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## **You Are What You Eat: Narrating Ethnic Identity Through Food in Polish Chicagoan Writing<sup>1</sup>**

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**Abstract:** This article offers an analysis of the representation and function of food in several texts by contemporary American writers of Polish descent associated with the city of Chicago. All of the texts analyzed below present Polish foodways as an important element of Polish diasporic identity. Foodscapes in what I call Polish Chicagoan literature are invariably depicted as a gendered space, although, as this article will show, detailed descriptions of food production and consumption tend to lead to different outcomes in the texts authored by male and female writers.

**Keywords:** Polish American literature, American Polonia, foodways, Stuart Dybek, Elizabeth Kern, Marcia Cebulska, Chicago

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### **Introduction**

The inception of food studies as a scholarly discipline in the 1980s brought to the fore the role that foodways play in the construction and preservation of identity, be it race, ethnic, gender, or class identity. The term “foodways” is defined as “[r]eferring to more than just physical food, also encompass[ing] activities associated with the procurement, preparation, service, and consumption of food and drink” (Niewiadomska-Flis 23). As a coinage of food and landscape, foodscape, another important concept in food studies, is in turn “a useful framework for discourses about food and sites of various sizes and scales, ranging from the personal space of a body, to the social spaces of a kitchen or community, to the public spaces of a city, region, or nation” (Adema 6). As Adema further argues, “foodscape incorporates the dynamics of global exchange, including the translocal and transnational character of modern food practices” (6). There seems to be a general consensus among scholars that “[f]ood simultaneously reflects and co-creates culture and identity” (Niewiadomska-Flis 22).

Within the Polish American context, the importance of foodways for the retaining of Polish identity in immigrant and second-generation families has been argued, among others, by John Radzilowski and Ann Hetzel Gunkel. In their take, “food is more than a matter of physical sustenance. It is also a system of communication, a type of language through which we express identities and

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relationships, including gender, ethnicity, nationality, festivity, and sacrality” (136). The two scholars go on to add that “Polish foodways often are the most persistent legacy of Polish culture, even when third-, fourth-, and fifth-generation Polish Americans have lost the Polish language and a direct connection to Poland itself” (140). As Gunkel argues in another essay, “[c]uisine and foodways play a special role in the work of ethnic memory, a role which has been overlooked from an intellectual and political point of view” (39).

Those briefly-sketched reflections on food in Polish diaspora and other cultural and ethnic contexts constitute an apt starting point for my ensuing discussion of the function that foodways play in literary texts by American writers of Polish descent associated with Chicago.<sup>2</sup> In what follows I will discuss two stories by arguably the best known and most acknowledged Polish American writer, Stuart Dybek, narratives tellingly titled “Blood Soup” and “Sauerkraut Soup,” both included in his first collection of short stories published in 1980 as *Childhood and Other Neighborhoods*. The second part of the essay will offer an analysis of two narratives authored by women writers: Elizabeth Kern’s 2011 coming-of-age novel *Wanting to Be Jackie Kennedy* and a recent memoir by Marcia Cebulka titled *Lovers, Dreamers, & Thieves: My People, Chicago, & the Polish Bakery Where I Grew Up*. In all of these texts Polish cuisine plays a substantial role, offering a link for the third-generation Polish American protagonists to the culture of their forebears. As I will argue, these texts also point to the gendered character of the Polish diaspora in the US, as the foodscapes they sketch are invariably presented as a female space, though with considerable differences between the accounts by male and female authors.

### Polish Food in Stuart Dybek’s Short Fiction

To begin with Stuart Dybek, when read as a whole, his first collection of stories strikes the reader as a nostalgic musing on times and spaces long lost, such as the eponymous childhood and neighborhoods, rendered in a manner reminiscent of magical realism. Characteristically for Dybek, these texts tend to employ a male narrator—a boy or a young man—and evoke the area of Pilsen/Little Village on Chicago’s Lower West Side, where Dybek grew up as a third-generation Polish American.<sup>3</sup> In the collection, Dybek names two out of eleven stories after soups, signaling the significance of ethnic food for his construction of diasporic identity and memory. Gunkel posits that “food clearly plays a special role in immigrant history and memory,” adding that it is therefore “not surprising that food imagery

2 I am consciously focusing on what I call Polish Chicagoan literature here, as Chicago can arguably be treated as the capital of the American Polonia, cf. Dominic A. Pacyga, *American Warsaw*, pp. 1-18. Therefore, it is my contention that the literature of Polish Chicago can likewise function as illustrative of trends within Polish American literature in general, regional and other differences between individual Polish American authors notwithstanding.

