



Sylvia R. Karasu M.D.
The Gravity of Weight

Human Bondage: America's Not So Magnificent Food Obsession

Four books on their authors' personal struggles with our obesogenic environment

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Four books from both professional and personal points of view about overeating.

Source: photo by Sylvia R. Karasu, M.D.



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This week marks the publication of *Obsessed: America's Food Addiction--And My Own* by Mika Brzezinski, author and co-host of the television program Morning Joe. This is one of several excellent books that have appeared in recent years that explore their authors' personal struggles with food--particularly the highly addictive processed foods laden with sugar, fat, and salt--as well as their authors' concern for a nation whose children and adults have continued to grow more overweight and obese over the past thirty years.

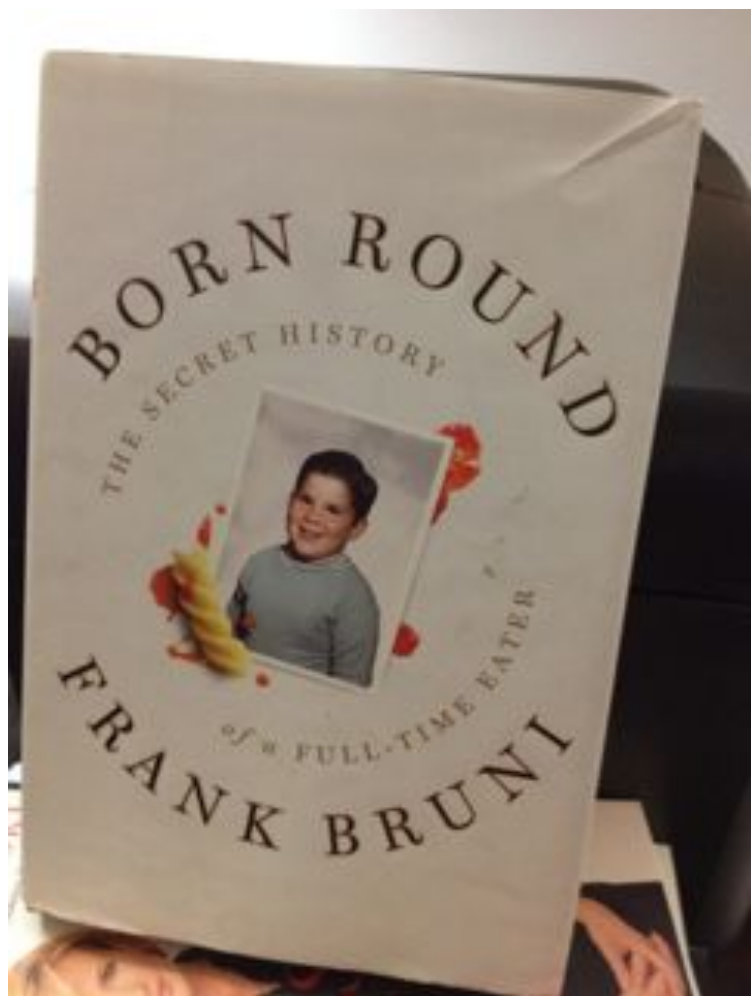
What makes her book different and particularly appealing is that, for all the public to see, although she has been a size 2 and in seemingly perfect control of her eating, Brzezinski has been quietly preoccupied with food for most of her life. Her book grew out of a confrontation she had with one of her best friends, Diane Smith, an Emmy-award winning journalist and author, who had a much more visible weight problem and whose weight had ballooned to the point she had more than 75 pounds to lose. Brzezinski challenged Smith to lose weight and write the book with her.

Brzezinski received considerable positive reinforcement for her size 2 body. No one knew how much control (and what was required) on a minute-to-minute basis to maintain her weight at that level. Says Brzezinski, "Most people assume all food addicts are fat, but I'm here to tell you they are not. Just because I have a healthy body weight doesn't necessarily mean I have a healthy relationship with food." Brzezinski became fascinated with the concept of the body's set point. Set point, though, is a theoretical concept--no researcher has yet to locate one area in the brain or anywhere else in the body that regulates the body's weight around a particular range. Nevertheless the concept is an appealing one and helped Brzezinski appreciate that her ideal weight was about ten pounds heavier than she had been struggling to maintain.

Obsessed describes research corroborating what Brzezinski has suspected all along from her own experience, namely there is such a thing as food addiction (with tolerance and even withdrawal symptoms). Some researchers, though, question whether any food can be addictive. After all, we can never be without food; we can speak of food use and food abuse, but, unlike the language of drug abuse, we can never speak of a non-user. Nora Volkow, M.D., Director of the National Institute for Drug Abuse (NIDA), though, has been writing for years on the addictive quality of certain foods that illuminate the reward centers in our brain in exactly the same way as cocaine or other drugs of abuse.

