

The (Re)presentation of Fat Female Protagonists and Food Addiction in Young Adult Literature

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Literature does not reflect an already-existing reality but presents a version or a vision of reality with the potential to influence our emotional responses, our understandings, and our convictions (Apol, 1998; Koppelman, 2009). It contributes to the constructed worlds we inhabit, yet many of us rarely consider the sociocultural, material, and historical contexts that influence its production and its reception. Literature provides versions of reality that readers may perceive as “natural and common-sense” to the extent that they are “invisible and unquestioned” (Bloome, et al., 2008, p. 28). In this study, I analyzed eight novels with fat female protagonists to determine how they are constructed and (re)presented to adolescent readers: to determine and make visible the version of reality they convey. To establish the constructed world in which these novels were produced and read and in which the analysis took place, I begin by briefly considering the rhetoric of the obesity epidemic in the United States, the pervasiveness of the culturally constructed ideal female body, and disordered eating as an addiction as they are (re)presented in both life and in young adult literature.

Throughout this article I respectfully follow the recommendation of fat studies scholars and of Health at Every Size (HAES) and use the word *fat* when describing the female protagonists. Wann (2009) states that the politically correct “O-words” (obese and overweight) as well as euphemisms such as large, big-boned, heavy, husky, chubby, voluptuous, or plump “put a falsely positive spin on a negative view of fatness” (p. xii). The word *fat* has negative connotations because of prejudicial social constructions that stigmatize the word as well as those who embody it. LeBesco (2004), Lyons (2009), and Wann (2009) note that fat communities advocate for public acceptance and use of the word *fat* to push back against prejudice, discrimination, and stigmatization and to claim *fat* as a neutral descriptor of personal and political identity. Furthermore, fat studies scholars often bracket the word *obese* with “scare quotes” and disclaim it as an arbitrary and contested term (Wann, 2009). I use *obese* in the discussion of the obesity epidemic, however, since it is the term used in mainstream culture to describe this perceived phenomenon.

Obesity is at the forefront of our national consciousness and has been transformed from a personal matter to a social issue framed as a politically charged medical condition (Burgard, 2009; Farrell, 2011; LeBesco, 2004; Wann, 2009). Weight designations are determined by medical and political entities that set (and change) BMI standards that identify who is and who is not normal, overweight, obese, and/or morbidly obese making the medicalization of obesity a social and political construction. Anyone over a certain BMI is deemed obese, and they are assumed to have poor eating and exercise habits and to have significant health risks. Americans accept the thin/healthy and fat/unhealthy binaries despite the fact that only 9% of personal health problems are correlated to BMI. These “assumptions are so seamless that they are not questioned” (Burgard, 2009, p. 46).

The medicalization of obesity and the rhetoric of the obesity epidemic lead to “apocalyptic thinking” (Farrell, 2011, p. 9) and a “witch hunt targeting fatness” (Wann, 2009, p. x) that “strip[s] away humanity” (Herndon, 2003, p. 125) to create a politicized condition that ignores the complexities of natural human differences in body type. The politics of obesity is evident in Michelle Obama’s *Let’s Move!* initiative that aims to decrease childhood obesity which she describes as “an epidemic and one of the greatest threats to America’s health and economy” (Hellmich, 2010, np). Linking obesity with the term “epidemic” conjures visions of contagion, corruption, and danger positioning the obese as a very real threat and a risk to our personal and national well being (Farrell, 2011). For example, at the height of the economic recession, a news report alarmed taxpayers by releasing the projection that obesity-related absenteeism and disability would cost Americans an estimated \$66 billion a year (Hartman, 2010). The message was clear that the obese were a drain on the national economy at a time when many American families were experiencing financial insecurity.

Although calculating the cost of obesity may be a fairly recent phenomenon, stigmatizing the obese is not new. From our Puritanical roots to the present, the fat have been deemed lazy, undisciplined, gluttonous, repulsive, immoral, unclean, and stupid (Farrell, 2011; Herndon, 2003; LeBesco, 2004). When we consider that ours is a constructed world, we realize these characteristics are not deterministic attributes but social constructions that marginalize fat people. As a result of these prejudices, fat adolescents frequently endure ridicule, bullying, and isolation at a time when appearance and acceptance are particularly important. Reflecting this social reality, fat female characters in young adult literature are depicted as unpopular and as

experiencing strained relationships (Beineke, 1998; Glessner, Hoover, & Hazlett, 2006). Beth Younger's (2009) analysis revealed that fat female characters are simultaneously (re)presented in literature as sexually promiscuous and as passive and powerless. These portrayals perpetuate long-held, negative views regarding fat females.

