

“ANYTHING IS BETTER THAN BEING FAT”:  
AN ETHICAL APPROACH TO THE FEAR OF FAT IN  
ADOLESCENT CHILDREN’S LITERATURE

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## INTRODUCTION

### THE FEAR OF FAT: WHY REPRESENTATIONS OF BODY SIZE MATTER

I am afraid  
of fat children,  
of flesh in the young,  
for it seems to be what death and the grave  
are all about. (Wakoski 38-42)

In Diane Wakoski's "The Fear of Fat Children," the aging narrator fears and detests a fat child named John because he is a constant chilling reminder of her mortality. Wakoski's narrator is frightened by the ravages of age on her body, and fears fat children because their excess flesh serves as a "a mirror/of what I fear" (62-63). David Brown in his article "Wakoski's 'The Fear of Fat Children'" explains that Wakoski uses the word "fat" to emphasize this parallel: "the word lodges itself, chant-like, in the reader's mind, where it is connected firmly at the poem's end with age, death, and finally 'the wasted life'" (293). Sadly, it is not only Wakoski who associates fat with failure. The echoing chant of fat hatred resounds throughout society, from Weight Watchers weigh-ins to Simon Cowell's caustic comments to plump contestants on the reality show *American Idol*. It is therefore no surprise that such hatred even resonates in the pages of children's literature.

All literature, consciously or not, reflects the culture in which it was created, as well as the culture that formed its author and readers. In the present age of cultural theory, texts are interrogated to expose portrayals of gender, race, class, and sexuality. Representations of body size, however, go largely unexamined. To understand why, I

first examine the pervasive fear of fat that silences otherwise verbose critics, then establish the importance of the portrayals of fat generated by that fear.

The presence of the fear of fat in children's literature is evident in Paula Danziger's *The Cat Ate My Gymsuit* (1974). Marcy Lewis, the fat child protagonist, looks "like a baby blimp with wire-framed glasses and mousy brown hair" (1). She fears repulsion from everyone she meets and is frequently reminded of her failings by her father, who sneers: "I don't care if you get good grades. You do stupid things. Why do I have to have a daughter who is stupid and so fat? I'll never get you married off" (Danziger 26). Marcy has come to believe that she is inferior because she is overweight, and that unless she can lose weight, she will never become happy. Marcy's new English teacher, Ms. Finney, teaches Marcy to find value in herself, and by the end of this highly entertaining coming-of-age tale, Marcy has joined her mother and friends in facing down an unreasonable principal and Marcy's dictatorial father, has had her first boy-who's-just-a-friend, and has somewhat found her place in the world. Although Marcy never comes to terms with her fat body, she realizes that not everyone bases their judgment of her entirely on her appearance.

Danziger's Marcy is an engaging, imperfect heroine. *The Cat Ate My Gymsuit* is similarly engaging yet imperfect. Fat children reading this book can learn to step outside their bodies and see that not everyone will necessarily detest them for their size, and that they too can make a stand for what is important. However, they will also learn that fat children hate themselves. Although at the end of the book Marcy has triumphed against her father and principal, she has not defeated her body. The boy is still just a friend, she

and her father are no longer on speaking terms, and she is flunking gym. Marcy may have learned to let people like her, but she has not learned to like herself.

The fear of fat demonstrated in Danziger's text and other young adult novels reflects a culture where fat spawns a consuming fear. As the average weight of the American adolescent continues to rise and the average weight of teen idols continues to fall, children across the United States are taught every day that it is impossible to like a fat body. Paula Danziger's book is one of a handful of texts in the flooded children's book market that has a fat child for a protagonist. Many children's books do not even contain fat children, although according to The National Health and Nutrition Examination survey of 1988-1997, twenty-two percent of the adolescent population are told that they are overweight every day by their peers, parents, physicians, and the media (Neumark-Sztainer 2). It may be dangerous to suggest that it is acceptable for children to be fat, but the powerful effect that the portrayal of fat youth in literature has on adolescents struggling to bridge the gap between childhood and adulthood requires examination.

In literature and culture, "overweight" and "normal" adolescents alike, fighting to define who they are, are bombarded from every direction with societal values of physical beauty. The fear of fat that Wakoski expresses in her poem and of which Danziger's Marcy is all too aware is deeply rooted in our culture, where an appealing self is necessary to get jobs, friends, and lovers. Mike Featherstone explores the causes of fat hatred in "The Body in Consumer Culture." Featherstone posits that fat is a product of capitalism and argues that consumerism has created a market for the ideal body in which "The reward for ascetic body work ceases to be spiritual salvation or even improved

health, but becomes an enhanced appearance and a more marketable self” (171). A slim body is required to compete in this marketplace. Marcy Lewis and other fat characters in children’s literature search for an improved appearance as they bid for Featherstone’s “more marketable self” (171). As Marcy says, “Who wants to say, ‘This is my friend, the Blimp’?” (Danziger 9).

The most marketable self is one that matches most closely the images of youthful beauty that the media presents. Featherstone explains that consumer culture uses these “idealised images of the human body” as “constant reminders of what we are and might with effort yet become” (178). This image is realistically accessible for very few individuals, thus increasing the market for body maintenance products, and defining larger and larger portions of the population as fat (hence the commercial emphasis on the beauty of supermodels Twiggy and Kate Moss). Featherstone asserts that this fear of fat that forces increasing numbers of women to see themselves as fat is created in part by the media. Skinny people are portrayed in popular culture as “lithe, bright-eyed beautiful people, in varying states of nakedness [. . .]. The fat are invariably portrayed as glum and down cast joke figures, survivals from a bygone age” (Featherstone 184).

The result of fat phobia and stereotypes is prejudice that is manifested in every arena of life, including the career marketplace. According to Deborah Gregory, a fat rights activist and former model, a Harvard School of Public Health study revealed that when compared to skinny women, “Large women [. . .] have household incomes that average \$6,710 lower and are 10 percent more likely to be living in poverty” (313). Gregory asserts that large men are similarly handicapped. Danziger portrays fat child Marcy as also suffering from a lack of marketability due to her weight. Marcy is

miserable throughout most of the book and makes it abundantly clear that she attributes her misery to her fat, “Some people can be different and still be happy. I personally think that while blimps are different, they are not special and not happy” (109). Marcy meets no positive fat role models in this book. Instead, she wanders around in a world apparently peopled with her own chubby self, a lot of naturally skinny people, and the “senior blimp” sales lady at the department store “Chubbies section” (88). No one tells Marcy that it is okay to be fat, that she, in fact, is attractive. Instead, like many fat children’s book characters, Marcy is told that she is loved *in spite of* her size. Marcy’s body is marketable only to those who are required to love her, and she is painfully aware of that fact.

Featherstone establishes the social context for the creation of children’s literature and that of the child readers of the texts. Both authors and readers are bombarded on their televisions, in magazines and movies, even, as Featherstone points out, in health films at schools, with the concept that fat is unacceptable. Thus, even those authors who are resistant readers of society’s messages of fat phobia are necessarily so immersed that it is difficult or unrealistic to totally escape from it in their writing. Their child readers look in books for the same messages they typically encounter in other media outlets. A text which departs too completely from these conventions is so subversive as to not be credible. Featherstone’s concepts, then, are not just applicable to understand the context of the writing and reading of these books, but to understand the content of the books themselves as inextricably linked to the context in which they are produced and consumed.

Examination of the fear of fat is not confined to Featherstone's Marxist indictments of consumer culture. The fat rights movement, begun in the late 1960s, sparked a number of works that deal with the fear of fat in society. Susie Orbach's *Fat is a Feminist Issue* (1978) introduced many women to the concept that dieting only hurt their bodies and actually caused them to gain more weight. In *Hunger Strike* (1986), Orbach posits similar ideas to those of Featherstone. "Women," she says, "are schooled to relate to their bodies as their objects/tools/weapons in the marketplace of social relations" (71). The images that women find in mass culture "project a few limited body types for women, and the designated female beauties of the moment correspond to these body types" (71). Although she questioned the definition of fat and methods of weight loss, Orbach still suggested to her readers that losing weight should be their end goal. Charlotte Cooper, author of *Fat and Proud: The Politics of Size*, attempts to shift the fat rights movement from the direction of Orbach's contribution. Cooper challenges fat men and women to stop considering fat to be ugly, and to love their bodies, whatever the size.

Cooper, Orbach, and the fat rights movement question the constant stream of yo-yo dieting that consumer culture prescribes to "cure" fat. Gregory explains the misconceived ideas that contribute to this mentality: "One of the most cherished assumptions that many people have is that body size and shape are under the complete control of the individual—and anyone who is heavy, plump, overweight, or fat is greasin' around the clock" (316). The image of the gluttonous fat person is not always accurate. It is, in fact, weight-conscious society that can employ messages of fat hatred to turn a naturally plump adolescent into an unnaturally fat adult. Gregory quotes Sally Smith of the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance, "You can actually diet your way

up to fatness” Smith asserts, ““With each period of low-calorie dieting, 95-98 percent of dieters can expect to gain back the weight and an additional 20 percent above that””

(316). If Danziger’s Marcy continues to detest her body, she can expect to potentially diet her way from chubby childhood to increasingly fat adulthood.

Language is a powerful tool in fat hatred. Cooper explains that the term “fat” is preferable to the term “obese.” She states, “Obesity is considered a disease because a fat body is regarded as proof that somebody has eaten too much according to social norms, and eating more than one is thought to need is considered pathological” (71). Cooper explains why she does not want her weight to be considered a disease. Besides the fact that disease implies that modern medicine should be able to “heal” her, “Disease is repugnant—to think of our fat bodies as diseased is so threatening that the language we use to describe our fatness, such as *surplus* or *excess* weight, or *overweight*, is suggestive of some weird growth that is separate to the rest of us” (71). Neither the children in the books I address, nor the children who read the books are repugnant or diseased, except in the eyes of the society and texts that tell them their “obesity” is unacceptable. While the term “fat” has traditionally been used insultingly, Cooper suggests re-appropriating it as a source of power for those whose bodies have been deemed unacceptable. For this reason, I will generally prefer the term “fat” to “obese” or “overweight.” I further choose to generally use the work “skinny” to represent those who are represented as possessing a body shape accepted by society because (in my perception and thus my use) “thin” evokes images of extreme lack of body fat and “slim” is highly romanticized.

In the real world, body shape is not an absolute to be divided into categories of skinny and fat. Further, values of body size vary between cultures, age groups, and

people. However, popular American culture and most literature does draw a distinct line between fat and skinny, creating a strict dichotomous relationship that lumps those who fifty years ago would be considered attractive and slim with people whose extreme obesity does cause medical problems. This binary world is reflected in children's literature. Each of the books I will address participates in this dichotomization, separating children and adults into categories of fat and skinny.

The fear of fat is based on the widely held belief that fat is unhealthy. It is true that those who are on the extreme fat end of the fat/skinny dichotomy are in true medical danger, but so are those on the extreme skinny end. Those who are less than dangerously obese or dangerously thin are defined as fat or skinny not just by the media and literature, but by the medical community. However, studies show that the doctor's charts draw an unnatural line between fat and skinny. According to Kim Chernin in *The Obsession: Reflections on the Tyranny of Slenderness*, Dr. Andres of the National Institute of Aging studied 1,233 people for fourteen years. According to Chernin, "the lowest mortality of all his subjects occurred among those who were 24-38 percent 'overweight,' as defined by the statistical charts" (31). Andres also analyzed a combination of forty studies involving six million people. His conclusion: "The current chart on doctors' walls, and our own ideas of desirable weight fixed by a sense of aesthetics, are not desirable if you want to live longer" (Chernin 31).

Those who are defined by doctor's charts as fat (though not seriously obese) are often healthier than skinny people. According to Charlotte Cooper in *Fat and Proud*, not only is "there is a lower mortality rate for cancer amongst fat as opposed to thinner people," but:

[. . .] fat people experience a lowered incidence of osteoporosis, fractures, anaemia, some types of diabetes, peptic ulcers, scoliosis and suicide [. . .] have an increased immune system and a lower fatality from infectious diseases [. . .] are less likely to have to deal with eclampsia in pregnancy, giving birth prematurely, vaginal laceration, hot flashes, or premature menopause. (74)

This is partially due to the fact that the dieting required to maintain the extremely small bodily proportions demanded by consumer culture and doctor's charts is dangerous. The following anti-diet warning, reprinted in Cooper's book, is based on research conducted by the University of Toronto:

WARNING: Dieting has been shown to lead to anxiety, depression, lethargy, lowered self-esteem, decreased attention span, weakness, high blood pressure, hair loss, gall bladder disease, gall-stones, heart diseases, ulcers, constipation, anaemia, dry skin, rashes, dizziness, reduced sex drive, menstrual irregularities, amenorrhea, gout, infertility, kidney stones, numbness in the legs, weight gain, eating disorders, reduced resistance to infection, lowered exercise tolerance, electrolyte imbalance, bone loss, osteoporosis and death. (Cooper 101)

Each of these facts is based on statistically significant medical studies. Yet the fear of fat continues to suggest that those who are not normatively skinny are fundamentally different because of their weight. A 2001 study in Pennsylvania indicated that five-year-old girls who think they are overweight have "A low opinion of their bodies, cognitive abilities, and their physical abilities" (Moon 33). The study further showed that these

perceptions were shared by the girls' parents. If parents can believe that their own child is stupid and lazy simply because they are overweight, there seems little chance that children's authors can escape from fat prejudice.

Literature plays a role in the perpetuation of fat hatred unique from that of the medical community or popular culture. According to Pat Rogers, some literature uses the fat body as a literary device. In "Fat is a Fictional Issue: The Novel and the Rise of Weight-Watching," Rogers asserts that "the novel is the place above all where the physical is the sign of the inward, and where a kind of sizism can be exploited as part of an entire idiom and syntax drawn from corporeal matter" (168). The potential symbolic nature of fat is, to Rogers, an underexplored—in fact, nearly unexplored—area of potential criticism. Although "somatic criticism" has been adopted by some, Rogers points out that, "none [. . .] focuses on the issue of body shape and the way this reinforces both an individual's sense of a self and the public construction of the identity of others" (169). Rogers traces the development of weight-watching in the novel, and calls for others to examine in similar ways the "tyranny of slimness" (184). This, then, is the fat criticism of literature that Cooper and Featherstone would applaud. Authors establish both the self of their fat characters and that of their fat child readers, and potentially influence skinny readers to learn to fear a change in their body shape—a departure from the tyrannically slim to the pathetically fat.

Rogers's point that literature plays an important role in the perpetuation of the fear of fat illustrates that representations of body size should matter to theorists. However, I found it difficult to find an established literary theory that could question the tyranny of the slim and pathetic nature of the fat in adolescent children's literature. The

solution came in the newly reworked lens of ethical criticism. Wayne C. Booth establishes in *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* that examining fiction as an ethical enterprise is not new. Rather, the ethical criticism that Booth and others practice is a reworking of a traditional way of looking at literature that went “out of style” in the middle of the twentieth century. The term “ethics” is somewhat deceiving when defining ethical criticism. Booth states in *The Company We Keep* that the term “ethical” is used in ethical criticism in only the broadest sense: “For us here the word must cover all qualities in the character, or ethos, of authors and readers, whether these are judged good or bad” (8). For Booth, the program of ethical criticism “will be any effort to show how the virtues of narratives relate to the virtues of selves and societies, or how the ethos of any story affects or is affected by the ethos—that collection of virtues—of any given reader” (11). Booth defines virtue as “every kind of genuine strength or power” (11). Thus, for the purposes of ethical criticism of fat, I will examine the good, the bad, and the ugly in the portrayal of the virtues of fat characters, delving into the separate ethos established for fat characters and their skinny companions.

