



52 Loaves: One Man's Relentless Pursuit of Truth, Meaning, and a Perfect Crust

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William Alexander is determined to bake the perfect loaf of bread. He tasted it long ago, in a restaurant, and has been trying to reproduce it ever since. Without success. Now, on the theory that practice makes perfect, he sets out to bake peasant bread every week until he gets it right. He bakes his loaf from scratch. And because Alexander is nothing if not thorough, he really means from scratch: growing, harvesting, winnowing, threshing, and milling his own wheat.

An original take on the six-thousand-year-old staple of life, *52 Loaves* explores the nature of obsession, the meditative quality of ritual, the futility of trying to re-create something perfect, our deep connection to the earth, and the mysterious instinct that makes all of us respond to the aroma of baking bread.

52 Loaves: One Man's Relentless Pursuit of Truth, Meaning, and a Perfect Crust Details

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From Reader Review 52 Loaves: One Man's Relentless Pursuit of Truth, Meaning, and a Perfect Crust for online ebook

Karim says

Food and spirituality are surprisingly close kin, and are in many parts of the world deeply and wholly related to one another. At least, that's the point that William Alexander is trying to explore in his book '52 Loaves'. The opening act of the book is an enchanting look at that most basic of foods, bread, and the near-alchemical processes that result in a perfectly-baked loaf of bread. Initially dry, Alexander's exhaustive eye for research provides a number of interesting excursions from the main idea to keep us interested in the remarkably complex food chemistry behind the world's staple food. From visiting the renowned Bobolink Dairy to correspondence with folks like the New York Times food writer Mark Bittner, Alexander's remarkable journey kept me quite interested.

Then comes act 2. Alexander is at his best exploring the roots and process behind something as simple as bread, his poetic prose elevates the subject. Once he has exhausted this wellspring of ideas, he turns to the metaphorical meaning of bread as food, vaguely alluding to his own irreligious past, and a thinly-veiled allegory to his fanatical quest to bake the perfect loaf of bread as some sort of deep religious trial and experience. He visits an ancient monastery to teach the monks to bake bread, but the entire experience reeks of schmaltzy pop-spiritualism. While it doesn't kneecap the book, it certainly does handicap the reader's enjoyment: When Alexander visits Morocco on a humble journey to find the roots of the best bread in the world, the book moves from what the reader hopes to be a frank cross-cultural examination of the importance of food to a creepily white-mans-burden display of the superficial differences between the countries (Despite spurning the food and water of the country he visits - ironic for a food writer talking about bread - the author catches a massive case of diarrhea which he promptly blames on the locals, only to 'nurse himself back to health' with bread he baked by his own hands... With dough imported from France). His experiences in a French monastery, though, are quite interesting, though, and worth reading certainly.

The book is scattered with these tonal missteps, which take reading it from an initially incredibly enjoyable experience to a hard slog near the end. In sum, the first act of the book is filled with the right, light touch of humour, history and fascinating insight into another man's mind as he strives to perfect a simple art, but it rapidly progresses into hard-to-endure pop-spiritualism which makes it difficult to enjoy the finish. I still recommend reading it, but it's not a bad idea to skim the last act of the book.

Diane says

This is a fun foodie memoir about a man who becomes obsessed with baking bread and spends a year trying to perfect his recipe. I wanted to read this because I had loved William Alexander's previous memoir, "The \$64 Tomato," about his obsession with his vegetable garden.

Alexander has a light, humorous writing style that is enjoyable to read. In "52 Loaves," he is inspired by eating a delicious loaf of peasant bread at a fancy New York City restaurant and decides to try and make his own. Thus begins a long journey of learning everything he can about bread, including growing his own wheat and milling it into flour. He visits a yeast laboratory, tours a flour mill, meets with bakers and even builds his own clay oven in his backyard. He also learns how to make a *levain*, which is a starter loaf that contains the precious yeast needed to make bread rise.

There is some meditation on the meaning of bread in our lives, and that humans have been making it for about 6,000 years. The recipe for bread was found scratched on the inside of an Egyptian pyramid and goes something like this: "Mix flour, water, salt and yeast. Let rise, then form a loaf and bake."

