

Henry First



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“Henry First was dying in the kitchen...” And so this marvelous novel opens behind the scenes at First’s where Henry, owner and master chef, is, with mounting anxiety, preparing a succulent dish to tempt the judges in the Restaurant of the Year Competition; a competition that is orchestrated and manipulated by the aggressively ambitious FK&K executive, Patrice Czarny, whose plush offices literally look down upon Henry First’s establishment from the opposite side of the square. In his humble street-side restaurant, Henry has the brash temerity to aspire to the grandest of culinary heights. Patrice Czarny, however, is a formidable foe. For FK&K Corporation, food is the ultimate commodity, one that is politicized and franchised, packaged and sold, where profit margins are meticulously scrutinized, where outsourcing threatens and food is less a masterful combination of carefully chosen ingredients but a weapon of politics, of celebrity, of power. Henry First threatens this notion of pre-packaged cuisine, of cut-rate homogeneity where restaurants are concerned. Despite the seemingly unlimited resources Patrice can bring to battle, the indomitable Henry has an ace up his sleeve – a secret ingredient that brings diners to their collective knees. Peppered with an exquisite cast of supporting characters – from the supportive Dolores (Henry’s wife) to Felix Stoll (Henry’s brother-in-law) who is hospital-bound and cancer-ridden, dying with a petulant childishness that is brilliantly portrayed – this novel is meticulously constructed and a seductive delight to read. Patrice employs her sometime henchman Grant Whant, food critic and reluctant cohort to the FK&K scheme, to determine Henry’s recipe for the delectable gravy that brings the ailing Felix back to robust life and that transforms dainty diners into ravenous beasts. The horrifyingly vacuous creature Lucilla (whose own son has been sacrificed at the surgical altar) is another memorable FK&K associate who has been harnessed to the cause – bring Henry down! Lawrence depicts, with incisive penetration, the modern obsessions with food and diet, with the allure of plastic surgery that promises physical perfection but delivers instead a horrifyingly homogeneous plasticity. Life in the restaurant kitchen is perfectly rendered - with a deft mastery of kitchen-speak, the chaotic hubbub of food-prep, the back-and-forth between underchefs, waiters and diners, the intermingling aromas and sounds that bring the busy commercial kitchen to vivid life. Lawrence winds up the plot with exquisite tautness, tensions escalating as Patrice desperately seeks Henry’s secret, the secret that promises to threaten the culinary uniformity upon which FK&K depends. With overtones of the Shakespearean *Titus Andronicus*, in all its gruesome brilliance, *Henry First* is a wittily macabre examination of eating, cooking and surviving in the 21st century.

Verdict: a witty delight, a literary feast for the senses, a culinary masterpiece of a novel - highly recommended!

