

## Book Reviews



### Refrigerator: The Story of Cool in the Kitchen

Helen Peavitt, *Reaktion Books*, 2017. 208 pp., 50 halftone and 50 col. illus., cloth, \$27.00. ISBN: 9781780237510.

There is a category of commodity that in some parts of the world is only noticeable by its absence or by its extreme size. In the over-developed world, TVs and fridges mostly go unnoticed unless they are missing or have become gargantuan. Such consumer durables exist in a state of ubiquity, hiding their magical properties beneath the blanket of ordinariness. Helen Peavitt's *Refrigerator: The Story of Cool in the Kitchen* is to be congratulated for offering an account of the refrigerator that manages to keep the magic of refrigeration alive, while also showing us how it became so banal, so ordinary.

Refrigerator magic is, as you might expect, most apparent in the early developments of refrigeration. For example, the 1862 International Exhibition in London showcased some spectacular instances of steam-powered refrigeration. The *Illustrated London News* described the scene of one fierce machine:

Visitors ignorant of science look on in amazement, while the learned, who know well enough about the theory, are equally surprised to see miniature icebergs rise up before their eyes, the results of the labours of a powerful steam engine and a quantity of very hot looking apparatus. (p. 37)

The alchemical trick of producing ice from steam is a shock, even to those that know the science. It still seems counter-intuitive to realise that heat, in some form, is required to produce cooling. But, such wizardry is harder to discern when the whirl of a compression motor has completely taken over from the sigh of a gas pilot light or the angry hissing of steam. And, this is the story of refrigeration: the dominance of a method and a power source.

Peavitt's book, however, is not a story of disenchantment, telling us that what was once magical simply becomes a commonplace commodity. For her refrigeration continues to cast mysterious shadows. In the contemporary age of ubiquitous refrigeration, where electricity is the only power supply, the strangeness of fridges is manifest through their secret language. Fridges hum, but they also sigh, and whirl. One recent manual, for instance, lists "'chirping/barking/woof/howl", "gurgling", "knocking", "hissing", "sizzling" and "arching" among the almost twenty distinctive noises that might be heard' (p. 120). In the dead of night, far away from roads and people, the fridge can be heard singing its doleful songs.

The story of the fridge's ubiquity in the global North (Peavitt reminds us that only one in four households in India has a fridge) is uneven and can only be understood as part of a series of sensual and technological shifts in domestic and social life. One reason why the fridge was

relatively slow in being adopted (compared to vacuum cleaners, say) is the fact that they took much longer to become affordable. The first domestic fridges were prohibitively expensive: a small domestic fridge in 1913 was more than twice the cost of a standard automobile. When fridges did become widely available Britain lagged behind the USA at some considerable distance. In the first half of the 1940s, the percentage of households that had fridges in the USA leapt from 50 to 85 per cent; in 1953, fridges had only managed to reach just over 5 per cent of households in the UK. Unevenness was a distinct feature of fridge dissemination:

As figures from 1960 show, the percentage of households with a refrigerator varied widely from country to country—from 97 per cent in the USA to 80 per cent in Australia; 50 per cent in the Netherlands; 3 per cent in Belgium; and only 17 per cent in the UK (p. 88).

While it might be easy to explain the prevalence of fridges in a hot but relatively wealthy country like Australia, it is much harder to explain Belgium's seeming antipathy for domestic chilling. Who knew that Belgium was a country of fridge resisters?

The story of the domestic refrigeration, as Helen Peavitt tells it, is impossible to understand as a discrete technology. On the one hand, the fridge is part of the 'cold chain' that allows us to eat cheap meat from faraway places or out-of-season fruits. This chain connects 'farm to fork' via chilled warehouses, refrigerated shipping and lorries, chilling cabinets in supermarkets, and domestic refrigerators and freezers in kitchens and garages. On the other hand, the fridge is part of a much more local re-orchestration of the senses. In this, the fridge enters the home as part of a symbiotic domestic 'climate change'. According to Peavitt, the average British house went from 12 °C in 1970 (though, of course, it would have been in Fahrenheit then) to 18 °C in 2004. Central heating altered the climate of houses. Where larders and pantries might have been cold enough to slow down putrefaction, in the modern centrally heated home not even a well-ventilated pantry could hold out against the pervasive presence of central heating: 'having got the central heating, we then

had to get a fridge...because the food started going off in the pantry' (p. 89).

The story of the domestic fridge is the story of the industrialisation of our domestic environments. Fridges are the cold spaces in generally balmy houses and apartments. In some ways, these cabinets of cool, that stand like sentries, protecting our food and chilling our drinks, have taken on responsibilities that used to be ours. Once, we knew how to preserve. Today, we are more likely to believe the sell-by date on an over-packaged bunch of broccoli than use our eyes and noses to tell if something is inedible. Fridges have allowed us to deskill. But, the costs of refrigeration have been greater than this. If they have cooled down little pockets of space in houses, then they have also been responsible for some of the most egregious warming up of the planet through the widespread use of chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) as refrigerants. Cool drinks in temperate rooms came to us at a cost.

The author, Helen Peavitt, is the curator of Consumer Technology at the Science Museum, London, and her book is published in association with the Museum. The benefits are immediately apparent: it is a copiously illustrated book and the images are outstanding. Indeed, the experience of reading the book is like attending a well-curated exhibition, where the chapter-rooms are thematically arranged, and where you exit with a sense of having engaged with physical objects and material processes. This is a book that is at once a history of domestic life, of cooking and food science; it is an account of a new technology becoming ubiquitous, a history of design (we meet famous designers such as Henry Dreyfuss and Raymond Loewy along the way), and a history of the continuing impact of industrialisation on all aspects of our lives.

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