Alexander learns by trial and error the thousands of different ways those four ingredients could be combined, and each week he makes a variation on the recipe. He was eventually confident enough to enter a loaf in the New York State Fair, and he won second prize! His family likes having homemade bread every week (and this book made me nostalgic for my childhood when my mom used to make fresh bread every weekend) but he's never satisfied with his loaves -- he always finds something he could improve on.

One element he investigates is the kind of water used in recipes; he was worried that the chlorine in tap water was hurting his bread, so he buys some bottled spring water that was shipped from France and feels guilty about it:

"When did drinking water become such a burden? My father didn't spend one moment of his life worrying about the ethics (or the purity) of the water he drank, I guarantee it. He was just happy to have indoor plumbing. Every trip to the faucet was a small miracle, and he thankfully drank whatever came out. In fact, my parents' generation didn't have to deal with half the decisions, ethical or otherwise, we have to make today. Forget paper or plastic. They didn't have to select from a dozen cable TV packages or choose between a PC and a Macintosh; they didn't have to decide between free-range and mass-produced chicken, between well-traveled organic and local conventional carrots; and they certainly never had to pick their own flights (and seats) from a zillion listings on the Internet. Sometimes I feel as if my head is going to explode. Fortunately I have a usually reliable antidote to this neuron overload: I retreat to the kitchen to do what men and women have been doing for six thousand years -- bake bread on a stone."

My favorite part of the book was when Alexander travels to France to take a baking class at the Ritz and to spend a week baking bread at an abbey in Normandy. His purpose at the monastery was to help the monks learn to make their own bread again -- their previous baker had left and no one had been trained to replace him. Alexander (who is not a Catholic and does not even consider himself religious) makes friends with several of the monks and enjoys his days acting like a French baker. His time there was very moving for him, and when he returned home to the States he had trouble adjusting to modern life again. Luckily, the monks had access to email and Alexander was able to keep in touch; a thank-you note from the monk was so touching that I got a bit misty-eyed.

After his year of baking, his wife asks him what he learned:

"Bread in a healthy diet doesn't make you fat. Too much bread, washed down with wine, does. The only thing more unsettling than having your faith shaken is having your lack of faith shaken ... Choose one thing you care about and resolve to do it well. Whether you succeed or not, you will be the better for the effort. Bread is life."

Lindquistheather says

I really enjoyed this one more than I thought I would. William Alexander tastes the perfect loaf of bread at a restaurant and wants to recreate it. So, he begins a quest to bake the perfect loaf of bread, and commits to baking a loaf once a week for a year. It becomes an obsession for him, and he ends up planting his own wheat, building his own oven, taking a bread making class in France, and eventually teaching bread making

at a French monastery. As part of this journey, he explores why he feels the need to do this, his lost faith in God, and the symbolism and use of bread in history and religion. I thought it was fascinating, but was a little disappointed that after having some epiphanies, nothing really changed in the end. I thought the writing was entertaining and humorous, but I felt like he left a few loose ends.

Melody says

Alexander's memoir about baking bread left me cold. I didn't connect with him on any meaningful level. I'm a baker- a dilettante to be sure- but I never felt the sort of connection with the dough I was looking for here. It took him almost 125 pages to even get around to kneading the dough by hand, fercryinoutloud. For me, that's the beauty part.

The structure was awkward, I thought, and didn't even begin to make sense till he took up residency in the monastery at the end of the book. Simply didn't work for me on any level.

Naberius says

One of my book groups had read The \$64 Tomato a while back, and we all liked it. In that book, William Alexander wrote of his struggles with organic gardening, combining humor with the imparting of information, resulting in a nonfiction book that read as quickly as good fiction. I had read that he was writing a new book, so I had kept my eye out for it --- and wasn't disappointed when this arrived at our library. In this story, Alexander tackles the pursuit of the perfect loaf of bread, embarking upon a quest to bake a loaf a week, using a very simple recipe. As with his previous book, I found that I was really enjoying the read, and was learning a lot at the same time. For example, I had no idea what "pellagra" was, but he goes into an interesting explanation around page 52, explaining not only what this disease was, but how it ties into enriched flour. (by the way, if you would like to know more about pellagra, there is an informative Wikipedia article --- be warned, there are photos..... and this isn't a pretty disease). Getting back to the book --- Alexander imparts a good deal of knowledge to the reader, all the while taking you with him through the weeks of baking, and his discoveries along the way. His time spent at the monastery was a section in the book that I found really interesting; his idea of going to this monastery to bake was daring, but what happens when he gets there is really very unique. Alexander's writing style is a lot like listening to a good friend relate a story --- very conversational. So, if you don't usually read nonfiction, but might like to try some, I'd recommend this book as a good place to begin.

