

## **Digging In: How our food shapes our lives.**

**SHAHIDHA BARI:** Hello and welcome to the Big Book Weekend and this event. Thanks for joining in the fun. I'm Shahidha Bari and I'm a BBC presenter and I'm your host for this event which will last forty-five minutes. And we're going to be digging in as we think about how food shapes our lives. What can we learn about ourselves from how we feel about food. What role does food play in our upbringings, our memories and our relationships and how can food help us to relate to each other better. We've got three brilliant food writers to talk to us about just that and their experiences of writing about food, so much food talk honestly, I really hope you've eaten your lunch already. Before I tell you about our panellists let me tell you that if you want to ask our panellists a question about food then you can do so. You can post your questions on social media using the hashtag Big Book Weekend. And if you are watching on Facebook live you can enter your question in the comments below and we will do our best to get to those questions. Now our guests are The Guardian food critic Grace Dent. She's the author of *Hungry* a memoir about growing up in Carlisle and becoming a food critic. All told through foil wrapped Mint Viscount biscuits and Findus crispy pancakes. The activist and writer Jack Monroe, they're the author of *Good Food For Bad Days*. You might know some of Jack's thrifty and wholesome recipes, they've been a tireless advocate for alleviating food poverty, working with the Trussle Trust food bank and Child Poverty Action Group and in their own words, they still gasp at supermarket mark downs and fancy cheeses. And columnist and author Ruby Tandoh. You might remember her as one of our favourite finalists ever on The Great British Bake Off. She has written three cookbooks. Plus, an audio cookbook called *Breaking Eggs Patiently* that talks you through how to bake vanilla custard buns. Her book, *Eat Up* is a gentle manifesto for food and kindness and it has strict instructions on how to eat a Cadbury's Creme Egg. Hello, Grace, Jack and Ruby.

**GRACE DENT:** Hello!

**RUBY TANDOH:** Hello.

**SHAHIDHA:** It's lovely to see you. Let's get cracking: important questions first, Ruby, what is the best way to eat a Cadbury's Creme Egg?

**RUBY:** I don't know. I feel like this has now been made out to be so incredibly important when obviously, it's very trifling, but I feel like to really enjoy it you have to carry it around in a pocket for at least a few hours before you actually get – you know you feel the weight of it in your jacket pocket. And you kind of touch it every so often. Is it still there, has it rolled out onto the bus seat, and you kind of build up the sense of anticipation and excitement and then obviously when you come to eat it is quite full on and maybe even too much? Maybe even too sweet and kind of makes your teeth hurt a bit. But I don't know, so much of it as with so many foods is about the anticipation of it and looking forward to it and so that is how I eat a crème egg. It takes me about eight hours.

**SHAHIDHA:** Eight hours? Wow! I mean there is a Venn diagram isn't there of people who eat it immediately, who bite off the top and those who allow it to melt a bit, but I'm sort of on your end. Where are you Grace?

**GRACE:** You see I don't think I would carry it around for a while. But what I'm interested in is do people just eat the whole thing or do they try to get all of the innards out first, cos I've seen people have a right carry on with them and really kind of - some people swear by that. But I think that the innards of a creme egg are probably the sweetest thing imaginable. And you can't eat it by yourself. So, yeah and also, I'm very fascinated by anyone that can eat more than one in one sitting.

**SHAHIDHA:** -Must be some kind of superpower or something!

**GRACE:** I think it is a superpower. People that, you know, it's not that I'm above eating a load of chocolate or sweet things at once, but those people that say, "oh I brought six creme eggs home this weekend and I've eaten four already." See, that's a - that's a higher level of sweet for me.

**SHAHIDHA:** Jack, where do you stand?

**JACK MONROE:** Well, I have eaten a box of six cream eggs in one sitting but also what I currently have – absolutely rotten tooth ache. So, I wouldn't recommend it. They're not connected. I don't think they're connected cos the six was about a decade ago. But yeah. Where do I sit on it? Well, I once froze a creme egg and then sliced it and ate it in slices and I wouldn't do it again. Often. And I wouldn't say that's the best possible way to eat it, but I would recommend trying it as a one off. You've got to use a bread knife to get into it because the chocolate's freeze. Absolutely solid. But the icing sets sort of like you know, like the really hard nice icing you get a really fancy biscuits from really fancy bakeries. It's like that and then you get it in little kind of slices and it's really, really nice. But generally, I just get out of the shop, unwrap the wrapper, pop it in and go.

