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Fat Fiction: Normalizing Fat Bodies in Literature

By

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Novels are an important way that social norms become ingrained in young minds and echo into their adult lives. Novels are the physical pieces of our education that we get to interact with daily. They provide context for certain subjects we learn about, and they shape the ways in which we view the world. However, we are never told what we are supposed to do when the books we read deny our identity, when the books we read encourage us to literally shrink ourselves in order to fit into a mold shaped so relentlessly by our society. That was my third-grade experience, when I read the novel *Blubber* by Judy Blume, which though meant to be an anti-bullying book, spent all 160 pages comparing a body much like mine to whale fat. I was meant to read it and be encouraged not to bully people even though they may be fat, but I was also taught that fat equals whale, that fat equals something negative to fuel the tormenting minds of elementary schoolers.¹ Instead of helping a young mind feel affirmed about their body, *Blubber* perpetuated the many self-deprecating thoughts that orbited my brain—and many other brains of young women looking for acceptance. As I grew up, I continued to look for characters in novels who looked like me, felt like me, and most importantly—were comfortable with their identities as fat women. Instead I found novels that continued to create fat characters who perpetuated anti-fatness. As I attempted to conceptualize this anti-fatness, I found something that made sense. I found Fat Studies.

What is Fat Studies?

Esther Rothblum and Sondra Solovay define Fat Studies as “an interdisciplinary field of scholarship marked by an aggressive, consistent, rigorous critique of the negative assumptions, stereotypes, and stigma placed on fat and the fat body” (2). These scholars begin to

¹Fat will be used throughout this thesis as a descriptive term. Fat Studies involves reclaiming fatness and breaking through negative stereotypes and connotations surrounding the word fat.

conceptualize how fatness and size are being used to oppress identities in their interdisciplinary critical anthology *The Fat Studies Reader*. In the introduction, Rothblum and Solovay state,

Fat Studies requires approaching the construction of fat and fatness with a critical methodology—the same sort of progressive, systematic academic rigor with which we approach negative attitudes and stereotypes about women, queer people, and racial groups (2).

Linking “fat and fatness” to other systems of oppression, Rothblum and Solovay highlight the ways in which fatphobia ties endlessly into our society; “the assumption that fat people are unhealthy is so ingrained in western society that it is hard to get people to face the facts” (3).

First, Fat Studies necessitates accepting that people who are fat are not always unhealthy—Solovay and Rothblum argue that if a reader is unable to accept this statement, they will not be able to practice Fat Studies. Next, Fat Studies involves looking at the ways in which individual thoughts and assumptions towards fat and the fat body perpetuate fatphobia. In her Foreword to *The Fat Studies Reader*, Marilyn Wann states,

If you believe that thin is inherently beautiful and fat is obviously ugly, then you are not doing fat studies work... you are instead in the realm of advertising [and] popular media... in other words, propaganda (ix).

Wann establishes this idea of fat propaganda as a means of highlighting how simply showing a fat body in media does not equal affirming that identity. This is especially true when the fat body being “represented” is used as a means of perpetuating negative thoughts and assumptions towards fatness. Instead, Fat Studies highlights the ways in which society pushes out bodies that do not fit normative sizes.

Susan Stinson's essay in *The Fat Studies Reader* titled "Fat Girls Need Fiction" draws attention to an absence of proper fat representation in the genre of fiction. Stinson challenges common notions that fat girls need fiction "because [they] are fat" (231) and argues that these novels are doing more than simply comforting fat girls. She states,

When I say that fat girls need fiction, I mean that we need to read and encourage the writing of a wide range of fiction about subjects both close to our various hearts and past the far-reaching imaginations. Beyond the desire to see our own lives and experiences reflected in fiction, we need those habits of mind and heart that deepen empathy with others (233).

Stinson takes the need for fat identities to be represented in literature even further. She moves past simply calling for representation, by asserting that not only do fat identities want to see their own experiences represented in literature, they also want these identities to foster empathy and understanding in *others*. Stinson suggests that participants of these novels will do more than just consume what is directly on the page, and that reading about these complex characters will encourage them to challenge their previously held perspectives towards fat and the body.

