



Manage your team and
deadlines with Gantt charts



Home | Children's | Comics | Fantasy | Mystery | Nonfiction | Romance | Science Fiction

Interview with Eric Schlosser

Eric Schlosser has been investigating the fast food industry for years. In 1998, his two-part article on the subject in *Rolling Stone* generated more mail than any other story the magazine had run in years. Schlosser has interviewed slaughterhouse workers; cattle ranchers; potato farmers; fast food employees, founders, and franchisees; and families who have lost a loved one to food poisoning. From his extensive research and travels for this book, he has unearthed a wealth of little-known, often unsettling truths about the fast food industry. His disturbing new book is called [Fast Food Nation](#).

In addition to writing for *Rolling Stone*, Schlosser has contributed to *The New Yorker* and has been a correspondent for the *Atlantic Monthly* since 1996. He won a National Magazine Award for "Reefer Madness" and "Marijuana and the Law" and has received a Sidney Hillman Foundation Award for reporting. His work has been nominated for several other National Magazine Awards and for the Loeb Award for business journalism.

Q) Whether the product is furniture, books, clothes, or food, chains are taking over independent businesses across the country and the world. What prompted you to focus on fast food?

A) The fast food industry is enormous—and enormously influential. The fast food chains demonstrated that you could create identical retail environments and sell the same products at thousands of different locations. The huge success of McDonald's spawned countless imitators. The founders of the Gap later said they'd been inspired by McDonald's and Kentucky Fried Chicken. The key to all these businesses is uniformity and conformity. So by looking at fast food, I'm trying to explain how communities throughout the United States have lost a lot of their individuality over the past twenty years and have started to look exactly the same.


Cover of *Fast Food Nation* by Eric Schlosser
[Click here](#) for ordering information.

Q) *Fast Food Nation* begins with a look at Cheyenne Mountain and the Colorado Springs area. Why did you focus on this part of the country?

A) Well, I could have chosen just about any suburban community and told much the same story. But Colorado Springs appealed to me because its growth has neatly paralleled the growth of the fast food industry. The city feels like a place on the cutting edge—like Los Angeles in the 1950s—a glimpse, maybe, of America's future. The high-tech economy there, and the kind of thinking that goes with it, seem linked to the fast food industry's worship of new gadgets and technology. And I wanted to set the book somewhere in the American West, the part of the country that embodies our whole spirit of freedom and independence and self-reliance. Those are the very qualities that the fast food industry is now helping to eliminate.



Q) Why has the fast food industry grown so quickly around the world?

A) Here in the States, I think, fast food is popular because it's convenient, it's cheap, and it tastes good. But the real cost of eating fast food never appears on the menu. By that I mean the cost of the obesity epidemic fast food has helped to unleash, the social costs of having such a low-wage workforce, and the health costs of the new industrialized agriculture that supplies the big restaurant chains.

Overseas, much of fast food's appeal stems from its Americanness. Like Hollywood movies, MTV, and blue jeans, fast food has become one of our major cultural exports.

Q) How do fast food restaurants benefit from "de-skilled" jobs and from high turnover among their employees?

A) A reliance on cheap labor has been crucial to the fast food industry's success. It's no accident that the industry's highest rate of growth occurred during a period when the real value of the U.S. minimum wage declined by about 40 percent. The chains have worked hard to "de-skill" the jobs in their kitchens by imposing strict rules on how everything must be done, selling highly processed food that enters the restaurant already frozen or freeze-dried and easy to reheat, and relying on complex kitchen machinery to do as much of the work as possible. Instead of employing skilled short-order cooks, the chains try to employ unskilled workers who will do exactly as they're told. The chains are willing to put up with turnover rates of 300 to 400 percent in order to keep their labor costs low. It doesn't really matter to them who comes or goes, since this system treats all workers as though they're interchangeable.

Q) Was it difficult to get people involved in fast food, meatpacking, and farming to talk to you for the book?

A) The workers, farmers, and ranchers I met were eager to talk. They often feel cut out of the story, as though nobody in the media is really listening. A few

Manage your team and
deadlines with Gantt charts

A) I guess it was the far-reaching influence of this food that surprised me most. Because it's something you never really think about. Fast food is everywhere; it seems so mundane, taken for granted. But it has changed what we eat, how we work, what our towns look like, and what we look like in the mirror. I also was amazed to learn that much of fast food's taste is manufactured at a series of chemical plants off the New Jersey Turnpike.

Q) Do you feel that the fast food industry has made any positive impressions on our culture?