Booth states that any text, even the most simple, presents a set of fixed norms, “notions of how the world in which we find [the characters] works, the norms of causation and behavior that can be expected, or perhaps even clung to, in that world” (142). The fixed norms of *The Cat Ate My Gymsuit* include that a fat child is necessarily unhappy. In this text and others, fat children have problems related entirely and exclusively to their size. This norm is fixed in this book, in society as a whole, and in each book I will address.

In “A Humanistic Ethics of Reading,” Daniel Schwarz suggests a framework for ethical criticism. Schwarz suggests that, in the wake of New Historicism and cultural criticism, the time is ripe for ethical criticism and humanism (or, as he says, “a neohumanist burst of energy”) to regain power and gives a model for understanding the precepts of this rebirth (3). An author is also an artist and thus, “Understanding the process of imitating the external world gives us insight into the artistry and meaning of the text” (3). Through examining how the “real” world is portrayed as working in the text, we can better understand some of the meanings inherent within the text. Schwarz further explains that ethical criticism supposes that literature represents the world in which it was created, so one can determine the meaning of that world independent of biographical or historical criticism. Examining Danziger’s experiences as a child is not necessarily required. Every experience that Danziger has had is reflected in her work, whether it was consciously addressed or not. Finally, Schwarz states that “the psychology and morality of characters must be understood as if the characters were metaphors for real people, for understanding others helps us to understand ourselves” (4). This suggests the motivation for studying Marcy as a character at all. By seeing Marcy as a representation of an adolescent girl, not just the artistry or humor Danziger uses in creating her, we can gain greater insight into our own perceptions of fat and the role of fat prejudice in society.

Ethical criticism requires an examination unique to the individual critic, author, and reader. Booth insists that ethical criticism necessitates a dialogue between critics concerning the values that each critic observes in a given text. Many critics must contribute their understandings of the ethics of a specific work in order to create a

diversity of opinions. Discussion rather than consensus is the goal. Booth states, “To me the most important of all critical tasks is to participate in—and thus to reinforce—a critical culture, a vigorous conversation” (136).

Like any new theory (or in this case, newly reborn), ethical criticism has its detractors. Richard Posner in “Against Ethical Criticism” states that ethical critics (specifically Booth and Martha Nussbaum) want to make a moralistic reading of texts: “They want to extract, albeit by consideration of the form as well as the paraphrasable content of the work, a moral lesson” (3). If there is no moral lesson to a work, or the moral lesson is repulsive, Posner feels that ethical critics want it banished, regardless of its aesthetic strengths. Posner’s criticism is unjustified, however. Ethical criticism is not an attempt to establish the universal importance of certain works based upon the morality of their ethical program. First, as established above, it has nothing to do with morals. Second, ethical critics as a whole oppose censorship and are not suggesting that works be banned necessarily because they make ethical statements that a specific critic does not agree with. Nor is it the position of ethical critics that a “poor” ethos *necessarily* makes a work bad, and a “good” ethos certainly cannot make an aesthetically bad work good.

None of the ethical critics specifically addresses children’s literature. However, Peter Hollindale in “Ideology and the Children’s Book” proposes an ideological criticism that closely resembles ethical criticism. Hollindale states that there is an unavoidable element of ideology in all literature, including children’s literature: “ideology is an inevitable, untameable and largely uncontrollable factor in the transaction between books and children” (27). Like ethical critics, Hollindale does not propose to censor those books which are not ideologically sound, nor does he suggest books should be

intentionally ideological: “Our priority in the world of children’s books should not be to promote ideology but to understand it, and find ways of helping others to understand it, including the children themselves” (27).

Whether it is called ethical or ideological, value based criticism is useful in this exploration of representations of fat bodies in adolescent children’s literature for several reasons. First, the values, good or bad, that adolescents receive from their literature are absorbed at the time of their life when they are defining their selves. Although many people attempt to constantly redefine themselves throughout their lives, it is in adolescence that many of the most defining points of character occur. Adolescents struggle with burgeoning sexuality and the birth of a unique self-image at a time when their bodies are at their most awkward.

Second, although children may be quite capable of reading resistantly, there are many adolescents who have likely not yet learned to be resistant readers. It was certainly not until college that I, an avid reader for most of my life, learned that texts and their authors are fallible. This lack of critical development leads to a somewhat more trusting child reader, although, as Perry Nodelman frequently points out, it is not advisable to underestimate children’s discernment.

Third, many people do much of their lifetime reading as children. Children and adolescents spend seven to eight hours a day at school, where most are required to read (specifically children’s) literature, something many people can avoid for the rest of their lives. The ramifications of this are twofold. First, a bad experience with a book in childhood—finding that there are no books which represent *them*—can turn a child off to literature for life (or, in the case of Alice Walker, inspire them to write the books that

they “*should have been able to read*” [Walker 13]). Second, children are at an age where they are the most likely to absorb values from literature. According to Claudia Mills, it is “difficult to avoid conceding that at least one (perhaps unintended) function of a children’s book is to shape the evolving moral character of its readers” (531). Just as it has been suggested that children absorb values from the television and movies, it certainly seems viable that at least some of the values found in children’s literature find their way into the child reader’s head.

My final reason for discussing body size in adolescent children’s literature is that books are often read in elementary and middle school classrooms as didactic tools. Teachers and librarians choose books to have students read, or to read aloud, both pre-censoring what the children read, and suggesting that the works that make it through are somehow good, that these works display the values they want the students to absorb.

I thus consider it important to critically examine the values America’s fat and skinny adolescents alike find when they open a book: that a fat child is invisible, insatiable, unwanted, and that with control over the body comes acceptance. I have chosen the texts that I examine because they are most likely to be read and enjoyed by somewhat impressionable readers. They are all young adult novels, aimed at liminal youth, transitioning from childhood to adolescence or adolescence to adulthood. Adolescents are seeking to establish their identity and the books that they read can have a powerful impact on the values that they consciously or subconsciously absorb and thus the people they become. I have chosen these specific books because they are by popular authors and are either currently or were at the time of their release, readily available on bookstore and library shelves. There are perhaps many books that are more or less

stereotypical than the books I chose, but they are not so readily available to children, and my concern is with those books that children are most likely to read. Finally, I chose these books because they are very enjoyable and generally well-written. Many of them have won awards or are written by award-winning authors. I found each of these books to be very engaging and enjoyable to read regardless of the messages that they presented about fat bodies.

I have divided my examination into three chapters. First, I look at the first four books of the extremely popular Harry Potter series by J.K. Rowling (1997-2000). The Harry Potter books present a strict dichotomy between fat and skinny that establishes the fat characters as stereotypical joke figures and the skinny characters as intelligent and powerful. Series protagonist Harry is frequently described as skinny, while his cousin Dudley is reviled for his stupidity and obesity, as is Harry's Gryffindor pal Neville and the other assorted fat characters in the series. In the Harry Potter tales, the heroes come of age while Neville, Dudley, and the other fat characters fade into the background.

In the next chapter, I discuss books from three different decades spanning forty years. In Leslea Newman's *Fat Chance* (1994), Robert Lipsyte's *One Fat Summer* (1977), and Florence Crannell Means's *Hetty of the Grande Deluxe* (1951), children who perceive themselves as fat spend the majority of the narrative focusing on their need to lose weight. Much has been written in the past twenty years on the pressure to be skinny, and the power that weight loss gives a subject over his or her own body. Control over the body is especially important in the ever-changing figure of an adolescent, where weight may be the only physical characteristic s/he can control. In *Fat Chance*, a girl experiments with controlling her developing body through bulimia while coming to terms

with her relationship with her mother. *One Fat Summer* tells the story of a fat boy who realizes his manhood by losing his “puppy fat.” Finally, in *Hetty of the Grande Deluxe*, title character Hetty controls her destiny by “reducing” to please her one-legged boyfriend. In each of these texts, gaining control over their bodies allows the protagonists to finally come of age.

In the books discussed in the last two chapters, a fat child body is unacceptable. The texts that form the focus of the final chapter attempt to rebel against fat hatred. The protagonists of Cherie Bennett’s *Life in the Fat Lane* (1998), Susan Stinson’s *Fat Girl Dances With Rocks* (1994), and Daniel Pinkwater’s *Fat Camp Commandos* (2001) all learn to question the stereotypes which perpetuate the dichotomy between fat and skinny. Lara Ardeche, the protagonist of *Life in the Fat Lane* begins her book thinking that she is happy, well-adjusted, and skinny. Very quickly, though, the pounds begin to accumulate and as her weight increases, the pieces of her life start to fall apart. By the end of the book, she finally discovers that her fat has revealed the true beauty of friendship and family. In *Fat Girl Dances With Rocks* by Susan Stinson and *Fat Camp Commandos* by Daniel Pinkwater, the protagonists give up on ever achieving society’s label of skinny. These progressive protagonists instead take a page from Cooper’s *Fat and Proud* and learn to love themselves as they are, to the very edges of their skin. Here, the children colonized by parents, teachers, and friends burst into the boundaries of their bodies, redefining themselves in a postcolonial rebellion.

Children’s texts are not unique in their portrayal of fat characters, and obesity is not a uniquely modern or exclusively American literary device. Shakespeare’s sixteenth century England contains the irrepressible Falstaff, who stands out for his gluttonous

body and personality. It is, in fact, his weight that is of central importance to multiple Shakespeare theorists. The fat child in literature is of less interest to critics. In this thesis, therefore, I will satiate the need for an appraisal of the perils of the much overlooked fat child, examining both fat literary youth and the repercussions for their flesh-and-blood counterparts. Examination of representations of fatness in children's texts is a necessary step towards the redemption of the fat child body.

## CHAPTER I

### ROWLING'S SKINNY PROTAGONIST AND THE FAT KIDS IN THE CORNER:

#### DICHOTOMIZED BODY SIZE IN THE HARRY POTTER SERIES

In Judy Blume's *Blubber* (1974), fifth grader Jill Brenner experiences the cruelty of children and learns to appreciate the value of true friendship. Jill may be the protagonist of this classic coming of age tale, but she is not the title character. The child who is teased mercilessly throughout most of the book, and whose nickname, Blubber, gives Blume the title for this extensively read children's book, is Linda. Although Linda is the catalyst for Jill's maturation, and even becomes buddies with the most popular girl in the class, no one ever truly likes her. Like most fat kids in books with skinny protagonists, Linda eventually must disappear back into her corner. Jill tells us at the end of the book that at lunch Linda, "sat alone at her desk, the way she used to" (Blume 148). Jill now knows that she doesn't want to "wind up like Linda"—fat, unpopular, and the brunt of her classmates' jokes (Blume 148). Blume's protagonist has truly matured and is now able to recognize the value of friendship with Rochelle, the brainy girl in the class.

The role Judy Blume conscribes Linda/Blubber to is all too familiar in children's literature. Many popular children's authors like Blume present worlds in which characters are either fat or skinny and fat characters serve as foils for the skinny protagonists, but are themselves left undeveloped and unsympathetic. Although authors

such as Blume frequently use these stupid, pitiful, and fat child characters as mechanisms in defining moments for the protagonists, they never allow them into the spotlight on their own. Blume and other popular children's book authors have a potentially powerful effect on child readers who devour their books at an age before they have necessarily learned to become resistant readers.

J. K. Rowling's wildly popular Harry Potter series, the most influential children's series in the last several years, follows Blume's example, establishing a powerful dichotomy between skinny and fat characters. Rowling's series is perhaps the most powerful literary influence on fat and skinny children across the world, and thus the portrayals in her text can become potentially self-fulfilling. The influence of texts on their readers is a central concern in the field of ethical criticism. As Booth notes in *The Company We Keep*, even somewhat fantastic books like the *Harry Potter* series can be investigated on ethical grounds: "The relevance of ethical criticism in no way depends on whether a story is overtly didactic, or on whether it claims to report on events in 'real life'" (13). Rowling herself does not feel the urge to overt didacticism. In an interview with *Newsweek*, she stated, "Children's books aren't textbooks. Their primary purpose isn't supposed to be 'Pick up this book and it will teach you this'" (Jones par 32). Booth explains that, regardless of whether they are intentionally didactic, aesthetically pleasing books such as Rowling's still present values to the reader: "Indeed, the actual consequences, the load of values carried away from the experience, can often be most substantial when the reader has been least conscious of anything other than 'aesthetic involvement'" (14).

The fat characters in Rowling's series are repulsive, and their undesirability is emphasized by the binary opposition between fat and skinny in the texts. Rogers establishes the potential role of fat as a unique literary device in the novel—a corporeal idiom and syntax (168). In Rowling's books, that device is particularly troublesome. Fat characters' bodies are represented as stupid, mean, and/or lazy joke figures on the losing half of a binary with skinny characters. According to fat activist Cooper, "the stigma attached to being fat is a control mechanism which supports a power structure of one group of people over another" (6). Cooper explains that fat hatred "encourages us to think in terms of binary oppositions, by which I mean that the fantastic variety of human body shapes is reduced to two opposites: fat and thin" (33). Although the control that places the skinny in power over the fat is illusory, "slenderness only exists in opposition to fatness because it has been positioned as a primary desire in Anglo-American culture—that without such distinctions there would be no such thing as fat and thin" in Rowling's series the skinny heroes and villains always reign over the swollen bodies of the marginalized fat clowns (6).

The Harry Potter books tell the story of Harry, an orphan raised by the very unpleasant, very non-magical Dursley family. Harry discovers on his eleventh birthday that he is a very famous wizard who, as a baby, unwittingly defeated the evil Lord Voldemort. Harry is whisked away to attend Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry where he becomes best friends with Ron Weasley and Hermione Granger. Each book in the series follows Harry, Ron, and Hermione's adventures during a year at Hogwarts, beginning with a description of Harry's summer holidays with the Dursleys, and ending with Harry confronting some form or friend of Lord Voldemort. None of the

fat characters in Harry's life are of central importance to the storyline. Instead, stupid and/or mean, they bumble about, frequently impeding Harry, Ron, and Hermione in their quest to save the wizarding world from Lord Voldemort once again. The fat characters in the Harry Potter texts are troublesome not only for their tangential nature. Even when these fat interlopers come out of their corners, they are inevitably seen as annoying by the skinny heroes of the tale.

I must point out before beginning my discussion of Rowling's fat characters that I am an unabashed Harry Potter fan. I freely admit that I have been caught in Rowling's magical world, and am among the thousands of people worldwide who have pre-ordered the fifth book in the series, due out June 21. That said, I was surprised when my mother, an avid reader herself, told me that she couldn't get past the first chapter of the first book. After re-reading with a critical eye the words that I had devoured on my first reading, I began to recognize my mother's objection. Unlike the assorted heroes of the tales, the fat characters in the Harry Potter series seldom make an appearance without a reference to their weight.

