Non-fiction Text Excerpt

"How Corn Took Over America"

From *The Omnivore's Dilemma (Young Readers Edition)* by Michael Pollan

(1) The average supermarket doesn't seem much like a field of corn.

(2) Take a look around one. What do you see? There's a large, air-conditioned room. There are long aisles and shelves piled high with boxes and cans. There are paper goods and diapers and magazines. But that's not all. Look again. Somewhere, behind the brightly colored packaging, underneath the labels covered with information, there is a mountain of corn.

(3) You may not be able to see it, but it's there....

(4) Supermarkets look like they contain a huge variety of food. The shelves are stuffed with thousands of different items. There are dozens of different soups and salad dressings, cases stuffed with frozen dinners and ice cream and meat. The range of food choices is amazing.

(5) Yet if you look a little closer, you begin to discover:

(6) **It's All Corn.**

(7) Well, maybe not *all* corn, but there's still an awful lot of it hiding here—a lot more than you suspect. We think of our supermarkets as offering a huge variety of food. Yet most of that huge variety comes from one single plant. How can this be?

(8) Corn is what feeds the steer that becomes your steak.

(9) Corn feeds the chicken and the pig.

(10) Corn feeds the catfish raised in a fish farm.

(11) Corn-fed chickens laid the eggs.

(12) Corn feeds the dairy cows that produce the milk, cheese, and ice cream....

(13) But that's not all. Read the label on any bag of chips, candy bar or frozen snack. How many ingredients do you recognize? *Maltodextrin? Monosodium glutamate? Ascorbic acid? What are those things?* What about *lecithin and mono-, di-,* and *triglycerides?* They are all made from corn. The golden food coloring? Made from corn. Even the citric acid that keeps a chicken nugget "fresh" is made from corn.

(14) If you wash down your chicken nuggets with almost any soft drink, you are drinking corn with your corn. Since the 1980s, almost all sodas and most of the fruit drinks sold in the supermarket are sweetened with something called high-fructose corn syrup....

(15) There are some forty-five thousand items in the average American supermarket and more than a quarter of them now contain corn. This goes for the non-food items as well—everything from toothpaste and cosmetics to disposable diapers, trash bags and even batteries.

(16) You are what you eat, it's often said. If this is true, then what we are today is mostly corn. This isn't just me being dramatic—it's something that scientists have been able to prove... by tracing the element carbon as it goes from the atmosphere into plants, then into our food, and finally, into us.

(17) You may have heard the expression that humans are a carbon-based life form. (This always seems to come up in science-fiction movies, but it's true.) Like hydrogen and oxygen, carbon is an element, one of the basic building blocks of matter. All the molecules that make up our cells—carbohydrates, proteins, and fats—contain the element carbon.

(18) All of the carbon in our bodies was originally floating in the air, as part of a carbon dioxide molecule. Plants take the carbon out of carbon dioxide and use it to make food—*carbo*hydrates. They do this through a process called photosynthesis. In photosynthesis, plants use the energy of the sun (*photo* means light) to *synthesize* (make) food.

(19) All of our food, in fact almost all life on earth, can be traced back to photosynthesis in plants. It's more than a figure of speech to say that plants create life out of thin air.

(20) So the plants take carbon and make it into food. Then we eat the plants, or we eat animals that have eaten the plants. That's how the carbon winds up in our cells. But not all carbon is the same. Corn uses slightly different types of carbon than other plants. So by looking at the type of carbon in our cells, scientists can tell how much corn we have been eating.

(21) Todd Dawson, a biologist at the University of California, Berkeley, has done exactly that kind of research. He says that when you look at the carbon in the average American's cells, "we look like corn chips with legs."

(22) Americans don't think of themselves as corn eaters. Our bread is made from wheat flour. We don't eat a lot of corn on the cob. When we think of serious corn eaters, we often think of people in Mexico. About 40 percent of their calories come directly from corn, mostly in the form of corn tortillas. Yet Americans have *more* corn in our diet than Mexicans. It's just that the corn we eat wears many different disguises.

(23) How did corn take over America? It's really a tremendous success story—for corn, anyway. Corn has managed to become the most widely planted crop in America—more than 80 million acres of farmland are planted with corn every year. Today it covers more acres of the country than any other living species, including human beings. It has pushed other plants and animals off the American farm. It has even managed to push a lot of farmers off the farm.... Corn is now one of the most successful plants on earth.

(24) It's important to remember that while humans use plants and other animals, it's not a one-way street. Plants and animals don't just sit around waiting for human beings to use them—they use us, too. The ones that can adapt use our farms and cities to spread and multiply. Corn became king of the farm and the supermarket because it adapted itself easily to the needs of farmers and food makers. It had qualities that human beings prized. Those qualities allowed it to spread and grow until it worked its way into every corner of our lives—and every cell in our bodies.