**SHAHIDHA:** I really hope Heston Blumenthal is listening as it sounds like it should be on a menu. What I want to ask you, Ruby is why that recipe is a recipe for you. Why was that recipe important for you to include in this book, in *Eat Up*, because you give very detailed instructions?

**RUBY:** Why is it? I mean, I guess, to me so much of cooking and eating is kind of peripheral, right? Like we start that kind of process that moment we go to the corner shop or we start writing that recipe and things like that. And then obviously it continues way past the point of when we are eating and saying, "oh do you remember last week when I had that Fanta lemon I got?" You know this is how long the lifespan of the food is. So, I guess for me the recipe was about drawing attention to that like it's not just in the moment of eating. It's not necessarily

having to eat something that you've cooked from scratch. It's about all of the anticipation and then the remembering and sometimes regretting that comes all around food. So, yeah. Yeah.

**SHAHIDHA:** Yeah, you write about it really beautifully unexpectedly beautifully for a Cadbury's Creme Egg. I should say, because we're hosting with the BBC arts that other chocolate eggs are available of course. And there are no Cadbury's Creme Eggs, but loads of childhood chocolate in your book, Grace - in your memoir *Hungry*. The Mint Viscount's, I've mentioned Tunnock's Caramel Wafers and it's really interesting how these vintage brands figure in your book and in lots of our childhoods. What do they mean to us? Why are they so important?

**GRACE:** Well, I think you know there's a lot of chocolate is definitely at the beginning of my memoir because I think that that's how we connect with the past us. You know it's - I think that's when I think about my childhood, the happiest times, weren't any of the orchestrated moments of fun that my family tried to put on for me. It was when you managed to get forty-five pence and go down the off licence and be able to choose whatever chocolate that you want or the ice cream van arriving and being unable to get a Funny Feet. It's those brands - and it is brands - it goes hand in hand with advertising and brands. It's that to me that is it a way back to my past and some of the happiest times of my life, whether it be - I mean you're talking about the Mint Viscount's - when I was a kid the factory where everybody worked was Carr's biscuit factory and there was a second hand - there was a kind of imperfect biscuit shop inside that factory. So, bags of those biscuits were like currency on my street. You know that people were like getting paid for doing things with this stuff. There was always, you know, to me that was an exciting thing. So, yeah saying so. Yeah, I mean I think that Ruby and I do talk about similar themes in what we do. We always talk about that deferred gratification as well that idea exactly as she is saying about sometimes there four hours carrying the egg around in your pocket is just as nice as the egg and I think I talk about that a lot in my book a lot. Just like the dreaming, the dreaming of when like the ice cream van comes and if you can maybe get thirty pence together you can get a cornetto, it's like that will get you through your day.

**SHAHIDHA:** I'm still in shock that you got forty-five P and that was riches to me!

**GRACE:** Forty-five P would have definitely been twenty P and then going down the back of the sofa definitely. Or taking bars -bottles back - this is how old I am, you used to be able to take glass bottles back and get money or then there would always be because I had a younger brother. I would sometimes save my money purposefully so that I could get a better ice cream the next day just to taunt him with because what's the point in having family. "Look at me with my cornetto", so yeah. Like Jack I've got terrible teeth and bad teeth as well, you know there's no, you know I always say when people talk about class, I always go there is no way I can try and pass as being quite posh but like the silver fillings begin there, you know... and there's bits missing because like my childhood was a lot of sugar.

**SHAHIDHA:** Jack. I've already mentioned you gasping at marked down cheese in supermarkets. Actually, you all write about grocery shopping. Grace you write about the mysterious allure of

an Asda, which I remember really distinctly and Ruby you have have quite a testy exchange with an Italian greengrocer when your grope one of his grapefruits! But, Jack, do you still gasp at cheese marked down? Are supermarket still lands of magic and mystery for you? Oh, Jack, you are muted, I think.

**GRACE:** Jack, you're muted! Oh Jack...

**JACK:** Sorry then I was poking the mute button and then it was like the host would like you to unmute and I thought well I would also like to unmute. It's not like I've been doing this for a year or anything, is it? Supermarkets, lands of magical and mystery and they absolutely are. I've got into a little routine now. Where I - my local Tesco Express closes at ten pm if I get there at nine twenty I've got in the last wave of mark downs before people have got everything, but also its close enough to closing time that I can justify buying like everything because otherwise it's like well, it might go in the bin and you know that and that would be terrible obviously I don't buy everything because I'm not a vulture but I can just go in and sort of up scoop up odds and sods of like twenty P hummus and fifteen P pineapple and whatever bits and pieces that people haven't bought through the day and then take it home and eat it. And It's great! I love it!