3 As Carlo Rotella puts it, “Dybek has rendered Pilsen/Little Village with a vividness and depth that turns it into a literary place on a par with Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha County, Elena Ferrante’s Rione Luzzatti, or J.R.R. Tolkien’s Middle Earth” (405).

serves as a powerful vehicle for exploring the ethnic self in literary contexts such as ... Stuart Dybek's short stories" (39). By virtue of associations it evokes—of comfort, home, and familiarity—ethnic food seems to function in Dybek's oeuvre like other tokens of Polishness, such as the Catholic church or snippets of the Polish language, that construe second- or third-generation Polish American identity as inevitably marked by nostalgia.

In "Blood Soup," the main character, a 13-year-old boy named Stefush, the Anglicized form of which is Steve, is asked by his dying grandmother to procure duck blood so that she can cook blood soup—called in the text also by its Polish name, *czarnina*—and continue to live. As Stefush's reminiscences about past family feasts clearly show, for his grandma blood soup equals a method of healing, what one of Stefush's uncles mockingly calls "the family's oral transfusion" (Dybek, *Childhood* 27). Busha<sup>4</sup> endows blood soup with almost magical properties, a testimony perhaps to her peasant roots.<sup>5</sup> Urged by her, Stefush embarks on a day-long dream-like peregrination through the neighborhood, which takes him from a butcher's shop, through the Douglass Park area marked by an increasing presence of Hispanics and Blacks, to Mr. Gowupme (the spelling of whose name evokes the pronunciation of the word *golqb* [pidgin] in Polish), an almost legendary figure said to be raising all kinds of fowl. Disobeying his parents' command to stay at home and watch the bed-ridden grandmother, Stefush and his 9-year-old brother Dove are willing to brave the hardships of their unsafe neighborhood in search of a mythic cure and, perhaps, adventure. The boys' quest offers the third-person narrator an opportunity to comment on the demographic changes that the area is undergoing, ceasing to be a primarily Slavic enclave due to the arrival of other ethnic groups, most notably Hispanics and Blacks, which the established Slavic population is not particularly amenable to, and with reciprocity. Taking the two boys through dilapidated buildings and encounters with inimical strangers, the narrative comes full circle when the two boys run back home under the characteristic Chicago El train tracks with a jar of what is supposed to be duck blood. Deciding to taste the liquid, Stefush realizes that he has been fooled by Mr. Gowumpe (as he was earlier deprived of his money by a group of African American teenagers in the park), and the only food item he turned out to have been able to obtain was beetroot juice.

While this brief summary of the story does not aspire to do justice to the complexity, poetic feel or the magical realist qualities of Dybek's prose, it does show, I hope, the prominence of food as the structuring mechanism and the driving force behind the story. Attitude to ethnic food seems to carry intimations of one's own ethnic identification. Busha, presumably a first-generation immigrant of a peasant stock from the partitioned Poland, speaking Polish—the snippets of which are intertwined with the English text—clings to her old-world traditions, both culinary and otherwise. Her bedroom is decorated with "[t]he holy pictures of

4 The grandmother is referred to in the text as Busha, a term of endearment frequently used by Americans of Polish descent that harks back to the Polish words *babcia* or *babusia*.

5 The major wave of Polish migration at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries was by and large of a peasant character; cf. Pula.

Jesus and Mary gaz[ing] down over Busha's bed with sorrowful eyes, hair flowing, their flaming hearts crowned with thorns, pierced by swords, and dripping blood" (Dybek, *Childhood* 26). Catholic icons and rituals, ethnic food, and her use of the Polish language all reflect Busha's primary identification as an ethnic Pole. Without providing much information on Busha's children, the narrative presents her American born and raised grandchildren as still willing to comply with their grandmother's wishes, despite their fear of disobeying their parents and falling victim to various crooks and villains inhabiting the neighborhood.

