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Cooking the Books

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There is, in the Whitworth Art Gallery in Manchester, a seventeenth-century casket, most beautifully embroidered, known as Hannah Smith's Casket. It has obsessed me ever since I first saw it, and when I began to write children's books, I wrote a story about it. This was never published, and I put it away in my filing cabinet. Some years later, I took it out, reworked it entirely, and turned it into a play, which had one brief, dazzling moment of success. It was put on at the Royal Exchange Theatre in Manchester at a fund-raising gala evening for the Friends of the Royal Exchange and the Friends of the Whitworth. I tried to tempt the BBC and Granada with this play, to no avail, so Hannah Smith's Casket was placed once again in the filing cabinet. In 1989, I wrote a poem about it in a sequence called "Needleworks," which has been published in two anthologies, so I feel that I can now leave this material to one side, perhaps (though perhaps not) forever.

I tell this story to introduce my subject, which is a short meditation on the points of comparison between cooking and writing, between books and food, as they relate to my work. What I did to the Hannah Smith story is much the same sort of thing one does with, say, a turkey: roast on Sunday, risotto on Monday, bones in the stock on Tuesday, and so forth.

Let us begin at the beginning. Books, like food, are nourishing, keep us alive. True, you do not strictly die from lack of books, but you experience a real form of deprivation, and it is probably only other
sorts of narrative (movies, TV, gossip, and so on) that prevent you from withering away entirely out of boredom, if nothing else.

Food and books are good for you. I think most people would agree with that statement. Some foods, however, are positively bad for you, full of synthetic flavours and sinister additives, and these should be avoided, according to some people. Unfortunately, these wicked foods (junk foods, as they are rather disparagingly called) are often exactly what you fancy, and there are many books—no names, no pack drill— which fulfill the same function. They satisfy a need for something sweet, something salty, now this minute, and who cares if the something does us good or not?

Before starting on points of comparison, I should say that there are two huge differences between writing and cooking. The first is the use of recipes. It is a fact that most of us use other people's ideas to make our more elaborate meals. These come from books for the most part, or perhaps from our mothers and grandmothers whose meals formed part of our childhood. It would be grand indeed if recipe books for novels were available which would enable you to knock up a passable *Madame Bovary* or a corking *Catcher in the Rye* whenever you felt so inclined. These do not exist, which means that as writers we rely on our brains (well stocked with memories of all kinds of books, for the most part) to come up with recipes for whatever it is we want to write. The other great difference is this: all of us, with a bit of help perhaps from an experienced cook, can produce almost any meal we set our heart on. It is not so, alas, with novels and short stories. You can write only the kind of books that you can write, and in this respect, books are much more like one's children. They depend on a kind of genetic blueprinting. It would be as impossible for me to write someone else's story as for two raven-haired parents to produce a flaxen-haired child.

In my own kitchen, I decide what we're eating, I choose the ingredients, and I prepare them, to the best of my ability. There are different kinds of meals: quick suppers, elaborate dinner parties, lunches, late night snacks. There are differing cooking methods, as everyone knows. Some things need hours of slow casseroling in a low oven; others need to be speedily stir-fried in a wok and eaten at once. Many things are tastier after an overnight stay in the fridge. Every cook will tell you about the importance of presentation, and of how crucial it is that the meal should appeal to the eyes as well as the taste buds. Finally, there is the time after the meal: the memory and effect of the food on the eaters and, for the cook, dealing efficiently with any leftovers. These, then, are what I propose to discuss: ingredients, menus, methods, presentation, and leftovers.