The fat half of the body size binary in Rowling's series is very sparsely populated. In the magical world of Harry Potter, there are many very large creatures whose size is above that which is considered normal. These characters, such as Hagrid, the half-giant groundskeeper at Hogwarts, may be stupid or mean, but their size is part of their magical genealogy. It would require a separate examination altogether to determine the significance of naturally-occurring body proportions in magical creatures. For the purposes of this discussion, a character is fat if they are entirely human and are described as large within human proportions. I will be restricting my discussion to the fat male

characters in the text, as the fat female characters are part of a larger discussion of the tangential role of female characters in general in Rowling's books. Thus, the binary that I will address is between the male heroes and villains and their fat sidekicks or counterparts. Dudley Dursley serves as the counterpart to hero Harry, and Neville is Harry's bumbling sidekick. The villains, Draco Malfoy and Lord Voldemort, respectively have as sidekicks the idiotic pair, Crabbe and Goyle, and the bumbling assistant, Peter Pettigrew.

Each of these characters is established as fat by the description of their physical characteristics. The Dursleys, Harry's only living family, are the first overweight characters introduced in the book. The description of the Dursleys as repugnant characters is itself repulsive. The Dursleys, particularly Uncle Vernon and cousin Dudley, stand out as caricatures. Uncle Vernon Dursley is "a big beefy man with hardly any neck" (*Sorcerer's Stone* 1). Harry's cousin Dudley is also described as very fat, even when he is a baby. Harry describes baby pictures of Dudley as resembling "a large pink beach ball" or "a pig in a wig" (*Sorcerer's Stone* 21). Uncle Vernon and Dudley's fat is a corporeal representation of their repulsive personalities.

Crabbe and Goyle, the sidekicks of Harry's schoolyard nemesis Draco Malfoy, are "thickset and looked extremely mean. Standing on either side of the pale boy [Draco Malfoy], they looked like bodyguards" (108). They are referred to only by their last name and are never individuated as two separate human beings, remaining stereotypical fat goons—stupid, gluttonous, and mean. They may temporarily serve the purpose of protecting their evil companion or unknowingly aiding the heroes in their adventures, but they must always be literally shoved back into their closet after their usefulness is over.

Like Crabbe and Goyle, Peter Pettigrew hangs around with those who are more powerful than himself. He begins the series as Scabbers, the pet rat of Harry's best friend, Ron. Scabbers is "a fat gray rat" with no magical attributes and a taste for sweets (Rowling *Sorcerer's* 100). Scabbers is scarcely mentioned in the next book, but in the third book of the series, Harry and his pals discover that Scabbers is actually the traitor Peter Pettigrew. Pettigrew is exposed to Harry and his friends as one of Voldemort's followers, returns to rodent form and escapes, only to reappear in the fourth book and help bring Voldemort back to life. This brief description of his role makes Pettigrew seem like a powerful wizard, but he is in reality treated with as much or more contempt than any other obese character in the Harry Potter series.

Harry's sidekick, Neville Longbottom, shares many characteristics with his fellow fat members of Harry Potter's universe, but is by far the most sympathetic fat male character in Rowling's series. He is also described as fat the least frequently. When Neville is introduced, he is described by Harry as a "round faced boy," not as fat or piggish like Dudley Dursley (Rowling *Sorcerer's Stone* 94). Those who dislike Neville, specifically the untrustworthy Slytherin crowd, do not mince words like Harry, though. In *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, Draco Malfoy's Slytherin friend Pansy Parkinson criticizes Gryffindor witch Parvati Patil for sticking up for Neville, "Never thought *you'd* like fat little crybabies, Parvati," Pansy sneers (Rowling 148). Neville is certainly obese, then, as his surname, Longbottom, indicates. Adolescents who enjoy the books, however, mention him as an approachable character. According to Sara Ann Beach and Elizabeth Harden Willner in their article "The Power of Harry: The Impact of J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter Books on Young Readers," some child readers feel sorry for

him (105). Interviewee Robert states that Neville is “actually brave” (Beach & Willner 105). Interviewee Morgan also seems to sympathize with Neville. She states, “maybe when Neville was a kid he was brave, but kids made fun of his name so he lost his bravery because he was put down so many times” (Beach & Willner 105). Neville is “put down” frequently throughout the series, though, an undoubtedly marginalized fat character.

While these five fat characters are shown to be unappealing through their physical descriptions, the skinny heroes are similarly established as good through corporeal syntax. Series hero Harry:

[. . .] had always been small and skinny for his age. He looked even smaller and skinnier than he really was because all he had to wear were old clothes of Dudley’s, and Dudley was about four times bigger than he was. (Rowling 20)

Draco Malfoy and Lord Voldemort are similarly skinny. Draco is first introduced as “a boy with a pale, pointed face” (*Sorcerer’s Stone* 77). When Voldemort is brought back to life, Harry sees, “the dark outline of a man, tall and skeletally thin” (*Goblet* 643).

The dichotomy between fat and skinny is not only established through physical characteristics. While the skinny characters in Rowling’s series are talented, courageous, resourceful, and intelligent, the fat characters are extremely stereotypical. Not only are the fat characters representative of Featherstone’s “glum and downcast” ‘joke figures,’ they are revealed to be dumb, untalented, frequently nasty, and show unswerving dim-witted loyalty to those who are more intelligent and accomplished (184). This follows the paradigm that Mills introduces in “The Portrayal of Mental Disability in Children’s

Literature: An Ethical Approach.” Mills states that in J. K. Rowling’s Harry Potter books, Dudley is “stupid, bad, and fat” (535). Although Mills’s comment is a brief mention in an article applying ethical criticism to mental disability in children’s literature, her paradigm is appropriate and can be expanded to include fat characters as not only stupid and bad, but as gluttonous, disloyal, coddled, weak followers.

Dudley Dursley represents each of the paradigmatic aspects of Mills’s analysis. He is established as stupid and coddled in the first book of the series. It is Dudley’s birthday, and the fat, greedy child is counting his birthday presents. He complains that the thirty-seven presents he sees are not enough. Then, when his mother attempts to avoid a tantrum from her eleven-year old son by offering to buy him two more presents, Dudley has some trouble counting “Dudley thought for a moment. It looked like hard work. Finally he said slowly, ‘So I’ll have thirty...thirty...’” (Rowling *Sorcerer’s Stone* 21). His mother has to supply the answer (thirty-nine for those who share Dudley’s mathematical troubles). Dudley is not only stupid, but mean. He and his gang of troublemakers terrorize Harry relentlessly until they discover that Harry is a wizard. When Harry is described in chapter two of *Sorcerer’s Stone*, we are told that his round glasses were “held together with a lot of Scotch tape because of all the times Dudley had punched him on the nose” (Rowling 20). Dudley is truly stupid, bad, and fat, a quintessential stereotypical fat character.

Dudley is not alone, however. Malfoy’s sidekicks Crabbe and Goyle are also fat, stupid, gluttonous, and mean. Their stupidity and gluttony is made abundantly clear in *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*. Harry and Ron want to spy on Draco Malfoy so they make a polyjuice potion that will change them into Crabbe and Goyle, allowing

them to gain access to the Slytherin common room and Malfoy's confidence. Harry and Ron manage to obtain pieces of Crabbe and Goyle's hair (integral to their potion) by leaving two chocolate cakes filled with sleeping potion on a banister. What follows demonstrates both Crabbe and Goyle's stupidity and their greed:

“How thick can you get?” Ron whispered ecstatically as Crabbe gleefully pointed out the cakes to Goyle and grabbed them. Grinning stupidly, they stuffed the cakes whole into their large mouths. For a moment, both of them chewed greedily, looks of triumph on their faces. (214).

The two immediately pass out, and then are laboriously dragged into a broom closet to sleep off the potion while Harry and Ron pull their hair and transform into the gorilla-like forms of Malfoy's minions. Of course, as Harry and Ron are still themselves inside of Crabbe and Goyle's bodies, they have to force themselves to look and act appropriately stupid. Ron tells Harry, ““You don't know how bizarre it is to see Goyle *thinking*”” (author's emphasis; Rowling 218). Crabbe and Goyle are mean largely because of their association with Draco Malfoy. Although they sometimes seem actually to be so stupid that they do not realize what is going on around them, Crabbe and Goyle are able to take orders and frequently intimidate other students at Malfoy's bidding. They are thus represented as stereotypical fat characters—their stupidity and gluttony directly tied to their weight.

Peter Pettigrew, the other evil sidekick in Rowling's series, is an adult, but is nonetheless a stupid, weak, and mean obese follower. As Scabbers the rat, Pettigrew is not only fat, but useless. Scabbers is frequently described by Ron, Harry, and Hermione as a worthless pet who merely sleeps and eats. As Peter Pettigrew, he is no better. When

Hagrid tells her the story of Pettigrew's supposed murder, Madam Rosmerta asks if he was "[. . .] that fat little boy who was always tagging around after them at Hogwarts?" (*Azkaban* 207). Professor McGonagall affirms: "Hero-worshipped Black and Potter" she says, "Never quite in their league, talent-wise" (*Azkaban* 207). Pettigrew is remembered as fat, untalented, and, according to Sirius Black, someone who would "sneak around people who were stronger and more powerful than [himself] [. . .] You always liked big friends who'd look after you, didn't you?" (*Azkaban* 369). The normal characters in the Harry Potter books detest tubby untalented Pettigrew for his stereotypical weakness and lack of independence.

Pettigrew does not fare much better when he returns to Lord Voldemort. Although Pettigrew brings his former master back to life, Voldemort holds him in contempt and frequently threatens to feed him to his gigantic snake, Nagini. Voldemort calls Pettigrew by his school nickname, Wormtail, and tells him "your devotion is nothing more than cowardice. You would not be here if you had anywhere else to go" (9). Voldemort also considers Pettigrew/Wormtail to be untalented and nearly useless, a "poor wizard" despite the fact that it is he who brings the Dark Lord back to life (*Goblet* 656). Thus, Peter Pettigrew, whether he is Scabbers the useless rat, Peter the incompetent student, or Wormtail the disposable minion, is perhaps the most despicable of the fat characters in the Harry Potter series, a mere tool of those who are more powerful, a portrayal directly tied to his weight.

Although Neville Longbottom has his redeeming points, he also is stereotypical. Neville is the only Gryffindor student who is described as fat and is also the only Gryffindor whose professors and classmates constantly criticize him for being stupid,

forgetful, and bad at magic. As Neville himself states in *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, he is practically a squib, someone who is born to a wizarding family, but is incapable of performing magic. From the beginning of the series, Neville is established as a bumbling character and is often an outcast for his incompetence. In *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, Neville makes a rare appearance. The slip of parchment on which Neville has recorded the password to Gryffindor tower is stolen and a reportedly dangerous criminal gains access to Harry's bedchamber. Neville is forced to confess: "There was utter silence broken by the smallest of terrified squeaks. Neville Longbottom, trembling from head to fluffy-slippered toes, raised his hand slowly into the air" (Rowling *Prisoner* 268). The fluffy slippers are a nice final touch, emphasizing the humor of Neville's pitifully unheroic character.

Many of the stereotypical qualities that these fat characters possess—mean, stupid, incompetent—are clearly undesirable. The portrayal is ethically suspect when Rowling is so careful to emphasize the contrast between the fat stereotypical characters and the skinny heroic characters. One of the most powerful ways that Rowling stresses the dichotomy between the fat and the skinny is through the animal imagery that surrounds the characters.

The fat characters are connected to gluttony and filth by the animals they (intentionally or not) become. The repulsive Dursley family is surrounded by pig imagery. In *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, the Hogwarts groundkeeper, Hagrid, zaps Dudley, giving him a curly pig's tail. Hagrid tells Harry, "meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do" (Rowling *Sorcerer's Stone* 59). This isn't the only place that Dudley is compared to a

pig in the series. In *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, the third book in the series, Dudley is given a television to watch in the kitchen, because he “had been complaining loudly about the long walk between the fridge and the television in the living room” hence, “Dudley had spent most of the summer in the kitchen, his piggy little eyes fixed on the screen and his five chins wobbling as he ate continually” (Rowling 16). Not only Dudley of the horrific Dursley family is described as porcine in nature. Uncle Vernon’s sister, Marge, who seems (if possible) to detest Harry more than his custodial relatives, also possesses “piggy eyes,” apparently a family trait connected with being very overweight and mean (*Azkaban* 29).

Peter Pettigrew is also connected strongly with unflattering animal imagery. He spends most of the first three books of the series as a fat rat. Even the very evil Lord Voldemort shows disgust for Pettigrew’s animal form, calling his assistant’s fellow rats, “filthy little friends” (*Goblet* 655). Even Pettigrew’s nickname, Wormtail, represents the revulsion associated with his fat, rat-like body and personality.

The animals that the skinny characters are connected to and transform into emphasize this dichotomy. While Pettigrew transforms into a rat, his Animagus friends become a stag and a large dog. Their animal form represents their human characteristics—Pettigrew is a sniveling coward who betrays his friends, James Potter the stag is a noble hero who dies to save his family, and Sirius Black the large dog is a loyal friend. Powerful hero and villains Harry, Draco, and Lord Voldemort are all connected with snakes—a creature that can be deadly, but is nonetheless skinny and formidable.

The binary opposition between fat and skinny in the text is further emphasized by the similarities between the characters within the dichotomous categories. Draco Malfoy

and Lord Voldemort are not just evil contrasts to Harry. Malfoy may be rich and unkind, but, like Harry, he is described by Rowling as skinny, and is a worthy opponent for Harry in wit, intelligence, and magical talent. Malfoy is a Quidditch player, and like Harry, becomes a Seeker on his house team. Tom Riddle, the teenage incarnation of Lord Voldemort that Harry encounters in *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, is a very evil future Dark wizard. Riddle himself points out to Harry when they meet in the Chamber of Secrets that, “there are strange likenesses between us, after all. [. . .] Both half-bloods, orphans, raised by Muggles. [. . .] We even *look* something alike [. . .]” (Rowling *Chamber* 317). Thus, both Draco and Riddle/Voldemort are great arch-enemies for Harry, but to be arch-enemies, they must also be skinny, matches for Harry in ways that the fat characters are not.

Just as the skinny characters—Harry, Draco Malfoy, and Lord Voldemort—bear striking similarities, the somewhat sympathetic Neville is pointedly compared to the far from sympathetic characters of Crabbe, Goyle, and Peter Pettigrew. In *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*, Neville finally stands up for himself to Draco Malfoy while watching a Quidditch game. However, it isn’t until Malfoy insults Harry and makes fun of Ron’s family finances simultaneously, that Neville follows hot-headed Ron into battle with Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle. While Ron fights Malfoy and emerges with only a black eye, Neville wrestles Crabbe and Goyle alone. He is, of course, not successful. Ron later tells Harry, “I gave Malfoy a black eye, and Neville tried to take on Crabbe and Goyle single-handed! He’s still out cold but Madam Pomfrey says he’ll be all right” (227). There is no mention made of how Crabbe and Goyle fare in the battle of the sidekicks. However, it is quite clear that the central characters battle separately from

their sidekicks, and Neville is Harry and Ron's less courageous version of Crabbe and Goyle.