Fat bodies are reviled, and females in the United States are bombarded with images of an ideal, thin body that is so narrowly defined as to be unattainable for most women (Lipkin, 2009). The result of this barrage of media and cultural messages is that many girls and women find it inconceivable that other body types might be seen as beautiful, and they unquestioningly accept the ideal body as naturalistic: as originating in their personal desires and basic instincts (Hubler, 2000; Lipkin, 2009). McQuillan (2004) found that girls as young as five evaluate their own and others' bodies and identify being fat as unattractive and undesirable. Similarly, fat female characters in young adult novels also struggle with appearance and respond to societal pressures to conform to body image ideals (Glessner, Hoover, & Hazlett, 2006). Quick (2008) found that the ideal body is the only body presented as beautiful in young adult novels, thus reflecting and perpetuating current normative constructions.

Given this early and persistent indoctrination, it is not surprising that many girls and women develop eating disorders as a result of chronic dieting and weight cycling in pursuit of this ideal body; they help fuel the multibillion-dollar publishing, pharmaceutical, medical, advertising, diet, and fitness industries (Farrell, 2011; Fisher & Harrison, 2009; Lyons, 2009, Wann 2009). Fat female characters in young adult novels also diet in pursuit of the ideal body (Beineke, 1998; Glessner, Hoover, & Hazlett, 2006; Quick, 2008). Despite the relentless pursuit of weight loss, research does not support that dieting and exercise result in permanent weight loss nor in increased long-term health benefits; to the contrary, chronic dieting has been linked to an increase in high blood pressure, depression, and eating disorders (Burgard, 2009; Farrell, 2001; Lyons, 2009). In fact, three years after beginning to diet, 76% of dieters weigh more than before dieting, and the percentage jumps to 95% after five years (Kulick & Meneley, 2005). Lyons (2009) reports that in a study of women weighing over 200 pounds, those who were the most overweight started dieting before the age of fourteen. Dieting is a complex undertaking that does not reliably result in permanent weight loss and certainly not in the ideal, thin body.

Complicating the landscape beyond the rhetoric of the obesity epidemic and the cult of thinness is the construction of disordered eating as an addiction. The discourse of food addiction draws on its similarities to drug or alcohol dependence, focusing particularly on the standard addictive behaviors of obsession, compulsion, and denial (Davis & Carter, 2009; McQuillan, 2004; Rogers & Smit, 2000; Sheppard, 1989). There are various models of addiction, and each suggests something different about the person who compulsively overeats (Fisher & Harrison, 2009). The common and highly stigmatizing moral model views addiction as the result of personal choice; the addict is responsible for the addiction, and it is the addict's responsibility to effect change (Fisher & Harrison, 2009). This dovetails with and reinforces the notion that fat people are undisciplined, immoral, and gluttonous; their weight is their fault, and they are "condemned by the world for being greedy and fat" (Sheppard, 1989, p. 26).

The discourse of food addiction includes four identifiable stages (Shappard, 1989). The first stage features preoccupation with food, sneaking food to avoid intervention and/or to avoid the embarrassment of public eating, using food to mask emotions, over-concern with weight, and experiencing self-loathing about overeating. The second stage is characterized by increased loss of control over food intake, escalated attempts to deceive oneself and others, blaming the overeating on external forces, and lethargy, irritability, and depression. The addict may enter a recovery phase after an experience of "hitting bottom" when denial is no longer possible, she comes to believe she has the efficacy to change, and she takes steps to do so (Prochaska, DiClemente, & Norcross, 1992). The fourth stage of addiction involves maintenance to prevent relapse into addictive eating, and at this stage the recovering addict senses that she is becoming the kind of person she wants to be (Prochaska, DiClemente, & Norcross, 1992). Recovery from food addiction involves actions and attitudes that perpetuate the stigmatization of fat and the valorization of the ideal thin body. My analysis of these eight young adult novels featuring fat female protagonists reveals that the discourse of food addiction has made its way into the (re)presentation of fat female protagonists in young adult literature.

Study Methods

This study is positioned within the constructed world of the obesity epidemic, the cult of thinness, and the discourse of food addiction. The goal of the study was to determine how fat

female protagonists are (re)presented in young adult literature: to make visible the version of reality authors construct and convey to adolescents.

