



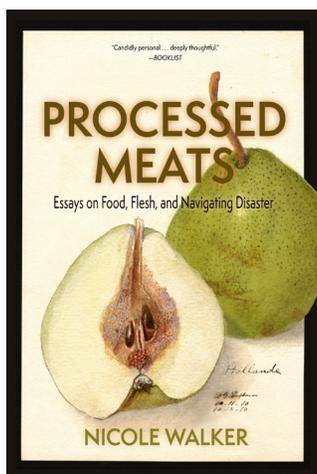
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## Reading Group Guide

# PROCESSED MEATS

ESSAYS ON FOOD, FLESH, & NAVIGATING DISASTER

BY NICOLE WALKER



### INTRODUCTION

Nicole Walker made cheese and grew tomatoes as a means of coping when she struggled to get pregnant. Amid the coronavirus pandemic, she cooked veggie burgers for friends and hamburgers for herself—to enjoy outside, six feet apart. Her Mormon ancestors canned peaches to prepare for the End of Days and congealed beef broth into aspic as a surefire cure for ailment. Throughout the richly layered essays of *Processed Meats*, Walker ponders food choices and life choices, dissecting how we process disaster, repackage it, and turn it into something edible.

“Walker plays her way linguistically deep into the grotesque and marvelous realities of what it means to live in a female body and to depend on other bodies—chicken, raven, pig, veal, cougar, husband and child—for one’s sustenance.”  
—ALISON HAWTHORNE DEMING, author of *Zoologies*

“To think about food is to think about life, and Walker does so with brilliant complexity and insight.”  
—BICH MINH NGUYEN, author of *Stealing Buddha’s Dinner*

“Candidly personal . . . Walker frames contrasting concepts of stability versus risk, abundance versus dearth, self-sufficiency versus reliance within the context of the larger global imperatives of climate change, pollution, and sustainability. The result is the kind of deeply thoughtful and relatable discussion one might have with one’s best friends around a dinner table.” —BOOKLIST

### A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

This book stems from my frustration at being able to make complicated recipes, host, and feed people but not be able to make complicated life choices, make effective change to my local or global environment, or even convince my body to do what I wanted. When I couldn’t get pregnant, especially after years of trying not to, the irony of how much we humans think we have control hit me hard. I hope readers come away from *Processed Meats* with the idea that humans are hypocritical but also full of great capacity to make good things.



**Nicole Walker** is the author of *The After-Normal: Brief, Alphabetical Essays on a Changing Planet*; *Sustainability: A Love Story*; *A Survival Guide for Life in the Ruins*; and other books. Her work has been published in *Orion*, *Boston Review*, *Creative Nonfiction*, *Brevity*, *The Normal School*, and elsewhere. Recipient of a fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts and noted in multiple editions of *The Best American Essays*, Walker is nonfiction editor at *Diagram* and professor at Northern Arizona University in Flagstaff, Arizona.

Learn more at [nikwalk.com](http://nikwalk.com).

Walker is available to discuss *Processed Meats* with reading groups in person or virtually. For more information, email [anne@torreyhouse.com](mailto:anne@torreyhouse.com).

## CONVERSATION STARTERS

1. In the essay “A Permanent Home,” Walker explores the meaning of the word *home*. She defines home as “an ability to move and find what you need when you get there” (p. 167) and considers the possibility that “the idea of home is, paradoxically, importable” (p. 169). Do you agree with these definitions? How has your perception of the word *home* changed over time?
2. Walker discusses the way her relationship with food has fluctuated throughout different phases of life, specifically during her pregnancies and times of emergency. How has your relationship with food shifted throughout your life? In the preface, Walker considers that the precarity of food during the pandemic “will lead to a thoughtfulness about individual versus collective impact.” How did the COVID-19 pandemic affect your perception of food?
3. Why do you think Walker has such a fixation with her Mormon roots, despite not being a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints? Is there a deep-rooted facet of your identity, or past identity, that similarly affects you?
4. In “An Unkindness of Ravens,” Walker explores differences between what is natural and normal and what is good and bad. She writes that wisdom may be “not insisting on a category called normal” (221). Do you agree?
5. Walker explains that she tries to make up for her meat eating with environmentally friendly decisions like installing solar panels on her house, buying clothing from thrift stores, and using recycled shampoo and conditioner bottles (p. 199). Do you ever find yourself calculating your actions in this way? Was there a specific statistic or insight Walker shared that inspired you to change some aspect of your lifestyle?
6. On page 199, Walker considers the possibility that she is a realist; however, on page 251, she shares that she is usually disappointed because she is generally optimistic. Do you believe realism and optimism are complimentary or opposing forces? What part do you think they each play in creating a sustainable future?
7. Walker analyzes the hazard of anger, writing, “Tempers are a bit like idling. They emit gasses and energy that seem like they’re doing nothing—until the molecules accumulate” (192). Later, she writes, “Anger, when it strikes randomly and individually, only scares and leads to your own demise” (199). Do you believe there are instances when anger can be permissible and even constructive? Do you think the same goes for gas and energy emissions?
8. Walker writes, “You’ve got to turn against your own nature, your own desire to stay, your own love of what you know. You’ve got to turn that dam to stream, virus to new host, and get out before you get stuck” (103). In what ways can going against our own nature be a form of survival?
9. Walker likens the production of Arby’s beef to the formation of new family units, fertility to a tomato garden, botulism to a growing fetus, and cooking to raising children, among several other food/ life comparisons. Why do you think she chooses to implement metaphors in this way? Were there any you found particularly impactful? Can you come up with one of your own?
10. On page 166, Walker considers the possibility that humans have grown distrustful and “have been trained not to believe our eyes,” especially in regard to climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic. Have you noticed additional signs of this in the world?
11. Did you have a favorite meal description or recipe you came across while reading?

12. Walker shares that she is willing to cook a separate pan of pasta for her vegetarian mother-in-law, stating that “love is always two pans. Anger, only one” (200). How does this idea lend itself to differing views on politics, the environment, and religion?



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