



## Shucked: Life on a New England Oyster Farm

*Erin Byers Murray*

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**Shucked: Life on a New England Oyster Farm** Erin Byers Murray

***Bill Buford's Heat meets Phoebe Damrosch's Service Included in this unique blend of personal narrative, food miscellany, and history***

In March of 2009, Erin Byers Murray ditched her pampered city girl lifestyle and convinced the rowdy and mostly male crew at Island Creek Oysters in Duxbury, Massachusetts, to let a completely unprepared, aquaculture-illiterate food and lifestyle writer work for them for 12 months to learn the business of oysters. SHUCKED is part love letter, part memoir and part documentary about the world's most beloved bivalves. An in-depth look at the work that goes into getting oysters from farm to table, SHUCKED shows Erin's full-circle journey through the modern day oyster farming process and tells a dynamic story about the people who grow our food, and the cutting-edge community of weathered New England oyster farmers who are defying convention and looking ahead. The narrative also interweaves Erin's personal story, the tale of how a technology-obsessed workaholic learns to slow life down a little bit and starts to enjoy getting her hands dirty (and cold). This is a book for oyster lovers everywhere, but also a great read for locavores and foodies in general.

## Shucked: Life on a New England Oyster Farm Details

Date : Published October 11th 2011 by St. Martin's Press

ISBN : 9780312681913

Author : Erin Byers Murray

Format : Hardcover 368 pages

Genre : Food and Drink, Food, Autobiography, Memoir, Nonfiction, Biography

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## From Reader Review Shucked: Life on a New England Oyster Farm for online ebook

### Sebastian Reyn says

Murray, Erin Byers, Shucked: Life on a New England Oyster Farm (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2011). Murray besluit haar comfortabele leven als food writer in te ruilen voor het ruigere bestaan van de oesterboeren in de baai van Cape Cod. Ze schrijft er vervolgens een boek over. Aardig idee, maar het verhaal ontstijgt het triviale niet. Cijfer: 6. Gelezen: mei/juni 2017.

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### Jen says

This book arrived as a total surprise in the mail from a friend who knows I love reading. It wouldn't have been something I picked up on my own, but I really enjoyed it. The basic premise of the book is that Erin Byers Murray is a prestigious and well-paying gig as a writer for the popular website the Daily Candy, but decided to leave it all to put on her hip boots and go work on an oyster farm for a year, and wrote about it. Reading the overview on the dust jacket, I was worried I was about to get to know one of those spoiled & idealistic aristocrats who expects revelations from the "simple life," but instead is shocked by how dirty, hard, and without easy answers the "simple life" is. Work on the oyster farm does turn out to be incredibly hard work, but the author didn't project any spoiled baby vibes and really draws you in with the stories she tells, revealing her honest fascination and passion for the experience of truly learning about what it takes to bring food from the farm all the way to the table. Not to mention you will learn a ton about oysters. I have a new respect (and craving) for them after reading this.

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### Judy says

Since moving to Cape Cod and having my husband go out to fetch oysters and then cook them up for me, I came to take them for granted. Add to that a friend who drops by with enough oysters for a party, having us wonder, how are we going to eat all these!? Our neighbors, who really love them right from the shell, love seeing us coming with a bag full. Well, I figured it was time to see where these tasty sea creatures came from and realize how lucky I am to have free access.

Erin Byers Murray decided she too would experience first hand the life of the oyster by signing up to work at Island Creek's oyster farm in Duxbury, MA. I now have a new appreciation for oyster farming, from the tiny seeds, working around the weather, and the back-breaking physical energy expended during a typical day. Thank goodness Erin's husband was understanding, as he had to pick up extra jobs to make up for the loss of income when she went from writing to harvesting oysters. Let's hope the sale of her book will make up for his sacrifice. You'll learn all the jargon and ups and downs through the full cycle of an oyster. In addition to joining in the harvesting process, Erin helped with the oyster fest events that benefited the community and eventually the opening of a Boston restaurant by Island Creek. She enjoyed mingling with many of the famous Boston area chefs along the way, whose names I happen to know, thanks to my husband's love of cooking.

