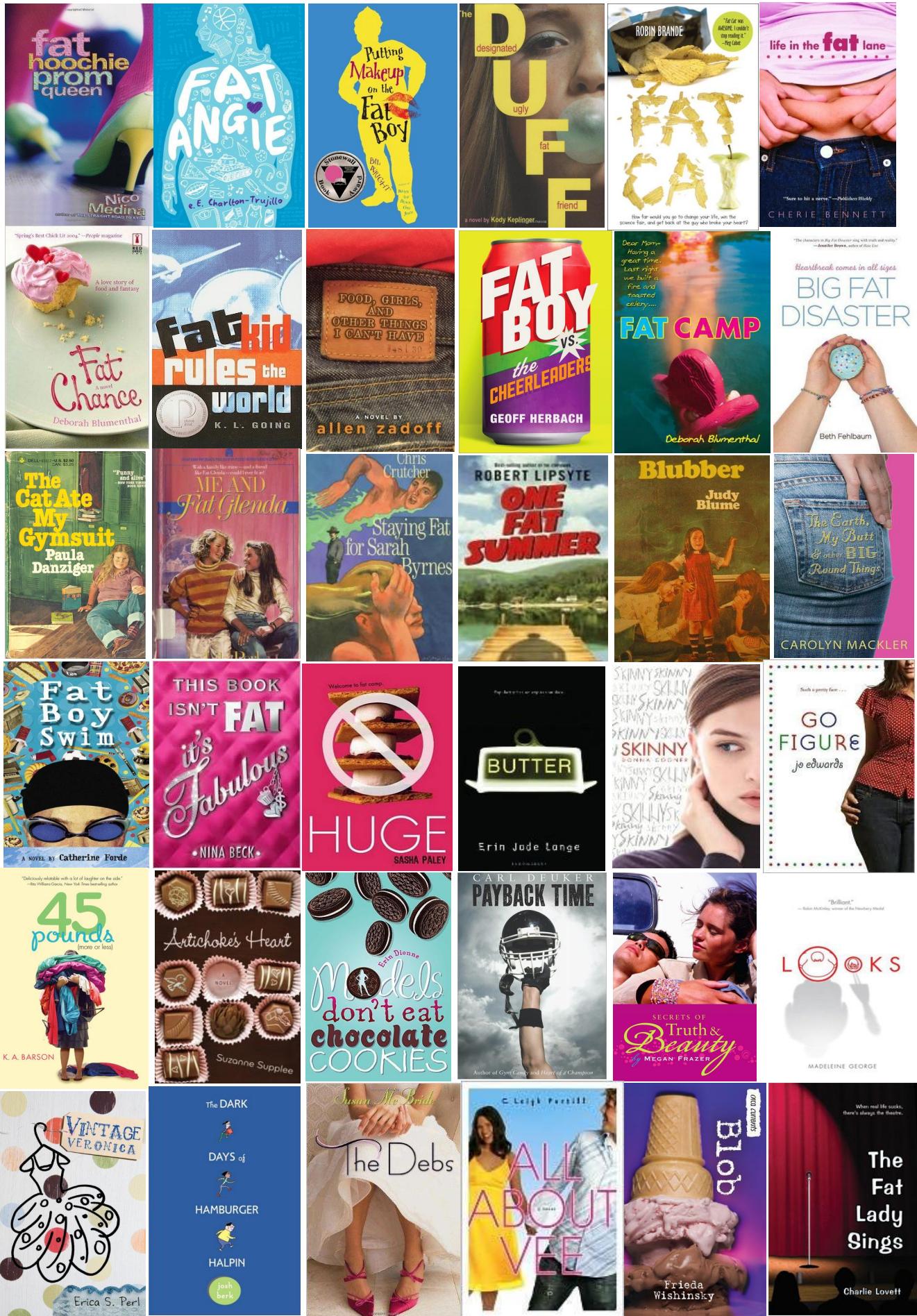


Unintentional sizeist sexism

the sizeism discussion



"MEANT TO BE HUGE":

Obesity and Body Image in Young Adult Novels, by Catherine Quick
Winter 2008, Volume 35 Number 2, The ALAN Review

In her 1998 *ALAN Review* article, "The Portrayal of Obese Adolescents," Rachel Beineke presents a moving account of her own struggles with obesity as an adolescent and decries the lack of young adult literature that mirrored her experience in a realistic way. In fact, she cited only six novels that addressed the issue, noting that most books about body image focused on eating disorders. Beineke sums up her primary criticism of the situation: "by the end of each book, each child either loses the weight or starts to lose the weight. The child then gains popularity and friends and has loving families that are pleased that their child is finally becoming 'normal' and fitting into their standards as a result of the weight loss" (44). While this ending is not universal in her cited six books—*Blubber*, for instance, ends with the child still overweight and still friendless—the point remains. Realistic adolescent novels with truly positive messages about obesity and body image were relatively scarce.