In addition to being a scholar, Stinson has published three works of fiction: *Venus of Chalk* (2004), *Martha Moody* (1995), and *Fat Girl Dances With Rocks* (1994). All three novels feature fat, female, queer protagonists and were published by small presses specifically focused on novels that center around feminist and queer representation. With Stinson's background in Fat Studies, as well as her choice to publish with presses that align with the values and goals surrounding Fat Studies and fat activism, it was my hope that her main characters would represent strong pro-fat forces in the literary community. This hope was aided by fact that Stinson published through small presses such as Firebrand Books and Spinsters Ink—

illuminating the ways in which mainstream publishing ignores marginalized groups, instead looking for novels that will bring in the most capital. This lack of representation in mainstream media was also reflected in the accessibility of these novels. It was very difficult for me to find these books, as they are not readily available in local bookstores such as Powells, and required purchasing through a third party seller on Amazon. In her article “Fat Girls Need Fiction,” Stinson also quotes a review of her novel *Fat Girl Dances With Rocks*. The reviewer states,

[I] read it a few pages at a time, as this was pre-size acceptance for me, and owing to my seemingly bottomless reserves of internalized fat hatred, I couldn’t bring myself to take it to the counter and buy it (Stinson 231).

This reviewer’s experience is an example of the pressure to adhere to the confines of our current weightism in western culture, which goes as far as to limit accessibility of the novels purely by shaming someone who would consider reading something that features such a “radical” viewpoint.² She challenges the reader to draw on their discomfort of fat characters, and to think about the systems that urge readers to interact with stories that feature normative bodies rather than ones that align with their personal identities.

My Project

Based on Stinson’s experience as a Fat Studies theorist, I expected these novels to push past the confines commonly attributed to fat characters in fiction. However, my findings instead uncovered how even a fat theorist can fall into the trap of stigma associated with fatness. In addition, for whatever reason, scholars have not applied a Fat Studies lens to the analysis of “fat fiction.” Therefore, by illuminating the ways in which even novels written by Fat Theorists like Stinson perpetuate the stigmas they attempt to break down, my project offers an original contribution to literary Fat Studies.

² Weightism is discrimination against people due to their weight, or the physical size of their bodies.

For this project I will be focusing mainly on the novel *Venus of Chalk* because it does not adhere to a subgenre while *Fat Girl Dances With Rocks* falls under coming of age, and *Martha Moody* falls under historical fiction. These subgenres project specific confines and expectations onto these novels, and therefore would reflect their genre more so than fiction in general. My focus on *Venus of Chalk* will bring attention to “Fat Fiction” as a genre in and of itself, which can then be transferred to more specific subgenres.

In *Venus of Chalk*, Stinson intends to illuminate the ways in which society contributes to fatphobia. However, the focus becomes Carline’s failure to “control” her own body and to succeed in reaching a goal of “normal” rather than identifying how society formed these unneeded desires for a normative body. The focus becomes Carline’s feelings of failure and her mental health issues rather than a critique on outside contributions to her negative behaviors. The moments in the novel of debunking the stigma surrounding fat bodies often get overshadowed by Stinson’s use of common tropes already overused in fat fiction novels. Stinson’s work to create positive affirming characters becomes limited by the focus on these characters’ self-doubt, self-harm, and other stigmatized actions.

To provide a framework for my analysis, after providing a brief synopsis of the novel, I highlight and define these common tropes I have discovered through my previous readings of fat fiction and my newly emerged critical Fat Studies lens. I separate my analysis into four sections that correlate to these tropes: the victimization of fat identities, characters being self-absorbed/obsessed with the size of their bodies, interpersonal issues, and intense isolated incidents of bullying. My argument revolves around a critical analysis of the choices Stinson made when establishing the character Carline. For each of the common tropes I have identified, I assess whether Stinson’s character development defies or perpetuates presumptions surrounding

anti-fat ideas. I also pose alternative decisions Stinson could have made that I believe better align with the goals of Fat Studies.

***Venus of Chalk* and the Anti-Fat Tropes of Fat Fiction**

The protagonist of *Venus of Chalk* by Susan Stinson is Carline, a fat woman with a loving fat partner Lilian (Lil), and a cat named Minnaloushe. Carline works for a home economics magazine and Lilian enjoys cooking tofu and performing slam poetry. The novel begins as a depiction of their relationship, defining the ways in which they complete each other. Carline says, “We shaped each other’s tastes. Lil fed me raw parsley, and I taught her my mother’s recipe for cornbread” (18). They work together as a team, preparing home cooked meals, keeping the house clean, working on DIY projects, and taking care of Minnaloushe. Their relationship becomes proof that fat women can feel complete—that their fatness still allows them to have fulfilling relationships and experiences. They practice normalized healthy behaviors breaking down the assumptions around fat bodies and health. However, these progressions are torn down after teenage boys harass Carline while Lilian is away at a poetry slam competition, sending Carline into a spiraling identity crisis. This identity crisis includes a road trip across the country with Tucker and Mel, who are both practically strangers to Carline, as she only knows them from her daily bus commute to work. The trip leads her to temporarily live with her mourning aunt Frankie in Texas, and later return home to Lilian, where she explains that she needed time away in order to process and move on from her feelings of internalized fat hatred.

