



# Hunger: An Unnatural History

By Sharman Apt Russell

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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?

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## **Hunger: An Unnatural History** By Sharman Apt Russell Bibliography

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## Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Russell's playful survey of the effects of hunger, which moves inexorably toward a wider moral meditation on starvation, suggests, "Hunger is a country we enter every day, like a commuter across a friendly border." Observing that "not eating seems to be innately religious," Russell (*Anatomy of a Rose*) explores the biochemical and cultural dimensions of hunger, from the stunts of "hunger artists" to the practices of fasting ascetics and so-called "miracle maids" (virginal women who appeared not to require food), touching on her own abortive experience of fasting. Turning to the history of political protest, Russell describes the force-feeding of British suffragettes and the strategic fasts of Mahatma Gandhi. She captures the limits of human cruelty and frailty in detailing the medical studies of starvation conducted in the Warsaw Ghetto; famine and cannibalism in the Ukraine and China; and the findings of the "Minnesota Experiment," which studied how semistarvation influences behavior. Addressing the stark facts of current world hunger, Russell reports on the medical challenges of reintroducing food to the chronically malnourished, on the iconic image of the starving child and on the efforts of humanitarian agencies to end world hunger. With its expert blend of scientific reportage, world history and moral commentary, Russell's work is informative and haunting. (*Sept.*)  
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From School Library Journal

Adult/High School—A fascinating, multilayered analysis. Russell describes the physiological effects of hunger, starting with what occurs in the digestive system while the subject is watching a commercial for the Olive Garden restaurant and ending with the body's processing of the last bit of pasta and anchovy. Her discussion of the biological aspects is concise, interesting, and free from scientific jargon. After covering what happens when the body has food, Russell gives a sobering account of what occurs in the mind and body when food is withheld. Using fasting periods from 18 hours to 30 days, the author shows the extraordinary ways in which the deprived body tries to save itself. Her choices for the historical overview of hunger include hunger artists, religious and politically motivated fasting, therapeutic fasting, famines, experiments on starvation, anorexia, and efforts to combat world hunger. The short essays on the Warsaw Ghetto, the potato famine in Ireland, Colin Turnbull's studies of the Ik tribe, and the industrialization of China are so interesting and well written that they invite further research. This is an important topic for teens to explore. As Russell points out, one in 10 Americans lives in a food-insecure household. The lasting biological and psychological effects of hunger on children are critical.—*Kathy Tewell, Chantilly Regional Library, Fairfax County, VA*

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From [Booklist](#)

**\*Starred Review\*** Russell's refined works of narrative nonfiction include *Anatomy of a Rose* (2001). Now, in her most hard-hitting book to date, she takes on a crucial yet little understood aspect of existence: hunger. Russell begins with the biology of hunger, that is, how our bodies tell us when we need to eat, but her concern is what happens when we don't eat. Hence her fascinating overview of fasting, from religious abstinence to the heroics of hunger strikers, particularly Mahatma Gandhi, as well as her discussion of anorexia nervosa. These compelling lines of inquiry pave the way for the book's most significant sections: Russell's unnerving chronicling of twentieth-century wartime starvation and catastrophic famines. Equally bracing is her report on the everyday hunger of millions of the world's working poor, including Americans, and her candid and informative assessment of just how difficult it is to orchestrate effective relief efforts. As Russell's extraordinarily well-crafted, far-reaching, and heart-wrenching investigation joins ranks with the revelations of global health experts Laurie Garrett and Paul Farmer, we can only hope that our hunger for

knowledge and justice will lead to international efforts to eliminate this unnecessary scourge. *Donna Seaman*  
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#### **Timothy Parker:**

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#### **Matthew Dealba:**

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#### **Brandon Justice:**

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