In less than a decade, the situation appears rather different. Obesity is now a hot topic for young adult problem novels. Some of these novels take a more beneficial approach to the issue than those mentioned in Beineke's article, providing positive role models of overweight teenagers and adults who are happy, self-accepting, and have many friends. The weight-loss ending criticized by Beineke is no longer the dominant scenario. In some of the books, the fat character does indeed lose weight, which may lead to self-acceptance and the acceptance of others. But weight loss does not always have positive results and is not always the catalyst for a change in perspective on the part of the overweight protagonist. Whether the character loses weight or not, the fat character moves from a position of self-loathing or doubt to self-acceptance. Such a message, on the surface, seems positive, and does offer improvement over an exclusive lose-weight-be-happy ending. However, this positive message as the focal point of young adult obesity novels covers a potentially more insidious problem than the weight-loss message of earlier novels: being fat is portrayed as outside of the norm and often the result of deeper psychological problems. When the novels are taken together, the picture of the fat person is of one who is abnormal and crazy—a freak. It is rare for a young adult novel to portray fat, or even a little extra weight, as beautiful—or even as an alternative standard of beauty. The protagonist may accept herself/himself in the fat state and go on to live a happy life. But the protagonists love themselves in spite of their fat. Thin is still represented as the absolute ideal for body image, and the fat person, although willing to accept fat as integral to identity, undoubtedly prefers thin. Fat is still viewed a decidedly negative body type.



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One might question why representing thin as the ideal is problematic, given that obesity is blamed for a myriad of health problems, and obesity rates among adolescents are rapidly growing. Young adult fat novels portray very few (if any) adolescents attempting to lose weight for health reasons. Their purposes are almost always related to body image. The young adult loses weight not to be healthy and live a long life, but to fit in better with peers, to be considered attractive and desirable. The pain of obesity, for an adolescent, is not because he or she is unhealthy. The pain is the rejection and humiliation by their peers. Health, for better or worse, is not the point. The real issue is belonging and self-worth. As Younger notes in her article on female sexuality and body images, "young adult fiction reflects girls' lives back to them" (46). Young adult novels that explore the theme of obesity, and by extension that of self-esteem, belonging, and identity, must find ways to make that reflection a more positive image for obese adolescents, without asking them to wait for a future that may or may not include weight loss.

A concept from the field of disability studies may help us understand better why simple self-acceptance is not enough. As a field of research, disability studies views disability not as a medical issue or physical limitation, but as a cultural construct. Specifically, disability studies defines disability as a representation of the "other" against a society's concept of the "normal" body. The definition of disability, in other words, rests not in the physical characteristic of the disabled person's body, "but in an oppressive social environment" (Marks 7). Disability exists because the world is constructed, both physically and in attitudes toward disabled bodies, to render a disabled body as abnormal. In much the same way that a society views a disabled body as abnormal, so too is the obese person viewed as abnormal.

I am not necessarily trying to argue here that obesity is a disability. That is a matter of debate in disability studies and best left to the experts (see Gilman for a discussion of the issue). However, the concept of disability as socially constructed, defining the abnormal against the normal, can be usefully applied when studying obesity within a carefully constructed world, such as that of a young adult novel. Like obvious physical disabilities, obesity is a bodily condition that society has defined as abnormal and undesirable. Obesity also shares other salient characteristics with disability when defined in terms of abnormality. For example, the stare—both the disabled and the obese are looked at by "normals" with an unwelcome and judgmental gaze. The disabled and the obese are both societal freaks, so different from the perceived norm that they get special response. However, the response to obese persons is of a different character. When a blind or a wheelchair-bound person is stared at, the mix of emotions on the part of the gazer is complex, but usually includes pity ("poor blind person!") and a sense of relief ("there but for the grace of God").

The irony of disability, of course, is that any normal person

may easily become disabled through accident, sickness, or simple aging. Even if the disability might have been caused by a perceived recklessness (riding motorcycle without a helmet, for instance), the disabled person is not usually blamed for the disability. The stare at obesity, however, rarely includes pity or relief. It is primarily revulsion, not tempered by guilt but exacerbated by self-righteousness (“how could anyone let themselves get so fat?”). Obesity is universally considered the fault of the obese, even when it can legitimately be attributed to glands, genetics, or medications. Whether pitied or blamed, both the disabled and the obese live in a world built for the society-defined normals, and it is the abnormal’s job to adjust, to fit in, to make themselves as normal as possible so that they don’t upset perceptions of normality. Society is rarely willing, without being forced, to make accommodations—note the necessity of a sweeping law, the Americans with Disabilities Act, to force such accommodations.

This normal/abnormal binary so prevalent in representations of disability, and by the above extension, of obesity, helps explain why young adult novels that promote the message of self-acceptance may not take the issue far enough. On the surface, this self-esteem message seems so important and positive body images are sorely needed for the young people who constitute the audience of such novels. But needed even more desperately is to break down the societal structures that support the idea of obesity as “other” and create negative body images in the first place. If an overweight character simply accepts himself or herself as they are, or other characters come to appreciate them despite the obesity, then one also implicitly accepts society’s judgment that obesity is something that needs to be “accepted” into the realm of the normal, despite statistics telling us that being overweight may, by strict numbers, be more normal than thin. Thinness still represents normalcy; the obese person simply decides that he/she will not be able to obtain normalcy and agrees to go about life as abnormal, to remain a freak.

