

The “Toad in the Hole”: Food and Foodways in Sue Townsend’s “Adrian Mole” YA Saga

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Created by Leicester-born writer Sue Townsend (1946-2014), Adrian Mole is the eponymous hero of a book series for young adults. The saga first gained success as a radio play, *The Diary of Nigel Mole, Aged 13¼*, in 1982, and was turned into a novel later in the same year. The book, *The Secret Diary of Adrian Mole*, introduces the readers to the everyday difficulties, the fleeting ambitions, and the largely unattainable expectations of a teenager growing up in the Midlands in the 1980s. The enthusiastic response of the public convinced Townsend to expand the series and portray Adrian’s transition into adulthood.¹ The following two novels, *The Growing Pains of Adrian Mole* (1984) and *True Confessions of Adrian Albert Mole* (1989), narrate the boy’s secondary-school years and his first job as a librarian. Readers thus learn of Adrian’s teenage insecurities as he fights against pimples and bullies at school, of his love for the pretentious, upper-class Pandora Braithwaite, and of his literary and intellectual aspirations, which harshly come to an end when he fails his O levels.

After Adrian’s stories became a successful TV series on ITV in the mid 1980s, Townsend further extended her media franchise to represent Adrian’s adult life.² The writer created a ‘feuilleton diary’ that reads as a modern-day *Bildungsroman* for an entire generation – that is, the British who grew up in the post-industrial, unemployment-ridden Thatcher years. Similarly, the readers grow up with Adrian, and a central feature of his diaries is the ubiquitous, and at times obsessive presence of food. Food accompanies various moments and stages in his coming of age, and it is crucial to his emancipation in *Adrian Mole: The Wilderness Years* (1993) and *Adrian Mole: The Cappuccino Years* (1999), where

he finds employment at a restaurant in Soho.

In this chapter I focus on the first three novels in the series, which depict Adrian's teenage years and are characterized by the constant memorialization of food, eating rituals, and consumption habits. Adrian's distaste for the processed, ready-to-cook meals that he is served at home, and his praise of the "proper food" lovingly prepared by his grandmother, foreground Townsend's interest in food but also in foodways, that is, the practices that surround the preparation and consumption of food, and endow it with social significance.³ Adrian's memories tell of an average teenager from a Midlands working-class family, but when one reads his multiple references to food and eating habits as signifying units of a complex socio-cultural system, as Roland Barthes (20-27) and Mary Douglas argued (249-275), his diaries bear witness to the transformations of the British society throughout the 1980s.

Consequently, I argue that Townsend's book series raises numerous psychological, affective, and social issues. These relate to the search for social and financial security, which is a staple of the modern consumerist society, but they are also indicative of changing gender relations and the crisis of the traditional family model in the 1970s and the 1980s. Moreover, I suggest that Adrian's obsession with food testifies to the advent of mass-market, fast-moving consumer goods, which is epitomized by his frequent references to brands and retail chains as opposed to dishes, and his friends' complaints about the "toad in the hole" served at the school canteen. Finally, I contend that Adrian's attention for the meals served at the school canteen reveals Townsend's criticism of Thatcher's neoliberal politics and its effects on children's and teenagers' education and nutrition.

The Affective and Social Implications of Food in Adrian Mole's Diaries

The beginning of Adrian's first diary is quite telling as far as his obsessive interest in food is concerned. After listing his New Year's Resolutions, the boy complains that "Eight days have gone by since Christmas Day but my mother still hasn't worn the lurex apron I bought her for Christmas! She will get bathcubes next year. Just my luck, I've got a spot on my chin for the first day of the New Year!" (Townsend, *Secret Diary* 11). On the following day, he notes that the pimple "is getting bigger" and blames his mother "for not knowing about vitamins" (11), thus relating the breakout to his poor diet. On 3 January his remarks take on a slightly dramatic tone when he writes that "the spot" is probably "a boil. Just my luck to have it where everybody can see it. I pointed out to my mother that I hadn't had any vitamin C today. She said, 'Go and buy an orange, then.' This is typical. She still hasn't worn the lurex apron" (11-12). Adrian's interest in food therefore emerges in connection with what he believes to be the effects of inadequate eating habits, for which he blames his parents' neglect of household duties such as cooking. When one reads between the lines, his mother's lack of interest in the apron that he gave her for Christmas,

and her indifference to the boy’s concerns over proper nourishment, suggest dysfunctional parental relationships that will be made clearer throughout Townsend’s book series.