The Victimization of Fat Identities

Fat characters are underrepresented in literature and other forms of popular culture, but when they are represented it is frequently in the role of victim, as in the case of Carline. This is

not unique to fat characters, but applies more broadly to underrepresented communities. Rather than recognizing systems of oppression and affirming/building up these identities, society continues to break them down by projecting its own stigmas against these communities onto individual fat identities. Audre Lorde illuminates this dynamic in her essay, “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle The Master’s House.” Lorde states,

Those of us who stand outside the circle of this society's definition of acceptable women; those of us who have been forged in the crucibles of difference; those of us who are poor, who are lesbians, who are black, who are older, know that *survival is not an academic skill*. It is learning how to stand alone, unpopular and sometimes reviled, and how to make common cause with those other identified as outside the structures (99).

Here, Lorde explains how society attempts to prescribe negative connotations with things that make people different. These differences get stigmatized and pieces of identity begin to appear undesirable, encouraging people who fit into the “normal” category to look at these bodies and identities with pity, seeing them as weak, and undesired. This is true too of fat bodies by promoting negative stereotypes in relation to fatness—such as assumptions towards health, self-control and athleticism. Lorde suggests that survival for these identities means taking these victimized and stigmatized pieces of identity and reclaiming them as strengths, an idea that often gets left out of fat fiction novels.

In *Venus of Chalk*, Stinson works to push against this victimization by featuring three fat women in the novel who all have complex identities not defined solely by the size of their bodies. Yet the novel’s most developed character, Carline, adheres to the victim trope. The novel focuses on the many conflicts caused by an episode of verbal harassment from teenage boys outside her apartment complex. While Carline leaves the apartment to take her trash down to the

dumpster, teenage boys approach her on their bicycles. They start yelling things at her; “Somebody yelled “Sooe,” as if calling a pig. Somebody else started repeating the word, “fat”” (20). This is the first instance where Stinson attaches fat to negative moral connotations. The teenage boys equate Carline’s body to that of a pig—an animal often associated with greed, overconsumption and bad hygiene. Seeing her as an animal makes it easier for the boys to publicly shame her, because they separate her from human emotions. They see Carline as an object to be shamed rather than a normative body able to freely exist in society. Stinson has the opportunity to break down victimized assumptions, but instead this singular scene triggers conflicts throughout the rest of the novel.

Though Stinson has successfully created a complex character attempting to navigate a world unaccepting of her body, these complexities become clouded by Carline’s constant projection of her own insecurities. Carline takes the boys’ actions personally, and her self-respect and feelings of self-worth quickly deteriorate. Carline begins to harm her body as means of coping with this traumatic event.

It hurt. Moving the flame in a tight circle, I watched the spot turn red. I was suspended and impersonal. I didn’t live in the sparse hairs, the dry layers of skin that had risen to the surface to be sloughed off. It was a feeling I remembered from highschool, when I was the age of those cigarette boys... Physical pain had been a focus, almost a relief (21). This instance of Carline burning herself intensifies a pattern of hatred toward her own body. Carline separates herself from her body as a form of coping; she describes it as “impersonal.” This pain that she causes herself acts as a release from her body. Rather than looking to her partner for support, Carline chooses isolation and self-harm. Harming herself makes Carline feel like she is no longer living inside her fat body. This projection of internalized fat hatred further

perpetuates her victimization, because she internalizes conflicts that would have otherwise remained external.

Rather than advancing Carline as a character who exemplifies resilience in the face of this harassment, Stinson emphasizes how she falls victim to the opinions of uneducated teenagers whose identities are expanded on no further than this one singular scene of harassment. This form of outward hatred towards fat bodies exemplified by the cigarette boys is still common, but the way Stinson chooses to unfold this reaction places Carline in a victimized position. Had Carline chosen to walk back into her house and call Lilian, or practice self-care and support by looking to things that bring her joy, such as cleaning the house or cooking, the entire premise of the book could not exist. The plot requires Carline to hate her own body, to fall victim to the traps offered by the confines of fat fiction, and continue ideas of isolation and unhealthy coping behaviors. Carline even adds that it had never occurred to her to stand up to these teenagers. She says, “The fact that I was bigger than every one of them had been useless. I never considered defending myself. Burning my own arm had seemed inevitable. I struggled to hold the thought that perhaps it was not” (32). Carline allows the size of her body to become her weakness, even though it doesn’t need to be. Rather than realizing the thoughts these teenagers have are not actual realities in her life, she chooses to take her anger out on herself instead of standing up to them. This singular moment of external harassment leads to multiple instances of internalized harm where Carline chooses to put her security at risk and avoid the root of the issue, rather than seeking out a support system and a path towards self-love. She sees the source of this conflict within herself instead of recognizing the social structure and ideologies of size.