**GRACE:** You're that lurker that I go to war with...there's always like a load of us just lurking at that point. Looking for that kind of, that woman who has the most sway in the entire store. That's the woman with the markdown gun, just following them round-

**JACK:** Being the person with the gun. So, I don't stalk them I just time it for the smash and grab now and I sort of...

**SHAHIDHA:** You've got a strategic angle in it because you've got an insider's take. But Ruby, you strike me as more of a romantic shopper. I mean groping grapefruits and being told off by Italian greengrocers. I imagine you swanning romantically and thinking of poetry as you wander through the aisles.

**RUBY:** That's very generous of you. No, I'm an anxious shopper like I would be at the marked down chiller but I'm too stressed about these confrontations with other people kind of shoving me out of the way with their trolleys. So, no, like I kind of covet from afar and that's why, when I kind of was in Italy and I made the terrible mistake of touching a lemon with an ungloved hand. I was like so, so upset with myself because I kind of really sunk into the romance for a second. Like this is what people do in Italy they touch lemons, and they smell them and of course they don't. They're quite particular about it and that was even pre covid. So, yeah, I can't say that I'm the most confident shopper, but I do love a supermarket and consider it to be a real treat to go down the Asda.

**SHAHIDHA:** We've started our conversation by talking about Cadbury's Creme Eggs and Asda and sort of wrestling in shopping aisles, but I kind of want us to reflect on this about the fact that all we've got really bad taste in chocolate. We don't like - we are not so keen on the fancy

bitter stuff and the books that you've written are not really about expensive ingredients and elaborate recipes and fangled kitchen equipment and not even fancy restaurants for you all the time, Grace. So, I wonder if there's something quietly rebellious about writing about everyday foods and our daily experiences with foods. What do you think Jack?

**JACK:** I think that's absolutely right. And I think a lot of the world that I don't inhabit that I sort of stand on the periphery of in the food world is very much kitchens, the size of aircraft hangars and every type of gadget and equipment and the finest extra virgin olive oil and cows that have had a massage and whatever. And it's all about the finest and most expensive – and it's all a load of willy waving really. I got away with that didn't I, so let's just move on! Everyone's trying to outdo each other with the most finest, the most expensive ingredients – you must do my recipe with this wonderful Hungarian whatever it is, that's fallen down a mountain somewhere. And I think, there are a thousand reasons why I upset people, but I think one of the main ones has been that I basically just call time on all of that and said well if you've got a can of tomatoes then you've got a can of tomatoes and you've got some cooking oil you've got some cooking oil. If you can afford nicer ingredients by all means use them. But these recipes will work with the absolute basics of the cheapest of the 9p of everything in the supermarket. Rather than insisting on – I mean if you've got fillet steak and a twenty quid bottle of wine then of course you can make fantastic bourguignon. But if you've got like a can of stewed steak and a teabag, I mean that takes some doing.

**SHAHIDHA:** Grace, Ruby?

**GRACE:** Is the question is it quietly rebellious to talk about a...

**SHAHIDHA:** -Everyday foods.

**GRACE:** Oh my god, I don't think I realised until I started how much, how quietly rebellious I was being. I think that - I think that with my restaurant criticism – I mean it's the greatest job in the world and I'm certainly not ungrateful for being able to go to the finest restaurants. It's a wonderful job. I have amazing fun at Michelin star restaurants, but I'm also very aware that there's a lot of the experiences that will be in my diary – when my diary starts to fill up again with restaurants it's not as if - sometimes I look towards Wednesday night or Thursday night and think oh, gosh, that's going to be an incredibly delicious meal. You know what I'm often going to go there to see is – I'm going for the beautiful restaurant and the gorgeous chandeliers and the technique and the Michelin star chefs that are going to do all this, massage the cows and all those types of things that they're going to tell me about. Is that food going to be as delicious as getting up sometimes on a Saturday morning and eating the rest of the chow mein that is in a silver tray, sitting on the couch. No. Sometimes it isn't. Do I sometimes think - sometimes I think: oh my God who ever really thinks I can't wait to go out for a big plate of technique because that's what, you know, people are showing you amazing technique? So, from the beginning - especially with my Guardian column - I've always talked about you know, just talked about the everyday things that are absolutely delicious. And you know I always say

as well that with my restaurant column about ninety eight percent of people that read the Guardian restaurant, you know, at 10am when it goes up on a Friday are never going to go to those restaurant because those restaurants, they come for the ride, they come for the writing but these are spaces that your everyday person would not feel comfortable and wouldn't have the money to go into so we have a duty to talk about the beauty in eating that applies to everybody. You know your stuff and I love doing that so, and so do these ladies. They're both excellent at it too.

