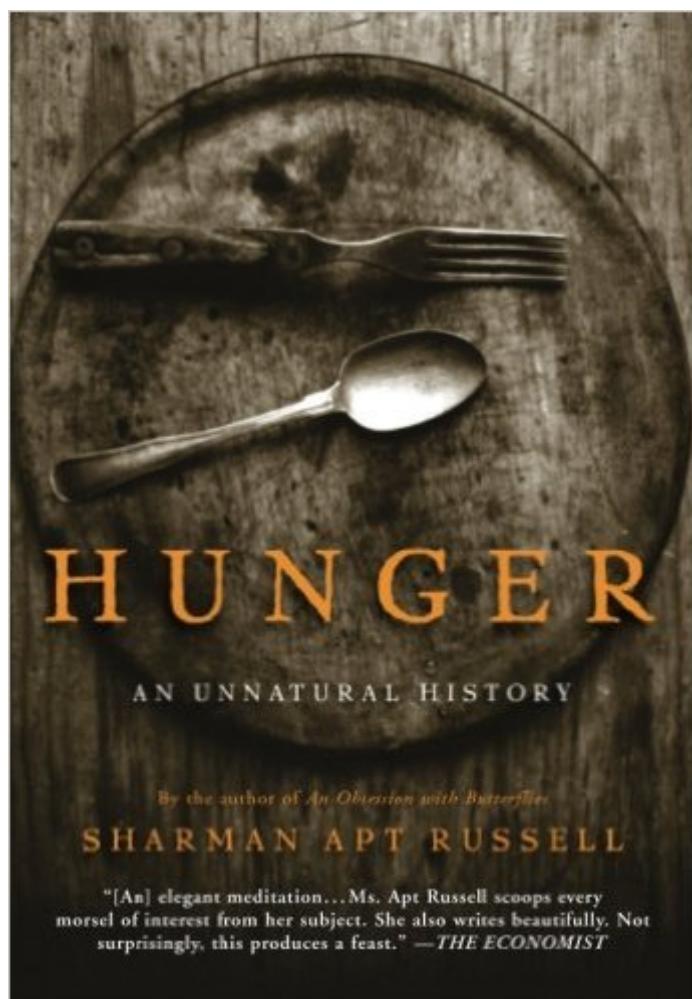


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# Hunger: An Unnatural History



## **Synopsis**

Every day, we wake up hungry. Every day, we break our fast. Hunger is both a natural and an unnatural human condition. In Hunger, Sharman Apt Russell explores the range of this primal experience. Step by step, Russell takes us through the physiology of hunger, from eighteen hours without food to thirty-six hours to three days to seven days to thirty days. In quiet, elegant prose, she asks a question as big as history and as everyday as skipping lunch: How does hunger work?

## **Book Information**

Paperback: 272 pages

Publisher: Basic Books; Reprint edition (September 5, 2006)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0465071651

ISBN-13: 978-0465071654

Product Dimensions: 5.5 x 0.6 x 8 inches

Shipping Weight: 9.6 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.5 out of 5 starsÂ  See all reviewsÂ  (22 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #197,618 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #190 inÂ  Books > Science & Math > Nature & Ecology > Natural History #253 inÂ  Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Social Sciences > Poverty #461 inÂ  Books > Medical Books > Administration & Medicine Economics > Health Care Delivery

## **Customer Reviews**

A wonderfully written, rich, sweeping survey of hunger. many fine stories - some harrowing - finely told and thoughtfully examined. Only a few minor errors - colostrum is thick and yellowy, not thin and blue, for example, and there was little reference to recent work on the speed of metabolic recovery after low-calorie eating. But these should spoil the book for no-one; it was informative, elegant and clever, and I recommend it heartily.

Most of us have never been hungry, I mean really hungry the way many of the people in this book have been hungry. What Sharman Apt Russell does is show the reader just what it is like in a physical, mental, political and medical way to be hungry, very hungry. She begins with the so-called "hunger artists" who performed feats of fasting for audiences while sometimes up in cages overlooking traveled boulevards. It seems fasting was a bit of a fad in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. She mentions literary fasters like the protagonist of Kalka's story "A Hunger Artist" and