Book Selection and Summaries

Bianca Ianzito participated in this study as a co-analyst, and we began by establishing parameters for selecting a purposeful sample that would maintain our focus, ensure information-rich novels, and yield a manageable data set (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2012; Gay & Airasian, 2000). Relying on our personal knowledge of young adult literature and online literature databases, we identified contemporary realistic fiction published between 2000 and 2013 featuring fat female protagonists. Bianca is a middle school language arts teacher, so we limited our text set to novels recommended for readers overlapping grades 6-8. Literary quality became our final criteria as we retained books favorably reviewed or highly recommended by reputable sources (Booklist, Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books (BCCB), Voice of Youth Advocates (VOYA)). A brief summary of each novel follows, and Table 1 summarizes characteristics of each novel and its protagonist.

Fat Angie (Charlton-Trujillo, 2013)

Angie is an overweight, high school outcast. Her sister is missing in action in Afghanistan, Angie has survived a suicide attempt, and she endures the bullying of her peers and her mother. KC Romance helps her see herself from a different perspective, yet KC has her own painful secrets. Angie hopes that making the basketball team will be the catalyst of her redemption.

If a Tree Falls at Lunch Period (Choldenko, 2007)

Narrators Kirsten and Walker navigate separate problems in middle school: Kirsten is slightly overweight and extremely self-conscious, and Walker is a new, biracial scholarship student. Through their developing friendship, they find they are closer than they think, and Walker helps Kirsten see the beauty in herself and in their imperfect families.

Skinny (Cooner, 2012)

Skinny is the name of Ever Davies' subconscious self, a name that does not describe her actual body. The novel details Ever's struggles after gastric bypass surgery and her unchanging self-perception. Despite her weight loss, Ever cannot silence Skinny until she realizes she has misjudged and alienated those who care about her, and she embraces herself as worthy and talented.

The Second Life of Abigail Walker (Dowell, 2012)

Sixth grader Abigail Walker endures the cloaked insults of her mother and father and the bullying from a mean girl at school simply for weighing a few pounds more than the "normals" in her class. Then Abigail meets caring and quirky Anders, who immediately accepts and identifies with her. Her budding friendship with Anders, his grandmother, and his veteran father, who struggles with PTSD, give Abigail the confidence to stand up for herself.

Looks (George, 2008)

Even though Meghan Ball is the most obese person at Valley Regional High, she is effectively invisible. Meghan becomes intrigued by new student Aimee Zorn, an angry girl struggling with anorexia. Aimee and Meghan form an unlikely alliance after they are both wronged by, and plot to take revenge on, Cara. Revenge is sweet, but sweeter still is finding the friendship they both longed for.

The Earth, my Butt, and Other Big Round Things (Mackler, 2003)

Virginia Shreve is the overweight outcast in her seemingly perfect family. When her best friend moves across the country and her older sister moves around the world, Virginia is left with her passive-aggressive mother, insensitive father, and arrogant brother. Acknowledging the cracks in her family's perfection is the catalyst for physical and emotional changes that allow Virginia to appreciate her body and form healthier relationships with others.

Artichoke's Heart (Supplee, 2008)

Rosemary Goode lives with her mother who runs a popular beauty salon in small-town Tennessee. Rosemary decides that she must take extreme measures to lose weight to be happy and to be noticed by her loved-from-afar basketball player crush. The diet has extreme physical side-effects, but the help and friendship of a fit and popular girl helps her lose weight and find the courage to be herself.

Big Fat Manifesto (Vaught, 2008)

Jamie Carcaterra is a role model for fat females everywhere. Her high school career, her school newspaper column, and romance are going just as planned. But when her boyfriend has gastric bypass surgery, her world is turned upside down. Jamie's insecurities are brought to the fore when her persona as "The Fat Girl" backfires, and the media turn against her. Jamie confronts her self-doubt and begins to recognize the totality of her identity which goes far beyond being fat.