The parallels drawn between Neville and Peter Pettigrew are more pronounced than those with Malfoy's cronies. Like Pettigrew, Neville is a good guy in school, the friend of those who are more powerful than himself. When envisioning Pettigrew in a dream, Harry draws a direct line of comparison between his father's old friend and Neville Longbottom: "he watched, as though somebody was playing him a piece of film, Sirius Black blasting Peter Pettigrew (who resembled Neville Longbottom) into a thousand pieces" (*Azkaban* 213). Although this comparison is made before Harry discovers that Pettigrew faked that scene, it evokes a connection, and foreshadows a choice for Neville. Will Neville, stereotyped as a weak-minded follower, continue to be loyal to his Gryffindor companions, or will he, like Pettigrew, be convinced to join Lord Voldemort's followers?

The binary opposition between fat and skinny is pointedly emphasized by the juxtaposition of the skinny characters with the fat characters, emphasizing the power of the skinny through their control over their fat counterparts. In *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, Harry and Hermione are caught out in a corridor far from Gryffindor tower late at night after they helped get Hagrid's adopted baby dragon off Hogwarts grounds. Unfortunately, Neville's misguided concern for his friends is the reason they were caught—he was concerned that Draco Malfoy, who knew about the escape plan, would interfere. Harry, while upset that he was caught, is above being angry at "poor blundering Neville—Harry knew what it must have cost him to try and find them in the dark, to warn them" (243). Perhaps it is considerate of Harry to not be angry at Neville,

but Harry's condescending pity for blundering Neville's fear of the dark emphasizes the contrast between heroic Harry and pitiful Neville, further elevating Harry's indomitable greatness.

Neville's incompetence serves to heighten Harry's greatness when later in *Sorcerer's Stone*, Neville once again attempts to prevent Harry, Ron, and Hermione from wandering the halls of Hogwarts after hours. He thoroughly shows himself to be misguidedly courageous, but Hermione casts a spell, putting Neville in the full Body-Bind so that the rule-breaking heroes can go on their merry way. This interference turns out to be well-placed, as poor stupid Neville earns Gryffindor house ten points and the house cup. Neville saves the day, but at the cost of being pitied and quite literally shoved aside to allow the heroes of the book their moment of glory. The image of Neville frozen on the floor of the Gryffindor house common room is that of ultimate incompetence—a stark contrast to the heroes of the text who save the world at the tender age of eleven.

The repulsive nature of Dudley's character provides an even more powerful framework for emphasizing the superiority of Harry and his experiences at Hogwarts. Although the Dursleys only make extended appearances at the beginning and end of each book, they provide the backdrop for Harry's adventures before being relegated to the back burner in their mundane Muggle existence while Harry returns "home" to the fascinating Hogwarts castle. Just as Harry becomes increasingly sympathetic to his audience, every time Dudley appears, he is meaner, dumber, and fatter.

The introduction of Harry and Dudley in *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* emphasizes the contrast between the two. As babies, there is little reference to their appearance, but Dudley is already a terror. Baby Dudley has to be wrestled screaming

into a high chair, and then, when his father tries to kiss him good-bye, he “missed, because Dudley was now having a tantrum and throwing his cereal at the walls” (Rowling 2). The reason for Dudley’s horrible future character is suggested here—he is the spoiled child of ordinary parents. Harry, on the contrary, is far from spoiled. He grows up in the closet under the stairs and is detested by his aunt, uncle, and cousin. Harry is, nonetheless, an extraordinary child. After all, he escapes Lord Voldemort’s curse and defeats the dark lord without lifting an infantile finger. The difference between Harry and Dudley is not merely behavioral. For Dudley is not just spoiled and mean, he is stupid and fat. Dudley Dursley is a thoroughly detestable character, a direct contrast to the thoroughly charming Harry Potter. It is fat, stupid Dudley that provides the most repugnant contrast to Harry’s greatness.

The sharp opposition between the fat characters and the skinny heroes and villains in the *Harry Potter* series follows Cooper’s analysis. Not only does the stupidity and lack of talent attached to being fat serve as a control mechanism, maintaining the power of the skinny characters over their chubby companions, but it confirms that being skinny is the ideal state. The skinny characters’ greatness is emphasized by the disparity between them and the fat characters. The ethical statement made by Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series about body size may be unwitting, but the books nonetheless present a strong message of fat hatred. According to Schwarz, who describes the ethical criticism program in “A Humanistic Ethics of Reading,” reading

[. . .] is central to life and contributes to the development of the mature personality. Literature provides surrogate experiences for the reader,

experiences that, because they are embodied within artistically shaped ontologies, heighten our awareness of moral discriminations. (5)

Schwarz's argument supposes that the artistic nature of literature delivers more powerful value systems, systems which, when read "actively and with intelligence" help the development of the reader's personality (5). A child reader, or any reader of Rowling's series for that matter, may not be engaging in the active reading Schwarz champions, but is nonetheless absorbing those same artistically highlighted value systems. Fat children may observe that fat characters are stupid, useless, and untalented. According to a study conducted by Kirsten Davison and Leann Birch of Pennsylvania State University, five year old girls are capable of absorbing these messages. According to Mary Ann Moon, Davison and Birch found that "Overweight girls 'may endorse the stereotype often portrayed in children's programs that fat is synonymous with stupid'" (33). The stereotype of fat characters is therefore likely to be self-fulfilling. The more fat children are told that they are stupid and gluttonous, the more they believe it and behave to fulfill that expectation. Thus, the position of the fat characters in the *Harry Potter* series, decisively entrenched in the corner with dunce cap firmly in place, has the possibility of further marginalizing the fat children who long so desperately to be in the spotlight like skinny heroic Harry.

## CHAPTER II

### MATURATION THROUGH STARVATION: THE SEARCH FOR A MORE

#### MARKETABLE SELF

“ *I often do say to myself, What a knockout Hetty would be if she were a little bit more—streamlined’*” (Means 90-91).

“*When my pants weren’t strangling my belly, and if there were no scales or mirrors around, I could forget for a while that I was fat*” (Lipsyte 2).

“*I know if I was thin, Richard Weiss would like me and everything would work out fine. If, if, if—dear Diary, do you think my secret desires will ever come true?*” (Newman 75).

In *Hetty and the Grande Deluxe* by Florence Crannell Means (1951), protagonist Hetty Beau’s love interest, Butch, encourages her to lose weight and become truly attractive. Hetty must control her eating in order to fully mature from an adolescent to an adult. In *One Fat Summer* by Robert Lipsyte, Bobby Marks wants to escape from his fat body by waking up skinny one morning. Like Hetty, Bobby must control his binge eating, a control that will result in Bobby finally becoming a man. In *Fat Chance* by Leslea Newman, Judi Liebowitz also must come to terms with her eating habits. Judi pursues the *Seventeen* magazine image of the perfect slim body, believing that only losing weight will make her truly happy. Unlike Hetty and Bobby, who join the adult world by leaving behind their fat adolescent selves, Judi’s weight loss is shown spiraling

into an eating disorder, and she must learn to love her body as it is to show true maturation. Each of these protagonists feel that his or her fat body is the source of and bodily modification is the solution to their misery. Judi, Hetty, and Bobby all believe that “if only” they can lose weight, they will be happy. With this goal in mind, each of them embarks on a journey towards a “more marketable self,” searching for a way to find acceptance in the eyes of their peers and parents.

Ethical criticism provides a useful framework for evaluating the messages that Judi, Hetty, and Bobby’s struggles may convey to children. It is important to remember Booth’s explanation of the purpose of an ethical criticism of a text: “any effort to show how the virtues of narratives relate to the virtues of selves and societies, or how the ethos of any story affects or is affected by the ethos—that collection of virtues—of any given reader” (11). When the given reader is a child reader, the effects of a text’s ethos can be powerful. Hollindale in “Ideology and the Children’s Book,” states that the ethos of a story is inevitably colored by that of the writer. Writers for all age groups:

cannot hide what their values are [. . .] the values at stake are usually those which are taken for granted by the writer, and reflect the writer’s integration in a society which unthinkingly accepts them. In turn, this means that children, unless they are helped to notice what is there, will take them for granted too. (30)

For Means, Lipsyte, and Newman, the attitudes towards fat children that they convey in their texts are not necessarily values that they are conscious of imposing or even holding. These values are nonetheless transmitted to the child readers.

It is not possible to say that adolescents will necessarily react in a specific way to any given text or message. Perry Nodelman states in *The Pleasures of Children's*

*Literature*:

Many adults base their judgments of children's literature upon guesses about how children might respond to it. Unfortunately, making accurate guesses of this sort is difficult, maybe even impossible, simply because it forces us to make generalizations about children—about how they read, how they think, and how they absorb information. Such generalizations cause more problems than they solve. (9).

Nodelman goes on to concede that some generalizations are inevitable. It requires few generalizations to establish that the journey to self-discovery in Newman, Means, and Lipsyte's texts is a journey undertaken to escape fat bodies. Examining that journey can lead to understanding the values of the society and the societal values that child readers are learning through these books. This appreciation can be gained by first examining Hetty, Bobby, and Judi's journeys, then examining the motives behind their search for "an enhanced appearance and a more marketable self," and the attitudes towards the fat adolescent body that the text both presents to and ignites in the reader (Featherstone 171). Next, I will inspect the implications of the methods of weight loss employed by Hetty, Bobby, and Judi, and the messages this presents to adolescent readers concerning body size, eating, and overeating. Finally, I will consider the ideological statement made by maturation of each character as a result of their weight loss battles. It is only through this assessment that I can truly interrogate the culture that tells children that a fat body is

repulsive, that a fat body is the result of gluttony, and that fat can be eliminated by mere discipline.

In *Hetty of the Grande Deluxe*, as title character Hetty quests after maturity, she learns that to be an adult she must overcome her own class prejudices, her family's poverty, and her obsession with food. Hetty's journey begins with her family's relocation to the Grande Deluxe, a run-down apartment building in Denver, Colorado. The very literary, very romantic Hetty expects to find a place with, "a formal kind of charm" that would "abound in fascinating girls" and "swarm with nice boys, [. . .] deeply perceptive boys who would see Hetty as she really was" (Means 6). Unfortunately, the apartment building falls far below her expectations, and contains only two other teenagers. Audrey may be interesting, but she is plain and low-class, a former itinerant farmer's daughter. Butch, a good-looking crippled boy from the first floor, may be nice, but he sees Hetty as a girl who could stand to lose a few pounds before he becomes truly interested in her. Hetty eats fewer sandwiches, loses the weight, learns to like Audrey, befriends two old women, then saves them from monoxide gas, discovers one is rich, but gives the scholarship her friend offers her to Audrey. At the end of her journey, Hetty gets the guy (Butch) and finally becomes an adult. Fifty-two years after its publication, the struggles that confront the characters of Means's book are still relevant. Although the morals of the story are dealt out somewhat heavy-handedly (Hetty manages to deal with all the big ones—poverty, class, disability, alcohol, racism), and the perfect ending for all the virtuous characters feel somewhat contrived, the treatment of weight and weight loss is in some ways similar to more recently published books, and in some ways more progressive.

As the only book in my discussion with a *fat male* adolescent protagonist, *One Fat Summer* is unique on multiple levels. First, it is a relatively rare book in huge children's literature market as it has a fat protagonist. Second, it is a member of a distinct minority of adolescent children's books that have male protagonists. It is thus unusual as a children's book with a male protagonist who spends the entire book concerned with his body image—specifically his fat body. While Chris Crutcher also addresses the issue of fat boys, he does so in a short story entitled “A Brief Moment in the Life of Angus Bethune.” Crutcher presents a fat boy protagonist who detests his body and is detested by those around him. First-person narrator Angus states, “I’d [. . .] swap reflexes, biceps, and brain cells, lock, stock, and barrel, for a little physical beauty” (Crutcher 7). Crutcher's story is very similar to Lipsyte's novel in its representation of a fat male protagonist, and thus *One Fat Summer* is representative of self-hatred in the small field of young adult fiction about fat boys.

The self-hatred of Lipsyte's protagonist is uniquely powerful in my discussion as the only book in which no one—character or author—challenges the idea that a fat body is directly tied to being lazy and gluttonous and can be lost by painful physical exertion and skipping meals. In this classic coming-of-age tale, Bobby Marks is a more-than-two-hundred-pound-fourteen-year-old whose father insults him frequently and mother indulges him. Bobby's journey begins with the start of a summer vacation that he is not looking forward to: “in the summertime [people] can see your thick legs and your wobbly backside and your big belly and your soft arms. And they laugh” (Lipsyte 1). However, at the advice of his best friend Joanie (who has a big nose, and thus is willing to hang out with unattractive, unpopular Bobby), Bobby takes a job working on the grounds of Dr.

Kahn, a fellow summer resident of Rumson Lake. As he struggles to defeat Dr. Kahn's yard, Bobby begins to defeat his body. He stops overeating, gains blisters, then calluses, then muscles, and finally discovers that he can walk around without his shirt on, "I felt like Charles Atlas compared to what I used to be" (Lipsyte 205). In the process, Bobby stops letting his mother pamper him, gains respect from his father, and learns to stand up for himself, thus completing his journey from Fat Bobby Marks, a child, to Robert Marks, a man.

The protagonist of Leslea Newman's *Fat Chance*, Judi Liebowitz, is perhaps more obsessed with her weight than either Bobby or Hetty. Yet, unlike Bobby and Hetty, the physical proportions that Judi obsesses over seem unlikely to be construed by any even barely realistic person as unhealthy or fat. At her heaviest, 5'4" Judi weighs 129 ½ pounds. She wears dark baggy clothes, and worries constantly about being fat and unattractive. Through the pages of her journal, the reader follows Judi's journey as she works towards her goal of losing weight, deciding what she wants to do with her life, and getting Richard Weiss interested in her. Judi is obsessed with calories, and fights with her single mom over every bite of food she is forced to eat, yet when alone in the evenings, she gorges herself on any food she can find. She eventually learns the secret to clandestine weight loss from the very skinny, very glamorous, very bulimic Nancy Pratt. Judi manages to lose weight by purging, but the more she loses, the more she wants to lose. Eventually Nancy Pratt is hospitalized after collapsing in the bathroom, and Judi learns the dangers of bulimia at a subsequent school assembly. Judi comes clean to her mom and best friend, stops purging, and enrolls in therapy, ending her journey no lighter or heavier than she started.

The messages these books present about fat bodies can first be found in the sources of the protagonists' journey. Hetty, Bobby, and Judi are all prompted to weight loss by that most potent of adolescent desires—to fit in. Featherstone explains how a slim body can be a prerequisite for acceptance, not just for children, but for all people. He asserts that every aspect of culture insists upon an ideal image of the body, an image that is reflected in every advertisement, television program, and movie. Achieving this ideal body results in acceptance: “the closer the actual body approximates to the idealised images of youth, health, fitness and beauty the higher its exchange-value” (Featherstone 177). Hetty, Bobby, and Judi are striving to attain the ideal image of themselves that they have adopted from what they read, see, and hear everyday. The achievement of that ideal will heighten their “exchange-value”—their ability to get boyfriends/girlfriends, friends, and parental approval.