While this is not necessarily the worst way to perceive of one’s own body image, a more positive approach might call for appreciation of the fat body as something special, perhaps even worthwhile, like the plump—by modern standards—bodies in a Rubens painting. The question we will attempt to answer in our analysis of the following recent young adult novels about obesity is whether or not any of them move beyond the simple self-acceptance message to an active deconstruction of the normal/abnormal, ugly/beautiful binary in relation to obesity. All of these books are entertaining, have engaging narrators, and promote a more positive self-image for an overweight teenager. But do any truly attempt to break down negative attitudes toward fat bodies?

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The Earth, My Butt, and Other Big Round Things (Carolyn Mackler)

Virginia Shreves is the only overweight member of a beautiful, brilliant, seemingly perfect family. Her mother is a successful and obsessively thin adolescent psychologist who constantly nags Virginia to lose weight. Virginia’s brother Byron is “big man on campus” at Columbia University; her sister Anais, slim and beautiful, is in Africa with the Peace Corps. Her father is a successful software executive who often expresses appreciation for the beauty of thin bodies.

A crisis, however, engulfs the “perfect” family when Byron is accused of date rape and suspended from Columbia. Virginia has always looked up to Byron and his fall precipitates a crisis in her attempts to lose weight and become what her family expects. When Virginia is invited to Seattle to visit Shannon, her recently moved best friend, her parents refuse, citing Byron’s need for family. Here, Virginia carries out her first act of rebellion—she drains her savings and buys the plane ticket (nonrefundable) herself.

While in Seattle, Virginia begins a process of self-discovery, symbolized by getting her eyebrow pierced. As she stares at her newly pierced reflection, she notes “it was like I was seeing myself for the very first time” (178). This is her first time changing her appearance according to her own desires, rather than to fit her mother’s very strict image about how one should look, dress, and behave if you are overweight. Rather than losing weight to fit in with her family, she makes a visible declaration of independence from the family norms, which definitely do not include an eyebrow ring. Students in school start to notice her. When her mother takes her shopping for a Christmas party dress, Virginia refuses the drab, old-ladyish dresses available in the plus-size section at Saks. Instead, she finds a purple dress at a funky secondhand shop and dyes her hair purple to match.

Her final act of familial defiance is to visit Annie, the girl Byron raped, expecting to find a shattered shell. Instead, she finds that Annie is doing just fine. Annie tells Virginia that she refuses to let herself be defined by what Byron did to her. She will be more than just a rape victim; she will control her own destiny, not Byron. Virginia is stunned and inspired by Annie, realizing that she has been letting others—her mother, kids at school, her own lack of self-worth—determine her identity.

Because she didn't measure up to that impossible standard of perfection she thought was expected, she could only consider herself a failure—a fat failure. However, as she witnesses her perfect family fall off the pedestal, she comes to understand that she must appreciate people, herself included, for who they are—complex and fascinating, but with flaws as well as strengths. By choosing to create her own sense of identity, she declares her independence from her overbearing family, but also feels more accepted as a vital part of it. She forcefully informs her father, when he compliments her on a little weight loss (from kickboxing), that "my body is not yours to discuss" (227). However, she derives great satisfaction when her mother tells her, "you really are a Shreve" because she is doing what she wants, asserting her independence (244), a comment that had nothing to do with her weight.

The novel is focused on self-acceptance. Virginia learns to define herself by something other than her body size, deciding she does not have to adhere to the body image norms of her family or the people around her. She accepts her freakishness and magnifies it by consciously choosing to defy the norms. But she still recognizes thinness as the ideal. Fat is still considered a failure to live up to norms. Virginia's action is simply to downplay the importance of those norms to her life and identity. But she never really takes the next step, of seeing worth in her large body, other than a brief appreciation of her cleavage. Instead, she begins to lose

weight from kickboxing. While Virginia's relation to her body image is much more positive and accepting than it started out with, the dissatisfaction, the desire to be thin, while pushed to the background, is still there.

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from 118 to 218 pounds in just a few months. Despite the fact that the protagonist is not "naturally" fat, the story is very realistic in its portrayals of the struggles of an overweight teen. Lara experiences every difficulty, indignity, and emotion in her responses and the responses of others to the weight gain. She can't find clothes that fit. She has to wedge herself into movie theater seats. She feels isolated and ugly. She almost gives up piano, out of fear of showing her fat body in front of a crowd. She overhears thin

people say mean things about her weight. She is constantly given diet advice, especially by her mother, even though her mother is well aware that the weight gain is not from eating. Her father grows distant; instead of calling her his "princess," he ignores her and eventually leaves the family—although Lara eventually learns that his distancing from the family began long before she gained weight. In fact, gaining weight and becoming less than perfect in her own body opens Lara's eyes to the imperfections in other parts of her life. Her family is not perfect: her father has been having an affair for several years, and her mother is suffering from depression. Her perfect boyfriend, Jett, likes her new curves early in the weight-gaining process, but eventually becomes distant,

Life in the Fat Lane

(Cherie Bennett)

Life in the Fat Lane takes an unusual approach to the obesity novel. Lara Ardeche begins the novel as a 17-year-old beauty queen and the epitome of bodily perfection. But she develops a metabolic disorder called Axell-Crowne syndrome which causes her weight to balloon

Thin is still the norm, and Lara, despite maybe being "pretty" as a fat girl, will never be able to see her weight as part of her identity or anything remotely positive.

too, not knowing how to handle the weight gain, her mood swings, and his discomfort at his own reactions. The only person remaining steadfast is Lara's decidedly imperfect best friend Molly, who at a size 14 was the chunky one before Lara's weight gain. Molly is smart, funny, and very much disliked by Lara's more bodily perfect and popular friends. But part of Lara's growth is learning about real friendship.

