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# Body stories in and out and with and through fat

edited by Jill Andrew and May Freidman, Bradford, Ontario, Demeter Press, 2020

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## BOOK REVIEW

**Body stories in and out and with and through fat**, edited by Jill Andrew and May Freidman, Bradford, Ontario, Demeter Press, 2020

Fat women in Western society are confronted daily with discrimination, stigma, and oppression due to their size. Theoretical perspectives and academic jargon can be prohibitive to learning the complexity of fatness in everyday life; however *Body Stories* documents first-hand accounts of the thoughts, feelings, and emotions of fat women in an accessible, compelling, and intricate manner. Jill Andrew and May Friedman clarify that *Body Stories* is not meant to create a space for fat bodies – fat bodies already exist in space. Instead, the authors link the narratives of those working toward liberation, be it scholars, activists, or students, in their journeys to promote size acceptance as a radical re-negotiation of how to think about and treat fat individuals.

Broken into thirty-one chapters, *Body Stories* is a book about the messiness, fleshiness, and complicated relationships women have with their bodies. Contributing authors use various mediums such as writing, poetry, artwork, and photography to express personal situations in which the interconnected systems of fatphobia, misogyny, sexism, homophobia, ableism, ageism, and racism create inequality. With real and raw storytelling, *Body Stories* is a collection of evocative, captivating, comforting, and accepting anecdotes intended to capture the challenges in the eradication of fat oppression.<sup>1</sup> All audiences, not just scholars or artists, can find connection with these narratives, making *Body Stories* an innovative and refreshing read.

In situating women's stories within and through their bodies, themes of shame, restriction, immorality, and inequality become common threads weaving together the diverse backgrounds of the various narrators. Despite the different races, sexualities, and abilities of contributors, this collection of authors shares the embodied experience of living in, with, and through their fat bodies, unifying their heterogeneous identities. For example, in chapter 2, "Neither Sari Nor Sorry: An Open Letter to the Indian Yummy Mummy," Sucharita Sarkar expresses the physical, cultural, and gendered limitations of being an Indian mother. A reclamation of both her body and sexuality, Sarkar unapologetically rejects the "yummy mummy" esthetic, which praises quick post-natal weight loss and a close monitoring of the body and the self. Alys Einion's chapter, "'I'm not fat. I'm Pregnant': A Critical Discussion of Current Debates in Body Size, Fatness, Pregnancy, and Motherhood," similarly connects corporeal experiences of fatness, femininity, sexuality, and motherhood to the established compulsory "thin ideal." Einion's discussion of pregnancy highlights the deeply embedded misogynistic scrutiny of not just fat women's bodies, but the futurity of their children's as well. Royce's poem "The Line" describes such an incident in which ideas about her child's health are assumedly linked to her grocery choices in the checkout line. Royce's ice cream selection is perceived as evidence of "maternal deficiency" (121) for the son she holds in her arms. Royce kisses her son in an act of love, protection, and rejection of strangers' knowledge about her or her child's health. Such anecdotes reveal the confluence of bodily control, medical diatribes, and socially sanctioned stigmatization that demand medical and societal reform.

*Body Stories* introduces readers to narratives that critically engage with the tenuous connections between medical discourse and the fat body in order to focus on the mundane, yet revolutionary ways in which fat women exist in anti-fat culture. *Body*

*Stories* showcases the stories of such women who radically love their bodies through essays, artwork, and pedagogical tools. Creative submissions such as food mapping (chapter 5), poetry (chapters 6, 10, 15, 20, 27), photography (chapters 3, 24), and comic books (chapter 22) weave together stories of flesh, curves, and bodily geographies that capture moments of doubt and insecurity as much as they represent spaces where women's bodies are central to critical dialogue with the social construction of fatness, health, and morality. For example, an educational tool known as food mapping reveals individuals as experts within and through their own bodies. Food mapping consists of outlining the bodies of participants on a sheet of paper with labels dictating their history and relationship with food. This process epitomizes the idea of a "body story" in that the body and its varying characteristics are vocalized through personal narration and complex storytelling to uncover their journey toward body love.

As inclusive and important as this text is, fat men remain invisible. Despite the editor's introductory statement that "this project resists the ways that bodies marginalized are often written and researched about and the assumptions these misrepresentations can plant into people's idea about our existence," the exclusion of men's voices reveal a new misconception: that fat men are not marginalized. Recent research on fat men, such as Monaghan (2007), Bell and McNaughton (2007), and Neumann's (2020) work, show how fat men experience discrimination and stigma. The contributing authors of *Body Stories* tell a multi-cultural narrative with a diverse *female* population. Yet a text that calls for fat liberation must also account for and include the negative experiences of men in fatphobic cultures. Men experience weight stigma too, yet a dearth of research exists to discuss fat men's experiences, especially outside of a weight-centric medical model.<sup>2</sup> Members of the Bear community and Big Handsome Men (BHM) may hold similar insights to narratives found in *Body Stories*; however the pervasive reification of fat as a feminist issue precludes men from speaking about their experiences and thoughts on ways to better theorize, challenge, and eliminate fatphobia. Understandably, the focus of *Body Stories* is to chart the often oppressive intersectional experiences of women of color, queer women, and women with disabilities who inhabit fat bodies. That being said, *Body Stories* lays a foundation for emerging research that uncovers the revolutionary potential of fatness and fat embodiment to include a coalition of fat communities and their allies needed to push forward the Size Acceptance Movement – this includes men, non-binary individuals, and trans individuals' voices.

*Body Stories* provides a platform in which nuanced and relatable stories are met with shock, revulsion, and a motivation to dismantle the far-reaching negative effects of a fatphobic society. By sitting with these narratives readers are asked to question the truth about fatness; the past, present, and future contexts in which fatness is deemed a discreditable trait and how accepting and loving one's body is a radical movement toward social justice. These intimate and eclectic stories illustrate that loving one's body is a process. Over time and with and in and through bodies, readers of this book can discover the revolutionary power of vulnerability, self-love, and self-acceptance.

## Notes


1. The authors acknowledge (page 231) the interconnected efforts needed to eradicate fatphobia as well as ending racism, misogyny, homophobia, colonization, and ableism.
2. Himmelstein, Puhl, and Quinn (2018, 974) find that 40% of men in their sample reported experiencing weight stigma. The average rate of experienced weight stigma in the U.S. is approximately 40–44.6% regardless of gender.

## Notes on contributor

*Elyse Neumann* is a PhD Candidate in Sociology at the University of Kansas. Her dissertation is entitled “The Phenomenology of Fat Men’s Health.”

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