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Blue Moon Vegetarian

Reflections, Recipes, and Advice for a Plant-Based Diet

by Paula Marie Coomer

"Blue Moon Vegetarian is a book that will feed all the essential parts of you: your body, your mind, your soul. It's a love story, a health journal, a cookbook, a lyrical memoir--the perfect recipe for anyone who desires to live a deliciously examined life."

—Kim Barnes, Author of *In the Kingdom of Men*



Part memoir, part cookbook, and part health-and-nutrition how-to, **BLUE MOON VEGETARIAN** chronicles Kentucky-born former nurse **Paula Marie Coomer** as she and her fiancé go vegetarian—and ultimately vegan—while also planning their wedding, adopting a pound hound, and remodeling their two-story Victorian. Writing with honesty, humor, and sometimes despair, Coomer tells the story of two people alternately thriving and suffering as they adjust to a new way of eating, living, and loving. With advice from a former public health professional and over fifty original, tried-and-true, plant-based recipes, this thought-provoking book is perfect for anyone concerned about their own health, the health of their loved ones, and the health of our planet.

About Paula Marie Coomer



Paula Marie Coomer is a vegan and former public health nurse who spent many years studying nutrition and plant-based diets and medicine, as well as creating wellness programs and working to help people take control of their own well-being. She is also a university writing instructor and the author of such literary works as the short story collection *Summer of Government Cheese*, two poetry collections—*Devil at the Crossroads* and *Nurses Who Love English*—and a single-poem chapbook entitled *Road*. Her first novel, *Dove Creek*, was featured at the Pacific Northwest Booksellers Association 2011 Fall Tradeshow.

Paula can be found online at www.paulamariecoomer.com.

About Booktrope

Booktrope is a new type of publishing company, founded in 2009 in Seattle, WA. We are pioneering a new type of book development process called team publishing. We are committed to the creation of quality books and to our unique marketing methods, which include offering all of our books online to read for free.

Ordering Information

BLUE MOON VEGETARIAN: Reflections, Recipes, and Advice for a Plant-Based Diet

By Paula Marie Coomer

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Praise for Paula's Previous Work

DOVE CREEK

"Paula Marie Coomer writes like a house afire, and her richly variegated novel deserves a prominent place in the literature of the modern American west."

—Ed McClanahan, author of *Famous People I Have Known*, and *O the Clear Moment*

"*Dove Creek* is a beautifully wrought novel which tells a tender story of a woman who loved and learned the lessons of the heart from the men and women she nursed on the Nez Perce and Coeur d'Alene reservations of northern Idaho."

—Mary Clearman Blew, author of *All But the Waltz* and *Balsamroot*

"The split-second decisions that alter our lives, the ancient rituals that save us—in Paula Coomer's *Dove Creek*, self-destruction and dogged perseverance come together in a novel of intimacy that crosses the boundaries of culture and time. We don't have enough female quest stories, but this is one of them—lyrical in its language, vivid in its detail, important in its observations of the chaos and confusion that come when a young woman lets go of her identity and strikes out on her own perilous journey of self-discovery."

—Kim Barnes, author of *A Country Called Home*

SUMMER OF GOVERNMENT CHEESE

"Paula Coomer's fine work is characterized by a palpable sense of place as well as by a strong compassion for, indeed love for, her idiosyncratic characters. *Summer of Government Cheese* is rich with, tension, poignancy and surprise. Paula Coomer is a writer to watch out for."

—Valerie Miner, author of *After Eden* and *Winter's Edge*

"Paula Coomer's stories are as sparkling and unexpected as found pennies, with their promise of pleasure in turning the next page."

—Mary Blew, author of *All But the Waltz* and *Jackalope Dreams*

"What has charmed me for years about Paula Coomer's stories evinces itself here in spades: her joyfully comic yet genuinely humane engagement with a fictive bus full of quirky and lovable characters; her meandering narratives that never lose their true course; and the drop-dead gorgeous lyricism that continually possesses her and transforms one's sense of what language is and can do."

—Lance Olsen, author of *Anxious Pleasures* and *Calendar of Regrets*

An Interview with Paula Marie Coomer, Author of *Blue Moon Vegetarian*

Q: You're known for writing fiction and poetry. What made you decide to write a memoir?