Like an individual who suddenly becomes disabled due to disease or accident, Lara goes from normal to abnormal practically overnight. She becomes the "other," an object of disgust and ridicule, even within her own family, especially her thin-obsessed mother and self-centered, egotistical father. The novel explicitly employs the language of freakishness to describe Lara's response to herself as she processes the changes in her body and the changes in reaction by others to her body:

So clearly I really had turned into someone else, morphed into some hideous, fat monster-creature, full of sizzling rage. (88)

"Well, look at me!" I blurted out. 'I'm some kind of fat freak now!' (90)

I had become a sexless, ageless, faceless blob. I wasn't a pretty girl anymore. (96)

It was no use. I looked fat. Enormous. Grotesque. (154)

When her family moves to a new city, Lara begins a new school where no one knew her as a thin person. She finds herself experiencing something new: not being popular. By default, she becomes a member of the "geekoid" crowd rather than the usual jocks and cheerleaders. Ironically, among the geekoids and fat freaks at her new school, Lara finds the kind of unconditional acceptance that she did not have with her popular friends at her old school. At the end of the novel, Lara has reluctantly accepted her place among the abnormals of her society. At this point, however, Lara begins to lose a little weight. But just a little—we do not learn if this is the disease going into remission or not. Neither do we learn if Lara retains her

newfound wisdom about friendship, perfection, and human nature. The message about obesity and body image in Bennett's novel resembles that in Mackler's; the fat person decides to accept herself as she is and try to be happy as a fat person. Lara realizes that she likes the new friends she has made among the freaks of society. As she dresses for a party, wearing a new pale pink outfit, Lara looks in the mirror and decides she "looked pretty. . . . Round to be sure. Too round. But still" (237). The final statement in Bennett's novel aptly sums up the basic self-acceptance conclusion: "I wasn't perfect. But I was okay" (260). This realization and acceptance of self does not change anything—two sentences earlier, Lara expressed her longing to be thin. As Younger notes in her analysis of this novel: "[the readers] worry—will Lara's newfound self-acceptance be lost? Is it really better to be thin after all? The book's answer is yes; thin is desirable" (53). Thin is still the norm, and Lara, despite maybe being "pretty" as a fat girl, will never be able to see her weight as part of her identity or anything remotely positive.

Name Me Nobody (Lois-Ann Yamanaka)

Emi-Lou Kaya, self-described chunk and the fourteen-year-old narrator of Yamanaka's novel, joins a softball team at the request of her best friend Von (Yvonne)—"where Yvonne go, Emi-Lou go," as Uncle Charlie explains (11). Von has a chance for a scholarship, but Emi-Lou is not very good. She is picked on for her weight by some of the other players on the Hilo Astros team, called "Emi-Fat," "Emi-Lump," and referred to as Von's "hefty shadow" (7, 19). Over the summer, Von helps Emi-Lou lose weight, mostly by enforcing drastic eating patterns and shoplifting diuretics and laxatives for her. Emi-Lou doesn't improve much in softball, but she does slim down to a size seven by the time school starts.

But the real problem by that time is not so much Emi-Lou's weight, although she never really feels thin or fits in with the group as anything but Von's shadow. The problem for Emi-Lou is the budding relationship between Von and Babes, a softball teammate. Emi-Lou, fearing both the idea of lesbianism and of losing Von, tries to keep them apart and insists to anyone who asks that Von is "normal." Emi-Lou futilely attacks Babes in the designated lesbian bathroom at school, futile because Babes is much tougher and stronger than Emi-Lou and it is Emi-Lou who gets hurt. More importantly, it alienates Von. In her despair over losing Von, Emi-Lou begins to gain weight again. In addition, her relationship to Sterling, handsome sophomore athlete, is unclear—she doesn't know if he really likes her or if he is simply "babysitting" to keep her out of Von and Babes' way. The end of the novel is a positive resolution—Emi-Lou accepts Von's lesbianism and her relationship with Babe; she learns that Sterling really does like her. She also decides to rejoin the softball team, despite protests that she is no good. Not for Von this time—she decides to join for herself, to prove that she can learn to play the

game decently.