The only problem I had with this book is that it made me crave bread. I have had a lifelong love of bread, and this book made me want to whip up a loaf of my own (or run to a Whole Foods and grab a loaf).

Lisa says

I was facing a force far more powerful, one that seemed at times as threatening as it was benevolent, stronger and more enduring than anything I had ever encountered. I'm speaking, of course, of bread. - p. 314

In *52 Loaves*, William Alexander, a middle-aged Director of Technology in southern New York state, chronicles his year-long effort to bake one loaf of bread every week . . . but not, as you might imagine, a

different kind of bread every week. Rather, Alexander's goal was to bake *one* kind of bread, a simple peasant bread, until he could bake it perfectly. This was a project I could sympathize with, since I'd spent an entire academic year in college perfecting my challah recipe by inflicting it every week on the very good-natured Unitarian Universalist youth group I belonged to.

One thing I love about Alexander's book is that he starts with the same modest amounts of time, skill, knowledge, and kitchen supplies as most amateur home bakers, which makes the story of his progress very relatable. It was especially beneficial as a reader-baker to hear how bread-making ideas I'd read about but never tried myself worked (or didn't work) for him and to eavesdrop on his discussions with expert bakers of all stripes and philosophies. Along with the bread advice, Alexander weaves in humor and fascinating bits of bread history and science.

I appreciated how deep Alexander got into the process. He didn't just bake bread: he grew wheat in his backyard, threshed it, winnowed it, ground it with an Indian grinding tool (I wasn't a fan of the Indian jokes in that chapter), made his own starter from local materials, and built a cob oven in his backyard. And I *love* that he makes this seem like a somewhat normal hobby for a middle-aged person with a full-time mainstream job. Which is how I think this kind of thing *should* seem. I mean, it's a million times better than watching TV, right?

Alexander's project culminates in a week at a French abbey, where he confronts some of questions about bread baking and spirituality that he had been wrestling with throughout the year. I was unprepared for how surprising and touching this part of the book would be. Alexander's account of this single week in Normandy lasts 50 lovely pages, in comparison to the other 51 weeks, which averaged between 3 and 7, and it's a very excellent 50 pages.

And if *that* wasn't enough, he includes his recipes and a bread baking bibliography in the back of the book.

Maybe this is a little over the top, but I was so taken with the book that I actually stayed up reading it last night from about 10 p.m. until one in the morning. Which means that this morning I feel completely exhausted. And I can't wait to spend the afternoon baking!

Valerie says

Any man who will obsessively grow and grind his own wheat, in order to make the perfect loaf of bread has my attention. And his family has my sympathy.

Margitte says

An obsessive guy is taking on bread-baking, hoping to find the perfect loaf of bread. What can you expect of his adventure into break-making if he weighs the water as well as the coffee EVERY SINGLE MORNING before brewing it? He was not too upset when he deleted an important file at work from his computer, confused road signs and forgot his wife's birthday. However, when he forgot to add salt to the bread mixture, he immediately had his memory loss and confusion evaluated. He felt awkward to visit his regular neurologist! He tries out his own faculty members in a psychology department of a university instead.

When I started out with the book, my immediate thought was that a perfect loaf of bread is one that is coming hot out of the oven, put on a table with jams and other condiments, with a few bottles of good wine, good company and good stories to share. It doesn't matter if it was perfect. It is hot and edible, and the friendships around the table is there, it will BE a perfect loaf of bread. It will not only feed the soul, but also the heart and mind. Eating, to me, is not about perfection, it is about sharing and making good memories.

