

Gross Me Out

A Brown University psychologist looks into the revolting science of everything that makes us gag.

BY ROBIN MARANTZ HENIG

DID you hear the one about the Texan at his first Passover Seder? He was mightily impressed with the soup. "These matzo balls sure are delicious, ma'am," he told his hostess. "What other parts of the matzo do y'all cook with?"

This old joke came to mind as I read

THAT'S DISGUSTING

Unraveling the Mysteries of Repulsion.

By Rachel Herz.

Illustrated. 274 pp.

W. W. Norton & Company. \$26.95.

"That's Disgusting," a lively look at all things revolting by Rachel Herz, a psychologist at Brown. I thought of it as Herz described an evening with friends at a pretentious restaurant, where she ordered the appetizer special, duck oysters. It turned out "oysters" was code for "testicles" — how come her dinner companions hadn't warned her? — and once she knew that, she lost her appetite for the small bulb-shaped delicacies. It occurred to me that I might never look at matzo ball soup — or oysters — the same way again.

Most of the grossest food described here isn't disguised body parts, though, but stuff that's fermented. "Controlled rot tastes good," Herz writes, introducing food like hakarl, the desiccated shark meat eaten in Iceland, or natto, a slimy soybean dish from Japan. Tastes good? Really? It's hard to believe that about casu marzu (Sardinia's "maggot cheese"), which is covered in writhing, wormlike insect larvae. Eating a hunk of fermented sheep's milk coated in live maggots tastes good? Yuck.

Or how about chicha, a popular drink in Ecuador, which a student of Herz's watched as it was made? To prepare the thick beverage, a group of women put handfuls of corn flour in their mouths, chewed it until it "vaguely resembled the vomit of an infant," spit it out into a collective milk jug and repeated the process until all the flour was gone. Then the women capped the jug and buried it in the yard to ferment. When a well-aged jug of chicha was unearthed and opened for the grossed-out young woman to taste, it took all her self-control not to gag on the warm, vinegary brew.

Too disgusting for you? Here's one more, my own personal last straw: the information that in China, "chefs can serve you monkey brains from a living monkey

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sitting at your feet with its skull carved open."

This is the point at which I wrote, "O.K., that does it," in the margin — and I was only on Page 17. Still to come were descriptions of mucus, semen, blood (both menstrual and nonmenstrual), vomit, pus, feces, phlegm; stories about slasher porn, cannibalism, necrophilia; and Herz's attempt to tie it all together with explanations of how disgust evolved, how it protects us, how it works in our brains, and how it keeps us from having to confront our own weaknesses and our own inevitable death.

Just reading that list was pretty vile, wasn't it? And that's the tightrope Herz has to walk, though she manages it quite admirably: to be vivid and true to her subject without getting so revolting that her readers react the way we react to anything that disgusts us, which is by trying to get as far away as possible.

Disgust, Herz writes, is one of "the six

basic human emotions" (along with happiness, sadness, anger, fear and surprise) that any healthy adult "can experience and recognize." She says emotional disgust is the only one, among living creatures, that's unique to humans, and the only one that has to be learned. This is what intrigues Herz, who began her career as a researcher in odor and emotional memory. She started studying disgust a few years ago, after she was asked to judge the National Rotten Sneaker Contest (an annual event — sponsored by Odor-Eaters, of course), with the stinkiest footwear enshrined in the Hall of Fumes.

"What is disgusting, or not, is in the mind of the beholder," Herz writes. Disgust is not an automatic reaction, like fear; it's "an unfolding and cognitive emotion." As the truly gross nature of a potentially lethal substance slowly dawns on us, our disgust response "protects us from creeping dangers that we have to figure out, dangers that are slow in their deadliness,

and of which disease, contamination and decomposition are the foremost threats." Hence the near-universal revulsion at anything oozy, wriggly, putrid or moist.

The things almost everyone finds disgusting are usually the things that would cause harm if eaten or touched. That's why seeing a pornographic image involving urination, or sitting on the subway near someone spewing loud, wet coughs, will almost certainly gross you out. That's why the scene in the John Waters film "Pink Flamingos," in which Divine gets down on the sidewalk and eats the deposit made by a defecating dog, was positively and universally revolting.

But the really interesting thing about disgust is how idiosyncratic it can be. I find horror movies completely gross, for instance, but to a huge proportion of Americans, teenagers especially, the more blood and guts on screen, the better. Herz has a theory about that: Horror films are a turn-on, she says, especially for girls sitting next to boys who act macho during them. Sit bravely through "Fright Night" now, get lucky later.

Herz describes the neuroscience of disgust, which involves the basal ganglia and anterior insula of the brain. She writes about disgust-related illnesses like obsessive-compulsive disorder, which is basically nonstop disgust, and Huntington's disease, which makes a person disgust-blind. People with Huntington's are "less offended by the smell of feces" than other people, frequently can't identify what the sounds of retching signify and can't name the emotion behind facial expressions for disgust, though they can identify facial expressions for every other emotion. And this inability to recognize disgust oc-

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curs very early in the disease — in people carrying the Huntington's gene, even before they show any other symptoms.

I'd have preferred if Herz had stayed more closely to scientific topics like this rather than trying to broaden her scope to discuss matters she's less comfortable with, like immigration reform or national political leanings. But that's O.K.; there are more than enough visceral gross-out moments to offset the hazy bits, and Herz is on firmer ground more often than not.

And now, as a reward for sticking through to the end of this disgusting review, here's a factoid to take to your next cocktail party: You are far more likely to catch "something nasty" by using your local A.T.M. or someone else's cellphone than by licking the toilet seat in a movie theater restroom. □