In general, the first/third generation connection is a common motif in Dybek's fiction, with the grandmother serving as a figure of primary importance, a link for the third-generation Polish Americans to their ethnic roots. In light of this, the ending of the story seems particularly poignant:

He [Steve/Stefush] flipped the jar up over the garage roofs. It turned end over end against the fading sky and seemed to hang liked a kicked football, then plunged down. Dove lunged forward to catch it, only to flinch as it touched his hands, jerking his elbows back into his stomach desperately as the jar hit the pavement with the muffled explosion of glass, splattering the cuffs of their jeans, the white laces of their gym shoes. (52)

Finding out that he has been cheated by people suggested to him as potential procurers of duck blood, Stefush seems to realize the futility of his efforts. Just as blood soup would not miraculously heal his dying grandmother, clinging to old-world traditions likewise seems pointless in the reality of an American working-class urban district. While in one of Anthony Bukoski's stories, invariably set in Superior, Wisconsin, the daughter Stanisława cooks beetroot soup daily for her aged mother coming from the "old country" as a sign of caring for her (177), Dybek's story seems to imply that in an urban setting of Chicago "old country" ways are losing relevance.<sup>6</sup>

The second story that I propose to discuss in this essay, "Sauerkraut Soup," is narrated by Franklin Marzek, who is reminiscing about a period in his young adulthood when he was working in an ice-cream factory to raise money for school. The story begins point-blank: "I couldn't eat. Puking felt like crying" (Dybek, *Childhood* 122). While the reasons for the protagonist/narrator's condition are not elaborated on in the story, his digestion problems are contrasted with the healthy appetite of the Slavic cleanup crew that he is working with: "The lunch table was spread as for a buffet. Swollen gray sausages steaming garlic, raw onions, dark bread, horse-radish, fish roe" (129). Not much is revealed about Frank's ethnic

6 Dybek's attention to ethnic detail in the story makes Thomas S. Gladsky conclude that it is the only story in the collection in which the author "examine[s] the interior of the peasant culture" (*Princes* 258). Elsewhere, Gladsky argues that "in this story Dybek moves beyond ceremonies and the surface features of ethnicity when he tries to capture something of the old world temperament that differentiates Eastern Europeans from Americans and first generation ethnics from their descendants" ("From Ethnicity to Multiculturalism" 110).

background, except for his last name, the fact that he grew up in a neighborhood “where every last name could be spit out like an insult” (124), and a few Polish words interspersed throughout the narrative.<sup>7</sup> Although it may come as somewhat surprising that Frank cannot “exactly identify where in Eastern Europe” (128) his fellow employees came from, his difference from others is accentuated by several other factors as well, including his sickly slenderness and his being a college student in love with literature, whereas most of the other employees are simple working-class folk. Still, Frank’s fantasies about a possible cure for his ailment are expressed in culinary terms as if he were—or were wishing to be—a member of the healthy-appetite group: “*Zupa*—chicken broth, beef barley, cream of celery—sounded like an antidote” (130). Eventually, he wanders into a restaurant on the corner of 47<sup>th</sup> Street and Western Avenue, Chicago, and the area where he works: “Forty-seventh had a number of places like it, mostly family-owned, bars that served hot lunches, little restaurants different ethnics ran, almost invisible amid McDonald’s arches and Burger King driveways” (136). The narrative thus establishes a stark contrast between ubiquitous American fast food restaurants—such as McDonald’s or Burger King—and unassuming ethnic eateries. It is in the latter that Frank is handed a bowl of sauerkraut soup that actually heals him:

She [the waitress] brought it fast, brimming to the lip of the heavy bowl, slopping a little onto the plate beneath it. It was thick and reddish, not the blond color of sauerkraut I’d expected. The kind of soup one cuts into with the edge of the spoon. Steaming. The spoon fogging as if with breath. The peppery smell of soup rising like vapor to open the bronchial tubes. I could smell the scalded pepper and also another spice and then realized what colored the soup—paprika. (137)

Having never had sauerkraut soup before, the narrator is nevertheless convinced that it is the only cure that can counter his inability to hold food: “I’d been thinking of zupa, but of something more medicinal, like chicken rice” (137). He eats two bowls and from a vantage point of further in his life he concludes that these two portions translated into two years of happiness for him, again endowing Slavic food with magical properties.