**SHAHIDHA:** That's right, isn't it, Ruby?

**RUBY:** Yeah, I mean to be honest, I think when I started all of this, I was quite naive about whether it even was rebellious to talk about this kind of stuff. I think I had really underestimated just how interested in kind of price and provenance and appearance some of these kind of professional food circles can be. But I mean there is another side to it as well like obviously part of me is desperate to kind of get people's backs up a little bit if I write all about crème eggs like I do get off on that, sorry, like I enjoy winding people up but on the flip side you're also positioning yourself in community with other people – like you're rebelling against food snobs but you are also saying like, oh I'm here with the other people whose diets I recognise and the kind of people who I grew up around and the kind of food that I know. So, it's not just contrary. It's also something that's quite rich and makes me feel connected with people as well.

**SHAHIDHA:** Yeah. Affinity. I think that's the word, isn't it or community. I want to ask you about the community of food writers of which you are apart in different ways. Tell me about the writers of influence you're writing about food, who really gets food or has changed the way you think about food. Grace, you go first.

**GRACE:** Um. Do I read lots of food writers? I probably haven't read as many as you'd think. I don't really read any, I shouldn't say this - I don't really read any of the other restaurant critics.

**SHAHIDHA:** Why would you – why would you need to Grace?

**GRACE:** Well, I mean because - it's how I find in the restaurant world is that it's really easy. Some restaurants they just get so much love and they've got a huge PR campaign and then everyone starts to go and then, before you know it Giles has been, and Jay's been, and everyone's been and it's difficult then to think: What do I think. So, I don't really read other people. With food writing the person that I always feel affinity with is Nigel Slater and I just, I think when I was really, when I was a little girl, Delia. Just because I loved Delia because she was on Saturdays Swap Shop when I was a tiny girl. She was probably one of the first chefs that I saw, but yeah, I think, I think Nigel Slater I just love because I think that he comes at cooking in a very unique way. And it's almost, he never pretends to love having a house full of people. You know which is meant to be one of those things you're meant to do when you, when you're a

food chef. You're meant to go oh on a Saturday night. I love to have fifteen people. That's my idea of Hell!

**SHAHIDHA:** Yeah, me too!

**GRACE:** Fifteen people in your house and not going home. You know by eight o'clock I'd just be in my pyjamas. Yeah, and I like what with Nigel, I like, I love the way that he kind of just suggests an ingredient and then suggests something that's very off kilter that might go with it. Yeah.

**SHAHIDHA:** Yeah, we are not, we are not going to get invited round yours for tea any time soon. I can see. Well not en masse. Jack, what about you?

**JACK:** The first food book that I read that I really connected with was *For the Love of Food* by Denis Cotter whose an Irish chef. It's a vegetarian cookbook. It has an entire chapter on mash and various kinds of mash and things that you can mash and things that you can do with mash, and things that you can serve with mash and things you can do with leftover mash. And I was like this is my man. But the way he writes about food is beautiful. It's very descriptive. He's very evocative and he's very – and just the language that he uses is just beautiful and I remember the first recipe book I ever came across was like *The Dairy Book of Home Cookery* that my mum had sitting on the shelf in the kitchen, and I've got my own copy of it now, but it was very, very black and white, isn't it? It's like here's your ingredients list and here's about seven words of instruction and here's a grainy like 1970's picture of a peanut loaf. Get on with it. Whereas Denis Cotter talks you through every single stage of that process. He doesn't assume that you know anything. He makes Michelin star worthy meals out of a handful of nothing but presents them and writes about them in such a way that you're going on a fairy-tale through an enchanted forest with him and there's a snack at the end of it. It's just –

**SHAHIDHA:** Great.

**JACK:** And I've not found - I mean love Nigella, I love Nigel Slater. I learnt to cook from various random, weird cookbooks that I found in charity shops, but to curl up with like a bedtime story, I'll always go back to Dennis Cotter.

**SHAHIDHA:** Ruby?

**RUBY:** I mean, I share with Grace like a love for Nigel Slater. I kind of - I can't figure out whether he's kind of a gentle dad or like that slightly badly behaved uncle figure - but I like that vibe and I like the approach to food that he has. I remember as a kid reading one of his books. I can't even remember which one now. But it's arranged by, there's like a chapter on garlic and one on potatoes and one on sausages and one on ice cream and I thought that is amazing. As a child like how you can just - that's your food worldview and that's how you categorise everything and I thought it was brilliant. But I think more recently, I don't know, I kind of, I've been reading a

lot of stuff online, which is kind of, that's my fragmented covid times attention at the moment. But a lot of 'Vittles' which is a kind of food website where loads of different writers write interesting things I like, but I dip in and out of things.