(view spoiler)

(hide spoiler)]

This is a fun read, often hilarious, as well as informative. You don't need to know everything in the book, but collected in one place, it becomes a relaxing experience filled with laughter and wisdom. He travels through time--six thousand years of bread baking, by starting from the very beginning, planting wheat in his garden and take it all the way to the loaf of bread from his oven. He also travels through space to France and Morocco to finally perfect his recipe of the perfect loaf of bread. It is in the monastery among the monks that he will experience his first perfectly-baked bread.

(view spoiler)

The approach to bread baking of combining science with sentiment, turns out to be an excellent idea in the end. Many travelers tour the vineyards of the world, celebrating the art of wine making. This author did the same for bread and wrote a book that will warm the hearts, as well as ovens, of all bread-bakers, including yours truly. I have never considered turning it into an arty science project, but this book encourages me to take bread-breaking to a much higher, much nobler level!

What a fun and fantastic way of getting to know the art of bread-baking better. Even if you do not do it yourself, you might enjoy this book as a travelogue through all the ovens and boulangeries of the masters.

He leaves his legacy in the back of the book by providing all his own recipes. A sure delight to try out.

He should consider expanding his experience by visiting the rest of the world. There are many kinds of bread to be baked, which will enchant him.

The earth won't move a minuscule millimeter if you don't read it, but you will feel amazingly good after doing so. So you've done the wine. It's time to do the bread!

I love books like these. I've done the pleasure of coffee; the history of the world in six glasses; will do the tea-route later; and now have done the bread thing. It's really a good feeling.

Gini says

Bill Alexander ate the perfect bread at a restaurant one day, and years later decided to try and recreate that experience in his own kitchen. His attempt to find that bread leads him to resolve to bake the bread--the same bread--once a week for an entire year. But whereas I might spend a year baking the same bread and attempting to perfect it by changes in the ingredients, the ratios, the oven temperature, etc., Alexander does it by visiting bakers and bakeries, entering state fairs, traveling to Africa and France, building his own clay oven, and living for a week in a monastery.

It's that level of commitment that separates the hobbyist from the author.

I love kitchen memoirs, because the act of cooking is so much the basis for everything about life. And since I've been baking bread myself lately, this book looked to be custom-made for me. Alexander weaves fascinating bread history and science through his tale of small triumphs and amusing setbacks. The book is lively and entertaining, and recommended for those who share my love of such tales.

And now that my kitchen remodel is done, it's inspired me to get back to baking good bread.

C. says

I wasn't sure what to expect when I started this book, having found it on the library bookshelf in the bread section of cookbooks when looking for bread cookbooks. I came away completely delighted by my experience with the book and very thankful to have stumbled across such a witty writer.

The book follows one man's attempts to perfect an artisan bread he tasted once. Each week he makes a new attempt, and so the book is divided into 52 chapters, each discussing his attempts of that week. But that's not all. Throughout his search, he is exploring what bread is, its meaning and its history, as well as the history of its component parts (he goes so far as to grow his own wheat). Each week has a different focus, building upon previous weeks.

Faith and religion play their parts as well, as the book is further divided into sections named after the office of the hours from Catholicism. The melding of bread-baking and religion might strike many of us as an odd choice, but the historical significance, as Mr. Alexander explains in the course of the book, are many. The author faces his own crisis of faith, in his bread-making quest, many times. He is not afraid to show himself, warts and all, to the reader with a deft and clever tone. And while I don't want to give away the ending, I will say that I was as anxious as the author to find out if he could, truly, bake that perfect loaf.

Baking, science, history, religion, and exploration--all handled in a wonderful series of personal essays. Oh, and there are recipes, too!

Brooke says

I really loved this book. It was funny, about baking, and included a visit to a monastery. All good things in my opinion.

Mo says

I love this author. I love his writing style. I love his sense of humor. I love how anal / compulsive / obsessive he is. I love it when he goes off on tangents.

For example:

By the way, if you'll pardon one more digression—this one is worth it, trust me—I have it from an extremely reliable source who works in market research that when a razor company introduces a new razor, which they do every few years whether there is a consumer need for one or not, they intentionally dull the replacement blades of their existing razors to make the new one feel superior. So, caveat emptor. (That's Latin for "the bastards!") - William Alexander

I love the fact that even though I have no desire to ever make bread from scratch, I still thoroughly enjoyed HIS attempts to create the "perfect" loaf of bread.