A: Actually, I don't really think of *Blue Moon Vegetarian* as a memoir, but more of a chronicle. I recorded the first six months or so of 2010 using a blog space. A few people followed it—my son, a work colleague, a friend or two. I found a creative voice in that space that I really liked. I'd had a very hard time with a non-fiction voice since I've done so much technical writing. It became clear at some point that the recipes Phil and I were coming up with were somewhat remarkable, so I did think about the possibility of a cookbook. I was thinking more of one I'd make for myself, with my own art on the pages. Something I might give to my daughters-in-law.

Q: What do you think is the main message of *Blue Moon Vegetarian*?

A: I think love is *Blue Moon Vegetarian's* message. I'm sitting here right now answering this question, and Phil is in the kitchen cooking 4 new recipes he found in the newspaper. Here we are, 3 ½ years into our marriage, and it's a holiday, and I'm answering interview questions, and he's peeling butternut squash. That's the kind of thing that happens in a house where love lives. How we got here is the story *Blue Moon* tells.

Q: In your memoir, you start off a meat-eater, then become a vegetarian, then make the transition to eating vegan. Are you still a vegan? What's your diet like now, and how has it affected your health?

A: This is the brand of confession that makes the vegan community scream: I eat fish once every week or two. I mostly eat wild-caught Alaska cod. Rarely do I eat wild-caught Alaska salmon. About 4 ounces. I don't know why I feel I need to, but I do. Maybe it's a spiritual thing. Otherwise, I also take a bit of half 'n' half in my morning coffee. This may get me thrown off some of the Facebook pages I enjoy, but it's the truth. Otherwise, I eat vegan, raw as much as possible, and gluten-free. I'm the healthiest I've ever been, and I've struggled with what's called "mild dysthymia" for most of my life. I've always felt vaguely sad and apart from everyone. I always thought it was cultural, but now I understand it was likely gluten intolerance. I've had a terrible time with viruses and infections, poor energy, etc. Always looking for a miracle cure, and it turned out to be something I was eating. Now looking back, I realize I always felt good when I was dieting, but guess what? I stayed away from starches during those times, which means bread, pasta, etc.

Q: You used to be a public health nurse on the Nez Perce reservation in Idaho. Did this prepare you for writing *Blue Moon Vegetarian*?

A: I have a bachelor's degree in nursing and worked in that career field for about 10 years. Mostly I was involved in public health, which has much to do with wellness and prevention, of which diet is logically a component. I took college nutrition courses and studied every kind of chemistry you can take at the under-graduate level. All that was put to use on both the Nez Perce and Coeur d'Alene reservations as I was struggling with the diabetes effort there, trying to teach people to eat good foods—especially traditional foods—and to work their bodies as a way of battling diabetes. I was trained to think of diet as a necessary component of health.

Q: More than anything, *Blue Moon Vegetarian* is about food and relationships. Becoming a vegetarian affected most of the relationships in your life. Do you have any relationship warnings or advice for vegetarians and people thinking of becoming vegetarians?

A: I think it is like what happens when alcoholics and drug addicts decide to stop being those things. If you decide to become healthy, and trade unhealthy behaviors for healthy ones, you can lose even your closest relationships.

Q: Your writing has a warm, conversational, human tone. Readers have described it as feeling like they were listening to an important female relative share with them her valuable wisdom. Were there any tips, health remedies, or recipes you would have liked to include but just didn't make it into your story?

A: Oh my gosh. So many. I want to write a book just on the body, on remedies, and plant-based medicine and how to take care of a self. On how to be alive and unique on this planet. We don't get instruction manuals with ourselves, and our world is designed to keep us from being whole. And Phil and I are working on vegan/gluten-free recipes, too. But right now? Off the top of my head? I would have talked more about flower essences. Flower essences (distillations) have been pretty extensively investigated as an adjunct treatment for cancer. It's been shown that they promote healing at a cellular level. They also work rather miraculously at the emotional level. Dr. Bach's Rescue Remedy is pretty famous for helping with anxiety.

Q: Many people are concerned about the cost of vegetarianism, and your book touches on ways to take an economical approach to buying vegetarian and vegan food. Do you have any wise words or tips specifically for how to keep costs low? Or do you think the idea that plant-based diets are expensive is a myth?