The juxtaposition of two public figures--one thin and the other fat-- but each similarly preoccupied with her weight and when to get her next fix of junk food, provides the back story for America's growing addiction to processed foods, made abundantly clear in Michael Moss's recent book, *Salt Sugar Fat*. Moss describes how our large food companies are all striving for "stomach share," i.e., "the largest share of what people eat," where the "cardinal rule of processed food, (is) when in doubt, add more sugar." Moss describes how these companies search for the bliss point, the "defining facet of consumer craving," or the "precise amount of sweetness--no more, no less--that makes food and drink most enjoyable." David Kessler, former head of the FDA, in his book *The End of Overeating*, also confronted the food industry and described our "conditioned hypereating" brought on by the "hyperpalatable" foods in our environment. Kessler, too, struggles with his own food demons, particularly chocolate chip cookies and the "enticement of a Cinnabon."

Born Round, written by Frank Bruni, NY Times columnist (and former restaurant critic for the Times) was published a few years ago and is an extremely funny (but painful) story of Bruni's own life-long preoccupation with food that started early in childhood. Says Bruni, "A third burger isn't good mothering. A third burger is child abuse." His mother, incidentally, always "believed that somewhere out there was a holy grail of weight loss...." Unfortunately, many share that belief.



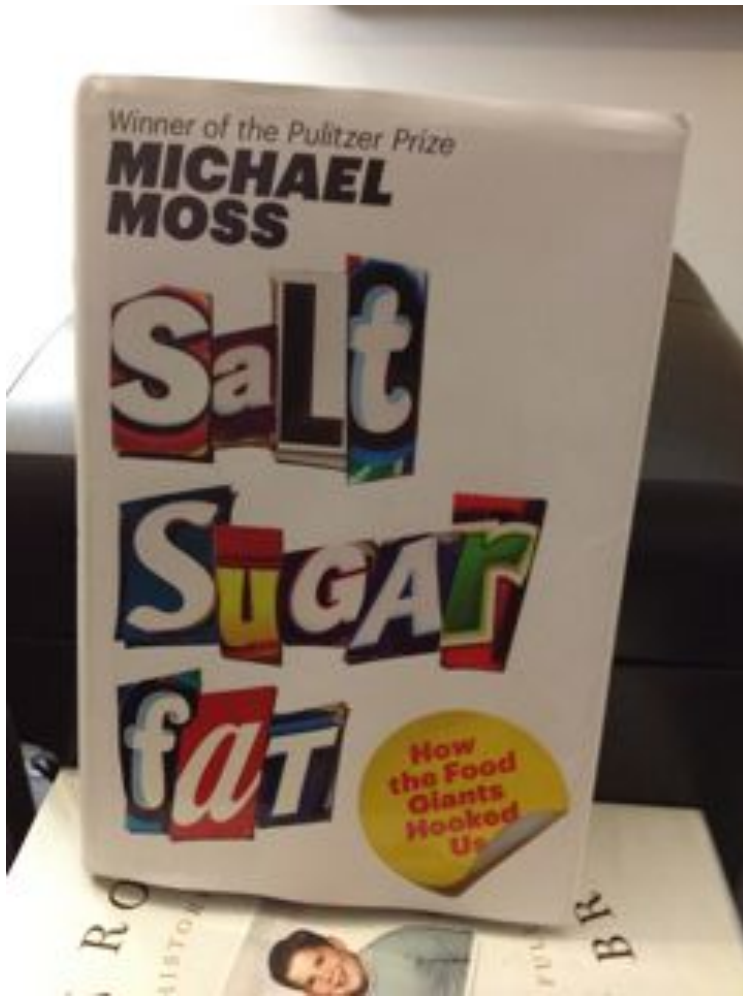
Source: photo by Sylvia R. Karasu, M.D.

David B. Katz, M.D., Director of the Yale Prevention Center, Editor-on-Chief of the journal *Childhood Obesity*, and one of the experts interviewed by Brzezinski, has spoken of the “prevailing gullibility” of a public “beguiled by a belief in weight-loss magic” such that “any weight loss claim is accepted at face value.” Those who work in the field and those who struggle with weight control know there is no magic to weight control.

We live in an obesogenic environment. The word “obesogenic” came into the scientific literature around the year 2000. One of the earlier references appeared in a 2001 paper in the journal *Obesity Reviews* by Drs. Cynthia M. Bulik and David B. Allison, both major researchers in the field of obesity, who raised the provocative question, “Why are certain people not obese, given the environment in which we live?” The answer lies in the fact that weight control is the

result of a highly complex interaction of genetic, behavioral, and environmental factors. Food both disturbs our body’s homeostasis and is required for its homeostasis. Some people are more genetically inclined to be predisposed to food preoccupation (and even addiction) and overweight and obesity in our current environment. While we cannot do much about our genetics, we can work on our environment. Brzezinski offers suggestions for ways to change the way we think about weight and confront our environment, including publicizing the costs of obesity and funding more research, as well as “celebrating a healthy thin in the media.” Her book is one of several that explain why it is so important to do so.

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About the Author



Sylvia R. Karasu, M.D., is a clinical professor of psychiatry at Weill Cornell Medical College and the senior author of *The Gravity of Weight*.

In Print: *The Gravity of Weight: A Clinical Guide to Weight Loss and Maintenance*

Online: my own website

