

READ ON

The pull of good writing

BY JOHN T. EDGE

“FRANCES HURRIES THROUGH THE crowds of Chicago. She is looking for a job as a waitress. The trams screech in her ears, a policeman’s whistle shrills, the ‘L’ train thunders. ... Now she stands in front of the restaurant. She looks in through the window at the bright, decked tables, at ladies and gentlemen eating at leisure, white-aproned girls holding plates in their hands. Frances hesitates. Should she go in or not?”

That scene opens *In the Restaurant: Society in Four Courses*. Written by Christoph Ribbat and translated from the German by Jamie Lee Searle, it’s a slim marvel of a book.

To track the restaurant and its various meanings over time and place, Ribbat weaves together hundreds of sources and stories in an erudite and entertaining history. He meditates on the steak-eating American origins of the Japanese preference for sushi made with fatty tuna.

He slowly reveals the marrow that comes into view when a chef sees the thigh bone of a pig in half. He sketches the life of Frances Donovan, the aforementioned sociologist who went undercover to write the 1920 book *The Woman Who Waits*. Ribbat renders moments as scenes. Characters present like actors. Sections, made from scenes stacked one atop another, read like short plays.

The book is a model of what writing can be, which is to say it counterbalances what academic writing too often is. Last August, I bought the book in Athens, Georgia, where I teach each summer and winter in the University of Georgia’s low-residency MFA program in Narrative Nonfiction. Since then, I have purchased and shared numerous copies. A colleague who teaches anthropology told me she admired the way Ribbat used the present tense to energize historic events. A friend who writes longform magazine stories



In the early twentieth century, sociologist Frances Donovan went undercover to explore the experiences of women servers, like this fourteen-year-old server in Boston. Donovan’s adventures are retold in Christoph Ribbat’s *In the Restaurant: Society in Four Courses*.

called to talk about how Ribbat built tension and drove toward resolution while spanning continents and decades.

I read in two ways. As an employee of an academic unit at a university, I search for research-grounded insights that will inform SFA documentary efforts and programming. As a popular press writer, I focus on conveying big ideas via closely reported narratives.

My reading patterns mirror the duality of SFA work. Our organization serves colleagues in food studies with oral histories and peer-reviewed scholarship published by the University of Georgia Press. Via *Gravy*, we also aim for approachable writing

that benefits from academic rigor, telling old stories in new ways to change how others see us and how we see ourselves.

Those difficult straddles are worth the effort, for they yield new insights and bridge old gaps. Comparable tensions also enliven this issue, which bridges two universities and two scholarly disciplines. More personally, this issue connects my two worlds of Southern studies and narrative nonfiction. In Ribbat, I recognize a fellow traveler, using academic research and narrative techniques to make readers wonder whether Frances Donovan will walk inside that restaurant and apply for a job. 🍷

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