Overview: In *The American Way of Eating*, author Tracie McMillan wants to unveil the truth about the way the American food system works and she does so with her journalistic writing focused on the issues of food and class in America. Originally from a small town in Michigan, McMillan grew up thinking that certain foods were attached to certain socioeconomic factors, including income as well as race and ethnicity. After moving to New York City to go to college, McMillan began working as a journalist, writing about welfare, child care, and other programs. It was during this time that she realized her own feelings about how economics and wealth play a role in the food industry as well as the politics behind the availability of fresh produce in America were not unique to her and her experiences. In fact, almost by accident McMillan discovered that the people with whom she was interacting for her writings had very similar opinions about the relationship between class and the way a person ate. This realization caused McMillan to seriously question the system: Why doesn’t everyone in this country have equal access to fresh, healthy, and fair priced food? What would it take to make it so that all Americans could eat well? With these questions in mind, McMillan set out to spend a year working undercover (and simultaneously following the journey of food from the fields to American’s dinner plates) in three sectors of the food industry: a supermarket produce section, a chain restaurant kitchen, and produce fields up and down the west coast.
The narrative in *The American Way of Eating* is approachable and engaging while still remaining informative. McMillan makes her point about the socioeconomic aspects of the world of food by taking three different food-related jobs in three different areas of the country. Starting at the lowest end of the economic spectrum, McMillan works as a field laborer harvesting produce. She moves out to California and spends two months moving around just as many farm workers do, constantly hoping to find better work and better housing. Next she makes her way back east to work as a stock clerk in two Michigan Walmart stores. Working at Walmart she feels as though she is infiltrating a part of the food system which is “curiously absent from most of today’s food debates” (11), the supermarket. McMillan points out that how food gets from the fields to American’s dinner tables is a part of the equation people don’t as often think about, even if they are concerned about whether they are buying organic or fair-trade items. Lastly she heads back to New York and works as an expediter (a role which doesn’t involved cooking but instead focuses on garnishing plates and the organization of orders) at a Brooklyn Applebee’s, which is one of the biggest casual dining chain restaurants in America.

At the beginning of each section (correlating with a new job) McMillan breaks down her wages before and after taxation, her food bill, and the percent of income spent on food. In a journalistic study similar to the one Barbara Ehrenreich set up for herself in her own book *Nickel and Dimed*, McMillan lives within the earnings she receives from each job as if there were no other option. McMillan carefully documents what she
experiences as a part of each job, while also watching and taking note of the lives of the people around her. As she was undercover and did not want to be treated differently, McMillan did not tell people she was planning on documenting what she observed about their lives. What is especially important about this book is that McMillan is not only interested in how having one of these three job affects her own life, but she is also interested in the people whose lives are defined by these jobs which she is simply testing.

In The American Way of Eating, McMillan has written a book which is relevant to everyone, no matter race, class, gender, or geographic location. We are all a part of the way food is produced, because we all eat. In this same way we are all affected by the availability of certain foods where we live and through her narrative McMillan is questioning why that is.

*How this work can be applied to American Studies:* McMillan is uncovering the truth about the way the American food system works as well as addressing questions about social privilege. The globalization of (mostly cheap and unhealthy) food, especially chain restaurants or brand names which produce cheap food, are being looked at historically and sociologically by McMillan. In the book, McMillan references many pop-culture icons as well as food historians and other members of academia while discussing theories surrounding the food culture in America such as the “paradox of plenty”. She is also examining the economic implications of food production and produce availability in
America and around the world. “Put simply, our [American] agriculture is abundant but healthy diets are not. The American way of eating is defined not by plenty, but by the simultaneous, contradictory, relentless presence of scarce nutrition in its midst. And though this conundrum may be seen most clearly in America’s extravagant harvests alongside our declining health, it is slowly taking root across the globe.” (10)