Table 1: Attributes of Novels in the Text Set

Title *novels listed alphabetically by author	Weight Focus	Character	Age	Description of Weight	Recommended Range of Intended Readers
<i>Fat Angie</i> (Charlton- Trujillo, 2013)	Fat Focused	Angie	Freshman	Moderately overweight	Gr. 6-12
<i>If a Tree Falls at Lunch Period</i> (Choldenko, 2007)	Fat Incidental	Kirsten McKenna	7 th grade	Moderately overweight	Gr. 6-8
<i>Skinny</i> (Cooner, 2012)	Fat Focused	Ever Davies	Sophomore 15 yrs old	Morbidly obese: 302 lbs	Gr. 6-10
<i>The Second Life of Abigail Walker</i> (Dowell, 2012)	Fat Incidental	Abigail Walker	6 th grade	Moderately overweight: 105 lbs	Gr. 4-7
<i>Looks</i> (George, 2008)	Fat Incidental	Meghan Ball	Sophomore	Morbidly Obese	Gr. 7-10
<i>The Earth, my Butt, and Other Big Round Things</i> (Mackler, 2003)	Fat Focused	Virginia Shreves	15 yrs old	Moderately overweight	Gr. 7-10
<i>Artichoke's Heart</i> (Supplee, 2008)	Fat Focused	Rosemary (Rosie) Goode		Moderately overweight: 5'6, 190 lbs	Gr. 7-10

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<i>Big Fat Manifesto</i> (Vaught, 2008)	Fat Focused	Jamie Carcaterra	Senior	Obese	Gr. 7-12
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Analysis Procedures

Analyzing texts qualitatively is subjective, intuitive, and interpretive since readers, as actualized subjects, construct unique meanings in response to texts (Attride-Stirling, 2001; Gay & Airasian, 2000; Krippendorff, 2004). Thus, our individual responses to each novel were shaped by our personalities and perspectives, and Bianca and I brought our personalities and perspectives to our analyses as researchers (Rosenblatt, 2005; Bender-Slack, 2010). Multiple stories might be constructed from our data, yet our particular story is not “idiosyncratic or arbitrary” (Goldman & Wiley, 2004, p. 82); we worked systematically to ensure that our interpretations and intuitions were rigorous and cogent.

We drew on critical discourse analysis to guide our work with these novels. Critical discourse analysis encourages analysts to consider the contexts within which the text was produced and consumed, and it involves reading texts for the ways they (re)present and produce versions of reality. We believe these novels constitute a “connected discourse” (Krippendorff, 2004, p. 64) about fat female protagonists. As do all discourses, these novels present a particular way of understanding fat females rather than simply reflecting a given reality or absolute truth, and our goal was to identify this discourse (Bloome, et al., 2008; Florio-Ruane & Morrell, 2004). There is a tradition of using critical discourse analysis to discern how texts and talk work within power hierarchies as social practice. It has been used to analyze media depictions of politicians, new media literacies and spoken language, the functions of spoken language in films or in television news, and the realities constructed by public documents, etc. (Florio-Ruane & Morrell, 2004). However, critical discourse analysis has also been used by researchers to analyze children’s and young adult literature. Rogers and Christian (2007) looked at the construction of race in children’s literature, Glenn (2008) critiqued the ways young adult novels encourage capitalist consumption, Curwood (2013) evaluated the portrayal of adolescent characters with disabilities, and Smith (2015) analyzed the impact of feminism on versions of *Rapunzel*. Our analysis aligns with this scholarship employing critical discourse analysis to evaluate constructions in literature.

Following the approach outlined by Glenn (2008) in her work with young adult literature, we engaged in deliberate readings of each novel, independently reading each book twice. Our first reading was from an aesthetic stance to “live through” the story (Rosenblatt, 2005). After our first readings, we realized that fat (re)presentation functions in two different ways in these novels: five novels are “fat focused” problem novels wherein the protagonist's weight and body image drive the plot while three novels are “fat incidental” with the protagonist's weight and body image of concern but not central to the plot. Our second readings were close readings guided by three *a priori* thematic categories developed in response to our review of the literature (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2012; Krippendorff, 2004). We carefully noted 1) the language the protagonist and others use in regard to her body, 2) how those in her immediate community respond to her, and 3) if/how the sociocultural structures that “other” fat women are accepted, interrogated, or challenged. These *a priori* thematic categories focused our reading and influenced what we noted as significant (Charmaz, 2006). After these two readings, we compared our separate analyses returning to each book a third time to support and/or trouble our understandings of language, community, and culture with specific textual evidence.

