Q: In your introduction, you mention the "enormous importance of an ordinary trip to the grocery store." What makes such a trip so important?
A: People often think of its importance in terms of their family, or perhaps friends. For example, think of the importance of the last-minute trip to the store because you’ve run out of milk and have young kids, or you need a particular ingredient to make a cake you’ve promised a friend. I argue that the scale should be expanded; food shopping is important to many systems—economic, political, and social.

Q: When did the concept of a chain grocery store first emerge and how and why did it catch on so quickly?
A: Chain grocery stores first emerged very early in the twentieth century, but didn’t really start to dominate food retail until the 1920s. The question of why they caught on is complicated; the conventional explanation is that it was because they were able to charge lower prices. I argue in the book, however, that their popularity also reflected their promise that women would experience “modern” independence and autonomy in the stores.

It’s also important to appreciate the limits of chains. While they did catch on quickly, their growth was not one big upward trend. In fact, chains ran into significant difficulty in the 1930s and the early 1940s, and that sparked what we might call “retooling.”

Q: Why did you choose to focus on Chicago in particular? Why not one of the other big American cities?
A: Chicago had extraordinarily rich sources and that enabled me to write from the perspective of everyday shoppers. Local politics and social dynamics are easy to overlook in the story of mass retail, and yet these are crucial to understanding consumer society. I needed to root these stores in a place—and Chicago turned out to be a wonderful site for doing so.

Also, I wanted to tell the story of mass retail in a way that reflected as much as possible
development in most of the country. The extraordinary density of New York City, and the sprawl of cities like Los Angeles make them somewhat idiosyncratic.

Q: Why did you choose to focus on women consumers?
A: When I started the project, I knew I was interested in recapturing this chapter in women’s history. As I moved deeper into the research, however, it became clear to me that ideas about women were just as important to stores’ structures as what individual women actually did. Grocers increasingly justified what they did in terms of women's desires. They had changing ideas about what those desires were over time, but they always referenced gender in their language. So, focusing on women revealed the social bases of business decisions.

Q: How do supermarkets and their evolution symbolize the growth of general consumerism of the twentieth century?
A: Supermarkets were often held up explicitly as models that other retailers—in the US and abroad—might follow. Indeed, some trade associations worked closely with the federal government to export American-style supermarkets to communist-leaning countries during the Cold War.

But just as importantly, both in the US and abroad, supermarkets developed as really powerful symbols of consumer society. They were taken as examples of what was best about mass consumption and capitalism from the late 1940s on. Later, when critiques of mass consumption gained traction, supermarkets were again taken as symbols of consumerism—but as negative symbols. Everyone from business writers to politicians to social critics used supermarkets, and the experience of shopping there, to make broader points about twentieth-century consumerism. The sheer mass of goods they sold, and the sort of depersonalized way they sold, seemed to many people characteristic of what consumerism required more generally. So their importance was both structural and cultural.

Q: How has the "housewife's paradise" changed over the course of the twentieth century? How has it remained the same?
A: Although how stores sell food has changed, the notion that shopping isn’t work, and that food stores make things easier for women, has been an important constant since the mid-twentieth century. Although supermarkets didn’t create a paradise, they kept promising that they had. I think in important ways both proponents and critics of consumer society echo the belief that stores sell items that “consumers” demand.

Q: How did the physical organization of grocery stores change over the twentieth century? How did this change affect—or how was it affected by—the demands of women consumers?
A: In general, grocery stores became physically bigger and more “open.” For instance, grocery stores moved to a “self-help” model of open shelving, where customers walked [more]
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up and down aisles taking items off of shelves themselves and carrying them to the cashier themselves. And of course, grocery stores began selling refrigerated and frozen items, as well as produce—so that added new departments to stores. These changes were certainly welcomed by some women some of the time, but of course they also imposed other constraints (for instance, having to shop while also caring for children) that could be frustrating.

Q: You mention that some local laws and regulations could hinder the emergence or growth of a chain store in a certain area. Can you give an example of one of those types of laws?
A: The most obvious example would be the effort made by states and municipalities to pass “anti-chain laws.” These were intentionally designed to cut into the profits of firms that operated several stores in the same jurisdiction, and thus to discourage chains. But laws affected stores in less intentional, but often more powerful ways too. For instance, sales taxes generally required retailers to physically collect taxes from customers. This was easier for large stores than small ones. One point I really stress is that grocers adapted, and the stores that ended up working were the results of political economy and not only consumer demand.

Q: Why do you think women in general sacrificed the personal attention of small grocery stores for the simple conveniences of a supermarket?
A: Well, some women found that personal attention suffocating and a form of surveillance. Others experienced difficulty in their interactions with grocers of different racial or ethnic groups. This is not to say that supermarkets or self-service stores were always more “convenient”—for instance, they often didn’t have delivery—but their anonymity and promises of fairness were appealing.

Q: You compare the female-based consumption in a supermarket to male-based consumption in a hardware store. How do these two entities compare and how does the fact that their consumer population differs in gender make them so different?
A: The difference is not so much in inherent differences in male or female customers—although it probably is true that women were more common food shoppers and men were more common in hardware stores. Rather the differences reflected retailers’ ideas about men and women. Slowly, over time, they created stores that reinforced the idea that men needed personal attention and service and women didn’t—even though in real life actual men and actual women might have “needed” different things at different times. Actual people rarely fit the rhetoric of retailers.

Q: You end your study in the 1960s. How have supermarkets changed since then?
A: I think we still think of them as the standard of mass retail. But in recent years, these sorts of stores have lost marketshare and really struggled to maintain profits.
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Q: Where do you see supermarkets going in the future? How do you think the act of shopping for food will continue to evolve?

A: Well, as an historian it’s always nice to be able to say “that’s outside of my time period.” But really, I think it is impossible to say how food shopping will change. It’s interesting to me that now we’re seeing the return of small, specialized, service-oriented stores in middle and upper-class neighborhoods. Stores—like butcher stores or specialized produce stores—that had seemed old-fashioned and inconvenient now seem high-end and cutting edge and a mark of class status.

Overall, my hope is that readers of this book will understand that the way food retailing changes is embedded in politics and policy—and that if consumers are unsatisfied with contemporary food distribution, they can think of shifting the politics and policy in which those stores are embedded.

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