A: We are so used to buying processed foods. If you go into an organic food store and try to buy the tofu version of Hamburger Helper, you are going to pay a lot of money for it. What people have to return to doing is cooking from scratch and buying in bulk. You buy beans 25 pounds at a time—even organic beans—and you're going to pay about 50 cents per pound. Grow them yourself and it's about a penny a pound. Buy them in a can and it's \$2.50. You have to invest yourself in yourself. Vegetables? You shop the local produce stand or, in the summer, farmer's markets. Find out what fruits and veggies are okay to buy non-organic. Drive out to orchards and buy u-pick and teach yourself how to can them yourself. Or buy seconds, slice them, and dry them in your oven or covered with cheesecloth in the sun. I understand that there are food deserts in our country where all you can get is soda pop and Snickers, but those shops also carry peanuts. My point is that you can make your money go a long way, but you have to want to. I have lived on the smallest amount of money you can imagine—short of having none at all—and I still ate organic, whole foods. Was it beans and rice? Yes. It was. And for almost 3 months at a stretch. But I did it. You have to change the way you look at food and spending money.

Q: The main relationship in *Blue Moon Vegetarian* is the one between you and your then-fiancé, now-husband, Phil. At one point, a food related incident causes a big fight between the two of you, and you take off your wedding rings, writing, "Someday down the road, we'll rethink those wedding rings." If you don't mind me asking, has that time come yet?

A: Ha! No. We'll never wear those rings. We both agree we don't like wearing a wedding ring, and those don't have the meaning they had for us when we bought them. We've even tried having them purified, but the bad vibe doesn't go away for us.

Q: You talk about one of the main conflicts in *Blue Moon Vegetarian* being between you and Tesla, the unruly shelter dog you tried to adopt. Reading about your experiences with Tesla was so heartbreaking. How hard was it to write that part of the book?

A: It was harder to edit than it was to write, since it was so stressful living through it as I was recording it. I remember having these conversations about it with people over social media. We so loved that dog, and I felt so much commonality with him. I completely understand the need for freedom and what it feels to be trapped in an existence. By the time I was editing the book for publication, some time had passed, and Phil and I both grieved again a bit as I read those sections aloud.

Q: You live in Clarkston, WA, a small, quiet town on the border between Washington and Idaho. Would you say it's easier to be a vegetarian in a small town or in a big city?

A: Definitely in a city. We relish getting to Seattle or Portland where we can indulge ourselves in organic, vegan, and raw cuisine. Here, we don't have too many choices. We don't eat out very much. We have one restaurant that serves steamed edamame. That's our Friday night splurge: steamed edamame and a beer for him, wine for me. We order most of our groceries from an organic and bulk wholesaler, simply because we can't get very high quality organic food, and what we can get certainly isn't reasonably priced.

Q: One of the things you realize in *Blue Moon Vegetarian* is that you grew to see food as medicine. You take a very scientific, historical approach to food—both when talking about your own health and with the advantages of the BARF Diet for pets. Do you think humans were built to eat certain foods from the beginning? Has that changed? Does the optimal diet vary from person to person, and from area to area?

A: I know from my work in the 1990s with the Indian Health Service that human phenome hasn't evolved as quickly as our ability to exploit our planet's resources. We were then seeing the highest level of diabetes in First People populations who started consuming manufactured food 20-30 years before it became epidemic in non-aboriginal populations. To me this says our ability to tolerate a certain food source is relative to exposure. If you come from an urban family who has been in this country since 1600 and whose diets consisted of whatever came from the foodmart in a package for all that time, then perhaps your metabolism and need for nutrients devolved at a rate that allows you to function on Kool-aid and Cap'n Crunch. For me, I am the first generation to not be completely dependent on what my own hands can bring forth from the land. Plus, I'm mixed blood. It makes complete sense to me that I have never wanted to eat foods that did not come directly from the ground, and that, in keeping with the scarcity of animal flesh my generations endured, that I should not feel a particular need for it. It makes sense to me that I've always tried to eat organic and to cook from basic ingredients, that I should have a relationship with my food. It also makes sense to me that I became very ill when I stopped taking time to feed myself in the way that my generations always had.

Do I think there is a one-size-fits all human diet? No. But I do believe that it is our food that will heal us, and that we'd tamp down most of the world's ills if we shuttered all food manufacturing plants and went back to growing only for our own communities.

Q: What are you growing in your garden right now?

A: Phil is the gardener, not I, although I do occasionally bury and turn the compost. He just pulled up what few potatoes we had, and that's the end of the season.

Q: You talk about your frustration with corruption in the healthcare industry, the food industry, and in pharmaceutical companies. What do you think is something the average person can do to combat this?