Means's Hetty Beau primarily finds her desired self-image in the books that she reads. Hetty feels stuck in her pudgy adolescent body. Just as her full name, Henriette Elizabeth Beaumarchand, is to her far more adult and romantic than the diminutive Hetty Beau, being slim—“tall and willowy and swaying”—is the true state of her inner self (Means 2). Hetty's image of her ideal self comes from the books that she reads, and that her father is always quoting. Like her adolescent readers, Hetty is a consumer of cultural mores through literature. She wants to be glamorous and rich, and reading has taught her that, to be a romantic heroine, she must look the part. Achieving that look means losing weight—Hetty knows that there is nothing romantic about a pudgy heroine. Like Bobby, Hetty must become an adult—not Hetty Beau, but Henriette Elizabeth Beaumarchand.

Hetty realizes that she is far from the romantic heroine she has learned from books and that she wishes to become after a discussion with the two old ladies that she befriends—Mrs. Clark and Mrs. Farraday. They tell her that she seems to have gained weight, “A few pounds whittled off here and there would maybe set off what was left” the kind Mrs. Clark tells her (Means 89). The downright mean neighbor Mrs. Tompkins overhears Hetty reply that she will try to lose five or ten pounds. Mrs. Tompkins replies, “ ‘Five or ten pounds? [. . .] Why, missy, there’s ten extra pounds in each of them legs of yours” (89). The fact that her neighbors think that she is overweight greatly disturbs Hetty. They are obviously not buying her romantic self image, but instead see her as the unromantic, plain pudgy girl she is afraid of becoming.

Hetty’s realization that she is not a romantic heroine is made complete by a statement from her chosen romantic hero. Butch’s crutches may make him that much more interesting to Hetty, but apparently her rounded figure is less than interesting to him. When Butch finds Hetty sobbing after her conversation with the three older women, she tells him, “ ‘I’m not meant to be skinny, Butch. I’m not built that way”” (Means 90). Butch hedges a little, but Hetty pushes and he tells her “ ‘I often do say to myself, What a knockout Hetty would be if she were a little bit more—streamlined”” (Means 90-91). Realizing that she is too chubby to sell herself as either a dramatic heroine or as a desirable love interest for her dramatic hero, Hetty begins her search for a more marketable storybook self.

Hetty doesn’t see herself as a heroine, but her child readers do. Adolescents reading about Means’s heroine can absorb very similar values to those that Hetty has imbibed. First, Hetty realizes that her weight is not marketable, and the adolescent reader

sees that fixed norm of the world of the story reflected early in the text. In the first chapter, the narrator tells us that “Hetty was gifted [. . .] She would have liked to be an actress, but her shortness and roundness seemed a handicap” (Means 5). She knows that in order to be successful, she must work extra hard to be loved: “either as writer or painter she meant to become so famous that the world would worship even her plumpness” (5). Hetty may not think she is a romantic heroine, but to the adolescent readers to whom she is, Hetty’s desire to lose weight becomes part of her romantic image.

Hetty knows that people are judged if they carry “extra pounds” on their body, even if they feel satisfied with their own appearance. Hetty does not choose to lose weight because *she* is unhappy with her appearance, but rather because others judge her for it. Before the fateful conversation with Mrs. Clark, Mrs. Farraday, Mrs. Tompkins, and Butch, “she had been able to live comfortably with her contours, only mildly dissatisfied with them” (92). Hetty is “reducing” because she has discovered that others see her weight as an impediment to the virtues of her character. Adolescent readers may subconsciously absorb this value—realizing that being satisfied with their own body does not guarantee marketability.

*Hetty and the Grand Deluxe* emphasizes that it is unacceptable to judge people based on class, color, race, or disability. However, it is perfectly acceptable for the other characters to judge Hetty based on her weight. Nowhere does the text assert or imply that it is wrong for Butch to tell Hetty that she would look better if she lost some weight. Although Mrs. Tompkins is too blunt in how she speaks to Hetty, even the good Mrs. Clark—one of the most virtuous characters in the book—tells Hetty that she needs to lose

weight, and the advisability of this suggestion is never questioned. Fat adolescent readers see that not only are they in an undesirable segment of society (the “overweight”), their undesirability is justified. Hetty should not have considered Audrey to be unwanted as a friend because of her family’s lack of class, but Mrs. Clark was justified in remonstrating Hetty for letting her figure swell. Skinny adolescents may subconsciously learn to draw the conclusion that not only is becoming fat undesirable, but that if they judge those who are fat, it does not reflect upon their own character. It is, in fact, helpful to the fat child—pointing out a deficiency that they may not have recognized so they can lose weight and become desirable once again. Fat and skinny adolescents alike may realize that their physical appearance impacts the ability of others to see their inner beauty.

Bobby Marks of *One Fat Summer* seeks a more marketable self because it would allow him to gain acceptance. Like Hetty, Bobby’s longing to be desirable is often prompted by what he sees and experiences in his everyday life. For Bobby, though, awareness of the undesirability of fat does not come from books, television, or magazines. It is his father’s disapproval, the taunting of bullies, and the stark contrast between his appearance and that of the local hunk that lets Bobby and the adolescent readers know that fat is not appealing.

Bobby and his father do not get along, and Bobby is convinced that this is because of his weight: “I think my father’s sort of ashamed of having a fat son. He wants me to be lean and athletic like he is” (Lipsyte 36). Bobby has reached the heartbreaking conclusion that he cannot gain acceptance from his father—that his entire self is not marketable to a parent, who is supposed to accept him unconditionally—because of his weight. Although the father’s frigidity extends to the entire family, Bobby is the only

one who can and does change the attribute that makes his father angry. It is also only Bobby who gains his father's acceptance by the end of the book. From this, fat adolescent readers may absorb the idea that parental disapproval may stem from the child's physical inadequacies, or, even if their parents seem to not disapprove of him or her, that a parent may appreciate him or her more if s/he lose weight.

Bobby does not just see his body as unacceptable through his father's lack of appreciation and approval. He also must deal regularly with the taunting of schoolmates and bullies who target his fat body as an object of scorn. Every time Bobby leaves the house, he sees his unacceptable body reflected in the eyes of others. He may forget how repulsive others find him when he is alone, "but sooner or later there'd be someone around to remind me" (Lipsyte 2). When Bobby ventures out to attend a carnival, local bully Willie Rumson's gang calls Bobby the "Crisco Kid," "because he's fat in the can" (2). Bobby's body is appealing to Willie and his band of local kids only as a target for ridicule. This, too, has sad ramifications for fat or skinny child readers who are reminded that one's body is constantly on display for consumption, and that fat is not acceptable in the eyes of the consumer.

Bobby finds his vision of the acceptable body in the person of the very athletic Pete Marino. Bobby describes how his body compares to that of his idol: "Muscles like Pete Marino's gave me a stomachache. Cannonball muscles with big blue veins over them. I didn't have any muscles, and my veins were buried in fat" (Lipsyte 5). To Bobby, Pete seems to be the epitome of manhood—he is an excellent swimmer and diver, all the girls are attracted to him, and even Willie is afraid of him. Adolescent readers thus observe not just the beauty of Pete Marino's body, but the connection of

marketability with rippling muscles. An attractive body brings desire from girls and fear from bullies.

Judi Liebowitz of Newman's *Fat Chance* desires to lose weight because she, unlike Bobby and Hetty, has just hit puberty. Her obsession with weight is her attempt to control a body that is developing before that of many of her contemporaries. She is sprouting breasts and hips and has suddenly realized that she wants to be appealing to boys, especially the very cute Richard Weiss. Judi may be a normal size (she wears a 9/10), but she thinks that she is fat because her peers and images in the greater media tell her so, and because she finds herself wanting compared to the skinny girls that surround her. Any reader of this book is seeing the world through Judi's eyes, and in doing so, see a world comprising two kinds of people—those who are skinny (and, aside from Nancy Pratt, usually seem to be naturally so) and those who are unavoidably fat. In Judi's world, one cannot escape from being fat, and those who are skinny have only to worry about weight gain.

Judy finds a model for her aspirations in the pages of *Seventeen* magazine, where she finds pages and pages of skinny girls. For Judi, *Seventeen* tells her what she is supposed to look like, how she should do her hair, and what she should weigh—five pounds over 100 for every inch over five feet, an old formula which has undoubtedly spawned countless eating disorders. Newman's use of *Seventeen*, a real magazine that sells 2.4 million copies to junior high girls all over the country every year (as an adolescent, I was one of them—convinced that reading *Seventeen* would solve many of my problems), is clearly designed to further draw her teen audiences in—it makes Judi more real. However, it is also somewhat disturbing. First, any portrayal which purports

to be descriptive—Judi is doing what real teens do—is also in some ways necessarily prescriptive. By saying that this is what a teenaged girl does, Newman’s unwitting message is that this is what a teenaged girl should do. Thus, if, in the world of the text, Judi, a very appealing and realistic teenage girl, reads *Seventeen* magazine, it follows that adolescent girls in the real world who want to be appealing to others should read *Seventeen* magazine, and the body image presented in this magazine is that of the skinny waif Judi so desperately wants to become.

Judi also sees that she needs to lose weight when she compares her body to the bodies of her peers. Her best friend, Monica, “can eat whatever she wants to and she still wears a size 7/8” (Newman 14). Judi envies Monica’s musical talent, straight hair, and slim figure, especially when Monica begins dating Judi’s crush, Richard Weiss. Judi doesn’t just want to be like her attractive friend, though. She wants to be skinny so that she can be gorgeous and glamorous like Nancy Pratt, who is “thin everywhere except her boobs” (Newman 13). Nancy is the ultimate junior high cool girl (she dates high school boys!). The model to which Judi aspires, then, is that of the most marketable self a junior high girl might hope to obtain—to be attractive to older boys and to be the envy of her classmates.

Like Bobby Marks, Judi discovers that her body is unacceptable through the cruelty of other children. Tommy Aristo, a student in her class, torments Judi relentlessly—particularly about the size of her breasts. Although he is probably a pubescent boy going through the same confusing changes as Judi, and apologizes to her when they learn at an assembly that peer pressure can cause dangerous eating disorders, Tommy’s criticism is accepted by Judi and others as the truth. Newman’s portrayal of

Tommy's power to upset Judi and his subsequent realization that he has, perhaps, hurt Judi more than he thought is admirable. Adolescent readers, like Tommy, realize the power of their words when they judge a fellow human being based upon her or his appearance. Like Tommy, they realize that their words can hurt, and like Judi, they realize that those words are not always meant to inflict damage.

The fixed norms within this text are thus perhaps not as dangerous as those found in Means and Lipsyte's books. Adolescent girls and boys may learn from Judi's experience that bingeing and purging is dangerous and gross, for instance. But they also learn that being 129 ½ pounds and 5'4" tall makes Judi miserable. They learn that only the very dorky Paul Weinstein is interested in Judi, while the very attractive Richard Weiss and Nancy's high school boyfriend Bruce are interested only in the skinny girls, Monica and Nancy. While the book does criticize eating disorders, it also upholds the dangerous body images that have the potential to cause girls and boys to develop them.

Hetty, Bobby, and Judi want to lose weight to improve the marketability of their appearances, but their journeys towards weight loss take them down somewhat different weight loss paths. Cooper in *Fat and Proud* explains that traditional views on weight loss are informed by the concept that, "fat people are fat because we ignore our body's natural hunger signals and eat compulsively, inappropriately" (83). Cooper says that this results in "fatness [being] strongly associated with eating, despite growing acknowledgements that there are other factors in its genesis" (84). Cooper explains the danger of believing that controlling eating through diets can result in a more marketable body: "Weight-loss treatments are basically ineffectual, and compromise rather than enhance our health" (116). Losing weight through low-calorie dieting causes a decrease

in metabolism, and thus inevitably results in the need to eat less and less food to keep from gaining back the weight lost...and more. According to Cooper, studies indicate that “Changes in diet, the end of a diet, or continued yo-yo dieting can result in weight gain as the body protects itself against further periods of starvation” (12).

Only Newman’s *Fat Chance* criticizes the traditional weight loss process, but each of these books supports some of these damaging traditional views about weight loss—views that are so ingrained in our culture that they are difficult for even a resistant writer such as Newman to avoid. According to Hollindale in his exploration of ideological criticism, for a resistant writer, sometimes “the conscious surface ideology and the passive ideology of a novel are at odds with each other” (31). A book can therefore consciously criticize norms that it subconsciously enforces.

First, in Means, Lipsyte, and Newman’s texts, fat children are fat because they are gluttonous. Hetty has seen a doctor about her weight, “She hadn’t a thing wrong with her, he said, and her surplus of weight came from a surplus of candy, ice cream, and between-meal snacks” (Means 17-18). Bobby, too, is fat because he eats so much. The first half of the book is filled with Bobby’s sensuous descriptions of the joy of eating. At the fair he attends with Joanie at the beginning of the book, he consumes, “about five hot dogs and [. . .] two ice cream sodas” (18). Even Newman, though very progressive in her portrayal of the eating disorder Judi develops, shows Judi as a consummate overeater. Judi records her battle with eating in her diary, “I’m okay if I don’t eat anything, but as soon as I start, I just can’t stop” (Newman 25).

Judi, Hetty, and Bobby all follow the same pattern of overeating—when they are upset or bored, they gorge themselves. This is where the line between being realistic and

avoiding the portrayal of disturbing values becomes difficult to draw. It is certainly true that many overweight people—children and adult like—eat too much. However, not all overweight people binge eat, just like not all skinny people eat a low calorie diet.

The portrayal of overeating in these books is damaging in two ways. First, it suggests that people who are overweight necessarily overeat. This indicates to children that a fat child is necessarily gluttonous, and is thus to blame for her or his own problems. Second, the connection of overeating with being fat in these books implies that those who overeat are necessarily overweight. In Hetty and Bobby's worlds, this means that between meal snacks and large meals cease to be the fodder of growing children and become the symptoms of a diseased overweight child. In Judi's text, this is even more disturbing. Judi is clearly not fat. The fact that she overeats connects her with the image of the gluttonous fat person, though. Thus, although Judi is told that she is actually a normal size by the eating disorders counselor and her mother, Judi behaves like a stereotypical fat person. When she talks about her lumps and bumps of fat, and eats an entire bag of Oreo cookies, Judi becomes truly fat in the eyes of the reader. This constructs a frightening image of a size 9/10 junior high student as overweight.