In the final stage of analysis, we individually created and then discussed thematic charts reflecting our analyses of the novels as a set. We used this visual representation of our data to move from analyzing the manifest content of each novel in relation to our *a priori* questions to considering the latent content across the novels as we grappled with the implications of the entire corpus of data; we moved from looking at isolated themes in each novel to looking across themes and across texts. We moved from the obvious, surface-level meanings within each novel to the inferred, underlying messages across all novels (Attride-Stirling, 2001; Charmaz, 2006; Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2012; Miles & Huberman, 1984). Although our thematic charts cannot be compressed to be included in this article, Table 2 shows the coding scheme we used.

Table 2: Thematic Coding and Questions within each Code

LANGUAGE	COMMUNITY	SOCIOCULTURAL
<p>Self-Talk</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What does the character say about herself? 	<p>Allies</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who are the characters who accept and/or support the fat character? • In what specific ways do the allies support her? 	<p>Fashion/Clothing</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the fat female’s experience with fashion/clothing? • What does the protagonist do based on this experience?
<p>Self-Perception</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What does the character’s language imply about how she perceives herself? • How does her perception of herself influence her actions? 	<p>Enemies</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who are the characters who overtly bully or dislike the character? • In what specific ways do these enemies act toward the fat female? 	<p>Food</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the fat female’s relationship with food? • What does the character do based on this relationship?
<p>Other-Talk</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What do others say about the fat character? • What do allies say? Enemies? 		<p>Medical Profession</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What experiences does the fat female have with those in the medical profession? • What does the character do based on this experience?
<p>Other-Perceptions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What does the language of others imply about how they perceive the fat character? 		<p>Critique</p> <p>What evidence is there that the fat female:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • is aware of the power of advertising? • critiques the built environment?

		<ul style="list-style-type: none">• critiques the ideal, thin body?• critiques the male/public gaze?• questions dieting and/or the diet industry?
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The (Re)presentation of Fat Female Protagonists

The plot structure of these novels follows a dramatic arc which creates a trajectory of obsession, a traumatic or revelatory turning point, and a period of self-transformation with or without weight loss. We saw that the latent content (re)presents overeating as obsession with and/or addiction to food. In various ways and to varying degrees, the novels all depict the stages and characteristics of food addiction: self-loathing, binge eating, hoarding food, eating in secret, interventions, a turning point, and a transformation. This trajectory and (re)presentation is evident, with no discernible difference, in both the “fat focused” and the “fat incidental” novels. Each character, regardless of the role her weight plays in the plot, is portrayed as obsessed with and/or addicted to food.

Multiple terms name and describe obsession with or addiction to food: emotional eating, compulsive overeating, binge eating, eating disorders, eating disturbances, and disordered eating. I use the term “obsession” to describe the protagonists' relationship with food and “addiction” to describe the (re)presentation of these fat female protagonists as it relates to the dramatic arc. In the following section, I discuss the version of reality these novels present; fat female protagonists are obsessed with/addicted to food.

Discussion of Findings: Fat Female Protagonists and Food Addiction

Research on food addiction supports our interpretation that these fat female protagonists are (re)presented as obsessed with/addicted to food, and the dramatic arc of the novels facilitates this construction. The exposition and rising action present characteristics of the first and second stages of food addiction. The climax initiates the action stage of recovery when the female protagonist experiences a turning point, a “bottom,” after which she vows to change; she may lose weight through dieting, exercise, or surgery, or she may change without weight loss. This

turning point is most often a traumatic event after which the character can no longer deny her downward spiral. The falling action and denouement continue the action and maintenance stages of recovery as the protagonist develops a new conception of self and of self-in-relationship. The discussion that follows presents the characteristics of food addiction as they are constructed in this set of young adult novels. I also provide support for our interpretation by including findings from research with fat women that emphasizes the parallels between the (re)presentation of fat female protagonists in literature and the experiences of women embodied in the actual world.

Obsession and Self-loathing

Each of these novels focuses on the protagonist's obsession with food. Detailed flashbacks revealing a traumatic event that was the catalyst of her food obsession are common. In *Skinny* (Cooner, 2012), Ever "cover[s] herself in grief and fat" (p. 5) after her mother dies. Angie's sister is missing in action in Afghanistan in *Fat Angie* (Charlton-Trujillo, 2013), and Kirsten's parents divorce in *If a Tree Falls at Lunch Period* (Choldenko, 2007). This detailing of the protagonists' adversities implies that they are responsible; obsession with food is a direct result of poor coping skills, and these girls "wear [their] failure for everyone to see" (Cooner, 2012, p. 35). This perpetuates the moral model of addiction implying that the protagonist is to blame for her obsession with food.