**SHAHIDHA:** When Jack was talking about Denis Cotter - who I'd never heard of so this is amazing for me - but that this kind of step by step process, it made me think of your book Ruby, the audio book which is lovely and companionable if anybody's listening to it. You basically chat, very easily while we rummage around for the butter and you take us step by step. But tell me about the thinking behind that. What - why did you want to do an audiobook?

**RUBY:** I just – I just think the conversation started because it was like everyone was doing lockdown baking. I personally know a lot of people, some of my own friends who are such incredibly anxious bakers it actually really makes me sweat watching them talking about, about baking. Like there is such a lack of confidence and a need for reassurance and I get it. I kind of realised that a written recipe leaves so much out. I think that's fine most of the time, but when people need extra help it can leave them floundering and so that's why I decided to do this thing where it's me talking you through it literally moment by moment in real time as you make these recipes and yeah, it was nerve racking for me to be honest because I think the idea of anyone hearing my voice for kind of forty five minutes straight made me feel quite uncomfortable, but it's a really nice, gentle way of easing into something and feeling like you've got a friend whose perched on the counter kind of in your way. But right there and giving you the help you need. So, yeah.

**SHAHIDHA:** That's exactly the experience. And my vanilla custard buns did not come out that great, but it was really fun having you in the kitchen with me. Can I ask you Grace and Jack about, about how you write about food because you know on the one hand you have the very pared down simplicity of a recipe? Jack, I made your golden milk earlier this week. Really simple and like full of turmeric goodness. But on the other hand, you also have to evoke the sensory and emotional experience of food in language as you do, Grace, all the time. So, so are their rules are there things that you are trying to achieve. Grace, you go first.

**GRACE:** I just, this sounds really cheesy, but I literally just write exactly from the heart and say exactly what I think as a - how do you even explain it, yeah, - I think I just say what I like and hope that there's people out there that get it. And I've got away with it so far. I never. I don't, I think when I'm writing about food, I think there's a very, very small amount of people who read a restaurant review and really want three hundred words on, you know, a three-hundred-word paragraph on the consistency of the gravy. I think that it has to be quite fleeting. I think the explanations should be fleeting and also just really, they need to really heat something by pulling something out of my head. This reminds me of this, and I say it, and then I just pray that it'll get past a couple of the subs and nobody's going to go... and I get past the subs by handing it in really late.

**SHAHIDHA:** Great tip!

**GRACE:** That's how I get away with it because what I find with anything I do is if I give it in early there always will be someone along the way that goes what is she talking about? That joke doesn't even, it's like what? So, it's like kind of always a bit of a, always a bit of a kind of flooding it out. I was just going to say about recipes and recipe books and you know, my early, my earliest memory of reading recipes was going off to the 'Blue Peter bring and buy sale' and there would always be a dusty box of laminated recipe cards that had been donated and they were by the Reader's Digest or something and you'd bring them home and you'd be like seven or eight years old and every single recipe would involve aspic and like it would be nothing that you could ever in a million years as a child think about cooking and it would be, the ingredients that you could never get. I love, so going back to quietly rebellious, I think I'm really influenced by that whenever I see what Jack and Ruby are doing, I do think, you know, go on because it is starting to celebrate in doing the things that you can kind of walk towards a cupboard and pull these things out and be a chef for half an hour and I love that.

**SHAHIDHA:** Jack?

**JACK:** Well, I've always - I'd only read a handful of recipe books when I was asked to write one. And so, I didn't really know what I was doing. And let's be honest, I still don't really know what I'm doing. I'm just kind of winging it. I just submit a hundred different essays about my dinner. So, someone puts them in a consecutive order and take some pretty pictures wraps it up in the cover and tells me to stop swearing on Twitter for a few months while we promote it.

**SHAHIDHA:** How's that going?

**JACK:** I try to, I tried to, - I always have a friend in mind when I write my recipes and it'll be whichever friend of the moment I am currently teaching to cook and it's not a fool proof system because they get to a point where they learn to cook and I think you're no longer my chief recipes tester because you're too competent now. I need to find someone else. But I try to explain enough in my recipes to assume like that people don't know these fancy culinary terms. I don't still know lots of fancy culinary terms, because I've never – and up till about three weeks ago I was saying that 'cool-inary' until one of my friends was like Jack I really have to point this out to you it's sauté and culinary and I was like oh that's great I've been a food writer for nine years now and I've tried to not use language that I myself found alienating when I was, when I was first learning to cook. You shouldn't need to swallow a French dictionary in order to be able to knock together a casserole. You just, you know, people mock my use of cooking language online a lot and to my face sometimes because I pop things in the oven, and I have fistfuls of parsley and I bung it in there and I sling it in there. I'm not trying to like to be anyone other than who I am. And that's the language that I use, and people appreciate it. And they learn from it because it's, it's just plain and simple.