Endlessly struggling to make ends meet, and wasting their savings on alcohol and cigarettes, George and Pauline Mole are self-indulgent individuals who fail to perform their duties not only as parents, but also as grown-ups. The couple are on the verge of divorce due to their financial problems, but also because of Pauline’s ‘elopement’ with Mr. Lucas, whose wife has recently come out as lesbian. Significantly, her extramarital affair abruptly comes to an end because of Mr. Lucas’s demands for a relationship based on stereotypical gender roles,⁴ and so will George’s short-lived passion for the younger Doreen Slater. Moreover, Pauline’s and Doreen’s pregnancies further complicate the family’s instability in that both women are uncertain of the paternity of their babies. In an attempt to better understand this complex network of dysfunctional relationships, in *The Growing Pains of Adrian Mole* (8-9) Adrian sketches a spider graph or “basic table of interpersonal relationships” that is reminiscent of contemporary soap operas.⁵ This never-ending emotional turmoil entails an ironic reversal of family roles that foregrounds the significance of food as a symbol of security and protection. When Adrian’s parents come down with the flu, the boy feels compelled to look after the two of them. Accordingly, he oversees a number of daily chores, including cooking:

I have been up and down the stairs all day. I cooked a big dinner for them tonight: two poached eggs with beans, and tinned semolina pudding. (It’s a good job I wore the green lurex apron because the poached eggs escaped out of the pan and got all over me.) I nearly said something when I saw they hadn’t eaten *any* of it. They can’t be that ill. My grandmother is coming tomorrow morning, so I had to clean the burnt saucepans, then take the dog for a walk. (Townsend, *Secret Diary* 14, emphasis in the original)

Acting as the adult in the house, Adrian prepares the family dinner and almost reprimands his parents for not eating their supper. Unlike the implied teenage reader, adults are likely to smile at Adrian’s definition of poached eggs and a tinned side dish as “a big dinner.” Despite their naïveté, the boy’s remarks, along with his concern over nutrition, point to the role of food as a source of *nourishment* as well as of *nurturing*, which is precisely what Adrian feels is missing at home. Thus, I suggest that this brief excerpt introduces readers to a constant feature of the Moles’ saga, that is, a process of parentification whose emotional and behavioral implications may be perceived in Townsend’s representation of food and eating rituals.

Introduced by family psychology in the 1970s, parentification is a process of role reversal whereby a child or teenager takes on a parental role, therefore blurring – and

in extreme cases obliterating – generational boundaries. As a consequence, children and teenagers may sacrifice their demand for attention in order to “accommodate and care for the logistical or emotional need” of the adults (Chase 5). More specifically, researchers have outlined two recurring models, which they identify as “emotional” and “instrumental” parentification. Whereas emotional parentification entails children and teenagers putting the psychological necessities of their parents or siblings before their own, examples of instrumental parentification include children’s and teenagers’ commitment to a variety of household chores, from arranging meals to managing day-to-day financial issues (cf. Hooper 217-218).

Even though Townsend’s ironic stance leaves doubts as to whether this may be the result of Adrian’s tendency to overdramatization, his diaries include several instances of both parentification modes, often in connection with food and eating rituals. This is the case, for example, when Pauline and George are about to divorce and deliberately avoid each other despite living under the same roof. Since they eat “different things at different times,” Adrian records in his *Secret Diary*, “I usually have six meals a day because I don’t want to hurt anyone’s feelings” (50). Similarly, he feels compelled to look after his father when his mother moves out with Mr. Lucas. George sleeps till lunchtime, while Adrian arranges the meals and takes care of the house in an attempt to relieve his father’s depression:

After we had eaten our frozen roast-beef dinner and I was washing up, he shouted from the bathroom for his razor. I lied and shouted back that I didn’t know where it was. I then removed every knife and sharp instrument from the kitchen drawer. [...] I like to think that I am broad-minded but the language my father used was beyond the pale, and all because he couldn’t have a shave! Tea was a bit of a drag. (Townsend, *Secret Diary* 61)

Townsend’s irony suggests that Adrian’s involvement with his parents’ emotional well-being is to a considerable extent the result of a process of self-imposed parentification. This is also manifest in his decision to join a local charity group and look after Bert Baxter, an elderly pensioner who is reliant on social services for daily care. Nonetheless, his recollections provide several instances of instrumental parentification that reveal his effort to counterbalance his mother’s and father’s failure of acting as responsible adults. Significantly, the textual indicator of the Moles’ dysfunctional familial model is food, which may thus be viewed as a token of the changes occurring in the British society of the 1980s. As Roland Barthes famously argued, food ceases to be a mere source of sustenance as soon as it is prepared, served, or consumed. As “an organic system,” Barthes claimed, food is “charged with signifying the situation in which it is used. It has a twofold

value, being nutrition as well as protocol, and its value as protocol becomes increasingly more important as soon as the basic needs are satisfied” (Barthes 26). The most relevant symbolic implications of food protocols in Adrian’s diaries, it is my contention, are the transformations that family structures and models underwent in the 1980s. In this regard, Townsend is especially keen on representing the impact of socio-economic change on gender roles, and therefore on parenting.

Unsatisfied with her family routine, Pauline Mole joins an assertiveness workshop where she is initiated to one of the foundational texts of the second feminist wave, Germaine Greer’s *The Female Eunuch* (1970). Greer particularly lambasted the patriarchal model of the suburban, nuclear family, which she believed to be the major obstacle to women’s empowerment. By endorsing the social model outlined by the Old Testament and enforced by Christianity, the middle class consolidated the myth of love and marriage, which eventually deprived women of free will and independence (Greer 250-251). Townsend’s gaze captures the zeitgeist of the times, and the element that catalyzes this aspect is again food. One evening, Adrian flips through his mother’s copy of *The Female Eunuch* after having a quick dinner on the street because no one is cooking at home. The passage is characterized by a certain degree of irony that suggests Townsend’s criticism of the impact of Pauline’s militant feminism on her parenting skills:

Nobody cooked any dinner so I went to the Chinese chip shop and bought a carton of chips and a sachet of soy sauce. I sat in the bush shelter and ate them, then walked about feeling sad. Came home. Fed dog. Read a bit of *Female Eunuch*. Felt a bit funny. Went to sleep. (Townsend, *Secret Diary* 29)

As a result of her newly endorsed feminism, Adrian’s mother carefully redistributes the domestic chores among the family. Implicit in Pauline’s rebellion is Greer’s criticism of marriage as an unbalanced “give-and-take” relationship, and her views on the mother-child relationship as a bond based on dependence and exploitation (Greer 265; 376). Adrian’s diary entries suggest teenage-like and overdramatic reactions, but they also foreground the affective and identitarian implications of food and foodways within the changing social system of the early 1980s:

Cleaned toilet, washed basin and bath before doing my paper round. Came home, made breakfast, put washing in machine, went to school. [...] Had Domestic Science – made apple crumble. Came home. Vacuumed hall, lounge, and breakfast room. Peeled potatoes, chopped up cabbage, cut finger, rinsed blood off cabbage. Put chops under grill, looked in cookery book for a recipe for gravy. Made gravy. Strained lumps out with a colander.

Set table, served dinner, washed up. Put burnt saucepans to soak. [...] Just my luck to have an assertive mother! (Townsend, *Secret Diary* 43-44).

