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2009

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Recommended Citation

Fitzgerald, Amy J.. (2009). What Goes into Pet Food Goes Public. *Society and Animals*, 17 (4), 361-362.
<https://scholar.uwindsor.ca/socanthpub/3>

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What Goes into Pet Food Goes Public

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***Pet Food Politics: The Chihuahua in the Coal Mine*, Marion Nestle. University of California Press, 2008, 232 pp.**

Esteemed nutritionist and sociologist Marion Nestle is the author of several important books on the human food system, including *Food Politics* (2002), *Safe Food* (2003), and *What to Eat* (2007). In her most recent book, *Pet Food Politics: The Chihuahua in the Coal Mine*, Nestle turns her attention to pet food, most specifically the 2007 pet food recall. In the book, she argues that the case should be of interest not only to those who care about their companion animals, but also those with an interest in food safety, human health, international trade, and state regulation of corporations. I would add corporate crimes to that list. I am confident that the book would convince even the most skeptical reader that this subject warrants the detailed and critical examination Nestle undertakes.

The central purpose of the book is to dissect the 2007 pet food recall and explain to the reader what transpired and why. This is no small task, as it is an extremely complex case: it involved companies and consumers in several countries, extremely long supply chains, an ever-expanding number of affected products, and an uncertain number of nonhuman animal victims. It was also the largest recall of consumer products in the United States at that time, and it is infamous for sparking a spate of recalls of melamine-tainted products from China. Nestle does an impressive job throughout the book of making the case and its many complexities intelligible for the reader.

The book is broken down into 20 concise chapters. It begins with a few chapters situating the recall in its larger socioeconomic and historical context, including a discussion of earlier pet food recalls and a biographical account of Menu Foods, the pet food supplier at the center of the scandal. Nestle then walks the reader step-by-step through the sequence of events in the case, including how and when the problem with the pet food ingredients was identified, the corporate response, the determination of the causative agent, the connections to China, the governmental responses, and the ultimate repercussions of the recall. Overall, it is an engaging and extremely readable book that will no doubt appeal to a variety of audiences. Academics reading the book, however, might be frustrated in a few respects.

First of all, Nestle provides relatively little information about the methods she used to collect and analyze the data. At the end of the introduction, there is a brief section entitled "A Note about Methods" in which Nestle explains that she gathered the data for the book from various sources, including government documents, Internet blogs, and interviews

with government officials, university researchers, veterinarians, and scientists working for pet food companies. She also indicates that many facts of the case remain proprietary and therefore have not been disclosed. This methodological discussion may strike academic readers as being too cursory. For instance, it is unclear whether the "government documents" analyzed and "government officials" interviewed were restricted to those in the United States, or whether she also examined government documents and interviewed officials in Canada, where the implicated pet food manufacturer was based, or in China, where the contaminated pet food ingredients originated. We are also not provided with information about how many government officials, university and pet food company researchers, and veterinarians were interviewed. Including a more detailed methodological discussion certainly risks boring the general reader, but it is important for understanding the scope of the research conducted and evaluating the claims that are based upon it.

Second, nonhuman animal studies scholars may take issue with the fact that Nestle seems to imply throughout the book that this case is important primarily because it serves to draw our attention to the vulnerabilities inherent in the human food system. This implication is illustrated by the subtitle of the book: *The Chihuahua in the Coal Mine*. This position is further exemplified by the following remark, which Nestle makes in the concluding paragraph of the book: "In this case [the 2007 pet food recall], I prefer to think that the warning comes from a Chihuahua, not a canary, but the message is the same. If we want our global food system to provide safe food for everyone, ensuring the safety of pets is as good a place to start as any" (p. 173). This gives the perhaps unintentional impression that improving the companion animal food system is not an end in itself, but instead is a means to improving the human food system.

Finally, there are two related elements in the book that might have benefited from elaboration. First of all, Nestle provides useful details about previous pet food recalls; she does not, however, provide much else in the way of background information about the pet food industry. Secondly, she describes how some of the tainted pet food was fed to farm animals and subsequently entered the human food supply, and she writes that she was surprised by how closely the pet and human food chains are connected. This is an interesting aspect of both food production systems, and I think that delving into more detail about the production of pet food would have further solidified Nestle's argument that what transpires in the pet food industry should be of interest to those concerned with human food and health. To be fair, however, Nestle does mention in her book that she was under contract to coauthor a book about pet foods with Malden Nesheim at the time of the recall. I eagerly await that book, and I hope it will include a detailed critical examination of the pet food industry—an industry about which both academics and the general public know very little.

In sum, this is a very informative book about the 2007 pet food recall case. Taking such a complicated case, rendering it intelligible, and demonstrating its significance were no doubt huge tasks, and Nestle does an impressive job. The book is sure to appeal to many audiences and put readers on the path to questioning what they and their animal companions are being fed.