**SHAHIDHA:** I prefer your pronunciation of 'cool-inary' –

**JACK:** ‘Cool-inary’ let’s do it with the long ‘o’!

**SHAHIDHA:** Ruby, in your audio book you say that we should all be like Cher in ‘Moonstruck’. What does that mean?

**RUBY:** Yeah, you know, sometimes you come up with a little, little simile and something a bit literary and you think that's fantastic and after you are like what was I talking about. I think that might have, I think that was because in Moonstruck, Cher is this beautiful, charismatic, person who is kind of navigating love and life in New York and she comes into contact with Nicolas Cage and he is this really angsty, baker character and he's like throwing loaves in the oven. And he's a hot mess. And she kind of walks into this kitchen and she just brings the tone down and she just keeps it classy, and it was it was a bit like that. It was like if you feel like Nicolas Cage in the kitchen, let's bring in some Cher. Let's kind of sort this out and kind of sand down the edges a little bit otherwise you're going to do yourself or someone else some damage.

**SHAHIDHA:** Has she done a cookbook? She needs a cookbook. I'd buy that cookbook. Grace, you've been one of the judges on Master Chef. I've loved you on MasterChef and I'm interested that you say in your book that we're all food critics now. So, what do you mean by that, in what way are we all food critics?

**GRACE:** Well, anybody can be a food critic, anyone could be a food critic. You might not end up getting paid to do it, but we all, I think we were all quite savvy now about, about what is good and what is bad. We can all have our opinions. We can all have our opinions heard now, if you have the energy to go on social media you can make or break places quite easily. I think that when I say we're all food critics, I'm really aware that, you know, whenever I talk about food because you know it's kind of my full-time job there are always people who come back and go: “What qualifies you to talk about food?” As if I'm going to go and get my kind of my qualifications from somewhere, like what is it, I don't have qualifications – I'm trying not to swear too! I don't have qualifications! So, I think that I'm always very aware that what I, what I do is only really my opinion as well. You don't have to listen to me. Sometimes I wish that people wouldn't listen to me. It's like, you know, I think that one of the reasons I do the things I get paid for sometimes is taking the amount of flack that I do for having an opinion that's unpopular. So, I think, you know, I think that anybody, right, anybody could be a restaurant critic in a way that we all are when you walk into a restaurant for the first time, and you sit down at a new table at a new place that you've never been to before everybody knows whether they love that place and whether they'd like to come back pretty instantly. Even if that's subliminal in the back, in the back of their mind. You know that when you sit down, if you love a place you begin to look around and everyone's talking and passing the menu about and you start thinking, oh I love that table over there, I would love to bring so and so back on their fiftieth birthday or isn't that a nice table to have a meeting on and that's when you know you love it. And whenever I tell people that and say that they go “oh, my God, yes.” That's how you know if you like somewhere or not. I think it's; I don't think it's, what I do it's not rocket science.

It's not, you know. But then I do think at the same time, you know, I steer people away from wasting a load of money. I just want to make people happy. I just want to give somebody - I say this time and time again - I just want to create something for people to read on the loo on a Saturday morning when they're hiding from their own children and that's really it.

**SHAHIDHA:** What a noble objective that is, I think.

**GRACE:** I don't think I; I don't want to control the restaurant scene; I don't want to close places. I don't want to influence food; all I want to do is take people vicariously out of their house and reflect a scene that I love and that's it.

**SHAHIDHA:** Well, while we're talking about influence how you as writers can influence things. Can I, can I bring up something quite difficult which is food banks and I know, Jack, you've been thinking about this for a long time and an activist, and we've had very high-profile debates at the moment about free school meals that footballers had a part to play in that - do food writers have a part to play in these debates too what do you think?