Hetty, Bobby, and Judi's methods of losing weight are all tied to controlling their food consumption. Bobby's weight loss is the most ethically suspect. He employs methods that are both more extreme than Hetty's and more successful than Judi's. The quest for a more marketable body that Bobby embarks upon requires both physical exertion and a new attitude towards food. Although these two goals seem to be a good idea in theory—exercise and diet modification are certainly safe—the application in this text is disturbing. Bobby loses weight through strenuous physical exercise at Dr. Kahn's

and frequently skipped meals. Granted, Bobby is not forcing himself to skip meals—he is simply not hungry for them in the midst of laboring under the hot sun—but it is a questionable message. Unlike the other books, in *One Fat Summer* there are no physical repercussions for missing meals. Thus, in the world of Lipsyte’s book, losing weight is clearly easy—Bobby achieves his desired marketable self by reducing his caloric intake and punishing his body with difficult work and nothing truly bad happens to him.

Unlike Bobby, Hetty does not need to embark on any strenuous regime to lose weight. It is relatively easy for Hetty to stop overeating. Sure, she struggles with refusing an extra piece of bread and jam at first, but merely refusing that extra food causes the extra pounds to melt off and stay off. Hetty conquers her appetite as easily as the pie that she now declines. Although Hetty stops trying to lose weight when she is still not absolutely skinny (she naturally looks better with a little weight, thank goodness), she nonetheless loses weight nearly effortlessly. The impetus to eat too much in people of any age may be caused by psychological trauma (in Hetty’s case, moving to a new city in a building that she doesn’t like) or by an association of food with comfort and happiness. Simply deciding not to eat so much does not seem likely to end this cycle of overeating.

It is important, however, to note that Hetty realizes that cutting too much food from her diet will only make her sick. Her parents warn her that if she continues to eat so little, she will get sick. In less than a week, Hetty has a cold. Whether one is “reducing” or dieting, eating too little food to lose weight is clearly portrayed to be dangerous. However, Hetty does not gain back the weight that she lost by eating too little. The only ramification of her intense dieting is a cold which keeps her from attending a football game. Even I, a conscientious objector to diets, thought that one measly football game

was a very small sacrifice to gain that ever-elusive marketable figure. Means criticizes Hetty for dieting too severely, but Hetty's diet is successful because of this excessive restriction of food, and just eating moderately does not cause the same weight loss as her low calorie dieting. From that point on, Hetty merely maintains her weight.

In Newman's book, Judi's unrealistic body image and bulimia is criticized. Dieting is indicted as well. Judi realizes at the end of the book that "the days I weighed 120 pounds, I didn't sound one bit happier than the days I weighed 129 ½. I still worried about my weight, I still didn't have a boyfriend, and I still had no idea what I wanted to do with my life" (200). Judi's realization that losing weight does not solve all of one's problems is a progressive departure from Bobby and Hetty's worlds. Judi also realizes that Nancy Pratt is "really too thin" and she must report Nancy's problem to an adult. So in this book, losing weight does not solve all of the problems that Judi sets out to eliminate.

Judi's weight, however, is still a central issue to her. She defines herself and every woman she sees by their weight, and counts calories compulsively. Judi is obsessed. Almost every entry in her diary records her weight as of that day. Although Judi is told by her mother and by the eating disorders counselor at school that she is a healthy weight, at no point does she truly believe them. Judi stops dieting because of her fear of getting sick from bulimia, not because she loves her body. Adolescent girls reading this book are constantly reminded that being outside the "normal" weight that society prescribes may be acceptable to adults, but it is not acceptable to their peers no matter how dangerous or difficult it might be to lose weight.

In each of these texts, the ideology of fat suggests that being in control of one's body is directly connected to losing weight. For Hetty, the achievement of her slimmer self coincides with maturation in all areas of her life. She and Butch go to a movie together at the end of the chapter where Hetty first begins seriously dieting. After she starts dieting, she becomes closer to Audrey and learns that Audrey's family are former itinerant farmers, making them romantic low class and thus acceptable. Hetty quickly realizes, however, that she should accept Audrey for who she is, not just for her marketability as a romantic heroine but does not see that others should do the same for her. It is also after her diet is over that Hetty organizes the children of the apartment building to go Christmas caroling in the building. By the end of the book, Hetty has grown up, and a central part of that maturation has been her achievement of a more appealing figure.

Bobby's achievement of his new self also results in the benefit of maturation. He gains his father's respect, stands up to and defeats Willie Rumson, and grows out of his blind adoration of Pete Marino. He also finally stands up to Dr. Kahn and forces his employer to pay him properly. Bobby Marks has lost weight and is now truly a man. In the ostensibly very realistic and thus very believable world of the book, a "man" is not fat, is able to take heatstroke and physical exhaustion, and is willing to skip meals in order to achieve his more marketable self. The text directly implies that exerting oneself to the point of illness is acceptable and even necessary to attain the ideal masculine self.

For Judi, control of weight is also directly connected with coming of age. Judi must come to terms with her body image and her weight in order to mature. At the end of the book, Judi presents her mother with her journal, symbolizing the end of her journey

and her mature realization that she needs help from loved ones to conquer her disease. Judi's maturation is accomplished through her painful battle with bulimia as she finally jumps over the first hurdles of puberty and into adolescence.

The conclusion that, in the case of Hetty, Bobby, and Judi, adolescents receive clear messages about the undesirability of the fat body requires few generalizations about adolescents. Although the received message may be slightly different from child to child, and book to book, it is undeniable that in these books a truly fat body is unacceptable. Bobby, Hetty, and Judi each find their marketable selves in their attempt to conquer the bodies that they see as undesirable. As each protagonist finds acceptance from their parents, peers, and selves, they look forward to a bright future in their slim bodies.

*"You look as pretty as a kitten, without a bulge where it shouldn't be" (Means 184).*

*"I skipped down the gravel driveway. I jogged along the county road. I didn't have to look over my shoulder. Nothing's behind me now, everything's up ahead" (Lipsyte 231).*

*"here's the one true insight I learned about myself this semester: I finally figured out that a fat chance and a slim chance are really the very same thing" (Newman 214).*

## CHAPTER III

### THE JOY OF FAT: BREAKING FREE FROM THE

### TYRANNY OF SLENDERNESS

In *The Obsession: Reflections on the Tyranny of Slenderness*, Kim Chernin explains that our culture supports a tyrannical obsession with slenderness as a control mechanism. In a feminist and post-feminist world, men find “something truly disturbing about the body and mind of a mature woman” (110). In a struggle to deal with women’s newfound power, they develop a preference for women who appear childlike, less powerful. Hence, a woman grows more attractive the closer her body shape comes to that of an adolescent. Chernin’s analysis, although somewhat disturbing (she cites a size nine as overweight, a size five as embarrassing), holds some weight. Larger women are often perceived as aggressive and dominant—as Chernin puts it, as matriarchs. The implications of Chernin’s tyranny of slenderness for fat children in adolescent children’s literature are clear. If it is possible to assume that a slim adolescent body is the ultimate standard for women (and the popularity of Britney Spears alone suggests that it is), then an adolescent girl who does not fit into that standard is doubly transgressive—representative of both a failure to conform to standards, and an appropriation of an (albeit marginalized) power beyond her years.

Lara Ardeche begins Cherie Bennett's *Life in the Fat Lane* as the perfect submissive daughter, student, and beauty queen. Her friend Molly mourns, "You can eat anything you want and not get fat. Frankly, Lara, you deserve to die painfully, squeezed to death in size-eighteen jeans." "Never happen," I said as I stuck a handful of chips into my mouth. "I am metabolically blessed" (Bennett 1). Beautiful, popular Lara may begin her tale as the metabolically blessed golden girl of the slim regime, but her reign is short. Shortly after she is named Homecoming Queen of her high school, she begins to gain weight due to an obscure metabolic disorder. Bennett uses Lara's weight gain as a chaotic force, turning Lara's life upside down, and in the process revealing truths about both Lara and her world. Susan Stinson's *Fat Girl Dances with Rocks* is also a text about a teenage girl's coming of age. Stinson's protagonist, Charlotte, has been fat all her life. Char's well-meaning mother has forced her to diet endlessly, but Char's weight has continued to climb. In one pivotal summer, Char finally rebels against those who tell her that her fat body is unacceptable, and thus comes of age by learning to love every inch of her flesh. Though directed at a younger audience than Stinson or Bennett's books, Daniel Pinkwater's *Fat Camp Commandos* contains a similarly powerful message. Ralph and Sylvia have never accepted society's message that their fat bodies are offensive, but are nonetheless shipped off to fat camp by their parents. They escape with their new friend Mavis, and appropriate the hurtful power of the slim to re-set the balance of their weight-conscious community. Each of these books attempts to show a child rebelling against the subjugation of fat bodies and adults' power over them as children. These three books embark on a postcolonial mission of emancipation.

According to Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin in *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literature*, postcolonial texts are unique in that they have materialized “out of the experience of colonization and asserted themselves by foregrounding the tension with the imperial power, and by emphasizing their differences from the assumptions of the imperial centre” (2). The emphasis on difference represents a “concern with the development or recovery of an effective identifying relationship between self and place”—a search for a unique identity outside of colonization (Ashcroft 9). Postcolonial literature and criticism critiques the colonial experience by interrogating the power relations between the imperial powers and the apparently powerless colonized. In colonization, “Language becomes the medium through which a hierarchical structure of power is perpetuated, and the medium through which conceptions of ‘truth’, ‘order’, and ‘reality’ become established” (7). A truly effective postcolonial text upsets this balance of power.

Children’s literature is unique within postcolonial discourse. Although much postcolonial theory and literature concerns the physical and psychological subjugation of a culture within a specific locale, in “The Other: Orientalism, Colonialism, and Children’s Literature” Perry Nodelman expands the concept of postcolonialism to encompass the physical and psychological subjugation of child culture by adult culture. Adult theorists writing about the colonization of child readers and children’s culture are necessarily writing from the position of the colonizer—adult writers and adult culture. Nodelman addresses the colonization of children not just as part of a colonized culture (such as Africa or India), but as one age group colonized by another. According to

Nodelman, children's literature is centered on adult needs, much as literature about colonized others is centered on the needs of the colonizer:

we write books for children to provide them with values and with images of themselves *we* approve of or feel comfortable with. By and large, we encourage in children those values and behaviors that make children easier for us to handle [ . . .]. (30)

It is rare to find a text written by a child about children, and the majority of children's literature—certainly the bulk of “good” children's literature—is produced by adults.

When a children's text performs a postcolonial indictment of colonization, it is seldom, if ever, written by a member of the colonized group themselves. The voice of the adult “one” is all that is heard. This is dangerous for the child “other” as, “In the act of speaking for the other, providing it with a voice, we silence it” (Nodelman 30). The colonization of children through literature is further complicated by the fact that the colonizing adults were once children themselves. According to Nodelman, “What distinguishes our thinking about childhood from other discourses about otherness is that in this case, the other does quite literally turn into ourselves” (33). This illustrates the difference between traditional geographically-based postcolonial theory and children's postcolonialism. While white American theorists and writers were never colonized Latin American subjects, and can be supposed to never fully understand their position, all theorists and writers were once children and consider themselves to have a right to understand children's position.

Equally complicated is the colonization of fat bodies by a society that insists on slenderness. While the aforementioned white American theorists can never become

colonized Latin American subjects and are no longer children, anyone has the potential to become fat. The colonization of the bodies of fat people is manifested in every aspect of life. According to Charlotte Cooper in *Fat and Proud*, “the stigma attached to being fat is a control mechanism which supports a power structure of one group of people over another” (6). All fat people, child or adult, are exposed to ridicule, direct criticism of their bodies, and constant messages about the ease and necessity of losing their fat. Cooper states that, “Being different in some ways from an assumed norm makes fat people super-visible and vulnerable as targets. We find that people consistently invade our space without our consent with comments or non-verbal messages” (26). Even dressing is difficult for fat people because of the difficulty of finding clothes in their size and the near impossibility of finding fashionable clothes above a size 12 or 14. Fatness is further colonized by the popular media, where fat people serve only as clowns, notable exceptions (“tokens”), or grotesque examples of humanity. The fact that any member of the colonizing force can join the colonized can cause great fear, and thus greater separation of the slim from the fat. While it is not politically correct to openly insult another person for their race, gender, or sexuality, society perpetuates the idea that, if individuals so chose, they could lose their weight and avoid persecution. Thus, it is often acceptable, and even applauded, to constantly remind fat people of the horror of their size.

Children’s literature with fat characters can thus be a powerfully colonizing force, as in the case of the *Harry Potter* books, or, like the texts addressed in this chapter, a potential site of postcolonial rebellion. Although a rebellion against fat prejudice in children’s literature is complicated due to the position of the adult author in relation to

the child reader and the children's text, awareness on the part of the author of their position as adult arbiter of tales for children can lead to a self-aware criticism of adult colonization of children's culture. Similarly, authors positioned within a culture of strict body size prescriptions must be careful in designing a rebellion against those prescriptions.

*Life in the Fat Lane*, *Fat Girl Dances With Rocks*, and *Fat Camp Commandos* carefully negotiate the boundaries between child and adult, skinny and fat, in an attempt to rebel against colonization by upsetting the dominant order, and by breaking out of colonizing standards for understanding the world. The colonization of fat children is particularly complex, as they are seen as not only children, who must be protected by adults, but as fat children, whose bodies are the site of societal criticism and so must be protected from scrutiny by those who care for them—liberated, if possible, from their fat.

*Life in the Fat Lane* is unique within this discussion because, when the book starts, Lara is skinny and much loved for her appearance. Like many skinny teenagers, her weight comes naturally to her—as her comment that she is “metabolically blessed” indicates (1). At the beginning of the book, Lara participates in societal criticism of fat people. Her best friend Molly is chubby, a “‘tight size 14 in jeans’” (3). Lara is friends with Molly despite her appearance, just as outcast Molly was friends with her despite her popularity: “Molly didn't love me because I was popular or a pageant winner any more than I had stopped loving her because she wasn't” (6). Even though Molly is not extremely overweight, Lara still must colonize her body—encouraging Molly to change her size to be more like Lara's. Lara tells Molly, “‘If you come over three afternoons a

week, and we work out together, you'll see a huge difference in no time [. . .] you make your own reality'" (28).

The worst colonization of fat bodies at the beginning of the text happens to Fatty Patty, the most overweight girl in Lara's school, and Molly's very overweight mother. Even Molly worries, "God can you imagine if I end up as fat as my *mother*?" (6). Molly's father is worse, exerting the most powerful colonizing influence on Molly's mother. Molly explains that he leaves *Playboy* magazines around the house, "'This morning [. . .] taped to our refrigerator was Miss September herself. Only Dad had drawn this little bikini on her with Magic Marker. And he stuck a Post-it note on it, for my mother: 'Margie: this is to inspire you to lose weight. I love you, Alan'" (6). Molly's mother's body is not even safe from humiliation in her own home and is a source of horror for her daughter.

Fatty Patty is the most reviled fat character in the book. At the Homecoming dance, Lara describes her appearance, "She wore a red velvet dress that fell tentlike over her massive form" (24). Lara's group of friends makes fun of Patty mercilessly, both after her entrance at the dance, and in the bathroom later. When Lara is alone in the restroom, Patty steps out of a stall. Lara immediately thinks to say to her "If you'd just go on a diet no one would be able to humiliate you like that" (31). Lara muses, "All I could think was, how in the world could anyone allow themselves to look like that?" (32). Lara then exerts the standard colonizing influence of the skinny, asking Patty to come work out with her. After all, she says, "'You have such a pretty face'" (34).