Self-absorption and Obsession With Body Size

In other works of fat fiction, though a novel may feature a fat female protagonist, their entire identity develops surrounding their wish to fit into the mold of a normative body. Rather than working to affirm their current identity, they work to achieve the expectations pressed on them to shrink themselves both physically and emotionally. This expression of diet culture can be seen in Sarah Dessen's novel *Keeping The Moon*. The main character Colie and her mother used to be poor and overweight.³ However, Colie's mom begins to exercise and they both begin to lose weight. Following this weight loss, her mother becomes a popular personal training figure, which leads to Colie moving in with distant family members while her mother tours the world to encourage weight loss in others. With the absence of her mother and the pressures of a new living situation, Colie's self-esteem again begins to deteriorate. Though Colie now fits the normative body type expected of her by society, emotionally she still feels fat and unworthy, which establishes Colie's identity as revolving around her internalized fat hatred.

Carline and Lilian both openly criticize dieting in *Venus of Chalk*, and Stinson describes Lilian's healthy eating behaviors as simply behaviors, rather than attaching them to a need or desire to shrink herself.⁴ However, Stinson also features a scene when Carline visits her aunt Frankie and reflects on her past of wanting to be in control of her body. In this scene, Stinson intends to complicate dieting culture by revealing the ways in which it encourages a type of self-harm. Instead, the scene uncovers how Carline feels a lack of control over her size, and often feels "too fat" to exist freely and to have healthy relationships. Though there exists an explicit criticism of dieting, Stinson still requires Carline to obsess over the size of her own body.

³I use overweight purely to describe the connotations against fatness in this novel. The rhetoric surrounding the term overweight perpetuates fatphobia by suggesting these bodies are too big and should work towards a more "acceptable size."

⁴By healthy I mean normative assumptions of health, i.e. she eats tofu.

It calmed me the way dieting did, with physical evidence of control over my body.

Making myself thinner meant that I was strong and good. It was a public achievement... I had been fighting feelings I barely recognized... fear that I was too fat for anyone to love, ever. Shunned parts of me had stumbled onto a language of pain (134-135).

Carline describes how she utilized this “language of pain” to cope with her internalized fat hatred by drawing comparisons between dieting and self-harm. Though Stinson depicts dieting as a negative action in this novel, she emphasizes this fear that has taken over Carline: the fear of failing to be in control of the size of her body. This lack of self-control suggests that Carline wishes she were a more normative body size, because thin bodies suggest control, strength, and moderation, while fat bodies suggest excess. Her descriptions of self-harm and dieting illuminate the ways in which she desires to shrink herself and her identity, placing more emphasis on how making a body thinner also means facing less societal barriers and setbacks. She does not feel that she can be loved by anyone because she is “too fat.” Though this is a flashback to her adolescence, these feelings are mirrored in her attempts to isolate herself from Lilian, leading to strains on their relationship and other social aspects of Carline’s life.

Interpersonal Issues, Negative Comparisons, and Undesirability

A person’s feelings of self-worth can greatly affect how they approach relationships. When society fails to validate a person’s identity, those feelings of unworthiness can transfer over to how they interact with others and conceive of other bodies. In relation to fatness, when these bodies become attached to negative connotations, the identities that fit within the mode of fatness then get seen as undesirable. Undesirability is a term often associated with fat bodies in fiction, whether they are a device used for humor or the best friend that occupies these negative stereotypes as a means of making their counterparts seem more attractive. Undesirability can be

seen when people don't want to date a character solely because of their weight, people avoid certain parts of their body, or people feel embarrassed to be seen with them in public spaces and only initiate social interactions in private.

This trope is reflected in Kody Keplinger's novel *The DUFF*, which features the main character Bianca. Bianca is friends with two more popular, and more normative bodied girls at her school. Bianca becomes hyper aware of her appearance in comparison to her two friends following an interaction with a popular jock named Wesley. Here Wesley calls Bianca "the Duff" an acronym for Designated Ugly Fat Friend, directly comparing Bianca's body to that of her friends. Wesley says,

"I actually need your help. You see, your friends are hot. And you, darling, are the Duff... Hey, don't get defensive. It's not like you're an ogre or anything, but in comparison..." He shrugged his broad shoulders. "Think about it" (6).

Keplinger directly associates undesirability with fatness, while also suggesting that Bianca's relationship issues correlate directly with her lack of physical attraction in comparison to her other friends. This term "duff" also ends up affecting her friendships by causing Bianca extreme feelings of anxiety and self-doubt. Bianca's fatness ends up at the heart of many of her interpersonal issues.

