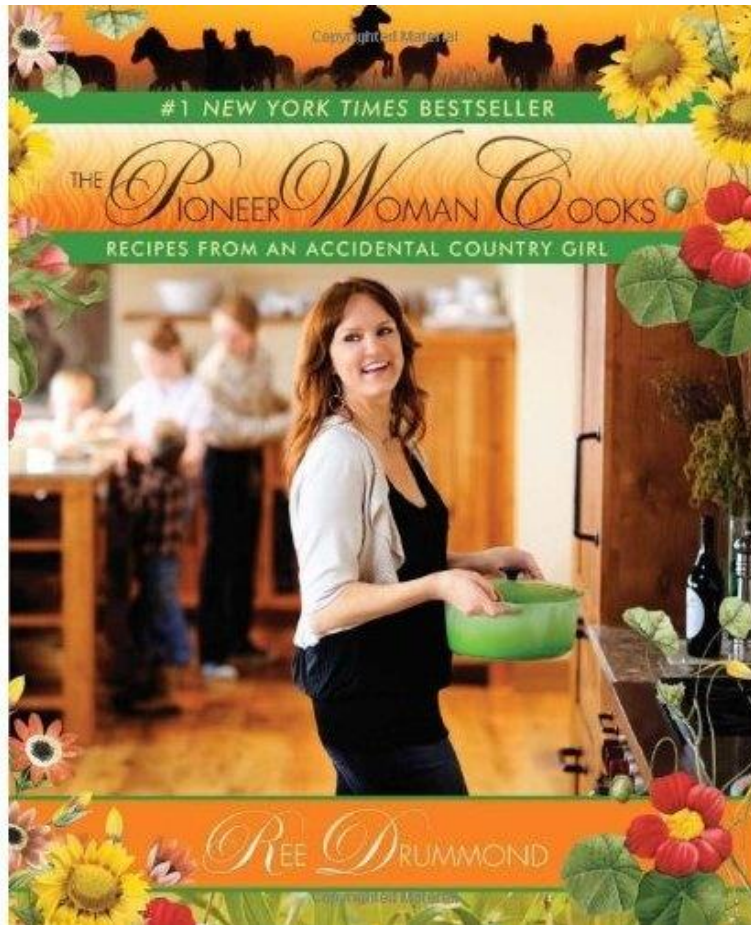


# *The Pioneer Woman Cooks:* Pioneering Domesticity



[Photo courtesy of The Pioneer Woman](#)

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Rhetorical Theory  
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## Introduction

Open book - a black silhouette of a cowboy against a yellow and orange sunset sits opposite the image of a circa 1986 strawberry blond woman, smiling. Three pages follow of love story, a woman swept off of her feet and into the country, and adapting to a new culinary repertoire. This book is, in fact, a cookbook.

Ree Drummond, author [\*of The Pioneer Woman Cooks: Recipes of an Accidental Country Girl\*](#), is a self-made, internet-famous food blogger and host of Food Network's television show [\*The Pioneer Woman\*](#). Ree is a red-headed, home-schooling, from-scratch-cooking, mother of four, and wife to a cowboy. Drummond married into the 17th largest land-owning family in the U.S. Drummond feeds them and feeds them well (Digregorio). She fuels the bodies that run and man the ranch. In 2009, she published her first cookbook and 2009, *The Pioneer Woman Cooks* (Drummond). Food Network announced her daytime series two short years later.

Drummond has created a lucrative career of her own out of a talent and passion for cooking. Third wave feminism has encouraged the idea of societal gender equality and consequently afforded women ever-increasing opportunities. The increase in pop culture presence on television, social media, and the internet of domestic, home cooks taking ownership of their important roles in the kitchen is influencing primary cooks across America to do the same (Rampton). Women are embracing their roles in the kitchen, resulting in an increased appreciation and value in cooking, food, the individuals who are cooking, and equating the out-of-the-home careers with homemaking cooks. *The Pioneer Woman Cooks* equates both roles as contributing equally to society. Educational and career opportunities are now generally culturally equated and achievable for both men and

women. But the appreciation for and value of cooking domestically has waned. Women are cooking again, and cookbooks, especially *The Pioneer Woman Cooks*, are reflecting this.

