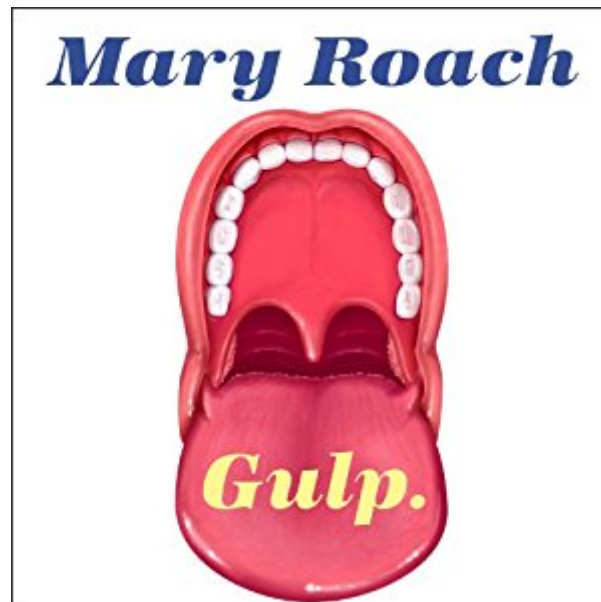


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Gulp: Adventures On The Alimentary Canal



Synopsis

Best-selling author Mary Roach returns with a new adventure to the invisible realm we carry around inside. Roach takes us down the hatch on an unforgettable tour. The alimentary canal is classic Mary Roach terrain: The questions explored in *Gulp* are as taboo, in their way, as the cadavers in *Stiff* and every bit as surreal as the universe of zero gravity explored in *Packing for Mars*. Why is crunchy food so appealing? Why is it so hard to find words for flavors and smells? Why doesn't the stomach digest itself? How much can you eat before your stomach bursts? Can constipation kill you? Did it kill Elvis? In *Gulp* we meet scientists who tackle the questions no one else thinks of - or has the courage to ask. We go on location to a pet-food taste-test lab, a fecal transplant, and into a live stomach to observe the fate of a meal. With Roach as our guide, we travel the world, meeting murderers and mad scientists, Eskimos and exorcists (who have occasionally administered holy water rectally), rabbis and terrorists - who, it turns out, for practical reasons do not conceal bombs in their digestive tracts. Like all of Roach's books, *Gulp* is as much about human beings as it is about human bodies.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Mary Roach is one of my favorite science writers and I always buy her books and read them when they first come out. This book - *Gulp* - is all about the alimentary canal; that part of the body that begins at the point where food is consumed and ends where solid waste is expelled. Starting with taste and the mouth, she follows our digestive system all the way down. As with her other books, this one is replete with interesting and often bizarre facts and tales of eccentrics and misguided

scientists and experiments gone awry. The author covers all sorts of "taboo" and sensitive subjects and both educates us and makes us laugh. At the start, we learn about the importance of our nose (our ability to smell) and what that has to do with taste. She also compares our tastebuds with those of cats and dogs - showing how we often assume that they will like what we will. Well, it turns out that's really wrong. We learn how different cultures throughout history have found different things palatable and that the foods consumed by the most privileged may not be the healthiest. She also goes on later on to compare the anatomy of man to those of various other animals and points out how we are the same and how we differ. We learn about the problems and benefits associated with our digestive system and the various theories and treatments over time for various intestinal ailments. In typical Mary Roach style, she candidly discusses such "taboo" topics as intestinal gas and our bowel habits. We read about the dangers of prisoners secreting contraband in their stomachs or their anal cavities and go from there to learning about the digestive systems of competitive eaters.

'Laundry detergent is essentially a digestive tract in a box.' Now, where else but in a book written by Mary Roach, the author who loves weird science, would we learn such a thing? I mean, it makes sense, but I have never seen anyone write those words. In her new book, 'Gulp' etc, Mary Roach takes us from the mouth to the anus, and all the by-ways in-between. It is one of the more fascinating and informative books I have read in a long time. I am a health care practitioner, but I have learned more about our alimentary canal and the research involved in its mysteries, than any of my Anatomy and Physiology books. There is so much to know and learn, I want to cover it all, but I won't, I will leave it to you to go on this journey. "The human digestive track is like the Amtrak line from Seattle to Los Angeles; transit time is about thirty hours, and the scenery on the last leg is pretty monotonous". There you have it, from the first bite of food that is first smelled, chewed, oral digestive acids acted upon, moved down the esophagus to the stomach and into the bowels, large and small intestine and then into the anus, where the food that went in is expelled. The circuitous route taken is fascinating. Chewing leads to a discussion of saliva, and we learn "Bodily fluids, gas and excrement may disgust us once they leave the body, but "we are large, mobile vessels of the very substances we find most repulsive." We learn a lot about 'gas', its make-up, smell, testing, who makes the most gas, farting, and on and on. Megacolon, the large bowel dilatation that causes much straining to release its contents and can cause cardiac arrhythmia and death, as it probably did for Elvis Presley. Mary Roach spent a great deal of time in her research for this book, traveling the world.

My review, in two words: don't bother. After I heard Mary Roach discussing GULP during a Radiolab podcast, I really wanted to read it. She was talking about the symbiotic relationship we have with bacteria that inhabit our intestines and colon, and the podcast was fascinating and disgusting and informative. A really wonderful mix. I read STIFF a while back and enjoyed it, so I started GULP with high hopes. All dashed. GULP supposed to be about nourishment, about eating and excreting, about how important and undervalued our 'alimentary canal' is. It starts with the mouth and ends with the butt, and every chapter is a little more disgusting than the last. There's a whole chapter about fecal transplants, and if you're like me, that's a hook that will make you reach for the buy button. I understand that this is pop science, pop non-fiction, that the purpose of a book like GULP is to entertain as well as inform. But GULP is so light it's in danger of floating away in a stiff breeze. Roach talks about sitting at a bar with this specialist, or visiting the home of that specialist, but instead of delving into the subjects those specialists understand so well, she pads the book with descriptions of the funny accent one speaks with, the video game the other's son plays. She cracks jokes about doctors with funny names (repeatedly, and it started to make me really mad -- we don't choose our names) and even describes looking at a page of Google search results. I did not buy GULP for the fascinating tale of how Mary Roach travels all around the world learning things for the book she's going to write, but I really did not buy it for the fascinating tale of how she sits at home and Googles things.

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