

Ellen Ruppel Shell

Date: 2024

From: Gale Literature: Contemporary Authors

Publisher: Gale

Document Type: Biography

Length: 1,473 words

Content Level: (Level 3)

Lexile Measure: 1030L

About this Person

Born: November 11, 1952 in Auburn, New York, United States

Nationality: American

Occupation: Journalist

Full Text:

PERSONAL INFORMATION

Born November 11, 1952, in Auburn, NY; daughter of Kenneth (a physician) and Ilse (an educator) Ruppel; married Martin Shell (a consultant), July 13, 1975; children: Alison, Joanna. **Education:** University of Rochester, B.A., 1974. **Memberships:** National Association of Science Writers, Writers Union. **Addresses:** Home: Newton, MA. Office: Frederick S. Pardee Center for the Study of the Longer-Range Future, Boston University, 67 Bay State Rd., Boston, MA 02215. Agent: Rodd Schuster, Schuster and Harnsworth, 1117 Broadway, New York, NY 10019.

CAREER

Writer and academic. *Technology Review*, Cambridge, MA, senior editor, 1980-82; *Technology Illustrated*, Boston, MA, senior editor, 1982-83; Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, MA, Vannevar Bush Fellow, 1984-85; WGBH-TV, Boston, series editor, 1988-90; Boston University, Boston, MA, associate professor and codirector of Graduate Program in Science Journalism, beginning 1990, professor, 2010— Harvard School of Public Health, Cambridge, MA, visiting fellow, 2010—. Has also been a correspondent for the *Atlantic* for over twenty years; University Medical School, occupational health and safety fellow.

AWARDS

National Magazine Award finalist, 1985.

WORKS

WRITINGS:

A Child's Place: A Year in the Life of a Day Care Center, Little, Brown (Boston, MA), 1992.

The Hungry Gene: The Science of Fat and the Future of Thin, Atlantic Monthly Press (New York, NY), 2002.

Cheap: The High Cost of Discount Culture, Penguin Press (New York, NY), 2009.

The Job: Work and its Future in a Time of Radical Change, Currency (New York, NY), 2018 .

Slippery Beast: A True Crime Natural History, with Eels, Abrams Press (New York, NY), 2024.

Contributor to magazines, including *Discover*, *Newsweek*, *O*, *Washington Post*, *Guardian*, *New York Times*, and *Smithsonian*. Correspondent for *Atlantic Monthly*. Contributing editor, *Parenting*, 1990—, and *Science* 86.

SIDELIGHTS

Ellen Ruppel Shell is a writer, journalist, and academic. She has worked as a professor of journalism at Boston University and codirector of the Graduate Program in Science Journalism. Her research centers on economic and science policy, as well as social justice issues. Shell is a contributing editor and correspondent for the *Atlantic* and has published hundreds of articles, essays, and reviews in other periodicals.

In Shell's book *The Hungry Gene: The Science of Fat and the Future of Thin*, she tackles the problem of obesity, incorporating discussions of science, social history, and consumer culture. A contributor to *Kirkus Reviews* noted that *The Hungry Gene* is “a compelling depiction of the complexity and size of the plague of obesity.”

Shell introduces the reader to a host of people working to determine the nature of obesity, including what *Booklist* reviewer Vanessa Bush called “a fascinating cast” of patients, doctors, and scientists. The rapid rise in the obesity rate among Americans has led to a race to discover its cause and find potential cures; genetics, environment, public policy, and social opinion all come into play. *The Hungry Gene* also discusses the medical research community's relationship to major pharmaceutical companies, which stand to make a large profit by marketing weight-reduction drugs.

Included in this multifaceted examination is a discussion of the food industry itself and its effects on the national rise in obesity. A *Publishers Weekly* reviewer called *The Hungry Gene* “timely and provocative” in its discussion of the fast-food advertising industry, in which Shell examines the influence of “Big Food” on public nutrition policy. Based on research in America and Micronesia—where a recently Westernized diet has led to a significant increase in obesity—Shell suggests that regulated advertising might help to lower the obesity rate. *The Hungry Gene* highlights the role of public policy in the obesity epidemic, arguing that governmental nutrition groups should be doing more to encourage healthy eating habits.

In Shell's next work, *Cheap: The High Cost of Discount Culture*, the author argues that the compulsion to save money by buying cheaper goods is actually a ruse. Shell explains that the historical idea that buying budget items is wise, has led to the mass production of poorly made goods. She traces this phenomenon back to the industrial revolution, but claims that today, China is responsible for a great deal of the shoddy products on the market. In *Cheap*, Shell even argues that the consumer obsession with cheap goods has even contributed to the current economic recession. In an interview with Dick Silverman in *WWD* Shell explained: "What my book is about is the overwhelming push toward ever lower prices for a wide variety of consumer goods and the consequences thereof. I'm asking consumers to look beyond the price tag to value that will benefit themselves, the retail sector and, ultimately, society as a whole."