A) In the early days, I think the industry embodied some of the best things about this country. It was started by high school dropouts who had little training, by entrepreneurs who made it big by working hard. Guys like the McDonald brothers didn't rely on focus groups, marketing surveys, or management consultants with MBAs. They just set up their grills and started cooking. It's ironic that what they created turned into such a symbol of faceless, ruthless corporate power. It's a very American story, both good and bad.

Q) You say in the book that restaurant workers are more vulnerable to robbery than bank tellers are. Why hasn't more been done to improve their safety?

A) The answer's pretty simple: more hasn't been done because it costs money to do it. A huge proportion of fast food robberies are committed by past or present employees. They're inside jobs. But for years the industry has resisted the idea of performing background checks on job applicants. One of the perpetrators of the recent Wendy's massacre in New York City had a long history of working at and robbing fast food restaurants. The chains could do a lot more to protect their workers. They could do background checks, keep less cash on hand, close their restaurants earlier at night, pay their workers better and reduce the turnover rate, impose tougher security at opening and closing times. By not spending the money on these things, the chains are placing countless young people at risk of violent crime.

Q) One of the book's most arresting passages describes your visit to a slaughterhouse in which the working conditions are atrocious. How have slaughterhouses gotten away with such poor management and treatment of employees for so long? Do you foresee any changes in this industry in the near future?

A) The meatpacking industry now employs some of the poorest, most vulnerable workers in the United States. Most are recent immigrants. Many of them are illiterate and don't speak English. Many are illegals. A generation ago, meatpacking workers belonged to strong unions that could fight for better pay and working conditions. But today's workers often feel that they can't speak out, since they are rightly afraid they will be fired or deported. It's amazing to me how well hidden these abuses remain. I think the media's lack of interest in the plight of meatpacking workers has to do with their skin color. If blond-haired, blue-eyed workers were being mistreated this way, there'd be a huge uproar.

I think the working conditions in the nation's meatpacking plants could improve very quickly—almost overnight. The fast food chains have the power to say to their suppliers, Treat your workers better or we won't buy meat from you anymore. McDonald's is the world's largest purchaser of beef. It recently issued strict guidelines to its suppliers on the humane treatment and slaughter of animals. I think McDonald's should now show the same kind of compassion for human beings.

Q) What changes would you like to see instituted within the fast food industry and the government agencies regulating it?

A) I'd like the fast food industry to start assuming some of the real costs it now imposes on the rest of society. And I don't think the chains are going to pay those costs willingly. The right legislation will have to do the job. I'd like to see a total ban on the advertising of unhealthy food to children. If a grown man or woman wants to buy a bacon double cheeseburger with large fries, well, great, it's a free country. But the fast food chains should not be allowed to spend millions advertising fatty, unsafe food for children. Obesity is now the second leading cause of death in the United States, after smoking. In the interest of public health, we've banned cigarette ads directed at adults. We should do at least as much to protect children. Such a ban, among other things, would encourage McDonald's to sell Happy Meals that aren't so laden with fat.

I'd like to see a rise in the minimum wage, tougher enforcement of overtime laws, and new OSHA regulations designed to protect employees who work at restaurants late at night. All of these things will help improve the lives of fast food workers—the biggest group of minimum wage earners in the United States.

And I'd like to see a complete overhaul of the federal food safety system, which at the moment is spread across a dozen separate agencies. We should have a single food safety agency, completely separate from the Department of Agriculture, that has power over the fast food industry and its suppliers. We should be able to demand recalls of tainted food, and we should be able to impose fines on companies that deliberately sell bad meat. Right now millions of Americans are needlessly being sickened by what they eat.

Q) Are you a vegetarian? Do you eat fast food?

A) I have a lot of respect for people who are vegetarian for religious or ethical reasons. Despite all my research, however, I'm still a carnivore. My favorite meal by far is a cheeseburger with fries. But I don't eat ground beef anymore. I've seen firsthand what goes into it, and I'm angry about the careless greed of the meatpacking industry. I still eat beef, though I always try to buy meat that's been produced by ranchers who care about their animals and the land. And no, I won't eat fast food anymore. Not until the industry changes its ways.

Posted with permission of Houghton Mifflin Company. Copyright ©copy 2002 Houghton Mifflin Company, All Rights Reserved.

Vice Media Files for Chapter 11 Bankruptcy

Oprah Selects The Covenant of Water as 101st Book Club Pick

Ed Sheeran Wins Copyright Lawsuit Over Marvin Gaye Song

WGA Writers on Strike Over Streaming, AI and Preserving the Writers' Room



Index

[Readers Read](#)
[Book Excerpts](#)
[Reviews](#)



Best Cloud Point of Sale

Elevate your business with a flexible POS built for mobility and digital guest experiences

Infrasys Cloud POS

[Learn more](#)