To go back to the contrast drawn in the story between Frank and the other Eastern European men who he shares the space of the ice-cream factory with, Frank’s inability to eat and participate in the communal lunch is a clear illustration of his departure from and non-belonging in the diasporic community. As Grażyna Kozaczka argues with reference to Dybek’s fiction in her essay “Writing Poland and America: Polish American Fiction in the Twenty-First Century,” “[i]n contrast to the nostalgic embrace of the diasporic past, the present of the Polish American homeland for Dybek is less encouraging as it exhibits clear signs of physical and

7 In Gladsky’s interpretation, in many texts of the collection the “unobtrusive Polishness” of the protagonists “is largely assumed or, if anything, reduced to a cultural residue” (*Princes* 257).

emotional ruin as well as the inability to create and sustain new life" (76). Still, this diasporic wasteland of sorts can be combated, the narrative seems to suggest, but solely by a return home. It is after all only when he accepts clearly ethnic food that Frank is healed, both physically and metaphorically.

To conclude the first part of this essay, ethnic identity is often articulated in culinary terms in Dybek's fiction, with allegiance to culinary traditions posited as a sign of willingness to retain one's ethnic identity as an Eastern European. As Kozaczka puts it, "Polish American characters, mostly representatives of the working class, rarely seek the renewal of their ethnicity through links to the old country, but rather create their ethnic identity based on nostalgia and collective immigrant memories which by the third generation have become practically mythologized" ("Cultural, Class and Ethnic Conflicts" 1063). This diagnosis seems to certainly ring true with respect to the two stories analyzed above; what is more, the memories of ethnicity the two stories evoke clearly have a distinct culinary aroma and taste. In one interview, Dybek himself reflected on the affective dimension of food:

As in any number of households and many immigrant cultures, food is a measure, a conveyor of culture, and it's also a nonverbal way that affection is communicated, which is really important in immigrant households where the grandparents are speaking a language different from the grandkids. In my family where my father was a native Polish speaker and my grandmother spoke little English, we could always communicate via food. The words for food were often in Polish. ("I'm Most Comfortable" 79)

Further, the gendered character of the ethnic foodscape clearly comes to the fore in Dybek's fiction. In the first story, blood soup is to be cooked at the grandma's request, while in the second text the young narrator receives medicinal sauerkraut soup from a waitress described as "too buxom to be grandmotherly" (Dybek, *Childhood* 137). It seems therefore that Dybek's fiction does not question the gendered character of the Polish diaspora, with women being primarily associated with the sphere of food production and distribution. This link between gender and foodscape is also clearly visible in the two texts by Polish American women writers to be discussed below, albeit to somewhat different results.

### **Polish Women Writers on Food**

According to Anne Hetzel Gunkel, as a result of the renewed interest in foodways, more attention is being paid to the role of women in ethnic contexts; as the scholar puts it, "[t]he recovery of material culture, particularly religious iconography and food, provides us access to the creative work of women in our community" (38). In light of this, let me examine the depiction and function of Polish cuisine in two texts authored by women writers associated with Chicago, namely Elizabeth Kern's *Wanting to Be Jackie Kennedy* and Marcia Cebulska's *Lovers, Dreamers &*

*Thieves*. The former is a coming-of-age novel, narrated in the first person by a 50-year-old woman, Ellie Manikowski, who comes back to Chicago after many years for a reunion with her childhood friend. On the way from the O'Hare airport to her hotel in Downtown, on a whim she asks a cab driver to exit the highway and stop nearby her family home on Ashland Avenue, close to the Ashland/Milwaukee/Division intersection, termed the Polish Triangle. The several frame chapters are clearly demarcated by the date May 20, 1994 placed right underneath the chapter numbers, and are strategically placed in the book as Chapters 1, 13, 26, and 36 to slow down the action of the main tale. The majority of the narrative, in turn, takes place in the early 1960s and focuses on the protagonist's experience of growing up in a Polish American household in the oldest Polish American neighborhood in Chicago. I would argue that by narrating ethnicity via food, Kern does not only show Polish cuisine as a link to one's Polish roots, but also signals food's community- and family-building function, a perspective that is not as emphasized in Dybek's short stories analyzed above.<sup>8</sup> The significance of food is accentuated by the fact that Kern devotes numerous paragraphs of her novel to detailed descriptions of Polish dishes, their preparation and consumption.