McQuillan's (2004) research revealed that a woman addicted to food "spends most of her time thinking about food, anticipating eating, planning her next meal or snack, and, more often than not, worrying about what effect the food she eats has on her weight" (p. 15). Rosemary, in *Artichoke's Heart* (Supplee, 2008), provides an uncanny parallel to McQuillan's findings. She asserts, "All I do is think about food, try to resist food, give into food, hate myself over food" (p. 11). Similarly, Kirsten tries to resist food but says, "The next thing I know, I'm walking back to the kitchen in a trance – the sugar is calling me" (Choldenko, 2007, p. 14). In *The Second Life of Abigail Walker* (Dowell, 2012), Abby daydreams about food constantly and cannot control her cravings or her "secret candy life" (p. 26).

A litany of the food the fat female protagonists consume in one sitting is common across novels as further evidence of their obsession with food and of their out-of-control eating. One day:

Angie had eaten three doughnuts and two Big Macs. And a small fry. And a Diet Coke. And a Hershey's bar and a bag of Mr. Peanuts. And three Taco Supremes from Taco Bell. And an Andes mint from her mother's nightstand drawer. (Charlton-Trujillo, 2013, p. 8)

Kirsten stashes snacks in her backpack and is embarrassed when classmates see that it contains "two bags of potato chips, a Snickers, and a bag of Famous Amos chocolate chip cookies" (Choldenko, 2007, p. 42). As she sneaks these forbidden foods, Kirsten imagines herself in a size 3 bikini.

Many of the characters binge eat in private, evading the judgmental gaze of family, peers, and society at large. This is consistent with women obsessed with food who "eat healthful amounts of food in front of other people and then secretly overeat at home [where they] can hide it" (McQuillan, 2004, p. 15). Rosemary notes that "when you're normal-sized, no one cares what you eat [but] when you're fat, it's everybody's business" (Supplee, 2008 p. 6), so she keeps her secret lovers, Mr. Hershey, Mr. Reeses, and Mr. M&M, stashed underneath her bed. Ever eats salads and fruit publicly but stuffs herself privately. She says:

I try to hide the actual eating part from almost everyone, especially the bad stuff that I'm not supposed to eat, because everyone knows the fat girl is going to devour the big chocolate sundae with the sprinkles on top, right? It's expected. Publicly, at the school lunchroom table, I eat salads and fruit. But secretly I continually push enough food in to my body to result in my current weight. (Cooner, 2012, p. 23)

In *The Earth, My Butt, and Other Big Round Things* (Mackler, 2003), Virginia eats Twinkies for lunch in a second-floor bathroom to hide her food consumption from her classmates. Similarly, in *My Big Fat Manifesto* (Vaught, 2008), Jamie stopped eating in the cafeteria to avoid people staring at the fat girl eating. She tells us, "I haven't eaten in front of people since fifth grade, when I got tired of the staring, even from the teachers" (p. 14).

After not eating at all or eating healthily in public, however, these protagonists binge in private. Jaime is "totally starving from not eating all day long," and she eats "way too fast ... everything on the plate and left overs in plastic containers in the fridge, too ... (Vaught, 2008, p. 15). This private, binge eating is often described as a sensual experience. After sneaking pizza to her room, Abby takes "bite after humongous bite, the sausage and cheese and crust filling up her mouth and making her whole body hum" (Dowell, 2012, p. 87). In *Looks* (George, 2008),

Meghan experiences “the salty sweetness flood[ing] her mind like a wave breaking on the beach” (p. 139). For these characters, the experience of eating food goes far beyond obtaining sustenance to a sensual feeling of release that occurs out of the public eye.

The protagonist's self-loathing is evident in these novels. Their feelings of inferiority and their self-loathing develop in response to cultural messages that stigmatize them for being fat and also in response to their inability to control what they eat. Rosemary is “consumed by overeater’s guilt” (Supplee, 2008, p. 4) and experiences “a wave of self-hatred so violent, a sense of disgust and regret so crippling” (p. 13) that she feels she might die. Angie hides, hoards, and turns to food for comfort and hates herself for doing so, and when a classmate reaches out in friendship, she fights “a host of self-loathing thoughts” (Charlton-Trujillo, 2013, p. 19) because she feels she is not worthy of friendship.