As with the "duff's" stereotypical relationship structure, Stinson continues to establish Carline's identity through her relationships with other characters within the novel. Although Stinson does not intend on turning Carline into "the duff," she creates a stark comparison between Carline and Lilian in terms of how they react to certain situations. When Carline chooses to leave Lilian in the dark of many of her choices following the incident with these teenage boys, the reader begins to question Carline's ability to be in a healthy relationship. Her

internalized fat hatred causes her to knowingly make illogical decisions, thus both affecting her relationship and developing her as an illogical character.

This can be seen when Carline chooses to leave her primary source of income without discussing this decision with Lilian. While on her normal commute to work, Carline's bus driver mentions that he needs to take the bus to an auction a few states over because the county no longer needs it. Following a call from her aunt Frankie whose friend recently passed away, Carline makes a brash decision to travel with the bus driver to Texas in order to visit Frankie.

The next logical step would be to check my vacation days and ask Lou and Crystal to cover for me. Instead, I turned on my voicemail and spent the rest of the morning writing up a guide to my files... Then I called my supervisor and left a message. "I'm sorry, but I quit" (33).

Carline knows that she's making an illogical decision. Yet, she still chooses to leave her supervisor a short voicemail with no explanation as to why she'd be resigning from her position. Her impulses are another form of self-harm, in that she's risking her long-term security in order to run away from this situation. She could have easily taken the time to check in with her supervisor, explain her situation, and return later to her financial security. Instead she acts impulsively and ruins any chance of a continued professional relationship with her supervisor. The tasks she chooses to describe evoke isolation: she sends all calls to voicemail, writes a guide in her office, and sends a message to her manager—all things that could have been face-to-face interactions. This isolation and loss of employment security are required by the plot. The narrative relies on Carline to make these questionable decisions as a reaction to the situation with the cigarette boys, but also as a reaction to the realization of her internalized fat hatred. These reactions subconsciously sabotage her chances of living her desired lifestyle. Though Stinson

intends to illuminate the ways in which our words can truly affect someone's self-worth and mental health, the plot is preoccupied by the ways in which Carline's fatness holds her back from a happy and healthy life.

Carline makes herself undesirable even by the partner who desires her, subconsciously pushes relationships out of her life. This dynamic is evident in the scene in which Carline chooses to show up unannounced at her partner Lilian's poetry slam to announce her spontaneous cross-country trip. Carline arrives at the poetry slam and finds Lilian eating dinner with a friend in a café. When Carline approaches Lilian, she can sense Lilian's concerns at this unplanned arrival, describing her as looking "irritated" (40). This irritated look becomes "flat" (42) after Carline attempts to explain this decision she has made. This flatness in Lilian's expression is a representation of her inability to understand Carline's choice of action, even as she outwardly expresses her attempt to empathize with Carline. Lilian is the voice of reason in the novel, and she's unable to follow Carline's thought process, or what led her to make these life choices. She's drawn away from Carline as it becomes clearer that her decisions are stemming from trauma rather than self-care.

Lilian's reactions are normalized and understandable, while Carline's decisions are brash and illogical, which further places Carline in "duff" territory. Lilian even asks the question "Are you leaving me?" (42), the only valid explanation being that Carline wants a way out of this relationship. Carline slowly pushes all healthy relationships from her life, leading to interpersonal issues and the risk of isolation. Carline projects her own insecurities onto her relationship, and is now leaving her partner to pick up the pieces. When Carline explains to Lilian the situation involving the cigarette boys, Lilian expresses empathy with Carline, while also giving her a piece of wisdom. Lilian says, "If it's not fat it's something else. Don't you

know that much about the world Carline?” (44). Lilian attempts to bring Carline back to her senses by explaining to her that anti-fatness is socially constructed. Lilian wants Carline to see the ways in which she gives in to the negative thoughts others have about her body.

However, mimicking the “duff” comparative structure, Carline instead thinks of the ways in which Lilian operates more confidently than she does. She says,

Lilian moved down a sidewalk with a firm stride that reminded me of Frankie. I tended to step briskly, too, but now I found myself exhausted. I ached with the desire to take a very long ride... I felt not only empathy for my aunt’s grief, but also the grate and pull of my body’s private history (44).

Though this image of her “body’s private history” evokes the ways in which past traumas can come back at anytime, Stinson fails to allow Carline to deal with these problems effectively. Carline’s impulse to compare her movement within society unfortunately to the other two female characters in this novel who are both fat themselves, advances her cycle of self-doubt, while Lilian and Frankie exemplify admirable strong characters. The reader becomes most immersed in Carline, whose inner thoughts towards her own body are on a downward spiral mirrored by her recent life decisions. Her relationships and decisions she makes in regards to these dynamics continue to develop how Carline’s self image affects her ability to continue to be a healthy friend/partner. Carline equates this self image to her aunt’s grief, almost as if what the teenagers said to her killed her love for her own body. She mourns the loss of herself the way her aunt mourns the loss of her friend. I do not suggest that she should not have visited her aunt and supported her through this hard time in her life. Instead, I argue that there was a way to avoid her fatness becoming the root of this necessity to escape. Carline should have felt confident enough in her relationship with Lilian to ask for support during this time; maybe they could have driven

there together, or gone on the bus together. There were ways for Carline to go on this journey without isolating herself from the most stable relationship she has.