The title of the book, *Name Me Nobody*, comes from two places: First, Emi-Lou does not know who her father is, and her mother left her to be raised by her grandmother. Emi-Lou refers to herself as "a nobody bastard girl" (2). Second, Emi-Lou does not seem to have much of an identity apart from Von or her image of herself as fat. Even after losing weight, Emi-Lou is only marginally accepted on the fringes of Von's group. In fact, the weight loss increases her sense of isolation, because now her weight can't be blamed for her problems: "I'm not fat. So it must be me. But who am I, if not Emi-oink?" (49). Weight loss does not change her sense of herself as a nobody. This is why her determination to succeed in softball for her own sake is so important. It's a first attempt to define herself, for herself. Even though Von will be a big part of that effort, she is not the cause of the effort. The night before rejoining the softball team, Emi-Lou finally asserts her own name and proclaims it good: "Good is a name. My name. Not Jerry Rapoza's name. Not Roxanne Kaye's altered name. My name. Name me: Emi-Lou Kaya" (211).

Yamanaka's novel demonstrates that weight loss alone does not bring happiness and popularity, a definite change from Beineke's claims about earlier novels focused on fat teenagers. Emi-Lou remains an outsider and miserable, even at a size seven. Despite her constant insistence that she and Von are "normal" (that is, not lesbians), this turns out not to be true for either of them. She must learn to accept Von's abnormality (abnormal in the sense of the typical societal binary). But she must also accept her own abnormality—not so much the weight, but her lack of any self-identity. The weight is a symptom, not the disease. She gets the freak/loser/outsider label because she never attempts to define herself as anything else. Rejoining the softball team will probably not change the label—she realizes she is never going to be a great player. But she decides to accept the label and all the teasing and torment that may go with it in order to develop her own identity. Ironically, it is through this act of acceptance of her freak status that the rest of the team may be willing finally to accept her, as many agree to coach her, to help her out. The end of the novel, however, still indicates Emi-Lou's desire to lose weight again, even on Von's rather dangerous diet. She may be willing to play the role of outsider, but definitely not a fat one.

Myrtle of Willendorf (Rebecca O'Connell)

In the present, Myrtle Parcittadino is a college sophomore art major and in the past, a relatively friendless high school junior who is invited by Margie to join a coven. At both times, Myrtle is obese. As for the coven, Margie is a true believer in Wicca; Myrtle enjoys the friendship and the meetings, but is not quite sure what to think about the spiritual aspect, the celebration of a divine feminine. To one meeting, Margie brings a small statue, an ancient image of an obese woman with ponderous breasts. It is Venus of Willendorf, a figure found in Austria, and possibly worshipped as an ideal of femininity and fertility by prehistoric peoples. Myrtle observes that the figure looks exactly like her own body. Yet the significance of this observation, and of Margie's

friendship, doesn't immediately register with Myrtle. She and Margie have a falling out when classmates accuse them of being lesbians. Neither are, but Margie does not try to deny it. She instead speaks a litany of praise for great lesbians from the past. Mortified, Myrtle pulls away from her friend—not because she fears lesbianism per se, but she fears the unwanted attention to her overweight body, attention that implies that it is sexual. Now in college, Margie constantly sends Myrtle postcards. Myrtle never answers them.

Myrtle rooms with Jade, who has a stereotypically perfect body and is obsessed with physical perfection. Jade spends two hours in the bathroom each morning getting ready, and constantly pesters Myrtle to use make-up and lose weight. Jade's equally perfect boyfriend Keith, nicknamed Goat, frequents their house, and Myrtle, much to her embarrassment, often witnesses sexual encounters between Goat and Jade. Myrtle submits a detailed and secretly made drawing of Goat to a local art show. Goat's upper half is drawn as a life portrait, but the bottom half as goat legs; Myrtle titles the drawing "Satyrsfaction." At the exhibit, Jade's friends are surprised at the drawing, and call Myrtle "nympho-psych-lesbo" (66). Once again pained at the attention to her body and its sexuality, Myrtle flees the opening and embarks on an all-night food binge—not the first time she has done so. When she awakes the next morning, she finds Margie's most recent postcard, which reminds Myrtle of the obese Venus figure. Myrtle strips naked in front of a mirror and begins to paint her own body with blue flowers, swirls, and patterns, recalling that blue is the color of the goddess. She then paints her own self-portrait—a naked, obese woman in blue, titled "*Myrtle of Willendorf*." She substitutes this portrait for "Satyrsfaction" in the show. This new painting is purchased and displayed by the Women's Studies department as an artful representation, albeit not without controversy, of timeless feminine beauty. Myrtle sends a newspaper clipping about the portrait to Margie, letting her know that she now understands what it means to connect with the divine feminine and to celebrate her own beauty.

