

*Gulp*  
Mary Roach  
Nonfiction  
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Gulping Down *Gulp* by Mary Roach

By Lily

Stymied in your search for the reason that your dog chows down on his own feces? Endlessly curious as to why, exactly, the smell of your flatulence can cause those around you to run screaming? Wondering who else has dropped one in their pants onstage? Luckily, Mary Roach's *Gulp* contains the answers to all, and more, of these bewildering queries.

A graduate from Wesleyan University, Roach has written for publications like *National Geographic* and *The New York Times Magazine*, along with penning other monosyllabic books such as *Spook*, *Bonk*, and *Stiff*. Astoundingly, Roach does not have a science degree, though she did have a part-time public relations job at the San Francisco Zoo. The strange calls she handled there, namely those about elephant wart removal and rumors of cheetahs falling victim to parasitic fleas, most likely laid the groundwork for her candid approach to the subjects she has written about.

In this case, Roach's stunning tale of the alimentary canal is not for the squeamish. By starting with taste and its relationship to smell, and ending with the digestive bacteria that colonize the gut, she manages to touch on the most fascinating parts of the digestive tract. Her chapters, comically and intriguingly named, such as "Up Yours: *the alimentary canal as criminal accomplice*," are witty and far-reaching, though not seemingly connected by anything other than their uniting theme. Her research often

answers the unasked questions, leaving readers giggling over their newfound enlightenment.

In *Gulp*, readers discover that their beloved canine spurns expensive kibble for the charming warmth of its own defecation because of the nutrients present only in the second round of digestion. Noxious flatus (a scientific word for a fart) occurs because of the lovely combinations of hydrogen sulfide, methanethiol, and dimethyl sulfide. And Elvis Presley, the King himself, was known to soil himself onstage due to his megacolon, which was almost three-times the normal size.

Roach's rib-tickling footnotes were a constant source of delight. They ranged from vocabulary lessons to amusing tidbits to exquisitely childish puns. A digression from "grumous remains of food" brought the reader: "Meaning 'clotted or lumpy.'" *Grumous* is one of the many evocative words that deserve to break free from medical dictionaries and join the ranks of day-to-day vocabulary. Likewise, *glabrous* ('smooth and hairless'), *periblepsis* ('the wild look of delirium') and *maculate* ('spotted')." For those curious, it is impossible, as ascertained from a footnote, to truly "knock the shit" out of a person without simultaneously killing them. Another Roach annotation shows her puerile glee from the realization that the name of a doctor working with defecation was Dr. Crapo ("who would, you think, had long ago ceased to find that sort of thing amusing"). Though readers haven't.

The one minor detractor from Roach's otherwise outstanding book was that the occasional onslaught of unexplained medical jargon had this reader reaching for a dictionary more often than otherwise desired.

Although *Gulp* is not a typical book that young adults enjoy devouring, it is immensely amusing and worthy of a read. It is vital to understand your own body, to realize that what goes in is as important as what comes out. Having said this, the teenager that picks up *Gulp* must have a preference for scientific humor. It isn't the average book that readers tote to the beach to casually peruse while sunbathing. To completely follow its flow, close attention must be paid to each sentence. For those that are not deterred by this, the book is a fabulous, entertaining, and wholly rewarding read. And for those that engage in a sort of method reading: eating or going to the bathroom while absorbing the book lends more meaning—along with some perverse joy—to the delight that is *Gulp*.