that of Knut Hamsun's splendid short autobiographical novel *Hunger* (1890). She also gives us the all-time champ, holder of the record in the Guinness Book of Records (last acknowledged in 1971; Guinness no longer records fasts because of the dangers involved). His name is Mr. A.B. and he weighed 456 pounds when he began. 382 days later he weighed 180 pounds. Next she shows how our digestive system works and how it changes during food deprivation--what happens after 36 hours, 7 days, 30 days. The details about ghrelin and leptin, glucose and ketones are fascinating. Then she recalls famous hunger strikes including some very interesting material on the suffragettes, the Irish Republicans and Mahatma Gandhi. Then comes the horror of the Warsaw Ghetto and, amazingly enough, the work of Jewish doctors in the ghetto who took that gruesome opportunity to measure and study the steps toward death by starvation. Russell reports on "The Minnesota Experiment" during World War II in which young male conscientious objectors volunteered to go on an extended starvation diet so that doctors would know how to treat those in Europe and elsewhere after the war was over. After awhile these healthy young men cared nothing about sex or social activities. All they thought about was food. The academically inclined turned from scholarly books to cookbooks and found that the only conversations that interested them were about food, food, food. This reminds me of some of the episodes of TV's "Survivor." In "The Anthropology of Hunger" (Chapter 9) Russell explores "hunger frustration" among some tribes in Africa and Papua New Guinea. People tend to get a little testy when they don't have enough to eat, and when they have a culture that admires thinness and detests gluttony, they tend to eat on the sly, as do the Kalauna of Papua New Guinea. In this chapter Russell revisits anthropologist Colin Turnbull's famous book *The Mountain People* (1972) about the Ik people of Uganda who seemed to lack in common human decency. She argues that it was semi-starvation that drove the psychology of these people, and that Turnbull failed to adequately appreciate this. There is a chapter on "Anorexia nervosa" and attendant psychology, Karen Carpenter and the distorted body images of adolescent girls. And then come the chapters entitled, "Hungry Children" and the "Protocols of Famine." Now it really gets ugly, and the pages no longer turn themselves. The technical words become "dysentery" and "cholera" and "marasmus" and "kwashiorkor," words that describe starvation in children. Now the book is hard to read: Somalia, Ethiopia, the Sudan, famine all over the world, in China under Mao 1959-1962, in Guatemala under the military backed by the US, in short the words are about the geopolitics of hunger. Russell ends with a chapter on the potato famine in Ireland in 1845-50 and how that too was as much the result of political failure as it was the result of the potato blight. Her last words are about St. Patrick who went on a hunger strike against God, "a troscad until death."

This incredible book covers every aspect of hunger from your rumbling tummy to mass starvation. It includes science, history, anthropology, philosophy, hope and despair; topics such as anorexia nervosa, religious fasting, and hunger studies - both planned and imposed. The phrases grip you; the thoughts connect or clarify. The subject matter is so huge, so important and so well dealt with that I felt at every level that Hunger touches us all.

In marvelously non-technical fashion, Russell describes the biology of hunger: what happens to your body as you go eighteen hours, thirty-six hours, and thirty days without food. She shows how hunger strikes have changed the world (from Gandhi's non-violent strikes to the Irish Republican Army and British suffragettes), the role of fasting in myriad religious traditions, how hunger has defined certain traditional cultures, and even how hunger has been used as entertainment. Some chapters illuminate fascinating chapters in the history of hunger. "The Hunger Disease Studies" narrates how internationally renowned Jewish scientists in the Warsaw Ghetto used the omnipresent starvation to perform scientific studies on every aspect of starvation, searching for meaning in terrible suffering. "The Minnesota Experiment" describes an enlightening study of starvation and refeeding during World War II. Russell casts her net wide, examining the social and biological aspects of anorexia, giving an inside view to famine relief in Somalia and Ethiopia, and showing how hunger affects children distinctly. Russell's skilled prose makes even the World Health Organization's technical instructions on refeeding a malnourished child interesting. She reminds us that science is a kind of poetry. As with all the best non-fiction, her endnotes offer a wealth of fascinating literature on every aspect of hunger, a literature I'll be sure to dive into. As another reviewer wrote, Russell's writing "is an extraordinary mating of exciting, sure-footed science and inspired prose poetry" (Burlington Free Press, 10 August 2003).

This book kept my interest from beginning to end. Among other things, she talks about the difference between fasting and starvation, the religious tradition of fasting (periodically for some, supposedly constantly for a few "saints"), anorexia, and the results of constant hunger on people's minds, bodies, and especially behavior, whether they're volunteer experiments or real people in poor societies who are slowly starving to death. The latter stories, as well as information about famines in China, Ireland, and elsewhere, are sobering and sad. Naturally, these experiences are in such stark contrast to how most of we overfed Americans live, and I kept thinking of some of the constant exhortations you find in diet books like "never skip breakfast" or "don't eat foods such as carrots or potatoes because you'll gain weight more easily, eat low carb only." This book was a

good reality check about that sort of advice. On an optimistic note, Ms. Russell also talks about the efforts of Dr. Steven Collins and others to help provide portable, nutrient rich foods to starving people, and that chapter ends very hopefully. I highly recommend this book.

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