

# YA Fatphobia

by Kathryn L. Nolfi

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



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tropes: the healing power of fat camp, bullying parents and doctors, mothers who are thin and beautiful models or fat failures, indulging 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

## Recommended Fat Acceptance Books

**A Fistful of Sky** (Ace/Berkley/Penguin) by Nina Kiriki Hoffman

**Big Fat Manifesto** (Bloomsbury USA) by Susan Vaught

**This Book Isn't Fat, It's Fabulous** (Point/Scholastic) by Nina Beck

**All About Vee** (Razorbill/Penguin) by C. Leigh Purtil

**Fat Hoochie Prom Queen** (Simon Pulse/Simon) by Nico Medina

**Hungry: A Young Model's Story of Appetite, Ambition and the Ultimate Embrace of Curves** (Simon) by Crystal Renn with Marjorie Ingall

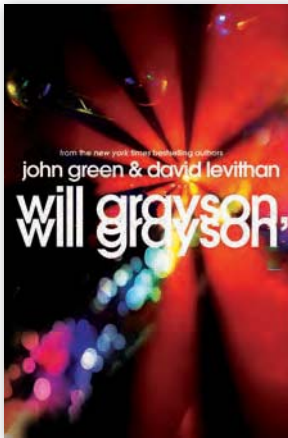
**The Earth, My Butt, and Other Big Round Things** (Candlewick) by Carolyn Mackler

**Fat Girl Dances with Rocks** (Spinsters Ink) by Susan Stinson

**Dinah and the Green Fat Kingdom** (Lippincott) by Isabelle Holland

**Myrtle of Willendorf** (Front Street/Boyd's Mills) by Rebecca O'Connell

**Food, Girls, and Other Things I Can't Have** (Egmont USA) by Allen Zadoff

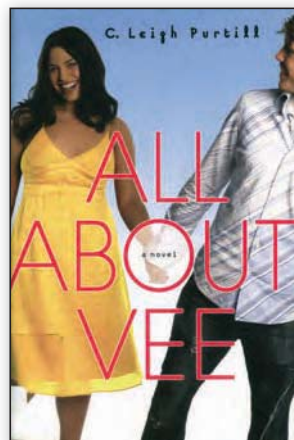


is grossed out by “bald and fat sex”; Will Grayson the Second says things like, “Most fat people get sweaty just lifting the twinkie to their mouth” and wants to be like Tiny without having “to gain, like, three hundred pounds.” Tiny complains of the constant visibility of being fat. The people in his 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 Purtil’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 whitewashing



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*, Nico 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

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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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