This self-loathing is also reflected in Virginia’s “fat girl code of conduct” which states:

1. Any sexual activity is a secret. ...
2. Don’t discuss your weight with him. ... You both know it’s there, so don’t start bemoaning your body and pressure him into lying. ...
3. Go further than skinny girls. ... If you can’t sell him on your body, you’d better overcompensate with sexual perks.
4. Never, ever, ever, ever, ever push the relationship thing. ... Bottom line: Let him get the milk without having to buy the cow. (Mackler, 2003, p. 16-17)

Virginia believes she is unworthy simply because she is fat, and the only way she can attract a boy is through sexual promiscuity. Kirsten also contrasts what thin girls can do that fat girls cannot do, and these observations reflect her belief that her body must be hidden since it is not as beautiful as a thin body. At one point she observes, “Rory is wearing makeup and she’s got new clothes. They’re tighter, with a lot more skin showing – the kind of clothes fat girls can’t wear” (Choldenko, 2007, p. 123). Jamie masks her feelings of inferiority with bravado. However, when she begins her transformation, she reflects on what she wrote as *The Fat Girl* saying:

I keep coming back to words *I’ve* written, about how Fat Girls don’t play the lead or get the guy. About how we’re not supposed to be popular, how we’re supposed to be pathetic, sad wallflowers. I was poking fun at those myths. So, what the hell? Do I believe them myself, at least a little bit? (Vaught, 2008, p. 284)

Jamie has internalized cultural messages about her inferiority and the role she must play because she is fat. This is consistent with McQuillan's (2004) observation that women who are addicted to food “suffer from feelings of shame, guilt, low self-esteem, and isolation” (p. xii). These novels reinforce for readers that this is how fat girls *should* feel.

Many of these protagonists begin dieting with or at the insistence of their mothers or other family members. Virginia's mother eats only low-calorie diet foods and monitors and criticizes what Virginia eats (Mackler, 2003), and while Rosemary's mother is critical of her weight, it is her aunt who constantly pressures her to diet. Rosemary internalizes an implicit message in these dieting suggestions: “It's like I'm not good enough just the way I am. Like all the other good things I do in life – good grades and working at the salon – like none of that counts because I'm fat” (Supplee, 2008, p. 106). Ever was “a pretty normal-sized little girl” (Cooner, 2012, p. 30) when she was nine, yet she and her mother started dieting and exercising together:

So we joined Weight Watchers together – the only mother/daughter team.

Then came the exercise craze. We walked, we Jazzercised, we did water aerobics. We balanced encyclopedias on our ankles, holding up our legs inches off the living room carpet until we couldn't stand the burning thigh muscles any longer. (p. 30)

These mothers perpetuate the social constructions that marginalize fat girls and contribute to their self-loathing. Furthermore, insisting that these young girls diet contributes to their binge eating and obsession with food.

Increased Desperation and Negative Interventions

In this phase of the protagonists' food addiction, their self-loathing persists as their desperation intensifies. Many of the girls take drastic measures to lose weight. These sometimes dangerous attempts reflect the girls' growing awareness of their obsession with food, but they are unable to control their eating and have not yet experienced the life-changing event that will lead to their eventual transformation and recovery. Rosemary cannot understand her “inability to eat sensible portions of food” (Supplee, 2008, p. 107) and recognizes that “one tiny seeming harmless bowl of Cheerios would lead [her] down the twisted path of Fat Girl Logic” (p. 132). She purposefully gives herself food poisoning prior to beginning an extreme diet of Pounds-Away weight-loss shakes. This is her attempt to avoid eating “like an addict who sniffs aerosol

cans” (Supplee, 2008, p. 49). She experiences constant hunger, difficulty concentrating, and intestinal problems while on this diet. Similarly, Virginia skips meals to lose weight quickly, resulting in dizziness and the inability to focus mentally (Mackler, 2003). Ever has gone to extreme measures to lose weight and recognizes the desperation they represent. She lists them while talking to a nurse:

Weight Watchers when I was nine and fat camp when I was eleven. ... cutting carbs and counting calories. ... I don't tell her about the cabbage diet or the lemon water diet or the cayenne pepper diet, because that's just crazy. My dad throws in the hypnotherapist I went to see down in Conroe when I was twelve. I forgot about that one. (Cooner, 2012, p. 51)

These protagonists know they have lost the ability to control their eating, and they are willing to go to any length to regain control and lose weight; yet they cannot do either.