Polish restaurants that serve *kielbasa* and *pierogi* abound in the Polish American Downtown, the neighborhood in which Ellie grows up, while Poles who attend the polka<sup>9</sup> potluck parties bring trays of Polish food with them. To give an example of Kern's attention to culinary detail, let me quote an excerpt of her novel. As Ellie and her friend Joy sit on a bus—which they typically ride to be able to talk out of the earshot of their relatives—the bus turns out to be filled with Polish men and women on their way to a polka party. One of the girls' acquaintances is described as follows: "Lydia was gripping both edges of a tray of *mazurek*, a dense almond cake layered with preserves and topped with marzipan, candied orange peel, and drizzled with angelica. Already cut into squares, the confections were neatly lined up on a paper doily and protected under cellophane" (Kern 246). Lydia offers the girls a piece of cake as a sign of her hospitality. To give another example, Polish food is also supposed to comfort Poles going through difficult times. When Joy decides to become a nun and leaves her despairing single mom behind, she asks Ellie to "take Ma out for pierogi at The White Eagle... all you can eat. Buy her wine. My treat" (267). Joy assumes that her mother, a Displaced Person who moved to Chicago after World War Two, having lost her husband during the war, will be comforted by the familiar taste of Polish culinary classic, which will help her deal with another loss, that of her daughter to the Catholic church.

Of course, food is not the only marker of Polish ethnic identity in the novel; the characters' religious affiliation as Roman Catholics is likewise very pronounced. Religion seems to dominate the lives of Poles as much as the steeple of their parish church, St Casimir's, towers over the neighborhood. The significance of clinging

8 For a detailed discussion of the novel in the context of transgressive sexuality see Chapter 6 titled "Transgressive Sexuality in Polish American Fiction of the Last Twenty-Five Years" in Kozaczka's *Writing the Polish American Woman* (pp.111-131).

9 For an analysis of the cultural significance of polka for Polish diasporics, see Gunkel; Trochimczyk.

to tradition—both culinary and otherwise—is explained to Ellie by her mother, who shares with her the story of the girl’s maternal grandparents, first-generation immigrants:

She [Ellie’s grandma] and your grandpa came to this country not speaking English, and like most immigrants they worked at simple jobs. Grandma made salads in a cafeteria. Grandpa worked as a machinist. I remember many a time they’d come home in tears because people laughed at them for their broken English, for their old-fashioned clothes, for misunderstanding directions. So they took comfort in sticking with their own. ‘Stick with your own,’ they’d tell me again and again. (Kern 257)

It goes without saying that “sticking with your own” pertains also to foodways.

When it comes to food’s family-building role, many of Ellie’s memories of her family life are accompanied by the aroma of food being cooked in her house. It seems that for the 50-year-old narrator it is easier to remember the smell rather than the taste of the foods of her adolescent years, as the olfactory aspect is definitely the most pronounced in her descriptions. Early in the text, the teenage Ellie draws the reader’s attention to the smell of her home, which is rendered in paradoxical terms as the family occupies two floors above a funeral home, the business that, in Ellie’s mom’s words, “puts the food on the table”:

Funeral homes have a distinct smell. Musty flowers. Stale cigarette and cigar smoke. The acrid chemicals used in embalming. That’s how it was downstairs at our place. But upstairs it was a different story. Upstairs, our hallway smelled like a Polish restaurant: spicy *kielbasa*, pungent sauerkraut, beef and pork roasts smothered in garlic, homemade *babka* and *mazurek* glazed with rum and almond. (Kern 27)

When Ellie comes home that day, she is drawn to her aunt Nina’s apartment on the first floor by the aroma of bread baking: “Nina was in the pantry, so I followed the yeasty aroma into the kitchen. I leaned over the golden crusts of two braided loaves of bread cooling on her stovetop and thought about how I could talk to Nina about anything—my lovelife or lack thereof, my insecurities, my dreams of the future” (27). When her relationship with her aunt is most intimate and comforting, freshly-baked bread seems a perfect reflection of that. However, when later on Ellie finds out that her beloved aunt was having an affair with a local priest, who died of a massive heart attack in her bed and left her pregnant, her naïve vision of the world and her uncomplicated trust in her relative are shattered. When Aunt Nina volunteers to prepare a dessert for Ellie’s 18<sup>th</sup> birthday party as a way to make amends, the girl’s choice could not be further removed from the simplicity of a loaf of bread: she asks Nina to bake her a Napoleon cake, a very complicated dessert, a testimony perhaps to the complexity of adult relationships.