Library Journal contributor Richard Drezen commented: "As Shell proves, the hunt for cheap products has hurt us all. Highly recommended for smart readers." A *Kirkus Reviews* contributor stated: "Shell's pronouncements on economics get a bit fuzzy, but her Silent Spring—like moralizing about the effects of superabundant, indifferently made goods will find an eager audience." *USA Today* contributor Seth Brown noted: "The book is an engaging exploration of the ways cheapness is making our lives worse. What's more, it conveys how difficult it would be for Americans to abandon their focus on low prices. Reading this book, however, might be a good first step." *New York Times Book Review* contributor Laura Shapiro remarked that Shell, "does show that the impact of rock-bottom prices on a stringent family budget is to some extent illusory." Shapiro also explained: "Ruppel Shell doesn't conclude with any grand ideas for reshaping the world's economy, though she praises Wegmans and Costco, arguing that they manage to thrive without doing a lot of damage. But she doesn't need to formulate grand ideas here. She's delivered something much more valuable: a first-rate job of reporting and analysis. Pay full price for this book, if you can stand to. It's worth it." Roger K. Miller, a contributor to the *Tampa Tribune*, commented: "*Cheap* is interesting simply as social and commercial history. You will be amazed at the ingenious ways corporations have come up with to bamboozle and deceive you—or to let you deceive yourself."

In *The Job: Work and its Future in a Time of Radical Change*, Shell considers the decrease in living-wage jobs in the United States during the twenty-first century. She reveals that poorly paid service jobs have increased despite the increase in technology to aid in jobs across industries. She argues in favor of major reforms in work culture, as well as the way that Americans see their jobs and find satisfaction in them. A *Publishers Weekly* contributor remarked that "general readers will appreciate the breadth and scope of Shell's thoughtful, inquisitive work."

Slippery Beast: A True Crime Natural History, with Eels offers a range of information about the eel and the mysteries surrounding its reproduction. Unable to reproduce in captivity, eels have baffled scientists anxious to learn more about the creatures' reproductive behaviors. Shell also covers the eel's appeal on the market as a delicacy in parts of Asia and in the agricultural industry. This has led to a range of regulations and criminal activity surrounding the capture and sale of eels. A contributor to *Kirkus Reviews* found the book to be "an unsuspectingly thrilling account of one of marine life's most enigmatic creatures."

Shell once told *CA*: "I write about public policy, whether the issue is science, education, or early childhood.

"Like most writers, I am fascinated by the sound and feel of language, and obsessed with the written word. Through I have always loved science, and majored in it, I was special features editor of my college newspaper, where my speciality was reviewing the talks of visiting poets. I began my career as a film critic, writing professionally while still an undergraduate. Upon graduation, I moved to Seattle, where I was writing book reviews for the *Seattle Times*, and feature articles for a number of regional magazines. Moving to Boston, I got a job editing at *Technology Review* magazine, at MIT, and then became a senior editor at *Technology Illustrated*, the self-described 'New Yorker' of technology. After working for Public Television as a science editor, I got my first book contract with Little Brown, to write *A Child's Place: A Year in the Life of a Day Care Center*, a narrative investigation of the history, politics, and science of child care. I also received an appointment at Boston Universtiy, where I codirected the Graduate Program in Science Journalism. Other books followed, my most recent being *Cheap: The High Cost of Discount Culture*. (My books have been published all over the world, and in nine languages.)

"Many thinkers and writers have and continue to influence me, but Susan Sheehan was an inspiration. Her 1977 tour de force, *Welfare Mother* taught me at an early age that social commentary need not be preachy or divisive, but merely beautifully, tenderly, and honestly observed. My deepest hope is that my books can approach having the impact she has had on me, and my generation."

FURTHER READINGS

BIOGRAPHICAL AND CRITICAL SOURCES:

PERIODICALS

Atlantic, August 3, 2009, "Dialogue: Ellen Ruppel Shell on Our Obsession with Cheap."

Booklist, September 15, 2002, Vanessa Bush, review of *The Hungry Gene: The Science of Fat and the Future of Thin*, p. 188.

Kirkus Reviews, July 15, 2002, review of *The Hungry Gene*, pp. 1016-17; May 15, 2009, review of *Cheap: The High Cost of Discount Culture*; June 15, 2024, review of *Slippery Beast: A True Crime Natural History, with Eels*.

Library Journal, June 15, 2009, Richard Drezen, review of *Cheap*, p. 79.

New York Times Book Review, July 19, 2009, Laura Shapiro, "Nothing for Nothing," p. 8.

Publishers Weekly, July 8, 2002, review of *The Hungry Gene*, p. 38; August 13, 2018, review of *The Job: Work and its Future in a Time of Radical Change*, p. 63.

Tampa Tribune, July 5, 2009, Roger K. Miller, "Writer Says 'Cheap' Ends up Costing Big," p. 12.

USA Today, August 10, 2009, Seth Brown, "Good Deals Can Be a Bad Thing," p. 04.

Washington Monthly, October 1, 2002, Stephanie Mencimer, review of *The Hungry Gene*, p. 50.

Wilson Quarterly, December 22, 2003, Daniel Akst, review of *The Hungry Gene*, p. 119.

WWD, August 5, 2009, Dick Silverman, "Q & A: Ellen Ruppel Shell," p. 12.

ONLINE

Pardee School of Global Studies, Boston University website, <https://www.bu.edu/pardee/> (August 9, 2024), author profile.*

Full Text: COPYRIGHT 2024 Gale, a Cengage Company

Source Citation (MLA 9th Edition)

"Ellen Ruppel Shell." *Gale Literature: Contemporary Authors*, Gale, 2024. *Gale In Context: Biography*, link.gale.com/apps/doc/H1000111295/BIC?u=23069_lcls&sid=bookmark-BIC&xid=4a231c28. Accessed 19 Dec. 2024.

Gale Document Number: GALE | H1000111295