### **The Cookbook**

*The Pioneer Woman Cooks* is Drummond's first cookbook; it is a standard cowboy cookbook, heavy on the meat and potatoes and organized by Starters, Supper, Dinner, Sweets, etc. She doesn't have an explicit argument. However, her implicit argument is that women are afforded the opportunity to make their own choices about family and cooking. Drummond makes the choice to be a nurturer and cook for her family because she enjoys it and because it is what she *wants* to do. She does what she wants; it is her choice. Using feminist theory, I'm seeing that this choice is empowering, because homemaking is essential to happy and healthy families. In Drummond's *The Pioneer Woman Cooks*, we can view cookbooks as a genre that values cooking, women's contribution to their household, and as a tool for kitchen-bound empowerment.

Men may be the breadwinners, but women are embracing the opportunity to turn that boring loaf of bread into french toast, grilled cheese, finger sandwiches, and ergo, feeding their families. The rhetorical situation here is that of the cultural resurgence of women reclaiming their homes, and specifically kitchens, as a domain of vitality and empowerment. Cookbooks are the linguistic evidence that cooking, as an artform and as something that can be enjoyed and fun, is making a comeback, and women are leading the way. Jamie White-Farnham is an assistant professor at the University of Wisconsin Superior, whose focus is material and circumstantial life rhetoric (Dr. Jamie White-Farnham). The appreciation and value of domestic cooking can be identified through

women's kitchen literacies and interpretive aspects of kitchen literacy like "attitudes, values, and other social meanings which lie behind these activities" (White-Farnham).

Elizabeth Fleitz reminds us that cookbooks have allowed women to connect and communicate with each other generationally, sharing values, identities, and cultural norms. She suggests that cookbooks were one means that women could "validate their own existence in the domestic sphere." Marion Bishop proposes a similar theory that cookbooks cook up a type of rhetorical situation that affirms women's self-worth (Fleitz). However, Drummond is not validating her value and contribution to her family with her cookbook; this is because *Pioneer Woman Cooks* is a post-modern, third wave feminism cookbook that seeks to share the cultural and culinary experiences of a Oklahoma ranch owning family. Ree's cookbook is an immersive, cultural experience. What *The Pioneer Woman Cooks* does is embrace a choice because and share it with the world.

At nearly 250 pages long, the cookbook is full of just as many photographs of her family and ranch, illustrations, and short tidbits of fun, witty narratives to describe the narratives.. The recipes aren't complicated, and the ingredients are common enough to be purchased from any grocery store. Drummond's cookbook was such a success that she soon published two more cookbooks, with another in the works. Drummond's cookbook, and just about all cookbooks, are an implicit historical, rhetorical reflection of many aspects of a society's culture.

The application of feminist theory is ideal for *The Pioneer Woman Cooks* because Drummond redefines what a cookbook is and how it should or could function. *The Pioneer Woman Cooks* is an example of "women's culture" as described by Fleitz, because it engages in an "exclusive discourse community that engages in coding" (Fleitz). Drummond's coding

facilitates communication by not including exclusive discourses from other communities that devalue cooking. She sets up inclusive discourse for multiple audiences with varying values. White-Farnham notes that women's personal values influence their cooking. Accessible ingredients, freshness and processed foods, methods of cooking, timeliness, size of family, confidence and experience, and individual cooking literacies reflect the level of a cook's value of cooking and kitchen literacies like cookbooks and recipes (White-Farnham). The common thread that ties together all these different audiences' experiences is the shared value of cooking. Drummond's cookbook appeals to audiences who value cooking because Drummond herself demonstrates a personal appreciation for cooking. Drummond's kitchen literacy text promotes an appreciation for cooking and whoever, man or woman, is doing the cooking. The audiences who identify with *The Pioneer Woman Cooks* are literacy users who see themselves in the cookbook, "sociocognitive practices in everyday settings as important or powerful beyond the scope of their kitchens, where and with what practices do they see themselves contributing, via change or simply cooperation, to their communities or the world (White\_Farnham)".

In the past, most kitchen literacies that cooks identified with are traditional texts - cookbooks in print and standard, technical recipes. However, Drummond has transformed the idea of a traditional cookbook into a more contemporary genre of cookbook that appeals to a wider array of audiences. More contemporary cooks are bright, colorful, full of pictures, and written in a far less technical style. These cookbooks exhibit the personality of the cookbook author.