When Pauline is busy with her workshops, Adrian and his father's dinners mostly consist of ready meals, such as "boil-in-the-bag cod in butter sauce and oven-cooked chips" (Townsend, *Secret Diary* 43). Again, the boy relates his problems with acne to his diet, and paradoxically wonders if his skin might be suffering from an allergy to plastic wraps:

Woke up this morning to find my face covered in huge red spots. My mother said they were caused by nerves but I am still convinced that my diet is inadequate. We have been eating a lot of boil-in-the-bag-stuff lately. Perhaps I am allergic to plastic. [...] I couldn't believe it when she said she was going to work as usual. Surely her child should come before her job? (Townsend, *Secret Diary* 45)

Townsend's skepticisms, however, is not directed against feminism *tout court*. In *True Confessions*, for example, Pauline's conversations with Adrian's girlfriend Pandora foreground feminist claims on identity, empowerment, and self-realization. This outlook also enables them to endorse broader political causes, from the need for a new environmental consciousness to the fear of missile attacks.⁶ At a closer look, Townsend's criticism of contemporary changes in gender roles and gender relationships is directed towards women as much as it is towards men. Her novels expose the difficulty of a generation, the post-World War II "Boomers," in acting as responsible adults and, by extension, as parents. Adrian's processed meals are often arranged by his father, whose shopping lists, from "tins of salmon, crabs and shrimps" to "cream crackers and tuna" (Townsend, *Secret Diary* 36, 77) are inadequate because of the family's little purchase power, but also because of George and Pauline Mole's chronic immaturity.

The attainment of psychological maturity may be defined as the ability to "deal effectively and resiliently with experience" when performing, cognitive, or social tasks that are "characteristic of one's age level."⁷ Counterbalanced by Adrian's melodramatic tendency to self-imposed parentification, George and Pauline's difficulty to act as mature adults also affects their parenting skills. This is evident in their neglect of basic responsibilities, from paying the bills to arranging the meals. As a result, the Moles often replace cooking with mass-produced substitutes or delegate this responsibility to Adrian. That their scarce attention to food is indicative of their lack of maturity is evident in that Townsend often represents foodways by comparing two different generations, that is, Adrian's parents – the Boomers – and his grandmother May.

In the wake of Roland Barthes's semiotic analysis, Mary Douglas read food and

foodways as part of a socio-anthropological network of signification within which eating practices may be intended as linguistic signs. “If food is treated as a code,” Douglas claimed, “the messages it encodes will be found in the pattern of social relations being expressed,” communicating “different degrees of hierarchy, inclusion and exclusion, boundaries and transactions across the boundaries” (249). This layer of signification is patent in Adrian’s praise of the meals cooked by his grandmother, which meet his need for emotional inclusion and well-being. Disappointed for not receiving a Valentine from Pandora, on 15 February he notes: “I cleared off to my grandma’s at dinner-time. She cooked me a proper Sunday dinner with gravy and individual Yorkshire puddings. She is never too busy to make real custard either” (Townsend, *Secret Diary* 32). Likewise, when Adrian is worried about his skin, he turns to “grandma” in search for the affection and care he misses at home:

I rang my grandma and she came round in a taxi and took me to her house and put me to bed. I am there now. It is very clean and peaceful. I am wearing my dead grandad’s pyjamas. I have just had a bowl of barley and soup. It is my first proper nourishment for weeks. (Townsend, *Secret Diary* 45)

Adrian is satisfied with the simple and healthy supper prepared by his grandmother, but his contentment also depends on the attention he receives. His grandfather’s pyjamas, like Linus’s blanket, is the simulacrum of a sense of protection and security, and Adrian’s bond with his grandmother continues even after his parents get back together. In *The Growing Pains of Adrian Mole*, the couple face the difficulty of unplanned pregnancies, and May’s house provides the boy with a ‘comfort zone’ characterized by affection and low stress levels. The lady treats him with Sunday meals consisting of “roast lamb and mint sauce made from the window box” (45), and the affective implications of food are even clearer in the following novel, *True Confessions of Adrian Mole*. With a concealed allusion to Proust’s madeleine, the boy imagines coming back home at the end of an ordinary, uneventful day: “The warm scent of home baking does not greet me as I enter the kitchen. So I create my own smell by baking scones” (59). In spite of Adrian’s pretentiousness, this act preludes to his emancipation as an adult, which begins when he leaves Leicester for London. As he explores the multicultural scenario offered by Soho in *Adrian Mole: The Wilderness Years* and *Adrian Mole: The Cappuccino Years*. Adrian finds employment as an assistant cook at the “Savage”, and eventually becomes a chef at the “Hoi Polloi.” Food, therefore, remains a central aspect of his affective and family life even after he becomes a husband and a father.