Suzka says

This ranks (as I see it) at a high three stars, so I'm rounding it out to four. It was a fast, enjoyable read. The author seems to be pretty good at gleaning those small details and nuances which flesh out what could have been a dimensionless account in the hands of a lesser writer. I love his moxie for going to the monastery. I wanted to eat bread the entire time I was reading.

Here's a nice little bit, from page 34:

"...In fact, my parents' generation didn't have to deal with half the decisions, ethical or otherwise, we have to make today. Forget about paper or plastic. They didn't have to select from a dozen cable TV packages or choose between a PC and a Macintosh; they didn't have to decide between free-range and mass-produced chicken, between well-travelled organic and local conventional carrots; and they certainly never had to pick their own flights (and seats) from a zillion listings on the Internet. Sometimes I feel as if my head is going to explode. Fortunately I have a usually reliable antidote to this neuron overload: I retreat to the kitchen to do what men and women have been doing for six thousand years -- bake bread on a stone."

Sorenconard says

As a Bread Head new born, this was the book that I needed. I needed to see somebody's path to great bread to know that it could be done. I needed to know that just because I left an ingredient out that I shouldn't give up hope.

This book is along the lines of Bill Bryson or A.J.Jacobs. A book about a journey with humor, insight,

history, over the top ideas, self-reflection and a dash of self depreciation. It's about Alexander's quest to make great bread as a relative novice and it is told in a self narrative fashion

Pros: Truth, Truth, Truth. He takes a common man's approach to learning the skill and finds many of the same dead ends other bakers have found. It's a great read for anyone into making bread. It is focused on natural yeast bread and is a little snobby towards other bread but he is really good at describing the ups and downs of learning how to bake.

Funny, Funny, Funny. There are some solid chuckle-to-yourself moments.

Educational. While he gets stuck with certain techniques, new bread bakers will learn a lot and all bakers will likely learn about some of the history of bread.

Cons: His style of writing takes a touch to get used to. He isn't a good/great writer (I found him solid enough as to not be distracting)

Week 37. He is a funny guy but he got a little carried away in week 37 talking about American Indian/Native Americans and was offensive and borderline racist. I doubt his intentions were to be insensitive, but he came off poorly.

Other thoughts:

Sometimes I found myself shouting at the book because of his laser focus on certain ways to do bread but by the end of his journey it seemed he was more able to free flow with baking.

This was a random library read that I picked up without looking on here. I am glad I didn't read the reviews as I might not have read this book. A lot of reviews stated that this book was good in the first half but then died out in the second half. I did not experience that at all. I thought the pace and quality of the book stayed the same. The only stand out of the book was the longer section about his stay at the monastery. I thought it acted as the climax for the book and his baking skills and actually built some suspense on if he was going to pull off.

Joshua Buhs says

A hard book to get a handle of.

On the one hand, an easy read, almost like a series of blog posts--very short chapters. The author, inspired by a great loaf of bread he once ate, sets out to bake a loaf of bread every week for a year, in the process trying to produce a similar loaf.

But the conceit of the weekly bakings more or less disappears, even though the chapters are divided by the weeks, as does the need for him listing his weight and the weight of his baking books at the beginning of the book's sections.

And that leads us to the other hand. Alexander connects bread to both religion and sex, and these themes take over. Ultimately, the book is divided into sections based on the rituals of monastic life. His quest for the perfect loaf simulates a religious quest, although in the end--despite having a kind of epiphany--he does not go back to the religion of his earlier life. He does, however, reconnect with his wife, the bread being both a source of separation from her, but also a kind of symbol of their union.

Little eddies of stories come up, and go nowhere--the wheat he sows ultimately plays little role in the book,

nor does the oven he tries to build. There is mock intrigue--the book opens with him trying to get a levain past TSA, but, really, they just let him go--and besides, he smuggled it through in other ways, too. So. Finally, there's something of a unreliable narrator thing going on, although I am not sure Alexander is aware of or in control of it. He wants to present himself as a total naif, but he has a job as an IT director and, based on passing comments, routinely takes on and completes large jobs. His fear of baker's ratios, therefore, makes no sense.

All in all, though, a good read.