## Reinventing the wheel

Traditionally, cookbooks were very technical documents, with few pictures, no or little narrative, and printed on standard paper. Their authors were established professional cooks and women. *The Pioneer Woman Cooks* was born of an entirely different mode - an internet based food blog. Drummond has reformulated what it a cookbook is. Similarly, actress and comedian Amy Sedaris' cookbook [\*I Like You: Hospitality Under the Influence\*](#) is highly narrative, witty, and more of a book about entertaining than a cookbook. The beginning of a recipe titled "Paul's Zucchini Fritters", she begins, "I don't use a measuring cup when I make Zucchini fritters although I probably should. I suppose I like the crap-shoot quality of cooking without specific measurements. It's exciting" (Sedaris). That's just funny. It's unconventional, relatable, and displays the cooks' personality.

*Pioneer Woman Cook* has all the ingredients of a typical cookbook - list of instructions and needed food stuffs and an index of recipes - but Drummond infuses narrative storytelling into her cookbooks. She breaks the jello-mold-would-be of a conventional domestic cookbook. The cookbook has recipes, that is true, but it also highlights Ree's family, Ree's life, Ree's interests and passions, and Ree's cooking. In this way, *The Pioneer Woman Cooks* is just as much about Ree as it is about food.

Readers can sit down and read her cookbook more like a chapter book or blog than one would read a traditional cookbook. It can be read nonlinearly, like most traditional cookbooks, however, portions can be read like stories; the recipes are optional and compliment the narratives. This is how she transforms the cookbook genre. She blends elements from her original outlet, a blog, with traditional elements of a cookbook. By doing this, Drummond is practicing socialist feminism. She has a clearly explicit cooking

pedagogy on page 5, “Today I’m still sharing my recipes online... For me, it’s simple. I like to teach cooking the way I like to learn it. I want to see it happening in front of me, and I want to see what the dish looks like before, during, and after the cooking process...”

(Drummond). This quote is a testament to Drummond’s storytelling and preservation of her recipes.

In *Calling Cards: Theory and Practice in the Study of Race, Gender, and Culture*, Barbara L’Eplattenier, stories are proposed as ways to reinvent and tell stories of the past (Royster and Simpkins 133). Stories, like Drummonds’ narratives, are a means of shaping the future. Drummond gives her readers stories about her family’s favorite foods, recipes, and memories. This cookbook is an example of how L’Eplattenier suggests that the retelling of stories are influential - Drummond reshapes the genre of cookbooks and, ultimately, their function. L’Eplattenier proposes that our methods carry “implications, possibilities, and limitations (L’Eplattenier 133)”. If we consider this theory in the context of a cookbook, Drummond is indeed pushing the boundaries of what and how a cookbook functions. The implications and possibilities of her cookbook vary compared to a traditional cookbook because it can be read more knowledge and experience. Drummond offers unique experiences and knowledge to her readers. She pushes the limitations of a traditional cookbook as well by reinventing the genre. She pushes the boundaries by not merely presenting dry information and recipes, but in a personable, narrative style.

As I’ve discussed, there are not just recipes in *The Pioneer Woman Cooks*. Pages 84-87 are entirely dedicated to Drummond’s husband, nicknamed Marlboro Man. She created the identity and embodiment of a cowboy by nicknaming him. There are two full pages of high resolution photos of her husband accompanied with two pages of complete text,

detailing their relationship. “Marlboro Man, who grew up with two brothers twenty miles from town, surprises me daily with his quiet confidence in marriage, fatherhood, and ranching. I’m so glad he (and his Wranglers) happened into my life” (Drummond). Pages 72-75 are profiles and names of some of the family’s horses. Certainly, a dedication so personal is not a key element to a traditional cookbook. Here, Drummond is making the cookbook about herself and her life: her husband, pets, horses, children, and ranch.

That genre transformation is an act of social feminism at it’s finest. *Socialist Feminism: A Strategy for the Women’s Movement* describe two goals of social feminism as being:

- social respect for the work people do, understanding that all jobs can be made socially necessary and important and
- a popular culture which enhances rather than degrades one’s self respect and respect for others.