**GRACE:** I don't think we can fail to. I mean I'm not as, personally speaking as compared to Jack and Ruby. I don't think I'm openly a political person, but I, I think about it all the time I think about it every time I sit down to write, you know. Like one thing that sticks with me is that in London it is so easy when I'm reviewing in London, throwing two hundred and fifty pounds at dinner is easing and that's my - and there will be people watching this right now that that just sticks in their throat and so to me I have I have to have it in my head all the time that I don't live a normal life that, you know, it feels like it in my lovely media bubble where people think that one hundred and ninety five pounds for lunch with a couple of pizzas and a bottle of wine is normal. So, I have to think about that and how it reflects and how it looks and it's difficult and I have to take the flack every Saturday. Every Saturday the column comes up and there's like five hundred comments underneath saying: Did you, do you realise we could have fed a family of six with this, but I'm by no means a person that puts myself forward to speak about this. I think I think Jack's the Queen of this and I'm trying, she's good at it!

**SHAHIDHA:** Jack?

**JACK:** Those five hundred people below the line know that they are disingenuous harpies. Don't like the term harpies, don't know why I used it. Just came out of my mouth. Going to get some flak for it but there we go. Said it again. But they are disingenuous, and they are harping on about something that they know full well has no correlation between the single mum of six who can't afford to feed her children is not starving because you can drop one hundred notes on dinner, but they like to make that correlation because rather than looking at the real cause of the issue which is an austerity ideology that has driven people into the ground. They like to go: "Oh you, you loaded food critic. This is all your fault" because it's easier. It's easier than actually dismantling the system that's lead people there in the first place. And if I every Saturday have to text you that and be like it's not about you, it's about them, it's about their own inadequacy

and they can't see the problem. Then I will. I think as food writers and I get a lot of food writers messaging me privately say what can we do about all these food bank things and I get sent all this free stuff that I don't ask for and where can I donate it. I've quietly steered a lot of people to various organisations over the years and just gone stick it all in a box and then once a month a nice lady from the tin collection comes around and takes away all of the fancy little wrapped biscuits and all of the nonsense and the little jars of chocolate spread that you get sent. All this fancy stuff and they take it away and give it a better life. And the PR's get in touch and say you didn't post about that on Instagram and I said it's fine it's in a tower block somewhere in the city centre by now. I think, I think we can't fail to get involved. If we've got any, if we've got the, if – because sometimes I have to step out of the arena, because the amount of abuse you get for calling for a bit of common decency and fairness is astounding. But if you've got the platform with which to raise the voices of people who are in difficult situations and you can use that platform to try to make things a little bit better for people then I think that along with the free chocolate spread and the advantages of fame we kind of have a responsibility to look out for and look after people as well.

**SHAHIDHA:** Have you been thinking about this, Ruby?

**RUBY:** Yeah, all the time. I think, I think I can be guilty of being a bit kind of reactive and a bit rebellious in a way that isn't always useful. Like so much of kind of the food media in general is about kind of ethically sourcing stuff like tracing the provenance of like... coco beans back and back and back and then there's not really any attention given to well who actually gets fed by all of these things? What happens in the other direction? So, I like in quite a reactionary way like mostly focus on where food goes to. Who gets it, whose cooking it in normal settings, whose cooking it in care homes, in prisons, in all of these places that don't often get covered? But obviously I think there's a balancing act there that I think I've definitely fallen into in the past by not looking in with enough kind of conviction – where is my food coming from – because I am so focused on equity and where it's going. So, I think there is both sides to things and it is something that we need to be very aware of and proactive about – not just aware of because that can be such an easy place to be complacent from but really trying our best.

**SHAHIDHA:** Can I ask another quite difficult question about, about mental health because you all in different ways write about the connection between food and mental health. Grace you've been writing really movingly about your mother recently and your book *Hunger* in which you wear a spectacular leotard - is very much about your relationship with your father and Jack, you've written, often about your struggles to feed your son and yourself and your own mental health and Ruby, your book seems to be very much about emotional wellbeing too. What is the connection between food and mental health do you think? Ruby, perhaps you could go first?

**RUBY:** I mean it's so intricately connected, isn't it? I mean, when we are doing badly in our minds we tend to not be as good at feeding ourselves no matter how that like presents and I mean, obviously, on a larger scale the things that make it difficult to be well and to feel well, kind of, whether that's job insecurity, whether it's not having enough money, all these things

also come to effect are the food that we can get and how nourishing that is and whether we can cook it. All of these things. So, I mean they're completely intertwined at the end of the day both things are about survival and thriving, whether you are just feeding yourself or nourishing yourself, whether you are getting by day to day or whether you are enjoying life. So, they're completely connected, and I think, I mean from what I've read of Jack and Grace's work like these threads come up again and again because it's just impossible to separate them.

