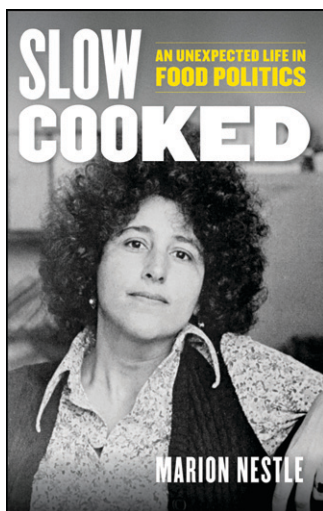


# A Food Politician Memoir and a Plea for Social Justice

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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**Slow Cooked: An Unexpected Life in Food Politics**  
By Marion Nestle

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I thought I knew everything about the trials and tribulations of Marion Nestle, who today is considered to be the greatest warrior for public health nutrition in the United States. For more than 20 years, I have followed the many epic battles she has fought and continues to fight today: her battle against junk food, her denunciations of the influence of agri-food manufacturers on the nutrition and health of consumers and their ability to influence public policy, and her salutary questioning of the impact of conflicts of economic interest on recommendations and nutritional policies. Details can be found in her books, articles, and interviews and on her Web site. In short, I thought I knew everything about the career of Marion Nestle.

But her latest book, *Slow Cooked: An Unexpected Life in Food Politics*, reveals many other battles she led, of which the vast majority of her admirers were likely unaware. These very difficult, trying fights forged her personal and professional life and allow us to better understand what she has become today, in particular to better realize why her true career began after the age of 60 years: hence, the wonderful title of her book. Her story confirms that slow cooking often gives rise to the best, tastiest dishes.

This fascinating story of her life, told in the first person, reads like an adventure

novel full of twists and turns. She teaches us about her long period of “simmering” with many obstacles to overcome, which made it possible to hatch this icon of nutrition who has inspired so many nutrition professionals worldwide. And I am one of those who have been deeply marked by her visions of nutrition and public health.

The first chapters remind us of the struggles of an American child born in the post-Depression period to a poor Jewish family who asks only to be recognized and loved, a sad and unfair childhood and a rather dark period but one fortunately interspersed with moments of joy, especially related to food. Her interests in food and the pleasures of eating in this dreary childhood undoubtedly weighed on her desire to study food a few years later.

We can follow her fight to escape her environment and to overcome the prejudices faced by women of her generation in the 1950s. As was expected at the time, she followed the societal model and left her studies to marry at 19 years of age and have two children she loved and cared for. However, a revelation came 10 years later. The story makes us relive the fight of a divorced woman with two children who decided to resume a university course.

It is in the bubbling context of this period marked by the struggles of civil rights movements that she earned a doctorate in molecular biology. But making a career in the world of science was not easy. We discover in detail the fight of a woman to have a professional career that recognized her skills and her work. It is also striking to find recurrently throughout her studies and later, in the different positions that she occupied in various structures, the same common threads: her constant interest

in (good) cuisine and (good) food and her passion for (good) nutrition.

It is also quite fascinating to see how she learned about this emerging discipline and became aware of its association with public health. In “on-the-job” training, she immersed herself in books and enriched herself through the various positive and negative encounters she had. Through her story, we discover the obstacles she had to overcome (and there were many) to evolve in an academic university setting still full of prejudice and social, religious, and racial discrimination.

By dint of persistence and despite the difficulties, she went on to a post-doctorate (in biochemistry) and became a lecturer and then an assistant professor. She was confronted with social inequalities (differences in wages between men and women, the difficulties of students from ethnic minority groups) but also discovered the pleasure and richness of teaching. First recruited as “her husband’s wife” at the University of San Francisco, she had to overcome many obstacles to finally be named, on the basis of her skills, professor of biology and of nutritional sciences at the university.

Eventually, she decided to work as a senior nutrition policy advisor at the US Department of Health and Human Services. She spent two years there in what she describes as a federal prison, a very difficult experience for the rebel faced with the constraints of a Reagan era administration so close to economic actors and their political influences. She worked for a year and a half on the famous *Surgeon General’s Report on Nutrition and Health*,<sup>1</sup> having to juggle between science and multiple pressures so as not to upset influential politicians who are so quick to relay the demands of economic actors. In the absence of

being able to recommend reductions in meat consumption—a flagship of the American economy—it was necessary to limit herself to mentioning saturated fats, terminology better tolerated by meat producers. She saw from the inside the pressure from lobbies that relied on politicians to block any unwanted messages and any unwanted public health action that they considered to go against their interests.

After these two years within the “DC culture,” she came out even better armed to testify against and denounce the interference of food industrialists. This provided her with the material to write books that became cult favorites and allowed her to be present in the media and listened to by health professionals as well as the general public. But it also gave her the desire to regain her total freedom by returning to the university setting. She was recruited by New York University, where she developed further, still having to overcome many obstacles, a nutrition department while pursuing (with great enthusiasm) a career as a critical analyst of food industry stocks.

She shares many “tasty” anecdotes that illustrate the underside of her new adventures and her meetings with scientists, cooks, public health officials, journalists, food columnists, politicians, and students, meetings that were often pleasant and sometimes rather unpleasant but that helped her to grow.

And we suddenly discover that it is not until the age of 66 years that she published her book *Food Politics*,<sup>2</sup> which marked a turning point in her life and made her the great lady who raised the concept of the link between food and politics. After the release of her book, she had to face attacks, criticisms, and even threats of lawsuits. She experienced moments of doubt but was

encouraged by testimonials of recognition, multiple awards and prizes she received, and the attention of the media that opened their doors to her.

By telling us the story of her life, Marion Nestle allows us to understand the journey of a woman whose courage and perseverance led to the birth of a militant public health activist, but one who always knew how to rely on science and knowledge. She is a critical activist against those who, for the defense of purely economic interests, heavily influence the food and health of populations, those (in particular, food manufacturers) who want us to believe that nutritional problems are only a matter of individual responsibility, thus minimizing or even completely denying their influence on the food choices of consumers. She is an activist certainly, but a thousand miles from the image of an Ayatollesque hygienist that some want to give to nutritionists, reminding us that, on the contrary, pleasure and health are compatible and desirable in the field of food.

Moreover, this book, beyond the author’s personal story and the issue of nutrition, is a magnificent plea for social justice against all types of discrimination and for the emancipation of women. She teaches us great lessons on how to overcome obstacles while maintaining intellectual integrity and faith in science and public health. Marion, thank you for your actions. Keep fighting and give us many more of the lessons of hope that inspire us so deeply. **AJPH**

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## CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The author reports no conflicts of interest.

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