When Carline arrives back home after getting kicked out of Frankie's house, she reunites with Lilian. Carline had sent Lilian letters while she was at Frankie's, but she didn't tell her much in person upon returning home. Lilian feels bitter about how Carline left, and also how she returned home without feeling like she needed to explain where she had been. Carline tries to better explain why she went on the trip, speaking of how hard it was for her to walk through the cemetery on her way home to avoid harassment from strangers. She was upset that it was impossible for her to avoid the harassment of the teenage boys, and she couldn't take it anymore. Frustrated by Carline's obsession with this isolated incident, Lilian does not appreciate her explanation. Carline says, "Lilian wrapped her arms tightly around her legs and looked at her knees. Everything I said about my own body had implications for her" (179). Lilian knows that what Carline thinks about her own body will also be projected onto Lilian's body. They are both fat women, meaning what Carline finds distasteful will remain distasteful when connected to any body.

Carline's internalized fat hatred doesn't only affect her own self-image, but the self-image of the other people in her fat community. Carline adds, "I didn't want you to see me lapse into hating my body, wondering what I felt about yours" (179). Here, she attempts to justify leaving by explaining that it was what was the best for both of them. However, she doesn't take into consideration how abandoning her partner for months, with little explanation, only to write occasional letters would affect her self-image, and furthermore affect their relationship. Rather than successfully protecting her partner's self-image, Carline leaves Lilian wondering about her health, wondering why she left, possibly wondering what she did to let this happen. She thinks

she's doing what is best for her partner, without ever actually telling her partner what she needs. Carline also assumes that Lilian would feel less confident about her own body if she were to witness Carline's insecurities. However, it is possible to still love your own body, when people that look similar to you are insecure. If everyone in society immediately projected other's insecurities onto themselves, we would live in a very toxic world. It is possible for Lilian to still love her own body when Carline falls into a pit of self-hatred, it doesn't have to be connected to fat in general, but instead her own personal internalized fat hatred. A world can exist where Lilian loves her own body, and can use that love to help Carline out of her relapse from size acceptance. To assume that Lilian cannot separate herself from Carline's self-esteem issues, is to assume that Lilian should hate her body, that Lilian would see those as direct attacks on her body. Carline's explanation is an excuse in circles, because she fails to give Lilian the agency to make her own decisions regarding how she reacts to fatness. Lilian, in turn, wishes Carline would reject the stereotypical "victim of bullying" role commonly allotted to fat characters.

Intense Isolated Incidents of Bullying

When novels feature intense incidents of bullying they bring more attention the act of bullying itself, rather than illuminating the ways in which a character overcomes these incidents. Focusing on the actions idealizes bullying in the sense that the perpetrator holds all of the power in the situation, and often do not receive repercussions for their actions. Giving the perpetrator power forces the fat body into the place of victimhood, which again develops assumptions of weakness towards fat identities. As I sketched in my introduction, this can be seen in the novel *Blubber*, by Judy Blume. *Blubber* is narrated from the perspective of Jill, a bystander, who depicts the story of one of her classmates Linda getting bullied after giving a presentation on whale fat. What started as a means of learning and exploration, turns into a title that the "victim"

cannot escape. Though the novel attempts to be anti-bullying, unfolding this narrative from the perspective of Jill rather than the person experiencing these incidents does not allow Linda to define this experience for herself. Linda becomes a product of the situations that shape her identity, which denies Linda the voice to react how she sees fit.

In Stinson's novel, the initial bullying scene with the cigarette boys is paralleled by a later explicit episode of bullying. It unfolds while Carline is traveling with the bus driver Tucker to visit her aunt Frankie. Tucker, Mel, and Carline take a pit stop at a hotel for a night, and Carline decides to go to the pool and swim late at night. Tucker sneaks up on Carline and takes a photo of her while she's swimming in the motel pool. It is hard to tell Tucker's intentions for taking the photo, but early on in the novel the reader learns that Tucker loves taking photos and observing the world around him. Though it's possible that Tucker didn't necessarily have ill intentions for taking the photo, Carline can't help but assume he saw her body as a public display of obesity. The plot relies on Carline to see this as a scene of harassment because following the incident with the cigarette boys, she cannot imagine the possibility of other intentions.

