

TEACHER'S GUIDE
AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS



VITAMANIA

How Vitamins *Revolutionized* the Way We Think About Food

CATHERINE PRICE



Penguin
Random House
ACADEMIC MARKETING

Vitamina, by journalist Catherine Price, is a fun and fast-paced exploration of how vitamins were discovered and the many ways in which they've affected Americans' attitudes toward nutrition. Suitable for courses ranging from nutrition, dietetics, public health, medicine, and epidemiology to food history, food marketing, chemistry, science writing, diabetes education, and American studies, *Vitamina* is a thought-provoking and philosophical adventure that will both spark lively classroom discussions, and change the way students think about food.

SAMPLE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What do you think of when you hear the word “vitamin”?
- If you see the word “vitamin” used on food packaging, how does that affect the way you think about the product? Why do you think this is?
- When did you first learn about vitamins? Did you take vitamins as a child? If so, why?
- Without reading any of the book, what do you think the definition of a vitamin actually is? When do you think they were discovered?
- What does the term “vitamina” mean, and why does Price use it to describe Americans' attitude toward vitamins and nutrition?
- What are some of the questions about vitamins that Price was surprised to find did not yet have answers? Does the fact that these questions do not have solid answers surprise you? Why or why not? What does this suggest about scientists' overall understanding of human nutrition?
- According to Price, our vitamina has ironic consequences. As she phrases it, “By encouraging the idea that isolated dietary chemicals hold the keys to good health, our vitamina is making us less healthy.” What does she mean by this statement? What are some examples you've noticed or experienced of the idea that particular dietary chemicals have large health benefits?
- When you think of the word “vitamin,” do you think of food or pills? If pills, why do you think this is?
- Price asks whether it's odd “that cyanocobalamin and alpha-tocopherol sound intimidating, even sinister, while vitamins B12 and E — which are names for the same substances — seem incontrovertibly good?” Do you find this odd? Why or why not?
- Which (if either) do you trust more: pharmaceutical companies or supplement companies? Why?
- True or false: in America, dietary supplements must be tested for safety and efficacy before being sold?
- In America, consumers are concerned about many ingredients in their food, including hydrogenated oils, high-fructose corn syrup, artificial sweeteners and genetically modified organisms. And yet we don't seem concerned about the levels of synthetic vitamins being added to our food. Should we be? Why does Price think that these synthetic vitamins are a cause for concern?
- How do you think the news media affects the way we decide what to eat? What cautions should readers keep in mind before changing what they eat based on something they see or read?
- What caveats are important to keep in mind when you look at a Nutrition or Supplement Facts panel? Is it important to aim for 100% of your Daily Value every day? Why or why not?
- Many of us believe that the more vitamins a food contains, the better. Is this true? Why or why not?
- Where do most of America's synthetic vitamins come from? What does this say about our nutritional independence?
- What effects are vitamin deficiencies having on people today? What are the consequences of vitamin A deficiencies? Why are they so common? And why did it take so long for researchers to recognize them?
- Price writes that, “Ultimately, the story of our vitamina reflects our abhorrence of uncertainty — a fundamental discomfort that leaves us hungry for solutions and susceptible to fads.” What does she mean by this statement?
- Price suggests that, while nutrition “contains far more nuances and unanswered questions than we'd like to admit,” the story of our vitamina also proposes an alternative: “What if, instead of running from this uncertainty, we embraced it?” What does Price mean by this suggestion? Do you think it's a good idea? Why or why not?
- Has reading *Vitamina* changed anything about the way you think about nutrition and food? If so, how? What do you think the book's most important takeaway messages are?

QUESTIONS FOR SPECIFIC AUDIENCES:

FOR NUTRITION/DIETETICS/ FOOD SCIENCE CLASSES

See sample questions on previous page.

FOR PHYSIOLOGY CLASSES

See sample questions on previous page. Also:

- What lessons can we glean from the story of vitamins about the complexities of human biology? How do you think these lessons should be put into practice?
- Describe the concept of synergy and how it relates to our bodies and the foods we eat?
- Do you think we will ever be able to have truly personalized diets? Why or why not?

FOR WRITING/JOURNALISM CLASSES:

- How is the book structured?
- What are some of the challenges in deciding how to organize a book that combines history and science with first-person reporting?
- Do you think Price succeeds? If not, how would you have structured the book?

FOR MEDICAL STUDENTS/ NUTRITION IN MEDICINE:

- What surprised you about this book?
- Will it affect the way you interact with your patients, or the questions you ask them during office visits?
- How will you address the issue of dietary supplement use among your patients (including getting them to reveal which ones they take)?
- Do you think that nutrition is adequately covered in medical schools, given the rise of lifestyle related diseases like Type 2 diabetes? Why or why not?
- What would you change about medical schools' approach toward nutritional education?
- What role do you think diet should play in the treatment or prevention of disease?