While all the novels discussed so far question the normal/abnormal, thin/fat binary, *Myrtle of Willendorf* perhaps goes the furthest in breaking it down and attempting to define fat as beautiful, not just something to accept and live with in the thin-obsessed society. Myrtle never really attempts to lose weight or to fit in. She is embarrassed by her fat, but seeks to be invisible more than to be thin, thus her dismissal of the outspoken, radical Margie as a friend. Margie never asks Myrtle to lose weight, instead encouraging her to celebrate her fat as an honor to the goddess—to celebrate and love, not just accept. Celebrating and loving her body is what Myrtle finally accomplishes with her self-portrait. The novel also forces the thin/fat, beauty/ugly question into the public sphere when the portrait is displayed. Through her two artworks, Myrtle not only celebrates fat as potentially beautiful and feminine, she exposes the conventional ideals of beauty as a hidden ugliness. The portrait of Goat shows his upper half as an ideal—handsome face, thin body, sculpted biceps, ripped abs. The bottom half, however, is ugly—hairy, crooked, and sexually predatory. The stereotypically beautiful, in other words, is cast into the role of deformed freak, the object to be stared at with revulsion and fear. The satyr is predatory and rapacious, destroying in order to get "Satyrsfaction." For beauty to be "beautiful" it must continually reinforce its superiority by degrading and dominating its opposite; if thin is beautiful and sexually desirable, fat has to be ugly and undesirable. By representing her own fat body as beautiful, Myrtle refuses to be forced into that side of the opposition, instead, turning it on its head. The display of her painting in the women's center is questioned by some, but the painting remains and a conversation begins.

Fat Kid Rules the World (K.L. Going)

In contrast to the above novels, Going's protagonist is male. Troy Billings is unusual in another way—he's 17 and weighs 300 pounds: "I'm a fucking three-hundred pound teenager living in the most unforgiving city on earth. I'm ugly and dumb and I make stupid noises when I breathe. I annoy and bewilder my only living parent, mortify my little brother, and have no friends" (9). As he stands on the subway platform contemplating what would happen to a fat body if a train hits it, a dirty, emaciated homeless boy confronts him. This boy is Curt MacCrae, a dropout from Troy's school, but a talented punk guitar player and a musical legend among the students. Claiming he saved Troy's life, Curt talks Troy into buying him a meal. Before Troy realizes what is happening, he finds himself the drummer for Curt's new band. The problem? Troy doesn't really play the drums and is terrified of placing his 300 pound body in front of people. Reluctantly he accepts lessons, but in his first performance, Troy vomits all over the drum set. He flees offstage, refusing to return, although the audience thinks it's a fabulous opening to a punk rock show. Despite Troy's questionable music skills and obese body, the strange homeless musician still wants Troy as his drummer. Curt sees something special in Troy, believing that he can be a punk rock star because of his size, not in spite of it: "you are punk rock, T. You just don't know it yet, and I don't know how to convince you" (143). In an attempt to explain what he means, Curt has Troy watch a physically attractive couple eating in a diner. At first, all Troy sees is their perfection and hates them for it. But as he watches, he notices a piece of pasta fall off the man's fork onto his chin, He sees the tentative way the woman carefully puts food on her fork and how hard the man works to maintain that perfect, confident demeanor. This, according to Curt, is the essence of punk rock:

"That moment when you see through the bullshit?" he says a moment later. "That's what punk music is all about. That's what anything great is all about. We're all just stuffing our faces, no matter what we look like, and people need to figure that out. When you can play that moment, you've got it."

.... "And me?" I choke. Curt smiles. "You live that moment," he says. (148)

At the end of the novel, Troy finally embodies, largely and happily, his punk rock destiny on stage.

Like Myrtle, Troy does not, in the end, simply accept his body and his life as a fat person in a thin world. Instead, he embraces his size as the essence of punk rock and as a legitimate, 300-pound representation of an ideal:

I imagine myself on stage, a huge shape that's meant to be huge. The crowd spreads out below me, pounding their fists into the air and waiting for me to bring my sticks crashing down. All those hands reaching for me. All those eyes looking at me. I wonder if they'd laugh. Maybe they would. Or maybe they'd scream louder than they'd ever screamed before. Without even trying I'd be king of the freaks. (103)

In this punk rock context, being a freak is the ideal. While skinny people pierce themselves and shape their hair into Mohawks to become freaks, Troy is the natural freak, the embodiment of the punk rock ideal, what they all want to be—a living defiance of the societal norm. His size, rather than being a disability, is his greatest asset and, even more so than his role as drummer, the basis of his identity as punk rocker. He is indeed the king of the freaks.

Conclusion

Of the five novels discussed here, we find that two, *Myrtle of Willendorf* and *Fat Kid Rules the World*, move beyond the simple acceptance message and attempt to break down societal attitudes that say only thin can be truly beautiful. The other novels fortunately do advance well beyond Beineke's justifiably criticized happy weight loss ending. But for overweight teenagers facing the same humiliations, degradations, and other daily injuries that the characters in these more recent novels deal with, simple acceptance is one step short of a truly positive self-image. Acceptance means liking yourself in spite of obesity—you recognize that it's a thin person's world and you'd lose weight if you could, but for now, you're okay. A truly positive self-image, however, means embracing the so-called negative qualities wholeheartedly, seeing them not as a negative to be accepted and dealt with, but as a positive asset, the essence of an identity. While the other protagonists simply accept their abnormality and move on, Myrtle and Troy embrace it. They come to see their bodies as a legitimate form of beauty, perhaps an "alternative body style" that should be recognized more readily in the thin-obsessed world. The alternative is forcing obese teens to do what may be impossible, that is, lose weight, in order to believe that they are worthy. As Emi-Lou Kaya demonstrates, losing weight does not necessarily lead to self-esteem, anyway. Instead, perhaps young adult novels can play a role in helping to encourage all teenagers—not just the fat ones—to accept a broader notion of beauty by giving them alternative representations of what beauty can be. Such an attitude has the potential to foster self-esteem and a truly positive body image, no matter what the size.

