

The Fascination with Cannibalism

Cannibalism, or anthropophagy (from the Greek for “man-eating”)—why *are* people so interested in this horrible subject? Mere mention adds a certain shock value to more civilized conversations. Mexican muralist Diego Rivera relished the effect of his comments about his alleged cannibal experiences. He maintained that he had access to fresh cadavers when he was an anatomy student in Mexico City. He hardly lessened his listeners’ discomfort by saying that he and his friends only ate bodies that “...had been freshly killed and were not diseased or senile.”¹ Baudelaire, likewise, impressed the habitués of the Paris café scene with cannibalistic prevarication. He boasted about his fondness for “the delicate taste and aroma of a child’s brain.”²

Aside from morbid curiosity and a taste for the *outré* (a substantial part of the literature), and the professional interest of anthropologists, psychologists and historians, can otherwise reasonable people discuss the subject? William Buehler Seabrook described the public’s fascination with cannibals in 1931, but it seems just as accurate today: “Even aside from their delightful humorous aspect they are a highly interesting and wholly legitimate subject, whether for the adventurer or the learned anthropologist.”³

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- 1 Harris, Marvin. *Good to Eat: Riddles of Food and Culture*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1985, pp. 200, 202.
 - 2 Deval, Jacqueline. *Reckless Appetites, a Culinary Romance*. Hopewell, NJ: The Ecco Press, 1993, p. 58.
 - 3 Seabrook, William Buehler. *Jungle Ways*. New York: Blue Ribbon Books, 1931, p. 131.