

Candy is dandy

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Candyfreak:

A Journey Through the Chocolate

Underbelly of America

By Steve Almond
Algonquin Books,

266 pages, \$32.95

Okay, I'll admit it. I'm a freak. And not any kind of freak, but a candy freak: who 1.) can't keep chocolate of any kind in the house without wanting to eat it all (and all of the time); who 2.) impulsively, guiltily, reluctantly -- and then, gasp, without remorse -- wholeheartedly devoured my child's stash of Easter (and, dare I mention it, Halloween) candy; who 3.) read Steve Almond's latest book, *Candyfreak: A Journey Through the Chocolate Underbelly of America* and was enrapt with awe, savouring each freak sentence, each freak fragment of candy porn.

Part reportage, part barroom confessional, *Candyfreak* is the deliciously heartbreaking odyssey of one man who travels across the good ol' U.S.A. in search of the United States' great independent candy barons while doing some good old fashioned neo-existential soul-searching at the same time.

Almond's path is a paradoxical one, and the reasons for his journey are nothing less than Homeric. Overcome by "a gradual aspect of grayness" and the oncoming winter, Almond allows himself to hope, as he did in childhood, "that the pleasures of candy would help me beat a path from my despair."

Desperate, intrepid and overcome with an unbridled lust for chocolate, Almond begins by explaining the psychological origins of his oral fixation. First, the thumb-sucking. Then, his name. Then, where he grew up (which, eerily enough, does sound like a chocolate bar): Wilkie Way. Then, his birthday, Oct. 27, four days before the Freak National Holiday (a.k.a. Halloween). But of all these reasons, Almond willingly admits, he formed an emotional bond to candy because he "was a needy kid, and terribly lonely, and candy kept me company." Candy was his enabler: "one of the few permissible forms of self-love in a household that specialized in self-loathing."

Almond is candid with all aspects of his life and lust for candy, and his writing is characterized by the same zealous nature of personal confession. He relentlessly criticizes himself and his identity as a Jewish American while he travels coast-to-coast; *Candyfreak* is an intimate portrait of the tortured inner conflicts of the human soul: his fears, his inhibitions, his loves, his hates and everything else political.

Indeed, it is this personal/political subtext underlying the candy-coated surface that sets Almond's

book apart from U.S. counterpart Hilary Liftin's *Candy & Me (A Love Story)*, another recent candy porn offering. Taking candy as the symbol for the United States' capitalist greed, Almond uses the torments of his own soul and his nostalgic desire for candy (read: innocence) as a mirror to reflect upon the good ol'/evil ol' U.S.A., rubbing candy like salt in the wound of a nation. And as Almond steals Goo Goo Cluster rejects during his visits to U.S. chocolate factories, his cynical wrath sparks throughout the book, with rancorous, sugar-addled references to 9/11, Iraq and Dubya.

Sensuous and self-deprecating, Almond flip-flops between his lustful *jouissance* for candy and his manic patriotic furor. While blaming himself for not voting, for having "flounced on my candyland adventure without even bothering to consider my civic duty," Almond denounces himself, admitting: "I deserved the damage that Dubya was no doubt going to inflict on our country's already limited capacity for mercy." Tormented by his demons, Almond succumbs to a box of chocolate-covered pretzels and lays "on my hotel bed in the dark with chocolate on my teeth, fuming like the good, useless liberal I am."

Make no mistake, this is a funny book. A charming, sexy book. A book that is nuts-o-choc-full of rapturous, delectable, oh-I-want-you prose: so laden with so many lustful, scintillating descriptions of enrobbers that it made me want to run out to the nearest convenience store and buy a small trunk load of chocolate bars. (For you non-candy freaks, "enrobbers" is candy porn for those machines that coat chocolate bars with chocolate.) Highlights include Almond's Mecca-like pilgrimages to visit other candy freaks: Steve Traino, internet candy mastermind; Ray Luthar Broekel, "legend among the confectioniscenti"; and Dave Bolton, chocolate engineer of Lake Champlain Chocolates, among many others.

Then there are his visits to the factories. Detailing every aspect of candy production, Almond is as happy as Charlie Bucket holding his golden ticket; transfixed before the assembly line, all hot and bothered by the candy-making machines.

For someone who readily admits that his sexual fantasies always involve naked women and chocolate bars, and who believes that people who say they don't like sweets are "total duds in bed," Steve Almond proves in *Candyfreak* that he is the undisputed King of Freak. Let us bow before him, all ye united candy freaks of the world!

Christine Walde ate obscene amounts of chocolate while writing this. Her novel The Candy Darlings will be published next year.



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