The ideas stated above are intrinsically featured in *The Pioneer Woman Cooks*. Socialist feminism argues that conscious recognition of self-interests leads to a greater societal appreciation for and value of women’s interests (*Socialist Feminism: A Strategy for the Women’s Movement*). Drummond’s cookbook clearly expresses her own interests as being family, food, etc. Her cookbook is a praxis of the two socialist feminist bullet points from above; Drummond values cooking and domestic family duties - these values are transmitted to her audience, thus, persuading and promoting the value of domestic roles and cooking to a greater audience.

In “Rhetorical Recipes”, White-Farnham shares Kathleen Weiler’s socialist methodology; socialist feminism advocates that the everyday, individual world is an



essential facet of the larger world. It is an “integral part of the social world” (White-Farnham). Because Drummond takes ownership of cooking as self-interest, and not an obligatory role in the kitchen, she raises a larger, sociological awareness and appreciation for cooking. Her cookbook praises cooking and encourages men and women to enjoy and value cooking too. Everybody eats, and somebody needs to cook the food *to* eat. That individual is a necessary element to a healthy family. Intrinsically, Drummond is affirming the significance of the people feeders. *The Pioneer Woman Cooks* exhibits a “mutually exclusive”, symbiotic relationship between domestic duties like cooking and outside of the home careers. Drummond reminds her readers that experience is knowledge (White-Farnham), too, and that it should be valued the same as careers. Domestic knowledge is equally as important as careers outside of the home since experience is knowledge.

### Cookbooks - A Literature Gateway

Only within the past half of a century have women dominated any form of literature. Women found their niche in cookbooks because private kitchens in homes were also women’s niches. Women dominated this homefront, so this was a natural step for their emergence into writing because they contained this knowledge as experience. Women who possess this cooking knowledge as experience possess the discourses in these spaces and share them among each other (Fleitz). Drummond’s cookbook is highly narrative. Accompanying most of her recipes are personal comments, miniature stories, or bright, high resolution photographs like in Figure 1.



Figure 1

Women, and all cooks alike, can relate to stories that she tells. These comments and stories are so personable that Drummond seems to be having a friendly conversation with her readers, similar to the kind of conversation that friends may have sitting at a kitchen table, swapping recipes.

Cookbooks bring cooking from the private sphere of primarily homes to a very public sphere (Fleitz). When cookbooks' audience were primarily marketed to women, the sole home cooks, they perpetuated gender binaries and the perception that women belonged in the kitchen because domestic were the primary readers, in the private of their homes and kitchens. Cookbooks like Drummond's are subtle vehicles towards gender equality. *Pioneer Woman Cooks* is such a highly public, popular cookbook. Anyone of any gender can read it. They can relate to it or learn from it by expanding their knowledge about experiences of ranch life, cooking, or being the primary family cook. Drummond equates cooking knowledge with out of the home patriarchal valued careers.

The discourses that Drummond presents are those of a modern day, contemporary cowboy's wife. Her recipes are tailored to the tastes of an omnivorous family with a hearty, healthy appetite. They may be similar to the kinds of recipes that cowboys' wives of the past cooked, but they have been updated. Drummond uses the affordances of traditional kitchen technology and easily accessible ingredients. Her recipes aren't gourmet because that is not the kind of food that she cooks for her family or that her audience would expect from her. She uses standard written english, only personalized.

An example of one recipe, see Figure 2, is on pages 146-147. There are minimal, standard ingredients, like a traditional cookbook. But there are six pictures to accompany the very personal recipe instructions. There are even inserted animated pictures of a

turkey and a butterfly. Even more significantly is the name of her recipe: PW's Creamy Mashed Potatoes. Drummond is taking credit for her own recipe. This is a praxis of socialist feminism at its best. She personalizes the discourse in her cookbook. In the instructions for the recipe featured below, two of the steps are "7. Add the butter. Feel really guilty" and "8. Add the cream cheese. Feel even more guilty" (Drummond). Again, this is where Ree blends her the two genres of a cookbook and a blog into something new and something that works for her.

