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Malcolm Gladwell cracked the diet-book code in 1998. In a New Yorker article about the obesity epidemic among Pima Indians in Arizona, he noted that all the popular advice on weight loss reduced it to a matter of technique: that the right foods eaten in the right combination can succeed, where more traditional approaches to nutrition have failed. That led him to The Zone, the most popular diet book of the late 1990s, and from there to other best-selling weight loss books of the 90s, some still famous (like Dr. Atkins' New Diet Revolution) and some we've forgotten (like The Rice Diet Report and The Rotation Diet). They all seem to be making things up, Gladwell wrote. But if you read a large number of popular diet books in a row, it's striking that they all seem to come up with things in exactly the same way. It's as if the diet-book genre had an unspoken set of narrative rules and conventions, and all that matters is how skillfully those rules and conventions are adhered to. Here is the formula he deified: 1. Dark Writer is lost: fat, lethargic, sick, or the last picked in playground sports. 2. The Eureka Moment Author stumbles upon One True Secret that has been forgotten, ignored, or deliberately and criminally suppressed. It may be long-forgotten research (for Zone author Barry Sears, it was a study published in The Lancet in 1956), a mysterious mentor, or a series of ominous events. 3. Patent claims are key, Gladwell wrote, because it explains how weight can be lost without sacrifice. Dieters know from past experience that it's not easy. But they also believe they lack the discipline to do a strict diet work for them. So the authors do what Gladwell calls a 540-degree rhetorical triple-gainer, since it involves making six claims in quick succession: It's a myth that you should like Sure, everyone says that but of course you don't believe them, I was once like you, convinced I had to suffer to lose weight because it's true unless you use my diet That requires no suffering whatsoever when suffering was the whole point the idea of not suffering would have seemed strange to early diet-book authors. Take Hippocrates, father of medicine. In Calories and Corsets: A History of Dieting Over Two Thousand Years, Louise Foxcroft writes that Hippocrates understood the importance of self-discipline and a balanced lifestyle: 'Man,' he wrote, 'can't live healthily on food without a certain amount of exercise.' - For the heaviest patients, he recommended that they exercise to exhaustion and then eat while they were breathless. That was 2,400 years ago, and for much of the story, counseling was similarly harsh. For example, in a 1937 book called Weight Loss: Diet and Dishes, Dr. Ernest Claxton wrote that the secret to success is being in the will ingness of the subject to submit to a disciplined diet. Shortcuts are not good. He went on to say that success required willpower, perseverance, submission, and even secrecy. Yes, secrecy. Because the need to diet has mostly been seen as a source of embarrassment, a moral failure that led to sin gluttony. Moral lapses require reconciliation. Reconciliation means a harsh and restrictive regime focused on self-denial. If there was ever a time for such an idea to take hold in the United States, it was the late 1800s and early 20th century. How History repeats itself interest in fitness, nutrition, public safety, and even religion waxes and declines in predictable patterns. The cycle that began in 1880 brought us progressive era in politics, women's suffrage, and prohibition. We got Christian Science, a new religion with an emphasis on mind-body health, and crusades against drugs, tobacco and sex that would return in our own lifetime. But for the sake of this discussion, the most influential innovation may have been the scale. Americans, especially women, began to weigh themselves regularly from the late 1800s, wrote medical historian Ann La Berge in a paper called How the Ideology of Low Fat Conquered America. Initially, this was done in public, on coin-operated penny scales (some of which played music or even told your fortune). The bathroom scale was introduced in 1913. At the time, La Berge noted, America had a firmly entrenched dieting culture. That made Americans susceptible to one of the worst ideas in history: Bodies should not become heavier with age, and thus men and women of all ages should weigh the same as they had at 18 or 25. Following logically from this utterly illogical concept was the idea that a diet low in calories should also be low in fat. The mathematics seemed simple enough; if a gram of carbohydrate has 4 calories and one gram of fat has 9, why would you eat fat instead of carbohydrate? The modern push for low-fat diets gained critical mass with Ancel Keys and his landmark study, Coronary Heart Disease in seven countries, published in circulation in 1970. What became known as the Seven Countries study had far-reaching implications. In public policy, starting in 1977, the U.S. government officially promoted the low-fat diet for the prevention of heart disease, the leading cause