

# Books in a Box

## Reading Guide

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the best place to begin



whatcom county  
**library system**

## Books in a Box Information

We hope you will enjoy the convenience of having multiple copies of the same title to share—either with your official book group or with an unofficial friends-and-family group!

Some general information about the kits:

- ◆ Kits check out for six weeks.
- ◆ Kits are available to reserve, but we cannot guarantee their availability for specific dates.
- ◆ One person in the group is responsible for the kits full return.
- ◆ Return kits in person at any Whatcom County library

How do I find a list of all your kits?

- ◆ Go to [www.wcls.org](http://www.wcls.org)
- ◆ Click on “catalog”
- ◆ In the Subject Keyword Search type “book club kit”

This list includes kits owned by both Whatcom County and Bellingham Library Systems. Please note that the Bellingham kits must be picked up and returned to the Bellingham Library. Whatcom County kits can be reserved and sent to any location for pickup.

## Suggested Discussion Questions

1. “Every restaurant is a theater,” Reichl explains. “Each one offers the opportunity to become someone else, at least for a little while. Restaurants free us from mundane reality.” How do restaurants allow a person to leave reality?
2. Reichl creates wildly innovative disguises. Which disguise is your favorite?
3. Why is it so important for Reichl to maintain anonymity in her work?
4. What insights did Reichl offer about the inner workings of the nation’s most powerful newspaper *The New York Times*?
5. Reichl states to her future employers, “Your reviews are very useful guides for the people who already eat in the restaurants you review...You shouldn’t be writing reviews for the people who dine in fancy restaurants but for those who wish they could.” How does this attitude change her role as a reviewer as well as how restaurants are reviewed?
6. By using disguises, Ruth is able to slip into the world of the “ordinary” diner. She can see what each restaurant will serve to the patrons who seem to be nobodies. Why is important that she has this type of experience in a restaurant? Do you feel this allows her to write an objective review?
7. Lisa Check said, “Her husband brings to mind the poem ‘Four Quartets’ by T.S. Eliot - “Garlic and Sapphires in the mud” as a way to describe the transition of Ruth. Why is the poem and title of the poem important? How does this become the title of her book?
8. “To say that the only thing that matters is what’s on the plate is to miss the major role res-

restaurants have in our lives today,” said Reichl. How does she portray that eating in a restaurant is more than just a physical experience?

9. Reichl in an interview with *Psychology Today* explains the importance of food. She said, “It’s a way that we tell the world who we are, a way of setting boundaries. You can see it in young children. Food is a place where they say, ‘This is mine. I will not eat this.’ You know, it’s virtually impossible to force someone to eat unless you stick a tube down the throat. So it’s really an area where children can have their own way. Everybody tells about their parents warning, ‘You can’t leave the table until you’ve eaten this or that.’ And the child will sit there, all day long and say, ‘You can’t make me.’ What they mean is ‘I can tell you who I am through this.’ How does food define us and our lives?

10. A book reviewer says, “Ruth Reichl manages to make not only writing about food, but writing about writing about food both entertaining and gastronomically bearable.” Did you feel the format of her memoir was engaging?

11. During her job interview, Reichl openly criticizes the paper’s high-brow approach to restaurant ratings, telling the editors that most people reading the reviews will never be able to eat at Le Cirque or Daniel (at least not on a regular basis) but want to be able to imagine that they can. How do her reviews allow people to do this?

12. How does Reichl touch upon topics of gender, class and generational issues in the world of fine food in her book?

13. Each disguise takes on a personality. What does Ruth learn about herself and others through each disguise?

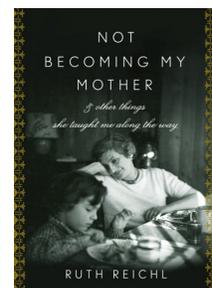
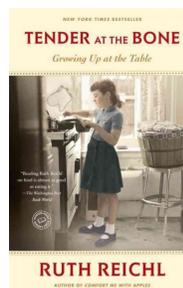
14. How does Reichl touch upon the political and social importance of food?

15. Her husband, at one point when she gets caught up in the glamour of her job, reminds her why food is really important. “You love to eat, you love to write, and you love the generosity of cooks and what happens around the table when a great meal is served.” How do the three components blend in this memoir?

(Questions by library staff at Manitowoc (WI) Public Library.)

## Other books by Ruth Reichl

*Tender at the Bone: growing up at the table*  
*Comfort Me with Apples: more adventures at the table*  
*Not Becoming My Mother: & other things she taught me along the way*



## Author Bio: Ruth Reichl

Source: excerpted from Wikipedia (accessed 5/28/10).