Last night my husband gave me a lesson in opening an oyster. I need more practice, but it's about time I

made an attempt to learn. I was pleased and also thankful I didn't need a trip to the ER for a stab wound. Let's hear a cheer for oysters!!!

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### **Carolyn says**

I really enjoyed this book. It was informative and well written. Erin is a great writer able to integrate personal aspects of her life with humor.

I made a visit to ICOF last summer and wish that I had read this before hand. So glad that the whole team has been so successful and really love knowing all that goes into oyster farming.

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### **Greg says**

A perfectly good non-fiction read, and good for anyone who wonders more about what it's like to work with oysters. It's 352 pages, but it didn't feel long. The subject was interesting to me. It has a very journalistic sensibility to it--like a book-long *Rolling Stones* article, which isn't really a bad thing.

I suffered from a lack of common ground with the writer. It's not a fair complaint to level against a book which is, after all, a personal account, but there were certain things that had me rolling my eyes a bit and slapping my forehead. For example, the continual references to "learning where food comes from", "strong women who inspire me", and some references to "putting employees before profit" would take me briefly out of the story. It's not a subversive book or one with an agenda, but at times I felt disconnected from the story as I, the reader, would participate in a line of the author's thinking that was so unlike my own thinking. Maybe that's a healthy thing, though.

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### **Kristin says**

Cue up descriptions of days planting oysters in frigid weather, back breaking work moving crates of these hard shelled creatures and mind numbing days spent sorting them for size. These descriptions would lead you to believe that "Shucked" is only about farming oysters in New England. I for one was drawn to this true story because of my familiarity with its setting and a curiosity of what "those people" actually did on the water and on the docks throughout the year.

In reality, Erin Byers Murray's story is a love letter from her to her employer, Island Creek Oysters, for providing her with a life changing opportunity:

"[Working there] taught me that no matter what it is you want to do, do it to the fullest and always find a way to have fun. If you enjoy growing oysters, grow oysters. But make sure you're enjoying every minute of it.... Go after what you want and work hard for it. But never stop dreaming big."

We've heard this before, that "You can be anything you want to be if you dream big"- right? Well, this story falls right in with that line of thinking and demonstrates something that is so positively part of our American psyche, that in America you have the opportunity to do just about anything. Even when the chips are down, you can pull yourself up by your waders and do good.

“Shucked” begins twenty years ago when things weren’t going so well for Skip Bennett when his clam farm was wiped out by a devastating virus. In order to make a living, he quickly switched gears and, against prevailing advice, started farming oysters instead. His business gained momentum, and he was about to pull in his largest harvest to date when 9/11 hit. People stopped dining out, and restaurants closed over night. With the chips down once again, Skip loaded up his truck with oysters, and sold them to whichever restaurants would open their back door to him. In time, through continued dedication, hard work and perseverance, he grew his Island Creek Oysters into one of the largest oyster companies in the United States.

Along the way, his director of development crosses paths with Erin Byers Murray. As editor of a popular lifestyle magazine in Boston, Erin led a lavish lifestyle of dining and travelling, yet had drifted away from her first love of writing about food. The chance encounter peeked her curiosity about their way of life, and a subsequent tour of the farm had her wishing she could get “in on the action.”

In a leap of faith, she was hired and quickly learned that life on an oyster farm is not all sunshine and calm seas. Over the course of two life-altering years, she became an integral part of ICO. She learned to cull, or sort, oysters by hand in the biting winter months, tended to the “baby” oysters in the much more pleasant summer months, and planted oysters in the muck that was left behind at low tide. She was enthralled by this opportunity to see food grown from seed to harvest. To then learn how the food went from harvest to table, she moved from being a “boot” on the water and into the company office.