of death in the U.S. In 1984, La Berge wrote, the scientific consensus was that low fat was appropriate not only for high-risk patients, but also as a preventive measure for all but babies. I'll give you an example of how totally accepted this idea was: In Once Around, a film released in 1991, Richard Dreyfuss played a salesman who is recovering from a heart attack. When he tries to eat a piece of dark meat His wife, played by Holly Hunter, stops him. Why? Because any will kill him. (I couldn't find a clip of this specific scene, so I hope my memory is correct.) I started working at Men's Fitness magazine in 1992. Like any other health and fitness magazine, we promoted low-fat diets for any goal you may have, from heart health to body composition. I remember a colleague writing an article about trying to stick to a 10 percent fat diet for a month. (As far as I remember, he was unable to do so). The paradigm shift The low-fat diet may have been ubiquitous as a media phenomenon, but it always had deviants. In the 1950s, La Berge wrote, some researchers had argued that it was the kind of fats, not the total amount, that mattered. The low-carb Atkins diet had been phenomenally popular in the 1970s, so much so that in 1979, in a sketch on Saturday Night Live, John Belushi played a fat Elvis imitator, explaining, I playin' the last part of the king's life after he discovered carbs. Even then, a low-carb diet wasn't exactly new. More than 100 years earlier, in 1863, a London undertaker named William Banting published the Letter on Corpulence, addressed to the public. In it he detailed his personal story: Just a few years earlier, he was so stout (5-foot-5, 202 pounds, according to Foxcroft) that he couldn't bend over to tie his shoes. After he cut out bread, butter, milk, sugar, beer and potatoes, he quickly lost weight (to 156 pounds), a phenomenal accomplishment for a man in his mid-60s. The diet became so popular that his name became a verb. Someone on a low-carb plan would tell friends I'm banting. If someone has lost noticeable amounts of weight, friends would ask: Do you have Bant? But let's go back to the diet wars of the 1990s. When I joined the human rights magazine in 1998, my colleagues were still on the side of the experts, bewildered by the resurgence of the Atkins diet. In the December 1999 issue, in an article we called Don't Have a Cow, Man, we took Atkins apart that Dr. Atkins is able to point to any studies showing that a diet high in saturated fat and low in carbohydrates is safe for the heart. The experts cited in this article included Dr. Dean Ornish, a rival author whose books advocated for a super-low-fat vegetarian diet, and Dr. David Ludwig of Harvard, who gave us the ideal alternative to Atkins: a diet in which 50 percent of calories come from carbohydrates with a low glycemic index. We now know that the glycemic index was never as strong for weight control as its supporters claimed. Lou's Eureka Moment Now we come to my small and extraordinarily insignificant part in the history of diet books. As I would have predicted, had I read Malcolm Gladwell's article, it began with a Eureka moment. It was the summer of 2000. I was returned from a trip to Muncie, Indiana, where got a full workup at Ball State University's Human Performance lab. I went to Muncie with the idea that I would write a feature on fitness testing. But the results changed my mind. Almost everything they measured, from blood pressure to lipids to VO2 max, showed that I was in excellent health for a man in his 40s. But to my surprise and disgust, three separate tests showed my body fat was over 20 percent. DEXA was the friendliest, at 21 percent, while Bod-Pod and calipre put it just over 22 percent. It was on my mind when I went into a meeting with the new editor of Men's Health Books. I brought him a new idea: What if everything we've told readers has been wrong? What if, instead of telling them to do cardio and eat a low-fat diet to weigh less and look better, should we tell them to lift weights and eat more fat, which is to say, fewer carbohydrates? It sounds silly obvious now, and is standard advice in Men's Health and other magazines. But that was only seven months after our anti-Atkins article. Not only were Rodale magazines like MH and Prevention all-in on low-fat diets, we also published Runner's World and Cycling, both of which promoted endurance training. Some colleagues fretted that the book, Testosterone Advantage Plan, may undermine the entire corporate mission when we published it 18 months later. Of course nothing like that happened. The nutrition plan, created by co-author Jeff Volek, was a modified Mediterranean diet, with only more protein (2 grams per kilogram of body weight). He recommended that the remaining calories be shared evenly: half fat, half carbs. In that sense, it was hardly different from the still popular Zone diet. Our readers embraced the book, buying well over 100,000 copies the first year, I was told. At first, I wondered why my colleagues didn't make a major deal over the book's surprising success. Then Rodale published the South Beach Diet in early 