Prior to realizing Tucker is watching her she describes taking off her clothes in a serene manner saying,

I felt practical and profoundly alone... My belly brushed against the links with a metallic rattle. I held my palm to the fence to still it... I unsnapped the shirt I had worn to bed, did a half shimmy with it down my back, then hung it next to my jeans... I climbed down the shaky metal ladder, The water hit above my knees, My thighs prickled with goosebumps.

The bottom was gritty... My breasts floated. I dove (89).

Carline uses a physical description of undressing and getting into the water, one that is not attached to any negative connotations. Her body exists in this space without the effect of

society's "norm" for fat bodies. This passage becomes an important piece of the novel, because Carline simply describes her body without allowing insecurities to overcloud her depictions; for example, when she says, "My breasts and belly dripped, innocent as rocks" (90). Her belly brushes against the fence, which feels very soft and light. She half shimmies out of her shirt, and folds her clothes onto the fence. Her breast float in the water, and her breasts and belly "innocently" drip water from the pool. All of the descriptions feel very calm and serene, a juxtaposition to the scene with the boys throwing cigarettes and yelling obscenities at her. This passage suggests a possibility towards a path of body acceptance, of not seeing it as "too" much of something, allowing her body to exist in its natural state rather than harming it for means of attaining a goal weight.

However, these descriptive characteristics change as soon as Tucker gets introduced to the scene. Carline notices Tucker when she hears the click of his camera lens taking a photo. She turns to see him over the fence with the lens pointing towards her. She says in response,

I sat up swallowing a scream. His face unreadable in the darkness... I swung my arm hard through the water, raising an arc of spray, furious... I pushed to the shallow end and stood up in the heavy air. I grabbed my belly with both hands and shook it at him. I was too mad to be ashamed. "Did you see this? Want a picture?" (90-91).

Carline's reaction to Tucker contrasts greatly to her previous depiction of her body in this scene. This reaction highlights the ways in which Carline has been conditioned to expect negative reactions to her naked body. Though Tucker should not have taken photos of Carline without her consent, Stinson is more concerned about highlighting Carline's reactions to the knowledge of this photo, then she is about highlighting Tucker's motives or reasoning behind this action. This in turn places Carline's insecurities/trauma at the forefront of the passage, causing the reader to

focus on these details of her body, this language of pain discussed previously. The reader becomes hyper-aware of her body's movements and reactions, which are associated with negative/aggressive qualities. She attempts to swallow a scream, her arm violently swings lifting water with it, she's pushing through the water, even the air commonly associated with weightlessness becomes heavy. She grabs her belly and shakes it, yelling that Tucker solely wants a photo of her large stomach. Though Tucker was invasive of Carline's privacy, she seems more upset about him documenting her fat body, than she is about him breaking her peace, and the situation says more about her personal insecurities and less about why Tucker had the desire to photograph Carline in that moment. This negative situation becomes a product of fatness and weight, because Carline assumes that Tucker's need to take a picture stems from a negative reaction towards her body rather than a positive one. Carline cannot imagine a world where someone would see her body and not initially hate it.

Though society conditions people to believe that fat and the fat body are distasteful, that is not necessarily a natural reaction. Fat simply exists, everyone has fat, and negative ideas towards fatness are socially constructed. Tucker could have seen Carline in that serene relaxed moment, and found beauty in her freedom in that water. Maybe he saw beauty in the fact that Carline finally felt comfortable to be free in her body, and not covering herself around strangers, afraid of their perception. There's also the possibility that Tucker finds Carline beautiful in all her forms, regardless of whether or not her body confines to society's expectations. However, Stinson does not give us this possibility, and instead has Carline immediately jump to negative conclusions regarding Tucker's intentions. Even when Tucker apologizes to Carline and admits that he should have asked permission prior to taking the photo, Carline describes his apology as a "weak thing to offer after wrecking [the] peace" (91). Carline does not care what Tucker has to

say to explain himself; she has written off any explanation he offers as weak, and cannot imagine a possibility of him seeing her as something other than “too fat.”

Conclusion Without Resolution

The novel concludes with Lilian supporting Carline and returning with her to Frankie’s house so Carline can be with her aunt for her friend’s funeral.⁵ Frankie forgives Carline for her mistakes like Lilian, and the novel ends with Frankie and Lilian helping to pierce Carline’s ears. Following the piercing, Carline says, “To be pierced so so carefully was worlds away from cutting in despair. The earrings glinted in my ears. Ready to flourish, I hugged Lil and Frankie by their hips” (206). This piercing becomes Carline’s new language of pain, which she describes as careful rather than a moment of despair. Frankie and Lilian use this action as a way of renewing Carline and allowing her to break away from her self-hatred. This renewing allows Carline to feel like she is ready to flourish.