“Shucked” almost reads like a parable. Learning about the transformation of growing baby oysters from seed to harvesting them as saleable oysters parallels Erin’s own realization that her desire to get back to her first love of writing has grown again, too. In the end, she leaves the company, starts her own family (again, the growing parable!) and begins writing again (hence, the book!).

I give it a “4” for the tale it tells, although the writing itself may be closer to a “3”. Regardless of where the grading needle lands, though, it is a sweet American story set in a charming seaside town in New England about a very special farm. Bon Appetit!

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### **Rachel says**

It was just okay. I enjoyed learning a bit about oyster farming, and found those parts to be interesting. However, the author just bothered me. The way she inserted herself into everything...I don't know, it was just a very "look at me!" kind of thing. I can't properly articulate the feeling. Anyway, it was a quick read.

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### **Julia says**

My grammar is atrocious. I write how I speak. I warn you now and apologize in advance.

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My mother absolutely loved raw oysters. It was one of the few treats she would afford to only herself when we were at a seaside town in Massachusetts. I always asked her what they tasted like and thought they were disgusting.

Years after I had grown and my mother had passed, I discovered my love for them. I was having an after work drink at an old local french american bar.

A dollar per raw oyster? Why the hell not!

I picked up this book on a whim. It was on sale at a local bookstore while I was perusing with my now wife. I grew up in the city so I never really knew what it took to harvest and sell these beautiful creatures. This book was read aloud to my wife via FaceTime since she is currently back in the UK awaiting her Immigration papers.

It was a fascinating book about all aspects of oyster growing, harvesting, promoting, and selling from a company whom I have been eating for years.

While the author did whine about the pains from work and the hard conditions, it was nothing out of the ordinary.

Coming from being a desk jockey to the hard manual labor of oyster farming is understandable. I appreciate that she truly did enjoy all the aspects of being a farmer.

The later, smaller, part of the book was about how the Island Creek Oyster Company functioned as a business. Personally it was not as enthralling as the first part of the book but I still found it fascinating.

Throughout the chapters you can find a few oyster recipes from famous chefs that know the Island Creek crew personally.

Overall I found this book to be incredibly interesting and worth the read.

Although, now I crave oysters even more.

Good thing I live in Massachusetts!

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## **Eric says**

What did I know about oysters? In retrospect, next to nothing until I read *Shucked*, by Erin Byers Murray. In fact, my only experience with harvesting shellfish was limited to a couple of hours spent digging clams at a beach behind my sister's apartment in Winthrop, Massachusetts. The only thing that I remember was the pain in my lower back and the relief that I felt when the tide finally rolled in and we had to call it quits for the day. It's hard work! Yet the author of this book left her comfortable 9 to 5 job at Daily Candy to work for an oyster farm in Duxbury, Massachusetts for 18 months! Not since George Plimpton has a writer been this "imbedded" to cover a story and learn all that there is to know about delivering oysters from farm to table.

During her work at Island Creek Oysters, Murray did everything from separating and sorting oysters according to size and shape, a process known as culling, to washing and bagging oysters, to even working in the company's front office. She was also responsible for managing the "seed" or baby oysters that would be nurtured until they were big enough to be planted in the company's leased oyster beds in Duxbury Bay. A mistake made during this phase of her assignment could have cost the company its future crop of oysters, an error that could have been devastating to the company financially. Despite the mental and also physical challenges that came with this undertaking, Murray was able to capture a unique insider's view into oyster farming and its place in the growing farm to table, slow food movement.

I've read this type of story many times before and each time I read it I love it even more. The Hero's Journey, when an unlikely hero faces daunting physical and mental obstacles. With perseverance and a little

help from mentors along the way, the hero becomes a master in their own right. Through the course of the book, the author takes this journey from oyster culling novice to "momma-seeda," master of the "seed" to confidant of the company's founder. Against this backdrop, Murray gives us an inside look at what it is actually like to work on an oyster farm – from production to marketing to customer relations. She also provides a historical account of the company itself from its modest beginnings to one of the most sought after brands of oysters today. In addition to having its oysters on the menus of marquee restaurants such as Per Se and The French Laundry, Island Creek now has its own restaurant in Boston, a venture with Boston-based Harpoon Brewery, and a philanthropic arm raising money through its annual Island Creek Oyster Festival for a business development project in Africa.

