct to run into a man’s arms when she feels unhappy, and start to consciously enjoy other things in life again. By not immediately indulging in whatever she wants now, she finds happiness at the end of the road. Liz experiences another example of this in India, while she is being eaten alive by mosquitos during her meditation.

The itch was maddening at first but eventually it just melded into a general burning feeling and I rode that heat to a mild euphoria. I allowed the pain to lose
its specific associations and become pure sensation—neither good nor bad, just intense—and that intensity lifted me out of myself and into meditation. I sat there for two hours. A bird might very well have landed on my head; I wouldn’t have noticed. (187)

By not reacting instantly to alleviate her discomfort, she reaches a level of meditation (happiness to her) that she had not reached before. Eat, Pray, Love is a popular novel and poses an alternative to instant gratification. Cusk mentions that “Women like this literature because it alleviates feelings of pressure without the attendant risks of rebellion or change. […] The more representative it is of what people personally feel, the more satisfying and necessary its publication” (n. pag).

The novel reflects that, in American society, being too focused on food in any way is not a good trait, even for someone like Liz who tries to regain a healthy relationship with food. While the first part of Eat, Pray, Love is filled with examples of enjoyment of food, Liz is also aware that what she is doing is not completely accepted in American culture. The fact that Liz eats very healthy in her home country, “I have been known to eat organic goat’s milk yoghurt sprinkled with wheat germ for breakfast” (93), while eating ice cream every day in Italy, says something about her thoughts on the American food culture. These are two conflicting things: on the one hand healthy eating is important, but on the other hand eating ice cream embodies living the American dream (Piatti-Farnell 31). Liz often sounds apologetic of her eating and at times also defensive. As she is enjoying some fresh asparagus, she thinks of what her ex-husband might say about her leaving him for asparagus and he would not approve. This is apparently different for Italian culture, where they can enjoy food for the sake of it and pleasure is a legitimate argument. Furthermore, eating is barely mentioned in the second and third part of the novel. Apparently, enjoying luxurious food is certainly not something many can afford in India and Indonesia. Liz is also reprimanded by Richard, a fellow American visitor of the Ashram, for eating too much. He calls her “Groceries” because of this (149). The balance that is reached in part three demonstrates that the amount of time a person focusses on food should also be balanced.

The novel shows that being in control of food is necessary to change your lifestyle. In Italy, Liz was successful in finding pleasure just for pleasure’s sake again. Her body healed and looks like that of a happy person. On the rest of her journey, she will have to keep working on finding the right state of mind to fit her new-found body. She uses praying as an instrument for
this. The reason that Liz is able to keep control over food after her ‘transformation’ is that instead of going on a diet, she makes a lifestyle change. Making a lifestyle change as opposed to going on a diet is something that weight loss platforms keep hammering on. Going on a diet means changing your food intake drastically and going back to ‘normal’ eating once you have reached your goal weight. This ‘normal’ eating is what caused problems in the first place and why a lifestyle change is needed instead of a diet. Not making a lifestyle change is what happened in *Big Brother* and why Pandora and Edison ultimately failed. Liz, on the other hand, is successful.

“I exist more now than I did four months ago. I will leave Italy noticeably bigger than when I arrived here. And I will leave with the hope that the expansion of one person—the magnification of one life—is indeed an act of worth in this world. Even if that life, just this one time, happens to be nobody’s but my own” (128). Making a lifestyle change means incorporating healthy habits that work for you gradually into your daily routine. It takes a while before you start seeing results but these habits fine-tuned specifically to your lifestyle are sure to stick around for longer than a diet will. In Italy, instead of focusing on the weight she has to gain, Liz focuses on the pleasure the Italian food brings her, and thus is able to keep enjoying food even after she has left Italy.

Being in control of food makes a person able to change their lifestyle.

Finally, the novel reflects the importance of the connection between eating, praying, and loving as the main thread in the memoir. Food and devotion must be experienced separately and when they combine, Liz becomes a happy person who has found herself and love at the end of part three. If a person has control over food, spirituality, and thus their emotions, they have found themselves and are able to love, themselves as well as others. This is the most important message in the book.
Conclusion

All three novels suggest that you need new surroundings in order to fix a major problem in your life. New surroundings also mean different food and eating habits. This is congruent with what modern society and the media think; always encouraging to go on a retreat to find whatever you are looking for. In *Big Brother*, Pandora and Edison move into a different house in order to lose weight. In *Chocolat*, Vianne moves to Lansquenet-sous-Tannes to hopefully find more stability for her daughter. In *Eat, Pray, Love*, Liz travels around the world in order to find herself. Only Liz really succeeds in achieving her goal. Vianne succeeds in changing the way the villagers eat and changes the community by uniting, but does not succeed in solving her own problem of not having a stable home for Anouk. Pandora idealizes her new surroundings and the food packets while they did not actually exist. I conclude that the novels reflect the modern idea that a change of surroundings, and therefore food, is helpful for overcoming problems in life.