From Consumerism to Thatcherism: Food as an Icon of 1980s Britain

From the family to the society at large, Adrian's constant memorialization of food also enables Townsend to portray a significant transition in the recent history of Britain. In the 1980s, changes in the national economy and the industrial system profoundly transformed consumptions, fostering a new consumerist attitude and promoting fast-moving consumer goods among the lower middle classes. This outlook is manifest in the Moles' preference for processed foods, but also in Adrian's – and his school friends' – obsession with brands as opposed to products.

Recalling his childhood in Staffordshire, food journalist Nigel Slater observes in his autobiography, *Toast: The Story of a Boy's Hunger* (2003), that processed foods were already perceived as a sign of upward mobility in the 1960s. A paramount example of this sentiment was Arctic Rolls, a frozen dessert consisting of a spongy cake filled with ice cream and fruit sauce that was considered as “a status symbol” (Slater 21). Families regarded it as a “treat,” and served it “with as much pomp as if it were a roasted swan at a Tudor banquet” (21). An enticing and colorful dessert for children, Arctic Rolls was also welcomed by adults in that its consumption indicated modernity and purchase power. This frozen dessert, Slater explains, was “a subtle reminder to the assembled family and friends of how well my father's business was doing” (21). However, it was at the end of the 1970s that ready meals and branded products became staple food in Britain thanks to changing tastes and habits, the spread of household appliances, and large-scale cold-chain distribution systems.

As Mary Gwynn recalls in *Back in Time for Dinner* (2015), Marks & Spencer was the first retailer to launch a chilled ready meal in 1979, Chicken Kiev. Although the product was quite pricey, stocks sold out within a few days (262-263).⁸ This is well documented on the retailer's website, which devotes a whole section to the history of their ready meals. The headlines (“A Taste of India,” “Buon appetito,” “Still a favourite,” and “All about convenience”) indicate that Marks & Spencer marketed these products by leveraging on taste and time/cost benefits, but also on an international appeal that possibly aimed to relieve the feeling of guilt experienced by working or careless parents, like George and Pauline Mole.⁹

In representing the Moles' consumption habits, Townsend portrays the development of a market dominated by brands, ready-to-cook meals, and chain stores, with Sainsbury's standing for upward mobility as opposed to the Co-Op.¹⁰ Adrian is keen on Vesta products such as curries and Chow Mein, which he offers to old Bert Baxter as if they were a delicacy. Again, Townsend's critical stance is patent in the reaction of the Moles' Indian neighbor, Mrs Singh, upon seeing Adrian's dinner:

Had Vesta curry and rice for dinner, during which Mrs Singh came round

and talked Hindi to Bert. She seemed to find our curry very funny, she kept pointing to it and laughing. Sometimes I think I am the only person in the world who still has manners. (Townsend, *Secret Diary* 133)

Mrs Singh’s laughter is reminiscent of Nigel Slater’s recollections about the popularity of Arctic Roll despite its “cold cardboard” taste (*Toast* 21). However, Vesta curries were the object of massive advertising in the 1970s and the 1980s, claiming to offer complete and tasty meals in 20 minutes. This selling proposition leveraged the new daily needs imposed by the changing family patterns, but it also responded to a demand for social inclusion. The consumption of advertised and mass-marketed products, in other words, also testifies to one’s ability to “keep up with the Joneses,” that is, to meet the socio-economic standards of one’s peer group.¹¹

Besides suggesting a process of adult de-responsibilization, Pauline and George Mole’s scarce cooking interests bear witness to a new consumeristic approach, which also characterizes Adrian’s obsession with brands such as Mars, Milky Way, Lucozade, and Vesta. This craving for candies, snacks, and carbonated drinks rests on diets that, despite Adrian’s concerns over “proper food,” imply the overconsumption of sugar, paving the way for issues that are still relevant at present. Adrian incessantly feeds on Mars bars, and as a token of its popularity among teenagers the candy is even accepted as a substitute for money by the school bully, Barry Kent. However, Adrian’s ‘guilty pleasure’ is Lucozade, an energy drink he repeatedly consumes as if it were an elixir:

Wednesday June 24th

A “get well” card from my mother. Inside a five-pound note. I asked my father to spend it on five bottles of Lucozade. (Townsend, *Secret Diary* 92)

Wednesday July 1st

The truant officer came round this afternoon; he caught me sitting in a deckchair in the front garden. He didn’t believe I was ill! He is reporting me to the school! The fact that I was sipping Lucozade while wearing pyjamas, dressing gown and slippers seemed to have escaped him. (Townsend, *Secret Diary* 97)

Thursday July 9th

[...] My skin is dead good. I think it must be a combination of being in love and Lucozade. (Townsend, *Secret Diary* 99)

Saturday April 16th

[...] Spent the day on the settee sipping Lucozade. (Townsend, *Growing Pains* 189)

Originally named “Glucozade” because of its formula, Lucozade was first marketed in the 1920s as a cure for hypoglycemia before it became a popular soft drink among teenagers. Its consumption is so widespread that in 2016 and 2023 Liverpool City Council promoted an information campaign targeting parents in order to raise awareness of the potential health damage linked to the excessive consumption of sugar. The programme, named “Save Kids from Sugar”, includes a website where parents can determine the maximum daily allowance of sugar for their children depending on their gender and age and their food habits. Excessive sugar intake can lead to serious conditions such as obesity, type 2 diabetes, and cardiovascular disease, as well as tooth decay, which costs Adrian one incisor and the dentist’s reprimand for his gluttony: “As I was stumbling out of his surgery clutching my frozen-up jaw,” the dentist, Adrian writes in *Growing Pains* (21), “said that he had often seen me walking home from school eating a Mars bar, and it would be entirely my own fault if I was toothless at thirty.”

In the wake of Roland Barthes and Mary Douglas, Kathleen LeBesco and Peter Naccarato argue that “buying, consuming, and serving food” are signifying practices that communicate and validate individual and group identities insofar as these acts are “circulated,” “enforced”, or even “transgressed” (1). These keywords suggest that foodways entail a political meaning, and this is often the case in Adrian’s diaries. Unlike the boy’s rather naïve teenager’s perspective, Townsend’s shrewdly makes brief but poignant comments on Margaret Thatcher’s neoliberalist politics and their socio-economic impact. When Adrian visits his mother in Sheffield, the writer’s ironical stance on the deindustrialization and deregulation plans of the 1980s is manifest in the boy’s remark, “I didn’t see any knife and fork factories. I expect Margaret Thatcher has closed them all down” (Townsend, *Secret Diary* 69). Back in Leicester, a picture of the Iron Lady at Adrian’s school is disfigured with a moustache and the words “Three million unemployed” written on her cleavage (175).

The early years of Thatcher’s Britain were marked by severe unemployment, which particularly affected the Midlands industrial system with an estimate of 330,000 job losses between 1979 and 1983. “Almost overnight,” historian Dominic Sandbrook remarks with reference to Thatcher’s first mandate as Prime Minister, “the world that Dickens and de Tocqueville had described with such horrid fascination [...] had almost entirely disappeared. Where there had once been the sound of hammers, there was only silence” (76). Consequently, recession and soaring unemployment fueled nationalist sympathies that almost create a short-circuit when one compares them with the cosmopolitan tastes

promoted by retailers and the food industry. At Sainsbury’s, the leader of the “Off the Streets” youth club instructs Adrian on the importance of grocery shopping as an “overtly political act,” and encourages him to buy national fruits and boycott imported produce (Townsend, *Secret Diary* 120). This new nationalist outlook, however, is to a considerable extent the result of the social discontent following the neoliberalist revision of welfare politics. Dissatisfaction with domestic matters is thus projected onto foreign products, and voiced through claims whose nationalist bent would be echoed by the populist resentment against the economic and immigration policies of the European Union that led to Brexit in 2016.