FOR CHEMISTRY/BIOCHEMISTRY CLASSES:

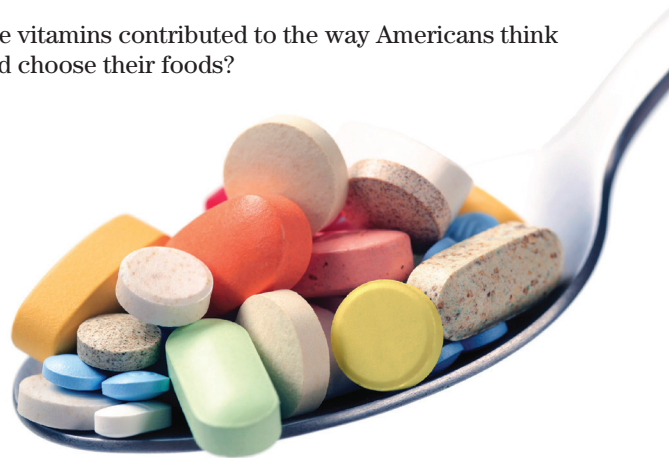
- What was most surprising to you about the process of vitamins' discovery?
- Do you think that the term "vitamin" should still be used now that we understand that they are not all part of the same chemical family? Why or why not?

PUBLIC HEALTH/EPIDEMIOLOGY:

- How did the development of germ theory — an undeniable leap forward in our understanding of disease — delay the discovery of nutritional deficiency diseases and vitamins?
- What are some examples today of theories or mindsets that might blind us to other explanations of sickness and disease?
- How prevalent are vitamin deficiency diseases in America? Can you find any examples of where our focus on infectious disease might get in the way?
- What are some of the challenges of performing nutritional research?
- What questions should you ask when evaluating the quality of a nutritional study?

FOR FOOD MARKETING/ ANTHROPOLOGY OF FOOD CLASSES:

- Price asserts that the word "vitamin" could be considered to be one of the greatest marketing terms of all time. Why does she say this? Do you agree?
- How did vitamins make the leap from the labs of scientists to the realm of food marketers?
- How do you think vitamins have affected the way food companies market their products?
- What makes the word "vitamin" so captivating?
- How have vitamins contributed to the way Americans think about and choose their foods?



VITAMANIA

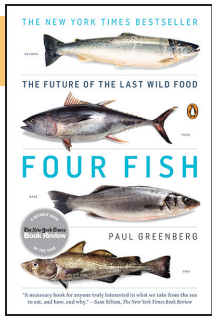
How Vitamins *Revolutionized* the Way We Think About Food

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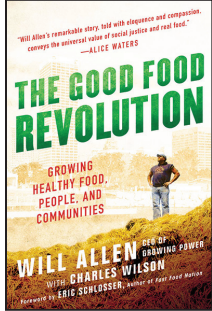


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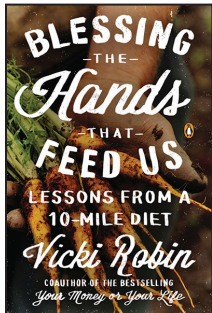
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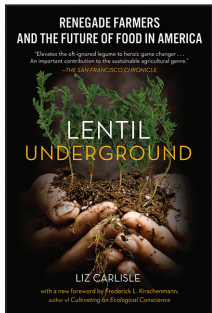
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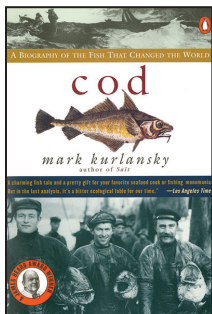
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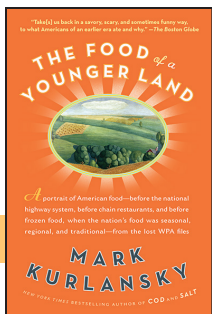
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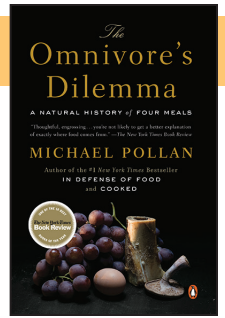


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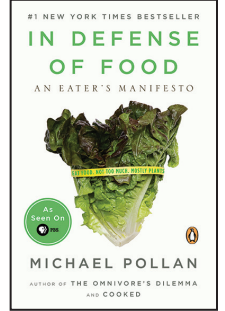


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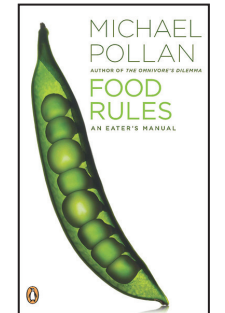
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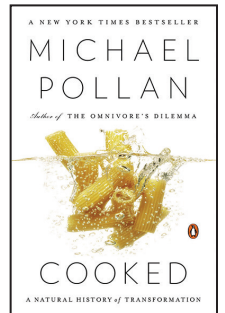
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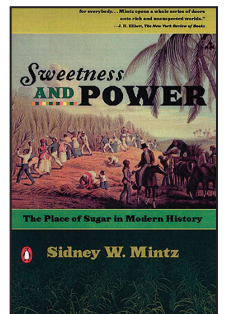
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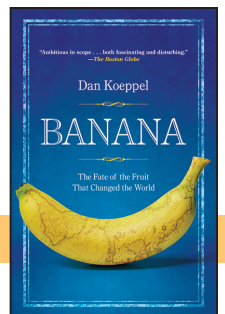
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