The description of Ellie's birthday party in the novel provides an opportunity to reflect on a relationship between food and social class status. Ellie's family is clearly well-off, as her father and his two younger brothers are running a successful funeral house business started by their father. When Ellie's mom offers to throw a dinner party for Ellie and her friends to celebrate her daughter's 18<sup>th</sup> birthday—a threshold into adulthood—the menu is very sophisticated and not at all distinctly Polish:

Mom served us appetizers on a silver tray. Cheez Whiz on sesame thins with julienne cuts of pimento, and Smoky Links on toothpicks with cellophane frizzies on their tops.... Dinner was prime rib on large china plates along with a leafy green salad, a fluffy spinach souffle, and parkerhouse rolls. My friends were duly impressed. They unfolded their linen napkins on their laps, nervously eyed the assortment of silverware and crystal before them and held their spines rigid. (Kern 173)

What is interesting, culinary sophistication generates discomfort among the young guests, in contradistinction to the previously quoted depictions of food that evoked a sense of intimacy, friendship, and community. Interestingly, this seems to be the only depiction of fancy food in the novel; for the most part, Polish Downtown does not seem to be a place for culinary extravaganza. Even if the food consumed by the characters is not Polish, it is still simple, to give the examples of the Chicago-style hot dogs served in the street or Ellie's Italian American aunt's lasagna brought to the dinner prepared for Father Ben, Aunt Nina's secret lover. The lasagna seems the only culinary concession to outsiders, which nevertheless shows that were the family to accept one not of their own, they would still need to be white and Roman Catholic.

Apart from these two major roles of food discussed above—as marker of ethnicity and element of community-building—food is also presented as a means of subsistence. Ellie's much younger sister Marta ends up as a proprietor of a chain of Polish fast-food restaurants in New York, simply called Marta's. Food also offers a glimpse into ethnic succession, a common pattern of change in urban areas. When the middle-aged Ellie asks her cab driver to stop at her old neighborhood, his initial response is: "That neighborhood is a dump" (Kern 2). As Eleanor walks the neighborhood, it becomes clear that it is now a Mexican American area, a change epitomized by her getting tacos-to-go.

Food also plays a significant role in Marcia Cebulka's *Lovers, Dreamers, & Thieves*, a memoir in which Cebulka tells her family's immigrant history through brief chapters focused on a single family member and through family pictures. Similarly to Dybek's and Kern's take, food in Cebulka's account is related to the preservation of ethnic identity. This is especially clear in the chapter titled "Polish Easter," in which the author enumerates dishes she remembers from Easter celebrations in her family home against the context of a trip she made as a young woman to visit her mother's relatives in the vicinity of Kraków so as to celebrate an

authentic Polish Easter. This notwithstanding, food in Cebulka's memoir serves primarily as a means of social ascent, a function hinted at also in Kern's novel. The family's bakery is so successful that they are wealthy enough to shop at Marshall Fields and move to the suburb of Niles when Marcia is about to start 8<sup>th</sup> grade. Like Kern's protagonist, Cebulka makes a come-back visit to her family home and bakery at 2501 N. Lotus Ave in Chicago as a mature woman. She does so upon the request of her husband, as she herself is extremely reluctant to go, given the painful memories that she shares with the reader: her father's proclivity for gambling, which cost him his reputation and freedom, the physical abuse of her mother by her father that she and her older brother could only helplessly watch, the eventual divorce of her parents, and the father's subsequent downfall and homelessness. The power of Cebulka's account lies in my view in the painful honesty with which she discusses the things that would typically be considered taboos, including her mother's crush on or a possible affair with a local priest, again a motive that her memoir shares with Kern's novel. Cebulka does not offer a sugar-coated view of the Polish American community or her own family, but rather seems to subscribe to the view that truth needs to be told, even if it is a very harsh truth. Even if Kern does not shy away from difficult topics either, her novel still reads as quite an optimistic account of all ending up well in the long run. If Cebulka celebrates anything, it is the power of perseverance.

### Conclusion

As argued in this essay, Stuart Dybek, Elizabeth Kern, and Marcia Cebulka all deploy food as code for ethnicity and family history. Polish Chicagoan literature tends to depict foodscapes as an exclusively female domain, regardless of the author's gender. What is interesting, however, is that women authors, such as Kern and Cebulka, in general seem to pay more attention to the preparation and consumption of Polish dishes as a way to signal their characters' allegiance to their identity as Polish ethnics. While in all of these writers Polish food is understood in terms of ethnic legacy, what the women writers propose is that food can also serve as a means for Polish women to achieve financial stability and freedom outside of the gendered constraints of the Polish American community.

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