Interviewed by Alex Clark, Townsend admitted to being “a passionate socialist” (Clark, “I Didn’t Know What Adrian Mole Looked like”) and her criticism of neoliberal politics was often connected with child nutrition and the declining quality of meals offered at schools. The first reference occurs in a scene that features the so-called “toad in the hole.” Consisting of sausages in Yorkshire pudding batter, and usually served with onion gravy and vegetables, Isabella Beeton defined the “toad in the hole” as a “homely but savoury” course in her *Book of Household Management* (1861), consecrating it as a staple British dish (Beeton 170). In a fun episode that is reminiscent of *Oliver Twist*’s request for more food, Adrian’s best friend, Nigel, gets “thrown out of school dinners” after “swearing at the toad-in-the-hole, he said it was ‘all bleeding hole and no toad’” (Townsend, *Secret Diary* 27). What might seem like a comic interlude is in fact rife with political tones. “School dinners,” Adrian complains,

are complete crap now. Gravy seems to have been phased out along with custard and hot puddings. A typical menu is: hamburger, baked beans, chips, carton of yoghurt or a doughnut. It’s not enough to build healthy bone and sinew. I am considering making a protest to Mrs Thatcher. It won’t be our fault if we grow up apathetic and lacking in moral fibre. Perhaps Mrs Thatcher wants us to be too weak to demonstrate in years to come. (Townsend, *Secret Diary* 120-121)

In her office as Minister of Education in the early 1970s, Thatcher abolished the free school milk programme that had been introduced thirty years earlier as a dietary supplement for children. Due to its costs, the government limited daily milk servings to students under the age of seven. The decision raised mass protests, resulting in popular demonstrations under the claim “Maggie Thatcher, the Milk Snatcher” (Schwartz 2017; Flakin 2020). Moreover, it is significant that as part of her campaign for the 1979 General Elections, Thatcher encountered representatives of the Food and Drink Industries Councils in London. During the speech that she delivered in London on 31 March 1978, the future

Prime Minister insisted on the need for a new economic course based on tax reduction and a more prominent role of the private sector. As far as schools were concerned, her government would approve financial cuts that resulted in school food services being outsourced to private suppliers. As one understands from Adrian's diary entries, this decision led to job losses and poor-quality meals:

Our school-dinner ladies have got the sack! The dinners now come in hot boxes from a central kitchen. I would have staged a protest but I have got a Geography test tomorrow.

Mrs Leech was presented with a microwave oven for her thirty years of toil over the custard jug. (Townsend, *Secret Diary* 177)

Implicit in these brief and ironic remarks is Townsend's criticism of Thatcher's reforms, which, consistently with the neoliberal support of the private sector, also entailed cuts on the expenses related to education. Adrian's (and Townsend's) concerns would be confirmed by a 1997 report of the Medical Research Council, which took into consideration changes in children's diet in Britain since 1980. The reduction of costs consequent to Thatcher's privatization of school canteens often implied serving easy and less expensive "popular fast-food items such as burgers and chips" (Gillard). Higher consumption rates of fats and sugar, the report concluded, posed considerable health risks for children, who were thus much more likely to develop osteoporosis, cancer, and cardiovascular disease than in the post-war years. Figures alarmingly suggest that this trend has only been exacerbated over the last few years, with nearly one in four children aged 10-11 and one in five teenagers aged 17 suffering from obesity in Britain (Gregory). Moreover, the socioeconomic distribution of weight problems clearly reveals another element, that is, a strong association between low household income and obesity (Fitzsimons and Bann). The triangulation between food, health, and democracy, is at the core of Townsend's criticism of neoliberal educational policies, with irony helping to establish a different dialogue with young and adult readers.