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Most of us read the following Horn Book article when it came out, so it's included here in the following pages mostly as a refresher. What I would like you to take fifteen minutes to watch/listen to is [Jess Baker's TED Talk from Tucson](#). (If the link fails you, it's <http://everydayfeminism.com/2014/10/social-impact-of-body-love/>) here. This short talk is about body image and body-love, and what would happen if the media represented bodies appropriately—where it would take us as a culture, and as a world. It's something worth thinking about when we write, to keep us wishing properly when we indulge in "wish-fulfillment" fiction. If we can write the world we want, why not write the best of all possible worlds, in diversity?

YA Fatphobia

by Kathryn Nolfi, Hornbook Jan. 2011

In my experience, children and teenagers who are ostracized tend to become readers, relying on books for succor and protection against the hostilities of the world. Unfortunately, those readers who are outcasts because they are fat will encounter not support and validation in most YA fiction but instead exhortations to diet and obsess about their appearance. Women who read the Sweet Valley High series as teens imprinted on Jessica and Elizabeth Wakefield's hallowed "perfect size six" figures. (In the subsequent series reissues, the twins have downsized to an even more perfect size *four*.) Those who read the Baby-Sitters Club series can't escape noticing that Claudia is always described as thin with good skin (although she eats lots of forbidden junk food). When readers are obsessed with series that routinely describe characters' bodies — the thin ones as desirable and the fat ones as disgusting and flawed — said readers can't help but internalize those attitudes themselves. Many authors include fat characters only to further the agency and growth of the main (read thin) characters, to provide instruction about bullying, or as a vehicle for character development through the magic of weight loss. As protagonist Jamie says in Susan Vaught's groundbreaking *Big Fat Manifesto*: "The fat girl never gets to be the main character. She never gets to talk, really talk, about her life and her feelings and her dreams." Often the fat girl is the sidekick, sexless and hungry or desperately oversexed. The fat boy is sloppy, grotesque, and lonely; sometimes he's the funny man. Either way, fat characters are pathologized.

The YA novels *Huge*; *Artichoke's Heart*; *Looks*; *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants*; *Shrink to Fit*; *Staying Fat for Sarah Byrnes*; and *Will Grayson*, *Will Grayson* are all fatphobic to varying degrees. These books feature similar tropes: the healing power of fat camp, bullying parents and doctors, mothers who are thin and beautiful models or fat failures, in-

dulging or withholding fathers, and students who harass and assault without consequences to their actions. And almost invariably the fat characters lose weight and become happy or are eternally miserable because of their bodies. In Suzanne Supplee's 2008 *Artichoke's Heart*, the fat girl is pathetic, self-flagellating, and desperate: "Once I'd wolfed down enough turkey and dressing and pumpkin pie to choke a horse, I loosened the string in the waistband and plopped down at the computer." Like almost all fat characters, Rosemary has binge eating disorder (BED), but her eating is seen as nothing more than a repugnant loss of control. Almost everyone in her life harasses her about her body. No one sticks up for her or reports the bullying. In a rare breakthrough, she wonders if she will always be sad, even if she loses weight. Despite its attempt at a happy ending, the book is depressing to read because Rosemary clearly has an unacknowledged and untreated eating disorder.

John Green and David Levithan's 2010 *Will Grayson*, *Will Grayson* has a fat secondary character, Tiny Cooper, who is supposed to be the heart of the story. Tiny is large and gay and rich and played for laughs. His fat is a quirk, a flaw, a metaphor for nurturance and hunger for love and attention. Tiny delivers a speech about body confidence — "I'm totally at peace with being big boned" — toward the end of the novel. It seems facile following the negative commentary about his body throughout the book. The authors are unclear about the purpose of Tiny's size. It is mentioned often and seems to show the reader that teenagers are cruel and that Tiny is strong. But Tiny himself is sometimes an obnoxious character (his best friend notes that "Tiny has not fully internalized the idea that the earth does not spin around the axis of Tiny Cooper"). Will Grayson the First is

grossed out by "bald and fat sex"; Will Grayson the Second says things like, "Most fat people get sweaty just lifting the twinkie to their mouth" and wants to be like Tiny without having "to gain, like, three hundred pounds." Tiny complains of the constant visibility of being fat. The people in his life are certainly unable to forget his weight. Even the last line of the novel attests to this: "He might be heavy, but right now he floats."

Looks is another book that fails to create a positive fat character. While *Looks* has literary merit, Madeleine George objectifies her main characters' bodies (one is fat and binges, the other is thin and anorexic) and uses them as metaphors. She writes about Meghan Ball, the fat girl: "In the obvious way, she is unbearably visible. She takes up the most space of any person in the entire school — in the entire town, in fact... She has a back as wide as a basketball backboard, perfect for spitting on and pelting things at." George's description of Meghan's body consistently dehumanizes her and encourages us to pity her, certainly not to identify with her. The novel's language and tone, however, encourage us to relate to Aimee, who has anorexia. Both characters have pathological relationships with food, but while Aimee's is positioned as relatable, Meghan's is portrayed as grotesque and weird; Meghan's bingeing is described, but her interior life and talents are not explored the way Aimee's are.