In this thesis, I have shown that the novels reflect that if a person is not in control of food, they cannot lead a fulfilling life for themselves. In *Big Brother*, Edison fails to gain control over food. He has to endure stigmatization because of this and he also cannot do the things he wants to do. In the end, the obesity results in his death. In *Chocolat*, Reynaud falls from grace after his loss of control in the chocolaterie. In *Eat, Pray, Love*, Liz was not in control of food but when she regained control, her life changed for the better. I conclude that because the three books have such a similar view on the subject of not being in control over food, it is also a correct reflection of what contemporary society thinks.

Part of the success of *Chocolat* and *Eat, Pray, Love* is that they spread the positive message that you can eat what you want, which is vastly different from the message the media spreads about the thin ideal. *Chocolat* and *Eat, Pray, Love* make the reader feel that it is okay to indulge in food and that pleasure is an important part of a balanced life. The media promotes the thin ideal in such a way that everyone is confronted by it. Novels that do not advocate the thin ideal are therefore a breath of fresh air and can become very popular. In contrast, *Big Brother* warns the reader of the dangers of obesity and while it is not an advocate for the thin ideal, it suggests that eating whatever you want might not always be a good idea. I conclude that while the media is still spreading the thin ideal, a large part of modern Western society is fed up with it. *Big Brother* is a relatively new book, however, and it might still gain in popularity.
Literature can be used to emphasize stereotypes and in this way reflect on how society thinks about certain characteristics. By stereotyping Edison, Shriver emphasizes the way society thinks about obese people. Through the plot, she criticizes this stigmatization by creating awareness for the problems overeating and obesity cause. By stereotyping the priest as a strict and unrelenting Father of the Church, Harris criticizes the enforcement of old-fashioned religious traditions. By not stereotyping Vianne, she shows that society prefers positive qualities in protagonists that are also credible. I conclude that the novels reflect that society does not prefer stereotypes because there is no place for them. This is reflected by the fact that stereotypes do not survive, are defeated, or are changed.

The novels reflect that food can be used to create, improve, or deny bonds, such as the bond between siblings, husband and wife, parents and children, and friends. In Big Brother, the sibling bond between Edison and Pandora is improved through dieting together but alienates Fletcher from them. In Chocolat, the villagers are united through food but are kept apart through fasting. Because Harris mentions that she wrote Chocolat after becoming a mother, I expected to find more elaboration of the mother/daughter bond. The bond that Harris describes is not overly extraordinary in my opinion. In Eat, Pray, Love, Liz is united with herself through food and she also makes new friends. Through the various anthropological and literary sources such as Sceats and Piatti-Farnell, I demonstrated that food is also an important aspect of bonds in contemporary society. I conclude that the novels reflect contemporary society closely when illustrating how food creates, improves, and denies bonds.

Because the novels are written by women, it is not surprising that the role of women is foregrounded. The protagonists are all females and the reader therefore gets a female perspective on food and eating issues. Pandora, Vianne, and Liz are all in control of food as evidenced by their independence and their strength. Anthropological research on food and body image mostly studies females because eating pathology is much more prevalent among females (Bair et al. 275-278).

All three novels reflect that food intake can be influenced by emotions and vice versa. In Big Brother, Edison is trapped in a vicious cycle of eating because he is depressed and being depressed because he keeps gaining weight. In Chocolat, Vianne seduces the villagers to indulge in chocolate to improve their emotional status. In Eat, Pray, Love, Liz fights depression and loneliness by eating Italian food. Happy feasts and events with friends encourage her to indulge
in food more. I conclude that this coincides with the modern notion of comfort food, which helps in sad situations and the celebration of happy events with, for example, diner parties.

Food is the overarching theme in this thesis. However, the theme of body image is the most important in *Big Brother*, power and control is most important in *Chocolat*, and emotion is most important in *Eat, Pray, Love*. This shows that food is related to many different social issues. As I mentioned in the Introduction, everyone in society has experienced traditions and customs related to food, and everyone knows what the influences and consequences are of food on the body. In conclusion, food as a theme in these three novels is important in its relation to other themes, because then the novels can reflect and comment, through food, on contemporary social notions. I, as foodie, experienced it as an interesting research topic, and though I took my time writing, it was never dull.
Works cited