Conclusion: The Socio-Affective Implications of Food

Townsend's attention to food and foodways branches out far wider than the memorialization of the quotidian that one expects from a teenager's diary. In *The Secret Diary of Adrian Mole, Aged 13¾*, *The Growing Pains of Adrian Mole*, and *True Confessions of Adrian Moles*, food emerges in a variety of contexts that state its role as an essential human need due to its physiological and emotional functions. Choices and preferences, the selection of specific ingredients and dishes, and preparation and consumption rituals and habits all indicate that food is the expression of a social behavior. As such, it also caters for some basic psychological necessities of the individual by providing a sense of acceptance, love, and

security. The noun “companionship,” after all, derives from the Latin words *cum* and *pānis*, that is, “with bread.” In the first three novels in Townsend’s saga, sugary drinks and candy bars are examples of comfort food, and so are Adrian’s grandmother’s lovingly prepared meals. Their constant memorialization foregrounds the complex nexus between eating practices and the socio-affective, as well as the socio-economic, development of the individual. In representing food, eating habits and rituals, Townsend brings to the page a complex system of reference whose meanings extend beyond nutrition. From this perspective, food becomes a blatantly audible voice, and its message is a prismatic snapshot of the cultural, economic, and political transformations that were to leave a profound mark on the British society of the 1980s.

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Notes

¹ See the BBC Arts webpage "Explore the List of 100 Novels that Shaped Our World."

² Over the years, Townsend's saga spawned three successful TV adaptations. The first, *The Secret Diary of Adrian Mole, Aged 13¾*, was shown on ITV in 1985. The sequel, *The Growing Pains of Adrian Mole*, appeared in 1987, while the adaptation of *Adrian Mole: The Cappuccino Years* aired on BBC One in 2001.

³ Modeled on the socio-anthropological concept of “folkways,” the term “foodways” identifies the system of “beliefs and behaviours” that surround the “production, distribution, and consumption” of food, therefore endowing eating practices with cultural, socio-economic, and political implications” (Counihan 100).

⁴ As Pauline tells Adrian, Lucas “expected his evening meal cooked for him” (Townsend, *Secret Diary* 152).

⁵ The diagram lists Adrian’s parentage, his mother’s and father’s extramarital affairs, as well as his friends and enemies, Margaret Thatcher included. Adrian’s “Basic Table of Interpersonal Relationships” may also be viewed online at https://archive.org/details/adrianmolefrommi0000town_m8b0/page/184/mode/2up (last access 3 September 2024).

⁶ “I went back to my room,” Adrian records in *True Confessions* (37-38), “to find Pandora and my mum having one of those sickening talks that women have nowadays. It was full of words like ‘unfulfilled,’ ‘potential,’ and ‘identity.’ Pandora kept chipping in with ‘environment’ and ‘socio-economic’ and ‘chauvinistic attitude.’”

⁷ See “Psychological Maturity” in the *APA Dictionary of Psychology*.

⁸ Gwynn’s book is the spin-off of the homonymous docuseries shown on BBC Two in 2015. The program featured a family traveling back in time to explore eating habits and trends in post-war Britain, from homemade meals and processed foods to the “mad cow” scare and the advent of organic produce (“Back in Time for Dinner”).

⁹ After testing the market response with foiled-packed ravioli in cheese and ham sauce in 1973, Marks & Spencer launched a variety of frozen, ready-to-cook Indian dishes and Italian lasagna in 1975 and Chicken Kiev in 1979. In the 1980s, the retailer expanded their offer with convenient microwavable and low-calorie products to meet the increasing demand for such products. See the section “The History of M&S Prepared Meals,” in the M&S corporate website, <https://www.marksandspencer.com/c/style-and-living/the-history-of-marks-and-spencer-food> (last access 24 August 2024).

¹⁰ In *True Confessions* (26-27) Adrian explains to his American pen pal, Henri Mancini, that Sainsbury’s is “where teachers, vicars and such-like do their shopping,” whilst the Co-Op is “a grocery chain run on Socialist principles.”

¹¹ Townsend’s interest in the consumeristic attitude of the 1980s and the advent of mass-marketed consumer goods is further connected with the role of food as a symbol of nourishment and nurturing. When Adrian’s grandmother resorts to processed ingredients, this is because of her desire to feed him properly, as for example when she cooks Bovril soup. A meat extract, Bovril was a cultural icon throughout the 1970s and the 1980s, when it was advertised in commercials featuring mountaineer Christ Bonington drinking it on the Everest to promote its nutrient power.

¹² See the website *Save Kids from Sugar*, <https://savekidsfromsugar.co.uk> (last access 9 September 2024).