

Candy Darling

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AN AMBITIOUS CHRONICLE OF AMERICA'S LOVE AFFAIR WITH SWEETS.



Some years ago, I heard a fantastic story about Andy Warhol attending a banquet for wealthy Manhattan art patrons sometime in the 1960s. The tables were laden with all manner of delicacies—caviar, pâtés, the works. As Warhol stood near one of them and surveyed the spread, the hostess approached him and gaily suggested he help himself. There was a pause before he turned to her—not a hair of his silver wig out of place—and said, in a droll monotone, “I only eat candy.” Then he drifted off into the crowd, leaving her in stunned silence. Forget about his prints of car crashes or the electric chair—he’d really done it this time. With a single, well-placed sentence, Warhol laid bare yet another aspect of American culture we prefer to gloss over: our dysfunctional relationship with sweet stuff.

I love this story for so very many reasons, but perhaps most of all because I love candy. I’ve had a lifelong and totally unrepentant affair with it, which I fully expect to continue until the day I die of some non-candy-related ailment. Long after my contemporaries have graduated to buying an espresso at the movies, I still chomp happily on Twizzlers as the lights go down (sorry, artisanal-chocolate makers!). In some ways, this makes me utterly

typical; as we all know from scolding news reports, Americans love sweets and we pay the price for it health-wise. But as Samira Kawash makes clear in her wonderful *Candy: A Century of Panic and Pleasure* (Faber & Faber, \$27), my unabated passion for sugar isn’t representative of the whole story when it comes to these United States. We are not, for the most part, a country that has been capable of constancy when it comes to our feelings about confections. We first went hog wild for candy in the 1860s, when the sugar-processing innovations of the Industrial Revolution made it more readily available. Then, just after the turn of the century, no less than *McClure’s Magazine*, the muckraking periodical famous for busting Rockefeller’s Standard Oil Company monopoly, turned its eye on these sweets factories. One of its reporters discovered—how quaint to the modern eater!—“counterfeit jams, jellies, candy, ice cream and soda waters,” all being made with the newly discovered glucose as filler. “Neck and neck for wickedness with the ‘near candy’ confectioner,” Kawash writes, “was the fake ice cream maker, ‘a modern magician [who] can make quite convincing ice cream without any cream at all.’” Anyone who’s ever made a purchase from a Mister Softee truck knows how the campaign against that particular adulteration turned out.

And so the story has gone ever since—a sweet ride shot through with periodic suspicion, addiction, and self-denial. During World War I, chocolate was standard issue in soldiers’ rations, but the huge amounts of sugar being sent overseas to feed the army and the Allies became such a problem that food administrator Herbert Hoover briefly considered candy rations at home. He backtracked when polling determined that households actually used more sugar than candy companies, but as the average American didn’t have access to Hoover’s numbers, the perception that the little guy was being wronged in favor of manufacturing was hard to change. As one aggrieved citizen in New Jersey wrote to the president: “In the name of Democracy and Humanity stop the manufacture of candy.”

The idea that people would rather give up candy than their own personal sugar stores terrified candy companies into action. They knew they had to do something to convince their customers they were all in it together. The result was “war candies” that usually used less sugar (but who was really measuring?). “Americans could have their candy and conserve sugar at the same time—all the reason to eat more candy,” Kawash notes, putting her finger on what may be a defining feature of the American psyche. Not only that, but the more candy they ate, the less of other foodstuffs they consumed, leaving all that bounty to be sent overseas to the troops and helping the war effort even more. Chomp, chomp: The affair was on again.

This pattern has repeated over and over. In the 1920s and ’30s, as the field of nutrition began to develop, candy was seen as a source of sustenance equal to any other food (let’s just say that the scientific understanding of metabolism and calories was in its infancy). Then the flappers and their skinny fashions came along, and suddenly “the reducing craze of the 1920s turned food on its head.” Candy was on the outs again (replaced by—guess what? “I smoke a Lucky instead of eating sweets,” one Lucky Strike ad of 1929 announced), but just in time another conflict arose to boost candy’s fortunes. “Along with guns and gasoline, candy is going to war wherever American soldiers and sailors go,” trumpeted the *New York Times*. One World War II innovation I wouldn’t mind getting my hands on right now is the Air Crew Lunch, a container with two sections and a sliding lid, issued to fliers to prevent exhaustion-provoked crashes on the way back to home base. “Inside one compartment were loose candies like chocolate drops, gumdrops, licorice, and candy-coated peanuts; in the other, fudge bars and gum. The ingenious design meant fliers could open the package safely with one mittened hand so that they could ‘lunch’ on the candies in flight.” As I write this, alternate, 2013 applications for the Air Crew Lunch are wildly proliferating in my mind, most of them related to crowded

commutes and the need for doing things with one hand while holding a baby.

As the twentieth century progressed, the line between food and candy became ever blurrier. After all, if eating some treats could keep you from a major air disaster, it could probably help you get some work done at the office, too. Presweetened cereal came on the scene in the early 1950s, boldly injecting sugar—and joy!—into the morning diets of children everywhere. In the ’60s, a Milky Way ad on television took the opposite tack, telling viewers that “it tastes like chewy creamy candy. But it’s really good food, that’s good for you. A Milky Way is loaded with farm fresh milk and the whipped-up whites of country eggs. And syrup from fresh picked corn. . . . That’s why we call Milky Way the good food candy bar.”

Meanwhile, scientists were starting to envision a future in which “a tailor-made, approximately balanced candy bar can be achieved.” That future, of course, is now, when so-called granola bars, breakfast bars, and energy bars are, in fact, candy bars. There is an energy bar on the market actually called the Balance Bar that comes in flavors like cookie dough, dark-chocolate crunch, and s’mores. None of these things, enriched to the hilt though they may be, are any better for us than a Snickers bar. Nor, for the most part, are cookies with whole grains in them, or “fruit” snacks for children, which Kawash refers to, in what may be my favorite phrase in any book ever, as “candy training pants.”

And yet we continue to buy all of these things, indulging in national hypocrisy fueled by a lust for sugar combined with our desire to be virtuous and thin. We are responsible for creating the candy mania that overshadows every other aspect of Halloween, a holiday that used to be about pranks and costumes, and we’ve also added a bizarre ritual to the celebration in which we “give our kids candy, then we take it away.”

I, clearly, have never taken my children’s candy away from them on Halloween. I don’t subscribe to the method of allowing them to eat only a certain number of pieces a day, and I don’t put it out of their reach. I do what my mother did—I just let them have it, and somehow it all works out in the end (as long as they share the miniature Almond Joy bars with me). All of us eat well for the most part, and so I’ve never made any hard-and-fast rules about candy. How could I, after all, when I like it so much myself? I’m well aware of its perils, but they’ll never make me quit it. And I’ve found a kindred spirit in Kawash, who not only shares my feeling but also articulates it with marvelous precision. “Candy is the one kind of processed food that proclaims its allegiance to the artificial, the processed, the unhealthy,” she says, quite logically. “This is something I really like about candy; it’s honest.” And really, who could ask for anything more? □

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