Lara's rights as a slim queen end as she begins to gain weight and her body becomes the site of control from parents, friends, and most importantly, from herself.

From the first ten pounds that Lara gains to Lara's heaviest, 218 pounds, Lara's parents encourage her to do anything—including fasting for days—to lose weight. Lara's mother, an aging beauty queen who worries constantly about losing her husband's love, is well meaning, but believes that the only way Lara can be happy in life is to be skinny. She mourns, “ ‘I just can't stand to see you ruining your life like this! [. . .] Do you think your father would still be with me if I had let myself go like you have?’ ” (77).

Lara's body is also colonized by her peers. Although her friends and boyfriend have good intentions, as her body size increases, their interest in her decreases. Only chubby Molly truly sticks by Lara as other former friends simply abandon her. When Lara moves to a different school district, she finds how cruel her peers truly can be as she becomes the target of the same cruel criticism she once administered. Besides the jokes and cruel words hurled at her, Lara's own words to Patty come back to haunt her. Jane Neisson, a pretty, popular girl, tells her, “ ‘You really have a pretty face, you know?’ ” and offers to share weight loss secrets. Lara's colonizing desire to help the poor fat girl be accepted into the dominant slim culture is reborn in Jane's stinging comment. The poster child for the colonizers has become the colonized.

Char in *Fat Girl Dances with Rocks* has known all her life that her weight is unacceptable. She has been forced into the category of fat girl since grade school, and has felt like a colonized other all her life—always on the outside, always the subject of criticism and “helpful” advice. Char states that in grade school, “I was a fat little girl with sparkles on the corners of my glasses. Nice people called me chubby; the boys said tub of lard or fatso. Grownups who wanted the best for me didn't want me sitting and

reading at recess” (8). Unlike Lara, Char never truly seems to hate her fat body, but nonetheless has known all her life that her body is unacceptable.

Char has primarily learned her role as a fat child from her mother. Unlike Lara’s mother, Char’s mom is also fat and realizes the pain that an unacceptable body size can bring. She does not want her daughter to endure that same pain, and so forces an endless stream of dieting upon her daughter. Each day for Char begins with the dreaded question of how many pounds she has lost since the day before. Every meal, Char and her mother eat different foods than Char’s brother and father, a constant diet and battle to lose just one more pound. Char’s mother is continuously lovingly reminding her daughter that they are both an other, that their bodies are outside the norm and thus must be controlled, and that they must act as the enforcers of societal norms on themselves and each others.

Like Lara, Char is constrained by societal values of beauty. Char is unable to find a home or acceptance in the arms of men. Her first and only boyfriend tells her that she is “not attractive enough to be faithful to,” thus forcing societal standards of beauty onto her body—comparing her to those who are attractive and finding her wanting (17). When Felice and Char stop at a Pizza Hut to eat, a man corners Char in the hallway to the bathroom. The encounter is unpleasant, but all too familiar for Char: “‘Pigass,’ he muttered, much too close to my ear. ‘Fat one. Fatso. Fat ass’” (42). For Char, men represent the most powerful enforcers of the slim regime, constantly reminding her of her inferiority and otherness.

Authority figures in *Fat Camp Commandos* are even more powerful than those in the previous two texts because the characters of Pinkwater’s text are clearly much younger than either Char or Lara. Although Pinkwater never gives Ralph or Sylvia’s

ages, the book has large type and a minimum of words and the illustrations depict children, not adolescents. Ralph and Sylvia are surrounded by adults who think they know what is best for them. Because the brother and sister are fat, the adults are constantly telling them that they are unhappy and will become more so unless they lose weight. Simon Primly, who recruits for Camp Noo Yoo, tells the residents of Pokooksie that fat children are unhappy: “They are going to grow up miserable. They will be hated. They will become stupid. And many of them will turn to crime. Why? Because this is what happens to fat children” (Pinkwater 12). The satirical tone of the book illustrates how ridiculous beliefs like these are, and Ralph further enforces the stupidity of Tator’s attempt to colonize his body: “I thought he was a raving maniac. I am fat, and so is my sister, Sylvia, also our mother and father. None of us are stupid. Nobody hates us” (Pinkwater 13). Their parents, who are fat like Ralph and Sylvia, are able to exert the power of an adult colonizer, forcing the children to go to fat camp while they stay home. ““We have to save them!”” they say, ““We have to sign them up for Camp Noo Yoo”” (Pinkwater 14). Once again, the imperative to change their body is forced upon children by well-meaning adults.

Ralph, Sylvia, and Mavis are also colonized by skinny characters in the book. In addition to the supposedly well-meaning diet industry representatives, they are accosted in public much like Char and Lara. A woman in a coffee shop remonstrates them for eating chocolate cake: ““Look at you! You children are overweight! And you’re eating cake! Don’t you have any self-control? Don’t you have any self respect?”” (Pinkwater 44). The woman continues to rant. Mavis later explains why: ““People in general think that if you’re fat, they can say whatever they like”” (Pinkwater 48). Ralph agrees, ““She

thought she had a right to lecture us, just because she's skinny and thinks that's neat—and we're not'" (Pinkwater 48). Ralph and Mavis define the impetus behind the colonization of the fat by skinny people.

Lara, Char, Ralph, Sylvia, and Mavis are all colonized by a dominant order that puts adults in power over children and skinny people in power over fat people. However, each of them attempt a postcolonial rebellion against that power structure. The first step a postcolonial text may take in challenging the power of colonization is to invert the dominant order. Lara, Char, Ralph, Sylvia, and Mavis participate in a shifting of the balance of power, gaining a degree of power over the skinny world around them. In *Life in the Fat Lane*, Lara spends most of the text hating her fat body and praying to return to her skinny popular self. The rebellion in this text does not begin in Lara's character. Rather, the rebellion against skinny societal norms comes through Lara's weight gain. At the beginning of the book, Lara believes that her life is perfect. She feels that she has the perfect parents, the perfect friends, and the perfect boyfriend. It takes uncontrollable weight gain for Lara to find out that her life isn't so great after all. Lara learns that her parents' marriage is built upon a façade of appearances—because the relationship is founded upon physical attraction, as the Ardeches have aged, they have grown apart, and as Mrs. Ardeche's looks have faded, Mr. Ardeche has begun having an affair with a younger woman. The happiness of their marriage for many years has been fake—a façade in itself. Lara learns this when her weight gain opens her eyes to her parents' behavior and their true feelings. After her mother has attempted suicide because of her father's infidelity, Lara tells her mother that she has come to realize that her parents never got along, "Even though you were young and thin and perfect looking, you weren't

happy. You and Dad always fought, and you always lied to us about it” (232). Lara has also realized something about herself, “I used to think that if I was just perfect enough, everything would be great. But it wasn’t. And I used to think that everything in my life was so perfect when I was thin. Only it wasn’t” she tells her mom (232).

Lara also learns that, except for her best friend, her friends and boyfriend are basing their affection on her appearance. With each pound that she gains, she loses a friend, until finally, Lara is forced to redefine how she understands true friendship. She realizes that being one of the geeks isn’t so bad, and is, in fact, very rewarding, “I wasn’t really by myself at all. And for the first time in a long, long, *long* time, I was happy” (248). Lara realizes that being fat does not mean that a person is stupid or unhappy, and is forced to rethink her colonizing ideas about fat people. Lara’s weight also causes her to rethink her aspirations for the future and discover her true musical talent. Rather than relying on her beauty to get her by, she must learn to develop her personality and begins to invest time and energy into improving her piano performance.

Char in *Fat Girl Dances with Rocks* effects her own postcolonial rebellion. She begins by refusing to diet anymore. Char has been told all her life that she must diet in order to be acceptable. As she begins to mature, Char realizes that dieting has never done her any good, and almost without knowing what she is doing, destroys the diet lunch her mother packs for her, then orders a non-diet dinner at a restaurant: “I didn’t feel my usual urge to scrunch up my shoulders when I asked for barbecued chicken and a baked potato with sour cream and butter” (Stinson 110). Char feels liberated by this rebellious act, “It wasn’t until I stood up to walk to the restroom that I began to get an inkling of what was happening. It was a little like walking out into a dark night from a bright room; at first I

was disoriented, but by the time I reached for the faucet in the restroom, I had a grasp on it. [. . .] I wasn't dieting" (111). Char is turning the tables. All her life she has been told that she must diet in order to make herself acceptable to others. Char chooses instead to be acceptable to herself, and to take her life back into her control.

Char also upsets the dominant order by refusing to believe that her body is not sexual enough. She begins by slowly coming to celebrate rather than detest her body: "I was delighted with myself at that moment, big, sloppy body, bar breath, and all" (Stinson 119). She becomes further liberated when she has a sexual encounter with her friend Felice. When Char and Felice begin touching and kissing each other while camping, neither Char nor Felice is necessarily renouncing men (Felice, in fact, has a relationship with a teenage boy at the time of the encounter that she continues afterwards). Rather, they are rebelling against the order that says that they must find their happiness only in boys, and Char is rebelling against the prescription that her body is not sexually attractive to anyone who is not desperate.

Ralph, Sylvia, and Mavis in *Fat Camp Commandos* also refuse to accept society's message about their bodies. At no point do they truly dislike their fat bodies—only the people who try to tell them that they should not be fat. Mavis points out to Ralph and Sylvia that there is no need for her to wish to be skinny, "I can do a hundred push-ups and then beat you at tennis. I don't call it doomed. I call it the way I am" (Pinkwater 40). From the beginning of the book, Mavis, Ralph, and Sylvia question whether adults know what is best for them, and when they escape from fat camp, they completely erase the power of misguided adults to control their lives. They return the power to decide what is best for their bodies to themselves.

The three children further upset the dominant order when they decide to become fat commandos. After being insulted by one too many skinny people, they decide to take the colonial power to insult upon themselves. The three begin insulting skinny people for their weight, thus inverting the order. While jogging at the park, they harass skinny fellow joggers. Sylvia tells one girl, ““You shouldn’t run at your weight [. . .] You should rest a lot and eat nourishing food”” (Pinkwater 47). The three hurl more insults, ““Beep-beep, Skinny! You’d be able to pick up those feet better if you ate something besides bean sprouts!”” (Pinkwater 47). The three children are appropriating the right to colonize unacceptable bodies and redefining skinny as unacceptable. They are thus re-centering privilege to their own fat bodies.

Ralph, Sylvia, and Mavis do not stop with insults. They also begin to challenge representations of beauty by defacing billboards and by challenging those who try to coerce others to diet. They attend a Junior Weight Whippers meeting and challenge the leader of the meeting with statistics about the efficacy of the Weight Whippers program: “ ‘less than one person in a thousand loses weight, and, of those, less than one in a thousand keeps it off for two years’” (Pinkwater 51). The children are publicly questioning the norms of society which assume that if you diet correctly, you will lose weight. The children move on from psychological warfare to propaganda when they attack a billboard “we [. . .] added about forty pounds to the girl in the swimsuit advertisement for Pokooksie Sausage Products” (Pinkwater 72). By defying the value placed on being slim in society, the commandos move fat to a place of prominence, enticing skinny people to eat, and making pictures of skinny models fat.

This is a postcolonial rebellion, but it is nonetheless merely an inversion and thus an incomplete rebellion, participating in the language and world order of the colonizers—not a rewriting of the colonial world. As Ashcroft et al. state of adult postcolonial texts that merely invert the colonial world: “they inevitably privilege the centre, emphasizing the ‘home’ over the ‘native’, the ‘metropolitan’ over the ‘provincial’ or ‘colonial’, and so forth” (5). Our fat heroes have yet to escape from the binary that views skinny as a center to be escaped from or questioned. The ultimate rebellion against a colonizing power lies in breaking out of the colonizer’s definition of the world. Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffen explain that this escape depends “upon the abrogation of this constraining power and the appropriation of language and writing for new and distinctive usages” (6). By redefining the world through the colonized other’s terms and ways of looking at life, the colonized ceases to simply upset the dominant world order, but forms a separate world of their own. It is necessary for fat child protagonists to both appropriate and abrogate skinny systems of meaning to truly break out of the colonized mold that expects them to view fat in opposition to skinniness. Appropriation is “the process by which the language is taken and made to ‘bear the burden’ of one’s own cultural experience,” while abrogation requires “a refusal of the categories of the imperial culture, its aesthetic, its illusory standard of normative or ‘correct’ usage, and its assumption of a traditional and fixed meaning ‘inscribed’ in the words” (Ashcroft 38). This is the most powerful post-colonial move, shifting away from the binary opposition of one versus the other that created the colonial order.

Lara Ardeche and *Life in the Fat Lane* only weakly manage to break away from the view of fat as unacceptable. Lara, who once believed that her beauty defined her

place in society, is forced by her weight to rebel against those ideas and redefine her definitions of the value of individuals in the world. She realizes by the end of the book that fat does not define the value of an individual. This is not, however, a complete rebellion against a colonizing one-other dichotomy of relationships. First, Lara does not ever stop wishing to be thin again. She simply realizes that losing weight should not be the primary goal of her life: "I'm not telling you everything was fine, or that I knew what would happen with Jett, or that I didn't still long to be thin, because I did. So much. But it wasn't *everything* anymore" (Bennett 259-260).

Second, although her weight gain has opened Lara's eyes to her true value and the realities of her existence, the end of the book mitigates the effectiveness of this promise. Lara learns that her metabolic disorder seems to only be temporary. The few other children in the world who also have the disorder are losing the weight—going back to their original size. Lara herself begins to lose weight at the end of the book. The wonderful promise of a book in which a girl is happier and learns from being overweight is destroyed as her weight gain, having done its job, promises to disappear. Lara still has to have the guarantee of returning to slimness to be truly satisfied and mature at the end of the text.

Char in *Fat Girl Dances with Rocks* ends her text with no such promise. Char must learn to love her fat body and to see herself as a sexual being, not despite her fat, but because of it. Through Char, Stinson redefines notions of beauty and of the relationship of fat people to skinny people. When Char finds that she has come into her skin, she has not only come of age, but has redefined the notions of body image that have been thrust upon her for her entire life: "I had been coming into my body all summer, and

as I leaned there listening, I arrived. [. . .] for once I didn't have to slip those useful hands secretly under the elastic of my white uniform pants to feel my belly and confirm what size it was. I knew it from the inside, because all of a sudden I seemed to go out to the edge of my skin" (Stinson 152). Char has learned that her fat is not repulsive, and that her body should not be undesirable, and has thus found the beauty and sexuality in her own skin.

Char also upsets her own assumptions about the desirability or necessity of sexuality. She comes to realize that heterosexuality is not absolutely necessary. Although this is a highly liberating realization for Char and is in no way unhealthy, it does take something away from the message sent about fat bodies. In this book, fat Char must relinquish heterosexual love and the attraction of men in order to accept her body. Her friend Felice, on the other hand, loses weight and is able to have a non-heteronormative sexuality—she truly escapes the strictures of heterosexuality by refusing the binary opposition of heterosexuality and homosexuality. However, Felice's sexual liberation comes as part of her successful weight loss. Char may achieve liberation from hating her body, but she does not escape the confines of the heterosexual world, nor does she seem to become attractive in the eyes of others. Felice does not choose to continue her relationship with Char—she chooses the boy she has met at the restaurant where she works. While newly skinny Felice can liberate herself sexually, yet return to standard acceptable heterosexual behavior, Char is forever colonized. She may have accepted her body and sexuality, but society never will.