Fatphobia occurs even on the covers of novels with fat characters. For the most part, fat characters are not shown on covers: the cover models are thin, or the covers feature carved up body parts — a butt, a stomach, a torso — or other images to avoid the issue entirely. Nina Beck's fat-positive *This Book Isn't Fat, It's Fabulous* depicts a curvy, not fat, girl on its cover, and the cover of C. Leigh

Purtill's equally positive *All About Vee* shows an average-sized girl — larger than the usual super-slim cover girl, sure, but nowhere near Vee's 217 pounds. Similar to the white-washing controversy over using white cover models on books about African American characters (viz. Justine Larbalestier's *Liar*), covers of books about fat characters err on the cynical side of selling to conventional attractiveness and not accuracy.

One of the most troubling things about body policing and shaming is that it is done in the name of health. While there is a growing fat positive movement, finding vocal advocates for fat acceptance books is difficult. Some critics say that fat teens should not have affirming books written for them or fashionable clothing made for them because it would encourage their unhealthy habits, as if fat teens should wait, in ugly clothes and shaming books, until they become thin teens who deserve attractive wardrobes and good literature. There is a clutch of books trying to change this. Susan Vaught's *Big Fat Manifesto* points out that being fat is often genetic, not a moral failing, and she explains the dangerous allure of surgical intervention for fat teenagers. Not only does BFM's Jamie not want to lose weight, she drops her intolerant boyfriend for a more accepting boy. She is attractive, active, social, and smart, not tragic or unloved.

Novels like *This Book Isn't Fat It's Fabulous*, *All About Vee*, Nicco Medina's *Fat Hoochie Prom Queen*, and *Big Fat Manifesto* show teens that they can have a full life and be fat. Although not published for teens, plus-size model Crystal Renn's memoir *Hungry* is a great book for young people. Renn encourages size acceptance in teens and critiques the modeling industry. *Hungry* demystifies the glamour of modeling and recounts Renn's misery with anorexia and her success and happiness as a healthy plus-size model. One of the newest books with fat acceptance credibility is *Food, Girls, and Other Things I Can't Have*. Unlike the other recommended titles, this novel is about a boy, Andrew Zansky, a fifteen-year-old intellectual who is embarrassed by the large number on the back of his Levi's. In this book, pleasure isn't as prohibited for fat kids as it is in most YA novels. Drinking and sex are not discouraged, though eating is fraught. Allen Zadoff has clearly written from experience; he previously wrote a memoir about his weight. What appears at first to be a clichéd story of wish fulfillment about an outcast teenager achieving weight loss through sports and romance becomes something terrific and positive. Andrew uses his size to his advantage and his immense appetite to bulk up for football; what was formerly a liability becomes the source of his strength. And in the end he no longer needs his football success to feel good about himself and finds romance with an unlikely girl. Zadoff is

frank about the troubles of a fat body, the difficult of "fitting in" physically and emotionally in gym class and even into the desks in a high school classroom, clothing oneself, exercising without fear and surveillance, even by those who want him to lose weight. Like members of other oppressed groups, Andy knows that "people can't see the real you, so you have to work really hard to show them."

Of course even fat-positive books often suffer from the same problems as other YA novels. Not only is the literary quality sometimes unremarkable, but diversity is also lacking; they tend to be about white heterosexual girls. Like many books for young people, fat-acceptance fiction can seem didactic, polemical, and bibliotherapeutic. But since the books are unraveling the pervasive and insidious messages that weight loss is the key to the essential self, that it creates health, belonging, and happiness, the polemics are inevitable and necessary. This is the first step to building inclusive literature. The ultimate goal would be fat-positive books that do not generally portray weight loss unless it is the accidental result of some enjoyable activity; that do not always have characters who binge, since BED and a fat body don't always have a causal relationship; that acknowledge that fat people can be healthy (just as thin people can be unhealthy) and that weight and body size are often largely genetic and difficult to alter. Kids need books that reveal the fraudulence of the diet industry, the inequity of the fashion industry, the hostility of women's magazines; that endeavor to show fulfillment, confidence, and happiness despite the difficulties of being fat in a fat-hating society. And ideally, these books would not exhibit oppressive attitudes toward other identities and would show the intersections between fat teens of different races, nations, classes, abilities, and sexualities.

It is unfortunate that young readers who are fat must struggle to find affirming literature. Authors and publishers need to create literature with positive, authentic, and interesting characters and stories for this significant audience. It is possible to write compelling and unsentimental stories for teens without casually insulting fat people, without relegating fat characters to the side, and without portraying fat teens as irretrievably damaged. To rely on the easy fat joke is lazy and oppressive writing. As the fat acceptance movement grows, I hope to see more positive and honest portrayals of diverse characters and less fatphobia and sizeism in YA novels.

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