However, it’s too little too late. The reader has been taken through moment after moment of Carline falling into these languages of pain and trauma, harming herself, her relationships, and her life security. She self-destructs, yet the reader is meant to believe that a moment of ear piercing will solve all of these issues. Not only are the other fat women in her life so quick to forgive her for the things she’s done to hurt them greatly, but they also perform an act that changes her physical appearance. It is only after some piece of Carline’s body has changed, that she is able to come to terms with her body. The plot relied entirely on an isolated incident of hatred, and concludes with an isolated incident of vanity—which are both areas that have greatly harmed the fat community.

⁵ While Carline was visiting her aunt Frankie, she helped her prepare to have a proper funeral for her best friend who had recently passed. Though the reader knows Carline’s main reason for visiting Frankie was to escape her personal issues at home, the reader begins to see the ways in which Carline helps Frankie to cope with this loss. Carline’s self-destructive tendencies end up affecting her relationship with Frankie, so she sends her home.

Though Stinson has created complex fat female characters, they are still often simplified to become a product of their fatness. There are many moments within *Venus of Chalk* where Carline reaches a sort of crossroads. She can either fall back into a history of self-harming behaviors or utilize her support systems to move on and move forward. Almost every time, she chooses a path of depression and self-doubt. Rather than creating a complex fat character who overcomes obstacles set in their path by the assumptions regarding fat, fat bodies, and the possibility for a happy life coexisting with fatness, Stinson creates a character who falls victim to these assumptions. Carline experiences one instance of public fatphobia within the novel, and that becomes her identifying characteristic. She becomes fat phobic herself, feeling that her body will constantly work against her. She pits her body against her healthy relationship, her job/stable source of income, and her cat. She assumes that Tucker wants to take a fatphobic photo of her, she feels that self-harm is the only way to ‘control’ her body. She falls victim to internalized fat hatred. Stinson had the opportunity and the background to create a character that defies these characteristics: one who does not ignore the oppression fat bodies face on a daily basis, but who does not allow this oppression to inhibit their self-expression and the deepest pieces of their identity. The world does not need another melancholic fat identity; the world needs one who does not give into adversity, who does not see fatness as an exception to their identity, but instead simply as a characteristic. We need a fat character who sees their body as beautiful rather than beautiful (for a fat girl).

Moving Forward

Authors’ inability to create self-affirming fat characters contributes to internalized fat hatred, especially since the ideas surrounding a normative appearance have been socially constructed. Novels are instrumental in society as ways of “looking into” the lives of other

identities or ones a person feels closely linked to. However, there's danger to this reality when representation becomes misrepresentation. By this, I mean that when we simplify characters to tropes commonly associated with their identities, that sets the stage for self esteem and self worth issues. In terms of Fat Fiction, adhering to the tropes of the genre affects future generations of readers. If a character constantly strives for weight loss or constantly must hear all the ways in which their body is not enough—while at the same time too much—then writers are telling their readers they should feel that way too. If authors create fat characters who are not at all concerned with the size of their bodies, especially in comparison to the more traditionally normative bodies around them, then their characters' identities no longer have to revolve around fatness. The fat on a character's body should be an explanation of their appearance, a trait, not a stigmatized abnormality.

We need more fictional examples of fat identities that feel fulfilled, are paying attention to and taking care of their mental health and have strong support systems. Such characters will better represent the possibilities for positive fat identities. A novel that adheres to what has previously been done in fat fiction is a novel that perpetuates common stereotypes of what it means to be fat today. I challenge authors to create a fat character where the word diet is not mentioned once in the novel. I challenge authors to create a fat character who is in a romantic relationship with someone, who goes on dates, who is sex positive— their fatness not leading to negative ideas about their appearance or their ability to be loved or in a healthy relationship. I challenge authors to begin to imagine what these representations would mean to the fat community, how a character like this might be what they need to feel seen and heard. Fat identities are aware of weight oppression, of negative views towards the size of their bodies, they know what it is like to be bullied, they know that their bodies are under surveillance. A novel

that subconsciously reinforces these ideas is not a novel for the fat community, but a novel for their oppressors. We don't need any more of these novels, and I challenge authors to begin to explore the ways in which fat fiction can become a genre of affirming identities. I sometimes wonder how my views on my own self-worth may have been different had I been exposed to a novel where the main fat character was not the girl being bullied, but instead the girl going on adventures or investigations. We need novels that will redefine visibility in a way that affirms the full human complexity of fat identities. A new level of visibility that pushes against our preconceived notions of what it means to be fat in society would be a powerful tool, and I urge authors to use it.

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