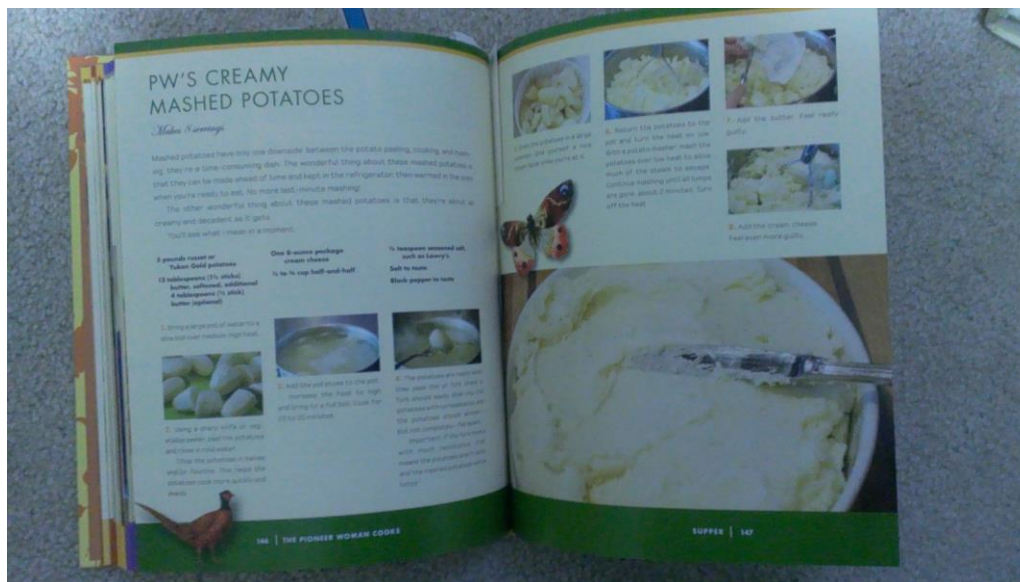


Figure 2.

*Pioneer Woman Cooks* speaks to Ree's audience and their shared values. Its audience is not gender-specific. However, the ways that different audiences react to her cookbook will vary. Drummond seeks to appeal to anyone who cooks, has a family, or wants to immerse themselves into a unique American subculture of Oklahoma ranching. Before the recipes begin, she has two pages of "The Cast of Characters", profiling her family, animals on the farm, and her cameras. Next is a page with photos and descriptions of her must-have

kitchen items, followed by four pages describing the ranch with incredible photos (Drummond).

Drummond's tone, voice, and cookbook content speak to the community that she cooks for and the audience that she will ideally appeal to like home cooks and people who cook for families; she appeals to women who cook and who enjoy it. The final step for the recipe titled "Patsy's Blackberry Cobbler" is "Just look at the golden, crispy deliciousness! I love this kind of cobbler. Serve it by the spoonful. Top with whipped cream or ice cream...or both. Live a little!" She clearly enjoys food and eating it. Her love for food and personality is apparent to her audience. The introductions to her recipes are often witty and detailed. In reference to a simple pot roast recipe on page 120, she says this:

I had to kiss a lot of frogs before I found my prince. And I had to make a lot of really bad pot roasts to finally figure who the whole dadgum thing out....and figure it out I did, thank the Lord above. And the verdict? Pot roast, when made according to a few fundamental rules, can be a savory, delicious addition to your repertoire...

Drummond uses certain "cooking codes" to communicate and relate to other women (Fleitz). One example of a cooking code is how Drummond embraces kitchen domesticity and culinary skills. Though women have subverted domestic oppression, some women find themselves in their kitchens out of preference - enjoyment - because cooking is fun for them. Pioneer Woman Cooks is an ultimate testament to a woman who cooks because she enjoys it, "I love cooking. I love raising a family. And I love country life. It isn't worry free or cushy. It isn't seamless, easy, or without challenges. But it's perfect for me" (Drummond 3).

She unapologetically writes this cookbook about herself and her life. She intrinsically promotes the importance of what she does - *cooking* and homemaking.

*The Pioneer Woman Cooks* attributes waning value to home cooking. By identifying the preferences of her online blog followers and the affordances of a traditional print cookbooks, she has practiced socialist, third-wave feminism. She has claimed ownership not only her own interests, but those of her audience too. Ree Drummond has infused two successful genres - one traditional and one contemporary - into her own hybrid.

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