The freedom from the colonization of the thin that Ralph, Sylvia, and Mavis achieve at the end of *Fat Camp Commandos* is also complicated. The three are caught

vandalizing a billboard by a fat police officer. Instead of taking them to prison, the officer makes the three children join the local fat theater troupe. The group produces operas—skinny people are allowed, but they have to wear fat costumes. This delicious inversion of preferences—that skinny people have to make themselves fat to be accepted—is delightful to Ralph, Sylvia, and Mavis. It is certainly agreeable that fat is preferred in this opera troupe, where, Ralph tells us, many of the performers are very talented. In fact, it represents the most subversive of binary disruptions I address. The skinny people, such as Mavis's butler, Schlermie, are merely taking on the appearance of being fat, and can return to their more societally acceptable bodies at the end of the performance. The subversion in this is twofold. First, rather than merely upsetting the dominant order and make fat preferable to skinny (i.e. by having the butler regret his skinniness, or having skinny people excluded from the opera troupe until they gained weight), Pinkwater establishes that both fat and skinny body shapes are acceptable. Second, it suggests that body size is performative. Skinny people can don a fat suit not to be grotesque, but to fit in, to gain acceptance within a fat community.

This separation of community is the one weakness of Pinkwater's postcolonial rebellion. In Pinkwater's book, the fat characters gain acceptance for their size only in a community separate from the skinny community. The acceptance of fat bodies only by other fat people may help Ralph, Sylvia, and Mavis's self-esteem, but it suggests that this is the only place in which these characters can find total acceptance of their selves. The rebellion is further impeded by the entirely unrealistic world of the text. Unlike *Life in the Fat Lane* and *Fat Girl Dances with Rocks*, *Fat Camp Commandos* makes no attempt to seem highly realistic. The book is very satirical, and, although it empowers children

through Ralph, Mavis and Sylvia's freewheeling exploits, it shows a world almost completely devoid of adult supervision. The illustrations also contribute to the sense of exaggeration and satire in the book. The simple line drawings are not the highly realistic renderings in a Harry Potter book or movie for instance. Thus, in this book, the forum for rebelling against weight-conscious society is the same forum as that in which children at a summer camp are left without counselors and travel home by bus on their own, then survive the rest of the summer with little to no supervision. Although the text is fun and certainly disruptive, it does little damage to the norms of the "real world" that operates under different rules than those of the textual world.

Just like postcolonial literature such as African American, Latin American, or Native American that establishes separate, exotic ways of life for its participants, intimating a separate mode of being for colonized others is not the ultimate solution. For those damaged by interaction with a dominant culture, those whose individuality and heritage will be lost through acculturation and conformity, an initial post-colonial step may be to upset the dominant order, and a secondary step may involve establishing a separate ethos, but it is only through a deconstructionist abolition of center that true escape from colonization can occur. Only by refusing to place people in categories according to their body size can we entirely avoid valuing one category more than the other, be it skinny over fat or fat over skinny. As Derrida himself says, it is impossible to think outside a system of binaries with centers, ones, and others:

[. . .] as soon as one seeks to demonstrate in this way that there is no transcendental or privileged signified and that the domain or play of signification henceforth has no limit, one must reject even the concept and

word 'sign' itself—which is precisely what cannot be done. (1118)

However, it is in the play, in the disruption of those binaries in search of a world without centers that true progress and maturation occurs. Children's books can therefore occupy a unique role in the play of the deconstruction of colonial binaries. Books for liminal children, on the verge of transitioning to adolescence such as Pinkwater's protagonists or on the verge of adulthood like Char and Lara, challenge the colonial centers that privilege the slim body over the fat body.

## CONCLUSION

### FINDING PEACE WITH FAT: CULTURE, LITERATURE, AND THEORY

*“My life was passing in front of my eyes, and it was pudgy.”*

—from *Squashed* by Joan Bauer

Hollindale states in “Ideology and the Children’s Book” that “A large part of any book is written not by its author but by the world its author lives in. [. . .] As a rule, writers for children are transmitters not of themselves uniquely, but of the worlds they share” (32). To extend Hollindale’s analysis, it is the choices authors make that serve either to reshape the world that their literature transmits or to reinforce its values. Books such as J.K. Rowling’s Harry Potter series fall into the latter category. Rowling chooses not to question the world order she draws her characters from and thus more deeply etches the image of the stupid clown-like fat child into the minds of her avid young readers. In the former category are authors like Daniel Pinkwater, who consciously battle the world that makes their fat child readers feel inferior to their skinny contemporaries. The world of fat prejudice may intrude into the pages of Pinkwater’s text, but he battles that world to the last humorous page.

In the introduction, I discussed Paula Danziger’s *The Cat Ate My Gymsuit* (1974) in which protagonist Marcy matures from childhood to adolescence by learning that she should not believe that she is stupid and lazy just because she is fat. I applauded Danziger for battling against stereotypical images of fat children, even if she somewhat

failed to completely shut out the voice of fat hatred. Six years after the publication of *The Cat Ate My Gymsuit*, Danziger brought Marcy back in a sequel entitled *There's a Bat in Bunk Five* (1980). In *There's a Bat in Bunk Five*, Danziger tells the story of the summer that Marcy turns fifteen. Marcy has lost weight. Now struggling to bridge the gap from adolescence to adulthood, she has been asked to serve as a junior counselor at a summer camp. No longer fat, Marcy has her first boyfriend, first kiss, and first job. Danziger's choice to have Marcy shed her fat demonstrates the immense power of fat prejudice. Marcy cannot completely come of age while trapped in a fat body. In order to undergo the rites of adulthood, she must be skinny and marketable, an appealing self ready for consumption by family, friends, and boyfriends. Danziger, it seems, has ceased to battle against the values of the world she transmits.

The consequences of Danziger's submission to fat prejudice illustrate the implications of my exploration of obesity in children's literature. First, the fact that even a once-resistant author such as Danziger can force her protagonist to lose weight before gaining acceptance represents the power of the tyranny of slenderness in our culture. Second, the failure of Danziger to liberate her fat protagonist from the skinny imperative illuminates the challenge facing children's literature to be simultaneously mimetic, entertaining, and responsible to child readers. Finally, the powerful messages about fat children presented in Danziger's text illustrate some theoretical implications for the role of children's literature within the fat rights movement and ethical criticism.

Chernin's concept of the tyranny of slenderness describes a culture in which fat bodies are marginalized and fat people are seen as repulsive. It is difficult to deny that culture plays a powerful role in the construction of the self. Whether it is through

Featherstone's consumerism or Chernin's patriarchal order, culture helps to define the character of all who turn on their television, flip through the pages of a magazine, or pay to sit in a darkened theater for two hours. The images presented to children by this culture give disturbing messages about body shape. The continued success of the popular Mattel toy, Barbie, is the most well-known example of this message. According to Kathy Chamberlain in her article, "Idollatry," Barbie, whose tiny waist and large breasts have been proven to be physically impossible proportions for a true human body, "looks as though she might be real and accessible [ . . . ] but the bland-faced, impossibly skinny creature with the big bosom, absurdly long legs, and feet curved to fit forever and only in high heels is a saboteur" (par. 33). Barbie and her long-time boyfriend, Ken, represent the ideal body images presented in the books I have addressed in my thesis. Barbie's proportions have insinuated their way into body image in children's books. In Leslea Newman's *Fat Chance*, Judi describes her idol Nancy Pratt's body as "thin everywhere except her boobs" (Newman 13). At the beginning of the *Life in the Fat Lane*, when Cherie Bennett's Lara Ardeche is at the height of her beauty, she is described on her "Miss Teen Pride of the South" application as 5'7", 118 pounds, with blond hair and blue eyes (Bennett 1). The ideal male body is not skinny (although that is still better than fat), but the muscle-bound body of Ken. In Robert Lipsyte's *One Fat Summer*, the muscular lifeguard Pete Marino represents the perfect masculine body to Bobby. The presence of the Ken and Barbie body types in children's literature displays the ingrained nature of perceptions of body type. According to Chamberlain, Barbie "holds the illusory promise of inclusion—you love her, identify with her, want to be like her, and you can't" (par.

33). The impossible beauty standards of adulthood are thus firmly established through childhood play.

Barbie dolls are not the only part of children's culture to uphold fat prejudice. Even the most progressive children's cartoons display unattainable figures. On Cartoon Network's extremely popular "Powerpuff Girls," a show about three young girls who save the world before bedtime, adult women characters have impossibly curvaceous figures, as do those on "The Proud Family," a Disney Channel cartoon about an African-American girl and her incredibly diverse group of neighborhood friends. On Disney Channel's "Kim Possible," Kim, a high school cheerleader who regularly saves the world, is impossibly slim, as are the rest of the girls in her world. Each of these shows is extremely progressive in other areas, showing that girls can be superheroes, and featuring friendships between children of different races and genders. However, they nonetheless maintain representations of impossibly slim body types. The message for boys is similar. Male superheroes such as Superman and Batman are covered in the same rippling muscles as a Ken doll or Robert Lipsyte's Pete Marino. The result is a culture where children identify with cartoon characters who are able to break out of racial, age, and gender stereotypes, but not fat prejudice.

Teen idols also reflect the necessity for the perfect body. Britney Spears, Justin Timberlake, and other teen idols represent youth, popularity, beauty, and glamour, and look like the most impossibly shaped cartoon characters or Ken and Barbie come to life. Teen magazines often perpetuate this image. Besides the skinny models and diet and exercise advice, at the back of the April 2003 issue of *Seventeen* magazine is an advertising section called "Buy Direct" which contains ads for modeling companies

galore, careers in fashion and design, and a specific section for weight loss camps offering the chance to “Lose Weight and Have FUN Too!” (*Seventeen* 186). These camps promise to help girls and boys lose as much as fifty pounds in one summer. The clear implication is that a glamorous lifestyle as a model or fashion design requires a slim physique and everything you need to attain that glamour can be purchased in the back of the magazine.

Whether attitudes reflect media images or media images reflect attitudes is immaterial. The skinny models and ads for diet camps and modeling agencies in *Seventeen* and many other teen magazines, the body-baring fashions and fat free physiques of teen idols, and the incredibly slim or muscular bodies of children’s dolls and cartoon heroes all represent a culture in which fat is unacceptable and the ideal body type is attainable by very few people. This cultural message of fat hatred is conveyed to children by their toys, television, movies, magazines and books and leads to a lifetime battle with an unrealistic body image. The result is a society of people who cycle through dieting and weight gain, never satisfied, their weight increasing at the end of each starvation regime. This is a society where parents think they are helping their children by forcing them to diet, a society where it is not acceptable to discriminate against someone for their race, gender, religion, or sexuality, but it is laudable to publicly humiliate fat people.

It is impossible to shield children or children’s book authors from popular culture, but it is not impossible for culture to change. If asked, Mattel would undoubtedly say that they do not make Barbie’s body more realistic because she would no longer be aesthetically pleasing and would not sell. Cartoon artists might reply that no one wants to

watch a fat girl superhero. The media can change and retain readership, however. *YM*, a magazine directed at adolescent girls, has taken on the challenge and begun to feature size 14 models. They no longer accept advertising for dieting products, nor do they give dieting tips. According to the *Toronto Star*, the editor-in-chief of the magazine stated, “We’re really aware that body image is a big issue for teen girls and I strongly believe that diet stories only make girls feel badly about the way they look and no good can come from them” (*Star* D02). *YM* has not suffered for their new attitude towards body size. *YM* reported a total circulation of 2,206,067 in the fiscal year 2002, just below *Seventeen*’s 2.4 million and well above the third place teen magazine, *Teen People* at 1.6 million (*Media Industry Newsletter*). A glance inside the pages of *YM*’s Prom 2003 issue reveals no ads for modeling agencies or diet camps, and no advice on losing weight. The primary piece of beauty advice in this issue is an article entitled “Updos That Don’t Suck,” the purpose of which is to “eradicate tendrils from every prom in America” (*YM* 32). The fact that *YM* can retain its number two rating in the highly competitive and highly lucrative world of teen magazines without diet ads or anorexic-looking models suggests that culture can change. It is possible to succeed without selling self hatred to adolescent audiences.

The tyranny of slenderness in our culture is thus pervasive and, as my exploration of the portrayal of fat children in children’s literature indicates, potentially very harmful. As *YM*’s successful makeover indicates, change is possible, but the ramifications of this powerful cultural message are evident in children’s literature. The control over Marcy, Dudley, Neville, Hetty, Bobby, Judi, Lara, Ralph, Sylvia, Mavis, and Char’s bodies that is exercised by textual, contextual and/or authorial voices is clearly a symptom of a

greater societal battle against fat bodies. However, as my analysis demonstrates, children's literature plays a role in this battle. The implications for children's literature are twofold. First, it is not enough for children to read, they must be taught to read with discernment. Books that children think are good are not necessarily good for them. This does not mean that books with a bad ethical message about fat should be banned or that they are not "good" books. Rather, like all texts, they should simply not be viewed as safe simply because they are children's books. Teachers, parents, and other caretakers can lead children to question the values presented in books and prevent the subconscious absorption of those values. The second implication for children's literature is that authors can write resistantly. Daniel Pinkwater's *Fat Camp Commandos* is a prime example. It is certainly true that authors will subconsciously convey values to their child readers that they are not even aware they hold, but if authors carefully interrogate the values their work holds, they can avoid perpetuating those values further.

The primary consequence of this study for ethical criticism is therefore that ethical criticism can not only further dialogue between critics about the value systems in texts, but can illuminate for authors the values that they are perpetuating. Ethical critics can seek to bring to light ethically dangerous portrayals in all literature that an author may be unaware of including in their text. Authors may then recognize these unintentional messages and seek to eradicate them. Second, my application of ethical criticism to children's literature shows that criticism can have the further purpose of illustrating the values contained within texts for readers. Parents and teachers seeking to start a dialogue with children about the hidden values of a text have a potential source in the works of ethical critics. Finally, ethical criticism can also expose the value systems

inherent in culture, not just those in literature. Movements such as feminism sought to examine not only literary representations, but the cultural prejudices that underlie all behavior. Ethical criticism can similarly expand its scope to consider the cultural value systems that contribute to those of author, reader, and critic. It is important, then, for criticism to contain a plurality of voices. As Booth says, ethical criticism is most valuable as a conversation to ensure that it does not become merely a platform for a different set of values.

Diane Wakoski's poem "The Fear of Fat Children" began this discussion. It seems fitting to finish with a poem by Grace Nichols, an author who has found peace with her body:

If my fat  
was too much for me  
I would have told you  
I would have lost a stone  
or two  
[. . .]  
But as it is  
I'm feeling fine  
feel no need  
to change my lines (12)

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