Murray has masterfully recounted this story along with her own experiences to create an intriguing look at what it takes to get oysters from farm to table. And if this were not enough, the book also includes an oyster or clam recipe at the end of each chapter. We tried one, Berg's Baked Oysters, and it was fantastic. We give this book four out of five stars.

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### **Michelle says**

A while ago I read *The Secret Lives of Lobsters* and learned more than I could ever have imagined about lobsters. It was a story of many sides of the lobster trade and packed chock full of information. I picked up *Shucked* expecting a similarly informative read. Unfortunately, *Shucked* is more of a personal memoir than a book about oysters. More unfortunately, despite her love of MFK Fisher, she has nowhere near that author's talent to craft an engaging memoir centered around food. I learned a little about oysters: that any one can turn female or male, that they eat as much plankton as the tide pushes through them and grow accordingly . . . and that's about it. *The Secret Lives of Lobsters* went into detail about how lobsters mate, what scientists are still trying to discover about their lives, and the political struggles over size restrictions. *Shucked* is pretty much about the journey of a writer for Daily Candy to understand where her food comes from, and her troubles maintaining her marriage while working an hourly manual labor job that demands far more of her energy than writing for Daily Candy did (surprise!). On top of the lack of content, the writing is mediocre at best: sentences are choppy and characterization is simplistic. She repeatedly describes the men she works with as having a dry sense of humor, but every time she gives an example of their banter the joke falls flat. A better writer might have been able to turn her experience into an interesting story, but she doesn't have the skill. I was going to give it two stars because the writing's not cringeworthy or anything that extreme, but then I realized that I wished I could have back every single minute of my life that I spent reading this. To me, that is a one-star book.

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### **Deborah says**

I'm now (1) craving oysters, (2) eager to try some of the fresh seafood recipes in this book, and (3) obsessed with figuring out how to hang out for a day of oystering in Westport MA with Erin Byers Murray!

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### **Kara says**

Oh Shucked....

First of all (by my own fault), this book wasn't what I expected. Perhaps because it has "Life" in the title, I

was under the impression that I was going to be reading about someone who spent her life (growing up) on an oyster farm. I must have read the description and then promptly forgotten it.

I did enjoy the way she recounted her time at Island Creek (and the toll it initially took on her marriage) but there were so many other things that popped up that left me sort of annoyed. She left what she seemed to portray as a 'cushy' job and began working at Island Creek just because...she asked...? If only finding a job were so easy. The last half/third of the book seemed to focus on her name-dropping: this and that celebrity chef from Boston or New York. And I really couldn't get past that. It was as if she originally wanted to show that she was 'slumming' it at the farm. And while I don't doubt the enormous physical strain and pay cut, it seemed like a huge part of the job was schmoozing while dining in fine restaurants and lounging by the ocean. The setting was unique but the story was the same.

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### **Louise says**

This is about a woman who took a year off her cushy writing job to become an oyster farmer. If that sounds boring, then this book probably isn't for you. But if you're curious like me about the oyster industry, then this book delivers. I was a little apprehensive that reading about the gritty details of oyster farming would turn me off from oysters, but this gives a sometimes glamorous look at the life of the oyster farmers at Island Creek Oyster farms. I know it made me crave the briny little bivalves even more.

I liked that the end of each chapter included a little recipe contributed by someone related to the oyster farm. The recipes range from a simple mignonette to more complex things like oyster casseroles.

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### **Emily Schmader says**

I learned much about oysters, shellfish farming, cooking, and business! This was a really fun read. I enjoyed the author's voice. (Note: occasional crude language.)

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### **Jacquie says**

Engaging narrative interwoven with natural history facts about oysters, the day to day struggle of oyster farming, and growing a small, local business. Very enjoyable.

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