Ruth Reichl is an American food writer and the last editor-in-chief of the now shuttered *Gourmet* magazine. She has written three critically acclaimed, best-selling books of memoirs: *Tender at the Bone*, *Comfort Me with Apples*, and *Garlic and Sapphires: The Secret Life of a Critic in Disguise*.



Reichl was raised in Greenwich Village in New York City and spent time at a boarding school in Montreal as a young girl. She attended the University of Michigan, where she met her first husband, the artist Douglas Hollis. She graduated in 1970 with a M.A. in Art History.

She and Hollis moved to Berkeley, CA, where her interest in food led to her joining the collectively-owned Swallow Restaurant. Reichl began her food-writing career with *Mmmmm: A Feastyary*, a cookbook, in 1972. She moved on to become food writer and editor for *New West* magazine and the *Los Angeles Times*, returning to her native New York City in 1993 to become the restaurant critic for *The New York Times* before leaving to assume the editorship of *Gourmet* in 1999.

She is known for her ability to "make or break" a restaurant with her fierce attention to detail and her adventurous spirit. For Reichl, her mission has been to "demystify the world of fine cuisine" (CBS News Online). She has won acclaim with both readers and writers alike for her honesty about some of the not-so-fabulous aspects of haute cuisine. Through an outsider's perspective, she harshly criticized the sexism prevalent toward women in dine-out experiences, as well as the pretentious nature of the ritziest New York restaurants and restaurateurs alike.

Despite her widely-celebrated success, and hilarious tales of how she used to disguise herself to mask her identity while reviewing, she is quite open about why she stopped. "I really wanted to go home and cook for my family," she says. "I don't think there's one thing more important you can do for your kids than have family dinner" (CBS News Online). Reichl is now married to television news producer, Michael Singer; they have a son, Nick.

## Reviews

### [Publishers Weekly](#)

★ Reichl, Ruth. *Garlic and Sapphires: The Secret Life of a Critic in Disguise*. New York: Penguin Books, 2005.

As the *New York Times*'s restaurant critic for most of the 1990s, Reichl had what some might consider the best job in town; among her missions were evaluating New York City's steakhouses, deciding whether *Le Cirque* deserved four stars and tracking down the best place for authentic Chinese cuisine in Queens. Thankfully, the rest of us can live that life vicariously through this vivacious, fascinating memoir. The book—Reichl's third—lifts the lid on the city's storied restaurant culture from the democratic perspective of the everyday diner. Reichl creates wildly innovative getups, becoming Brenda, a red-haired aging hippie, to test the food at *Daniel*; Chloe, a blonde divorcée, to evaluate *Lespinasse*; and even her deceased mother,

Miriam, to dine at 21. Such elaborate disguises—which include wigs, makeup, thrift store finds and even credit cards in other names—help Reichl maintain anonymity in her work, but they also do more than that. "Every restaurant is a theater," she explains. Each one "offer[s] the opportunity to become someone else, at least for a little while. Restaurants free us from mundane reality." Reichl's ability to experience meals in such a dramatic way brings an infectious passion to her memoir. Reading this work—which also includes the finished reviews that appeared in the newspaper, as well as a few recipes—ensures that the next time readers sit down in a restaurant, they'll notice things they've never noticed before.

"This wonderful book is funny—at times laugh-out-loud funny—and smart and wise." (*The Washington Post*)

"Reichl is so gifted . . . the reader remains hungry for more." (*USA Today*)

"Expansive and funny ,, [a] fun confection." (*Entertainment Weekly*)

## Suggested Readalikes

*Kitchen confidential: adventures in the culinary underbelly*, by Anthony Bourdain.

*Heat: an amateur's adventures as kitchen slave, line cook, pasta-maker, and apprentice to a Dante-quoting butcher in Tuscany*, by Bill Buford.

*My Life in France*, by Julia Child.

*The art of eating*, by M.F.K. Fisher.

*Cooking for Mr. Latte: a food lover's courtship, with recipes*, by Amanda Hesser.

*It seemed like a good idea at the time: my adventures in life and food*, by Moira Hodgson.

*Julie and Julia: 365 days, 524 recipes, 1 tiny apartment kitchen: how one girl risked her marriage, her job, and her sanity to master the art of living*, by Julie Powell.

*The making of a chef: mastering heat at the Culinary Institute of America*, by Michael Ruhlman.

*The man who ate everything: and other gastronomic feats, disputes, and pleasurable pursuits*, by Jeffrey Steingarten.

## Web Resources

Author website: <http://www.ruthreichl.com/>

Food Critics' guidelines: <http://www.afjonline.com/afj.aspx?pgID=887>

Salon.com interview: <http://www.salon.com/nov96/interview961118.html>