A: Honestly, I feel so sad and sorry for anyone who does not have a nurse in the family. I can't imagine how an average person fares in the face of our "healthcare industry." Who even interprets the lingo for people, much less the paper work? The best thing we could possibly do is to break the healthcare system by eliminating the need for it. We could actually do this if we all changed the way we eat and conduct our lives. Most of illness is lifestyle or stress-derived. It's a naïve and simplistic approach, I know, but there certainly is a movement afoot. Lots of people are starting to recognize that it is possible to take back their lives for themselves. Say sayonara to capitalism. That's a start. Don't buy from the big guys. Vote with your wallet.

Q: You mention a lot of resources in the book that help readers learn more about food and the benefits of vegetarian and plant-based diets. If readers would like to start or continue their journey as a vegetarian, are there any other books, cookbooks, or movies you would recommend?

A: I would say to watch all the food documentaries out there. *Vegucated*, *A Place at the Table*, *Farmageddon* come to mind. As for cookbooks, *Laurel's Kitchen* was and always has been my bible for organic and vegetarian cooking, but there is also *Diet for a Small Planet* that everyone should read. *Feast of India* also includes a wonderful discussion of cooking and using spices as a spiritual journey.

Q: What's your favorite recipe from *Blue Moon Vegetarian*? Do you plan on creating any more recipes with your husband in the future?

A: We are constantly creating new recipes. My website subscribers last week received my latest—Cherry Oat Sunday Cake. As for favorites from *Blue Moon Vegetarian*, I'd have to say the lasagna, simply because it's been part of my life for so many decades. I still have to morph it to be gluten-free and vegan. The vegan part is tough because I have to make nut cheese. Just found out cashews are not vegan because of some animal-based something used in the processing of them (they are actually housed in the cashew fruit in a toxin that has to be burned off), which is too bad because cashew milk makes a good ricotta-ish cheese. I'll just have to keep working on it.

Suggested Reading Group Guide

1. How is food shown to be a factor in the author's relationship with her fiancé? Do you see cooking as a uniting force or, possibly, a way of camouflaging underlying ills?
2. In what way is food a metaphor for how we have culturally come to expect a strong romantic relationship between adults to ideally evolve?
3. Do you agree with the author's views about the way our relationship to food has evolved, that we remain an extension of our hunter-gatherer ancestors? Why or why not?
4. It would appear that the author sees her relationship with the shelter dog, Tesla, as an omen predicting the trouble between her and her fiancé. Do you agree with this? What other foreshadowing exists in the book that would indicate possible trouble ahead? Do you agree with their handling of the dog situation? Why or why not?
5. The author, by her own admission, has had a life-long problem with food and weight control. She embarks on the vegetarian journey in part because of the difficulties this dysfunctional association has created in terms of her health. However, weight loss is not a side effect of her having embraced a plant-based diet. What do you make of this? Do you trust her perspective since she is by her own admission not a shining example of what we have come to accept as the ideal image of fitness and health?
6. Early in the book the author tries to cook a buffalo roast for guests which doesn't quite turn out. She ends up having to discard it. In what way is that particular segment for the book representative of other off-kilter occurrences, such as the adopting of the shelter dog and the troubles in her relationship with her fiancé?
7. The book uses the phases of the moon as a recurring image and as a means for organizing the narrative. What do you make of this? Do the phases of the author's personal evolution parallel the book's lunar phases? Why or why not?
8. What do you make of the author's choice to use the Haitian earthquake as backstory, and the way the use of that backstory provides a means for her to massage her own guilt? Does it detract from or reinforce your sense of empathy as a reader for her situation?
9. How do the images of what was occurring in Haiti parallel or reinforce some of the other recurring themes, such as inflammation and conflagration?
10. In one memorable scene from the book, the author confesses that she uses a fairly non-environmentally friendly chemical cleaning product to mop her floors and give them a satisfying shine. Why do you think she included this scene? Do you think her actions are hypocritical? Does eating a plant-based diet define a person? What do you think it means to be a vegetarian?
11. Until the end of the book, it's not clear whether Paula and Phil's relationship is going to survive. What relationship can you draw between their journey as a couple and the Rainer Maria Rilke quote at the beginning of the book?

12. Toward the end of the book, after the wedding and return from the honeymoon, the author obviously makes a decision to not reveal some details about those weeks stating, "Of course there is more I am not telling." What effect does this have on you as a reader, on the way you trust the story that is being told? What information do you think the author is withholding? And why?