

## ★ **Small Fires: An Epic in the Kitchen**

**Rebecca May Johnson**

ONE (Jun 6, 2023)

Hardcover \$24.00 (192pp)

978-1-911590-48-4

The creative, bracing essays of Rebecca May Johnson's *Small Fires* redefine the act of cooking and elevate the value of domestic labor. They critique what it means to interpret recipes; with a combination of intellectual rigor and playfulness, they analyze the emotions, difficulty, and importance involved in offering food to others.

Johnson began cooking in college. As she pursued advanced degrees in classical studies, she found parallels in the interpretations of recipes and ancient texts by different voices. References to Johnson's decade-long iterations of a tomato sauce recipe—"a hot red epic" that is transformed with each performance depending on mood, eater, ingredients, and research into the recipe's origin—link these essays. They show how patriarchal mores were used to denigrate women's work and creativity; they explore the "radical potential of cooking." Johnson resists this diminution, making the interpretation of recipes as important as the translation of a classical text. Especially noteworthy is a passage about how Audre Lorde's mother resisted racism by creating exquisite family picnics as a "radical act of subsistence," carving a space for her loved ones that was "materially vibrant and gorgeous."

Johnson's themes are weighty, but her prose is spiked with engaging tidbits, including poems, adages, diagrams, menus, and quotes. There are also deft analyses of artistic works, including *The Odyssey*, Rainer Maria Rilke's poetry, and Martha Rosler's 1970 video *Kitchen Semiotics*. Johnson's incisive views concerning television chef Nigella Lawson's unabashed pleasure in, and assertion of ownership over, her dishes will certainly change perspectives of the Domestic Goddess.

*Small Fires* is an intense, revelatory reconsideration of cooking, treating it as important work that can be liberating, intimate, imaginative, erotic, and heroic. After reading these essays, you'll never eyeball a pot of marinara the same way again.

RACHEL JAGARESKI (May / June 2023)

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