**SHAHIDHA:** Grace?

**GRACE:** Oh, well, yeah, I think food mental health is hand in hand all the time, the whole, you know. I always think, you know, whenever I'm stressed or sad or bereaved or heartbroken all, like food is the first thing that goes, whether it's because I have no appetite or it's because I just forgets to feed myself or because I then go into a starvation mode, thinking everything will be OK once you've got better cheek bones – do you know what I mean? And that kind of stupid game that, I won't say we all play. So, I think I've always been very aware that food when you are - right, so, when, I can count so many times in my life when I've been hungry, hungry, hungry, hungry and not looking after myself and then – you know, when I was getting divorced, maybe. And then someone's just went, "Grace, why don't you eat" and they've given you a lovely plate of food that they've cooked for you and halfway through a plate of lasagne you can almost feel something shift and you think it was food. It was food that I needed that was going to make me better and I think that all the time when I walk down the street and I see people sitting outside a cash machine asking for money and stuff like that. So, I always think this - how different that person would feel if - it is not their only problem of course - if people just were fed. So, I'm very, I'm very, very conscious of that all the time I think that - I mean, I wrote yesterday that there was well, it was kind of, it was a funny article, but it was it was in truth as well. This idea of a new worlds beginning and I'm not good enough already because I've spent so long, I spent twelve months eating whatever I want. I've eaten all I've been doing is eating carbohydrates, so my clothes aren't going to fit. So, I need to, so I was talking about in getting freedom I've already created myself a new prison. A prison that I've put myself in a hundred and fifty times since I was fourteen years old. You know, oh if I was just a dress size smaller then everything's going to be great. And I just, you know, and I create that through humour when I'm writing. And it's true, you know? It's kind of... I can feel my mental health going a bit already about this fear that I've eaten so much comfort food so that means I'm bad. So, you know, I think that when you get any group, particularly of women together, once we begin to talk about this food and mental health. You can't have one without the other.

**SHAHIDHA:** I think Ruby's book is really good in sort of changing that sort of mindset as well, I think. Jack your answer before we go to the last question.

**JACK:** I mean, I've spent a significant period of my life hungry from being a single mum on the dole – don't need to rehash that story because I'm sure everybody knows it but what that also did was that it meant that I can go for a very long period of time without registering that I'm hungry. So, when I'm stressed or you know, not particularly happy, hitting a bad mental bit or

bunt out, I lose my appetite completely, but it can take a couple of days to register that I haven't eaten anything. And I'm a food writer and my friends, my closest friends know the trigger points because they'll text me and they'll say you haven't posted any of your meals on Instagram for a few days. What have you eaten? And I'm like damn.

**SHAHIDHA:** Listen, we're going to run out of time, and I've got one minute, and I really want to ask you this question because I think this is quite a nice place for us to end because all of your books are a heartening. They're really, they're like a warming bowl of soup and I want us to end with a warm moment. There's a lovely moment in your book, *Ruby*, where you describe a cookbook that is so loved and used that every page is turned at the corner and I want to know very quickly, which is that book for each of you. So maybe Ruby, you can go first, what was that book?

**RUBY:** Oh my god, I can't remember. I can't remember!

**SHAHIDHA:** You've ruined the question!

**RUBY:** Yeah, sorry, I actually can't remember...

**SHAHIDHA:** Maybe it was all the books, maybe it's your own book!

**RUBY:** No, I hope not. It might have been, there's a baking book that I really like called *Short and Sweet* that I am particularly fond of.

**SHAHIDHA:** Okay, that, Grace?

**GRACE:** I would love to tell you it something incredibly, incredibly gastronomic but what it actually is, is *How to be a Domestic Goddess* by Nigella and it's because there's so many recipes in that book that they'll get you out of a fix. Whether it's a supper onion pie or the scones with thunder and lightning or you know there's a just few of them in there - that that book to me it's just, it's filthy and unsanitary, my copy of it now! It's covered in onion!

**SHAHIDHA:** Perfect. That's the one, Jack.

**JACK:** Mine currently because it changes quite a lot is *Big Table Busy Kitchen* by Allegra McEvedy. And that's a very, very big, gorgeous talk you through step-by-step cookbook. Teaching kids to cook things through to things like home comforts. That's my favourite at the moment.

**SHAHIDHA:** Perfect, thanks. Thank you so much, Jack Monroe, Grace Dent and Ruby Tandoh. You can buy Grace's memoir *Hungry*, Ruby's audio book 'Breaking Eggs' and her book *Eat Up* and Jack's *Good Food for Bad Days* in all the usual places. See you soon. Happy reading and cooking and eating too. Goodbye.



**GRACE:** Bye!