2003, and I understood. Described as a kinder, gentler Atkins, SBD was an instant bestseller, and for a while sold more than 100,000 a week. Life during wartime I thought Diet Wars was over in the mid-2000s. Low fat was dead, and the public seemed perfectly comfortable with lower carb, higher protein diets. Moreover, so many hucksters had moved into the field, including Dr. Phil, author of The Ultimate Weight Solution in 2003, and convicted con artist Kevin Trudeau, who in 2007 published The Weight Loss Cure They Don't Want You to Know About-that I didn't see how much lower it could go. Could I have been more wrong? It's hard to even categorize the dizzying array of diets we either love, hate, or ignore. I suppose the most useful for consumers is what I call themed diets. Paleo, vegan, and maybe the Mediterranean means about the same thing to most with a random interest in nutrition. Nutrition. may vary in their specific interpretations of these themes, or their adherence, but they all have relatively straightforward and easy-to-remember parameters. The last few years have seen the rise of what I call lone gunman diets. These highlight a malefactor that the authors claim is responsible for outsized (and thus unlikely) damage to our health and waist size. Right from the top of my head, I can think of books, sloth-shamey wheat, sugar, gluten, animal fat and/or protein, or omega-6 fats. It almost makes me nostalgic for the days when we were arguing over whole macronutrients, like fat or carbohydrates. The Greatest Diet Ever Inevitable, we get to the question of which diet is best.. The only honest answer is: It depends. If you think a paleo or vegan diet is best for you, you'll probably do well with it. If you believe that the key to a healthy weight matches your diet to your blood type, it doesn't matter if there is absolutely no evidence to support your beliefs. As long as you follow the diet, it will probably work. There is no right or wrong. For the end user there are only works or does not work. I'll give you an example from perhaps the greatest weight loss story in human history: Celesta Geyer was a circus fat lady in the 1930s and 40s. Her stage name was Dolly Dimples. If anyone was ever born to be fat, it was Geyer. She weighed 150 pounds in fifth grade. She was 338 pounds, at 4-foot-11, when she started her career. Another fat lady recruited her by saying: You know, honey, everyone's laughing at you now. Don't you think it would be a good idea to make them pay for their fun? She weighed 588 pounds at her peak, and estimates that she ate 10,000 calories a day, including four loaves, two pounds of sugar, and a gallon of milk. In 1950, when she was 48 or 49, she had a near-fatal heart attack. Her blood pressure was 240 over 132 and she was told she had just a few hours to live. That's when she decided to go on a diet. In just over a year, while eating 800 calories a day, she lost more than 400 pounds, and maintained a weight about 120 pounds for the rest of her life. She was 81 when she died. I learned all this from Diet or Die, her long-out-of-print autobiography and weight loss manual. (I found it through an interlibrary loan.) Her diet was the opposite of what any of us would recommend today. She started with baby food, and a limit of six glasses of liquid a day. A quarter of the diet was grain. Instead of exercising, she took hot baths and got massages. Here's how she described her approach to weight loss: Like any American person, I've read about fast routes to losing ten pounds in two weeks, three pounds in two days or forty pounds in two months, and I'm convinced that no one, no one, no one, not can be successful if you do not first take in your mind before removing it from your body. So if you ask me what is the best diet, I would say it was Celesta Geyer's because she lost more than 400 pounds and kept it off for 30 years. If you ask me what is the worst diet, I'd say it's a 300-way tie between all the diets that follow the recipe Malcolm Gladwell outlined, making amazing claims based on dubious or cherry-picked science. Which brings me to The Lean Muscle Diet, my upcoming book. It has no Eureka moments or magical transformations. The diet plan, by co-author Alan Aragon, is practical and flexible, with more or less balanced amounts of protein, carbohydrates, and fat. It doesn't inaugurate or denigrate foods, but instead gives you these guidelines: 80 percent of your diet should come from whole or minimally processed foods you like 10 percent should come from whole or minimally processed foods you don't necessarily like but don't hate 10 percent should come from something else, even if that's what Alan calls pure junky goodness We bet on an audience who prefer guidance solid over solid waste. Are we right? Lou Schuler, CSCS, is an award-winning journalist and author, with Alan Aragon, of The Lean Muscle Diet. This content is created and maintained by a third party and imported into this page to help users enter their email addresses. You may find more information about this and similar content on piano.io piano.io

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