Many of the protagonists fuel their low self-esteem with self-talk imagining what others think of them, and this self-talk increases in intensity. For example, Ever internalizes imagined public scrutiny into her alter-ego, Skinny. Skinny preys on what little confidence Ever has by intervening in social situations and telling Ever things like, “I can't believe a human being can weigh this much” (p. 59). Likewise, Abby imagines the judgmental gaze of others. As she climbs a fence to retrieve a soccer ball, she wonders if her classmates are “looking at her butt? Were they thinking it was big?” (Dowell, 2012, p. 49), and when she contemplates horseback riding she imagines, “They'd probably look at her and think she was too fat to get on a horse anyway” (p. 115). Kirsten believes her classmates must try to figure out how to get around her in the hall: “Butt approaching on the left: steer right, steer right!” (Choldenko, 2007, p. 10). This judgmental self-talk exemplifies the extent to which these protagonists have internalized cultural messages that condemn and blame them for the bodies they inhabit thereby increasing their isolation.

These fat protagonists, like women with food addiction, use mirrors as a vehicle of criticism (McQuillan, 2004; Younger, 2009). The mirror reflects back to them their self-critical gaze and that of others. Jamie hates seeing herself in mirrors and wishes she “could be all Fat Girl about it and love [her] big body, find it beautiful” (Vaught, 2008, p. 207), but she cannot. When Angie sees herself in a mirror, she tries “to see the Angie beneath the fat. ... But she just [sees] fat ... Fat Angie” (Charlton-Trujillo, 2013, p. 90). Rosemary imagines that the full-length mirror on the back of her bathroom door talks to her, and she can hear “the wicked mirror

laughing hysterically” (Supplee, 2008, p. 146) as she contemplates running with a new friend. Virginia hates her body so much that she cannot guarantee she will not commit suicide as did her namesake, Virginia Wolfe. In a particularly disturbing scene, she abuses her body as she stands naked before a mirror:

I grab a fold of my tummy and squeeze. ... I pinch the flesh on my thighs [which are] dimpled with cellulite, resembling cottage cheese, ... I pinch and squeeze all over my butt cheeks, so hard that it leaves red marks. ... I proceed to pinch every unsightly part of my body – my inner thighs, my upper arms, my breasts, my hips. (Mackler, 2003, p. 78)

Virginia ends up sobbing in the fetal position on the floor. Virginia’s self-loathing has escalated to the point of self-inflicted harm.

In some of the books, thin mothers are ruthless in their interventions as they themselves have “won” their personal weight-loss battles. Angie’s mother bullies Angie into dieting telling her, “No one is ever going to love you if you stay fat” (Charlton-Trujillo, 2013, p. 43), and she forces Angie in front of a mirror, squeezes the skin on her stomach, and says, “You *are* sick and you’re fat” (p. 166). Abby’s parents put her on a diet when she was ten. Her mother wants Abby to be thin and popular but cloaks her insults about Abby’s body and eating behaviors as concern: “The sausage is for the boys and Dad, okay? You don’t need sausage. It’s so fatty” (Dowell, 2012, p. 80). These negative interventions fuel the protagonists’ desperate behaviors, drive their obsession with food further from the public eye, and increase their desperation.

The father figures’ roles are varied: some are highly involved while others are distant or simply ignorant of their daughters’ problems and emotional needs. Virginia’s father enjoys her company, and they watch baseball and eat junk food together. However, he openly admires extremely thin women and focuses on Virginia’s weight while ignoring other positive aspects of her identity. At one point he tells her she has a pretty face but would be much prettier if she “lost twenty or thirty pounds” (Mackler, 2003, p. 67), and he buys her “a tell-all, show-all, full-length mirror” (p. 75) as an incentive to lose weight. This is the same mirror, mentioned earlier, in front of which Virginia abuses herself in an attempt to exorcise her fat. Ever’s dad shows genuine concern for his daughter when she chooses to get gastric bypass surgery: “Are you sure you want to do this, peanut? You know I love you no matter what, right?” (Cooner, 2012, p.78). Yet when Ever started gaining weight after her mother’s death, he sent her a letter sharing his concern that

“finding someone who will take the time to look beyond just [her] looks might be hard” and that “being overweight may keep [her] from doing everything [she] wants” (p. 77).

Abby’s father expects her to combine diet and exercise. When she walks for exercise, he suggests she should jog: “Great for your heart, and it really burns the calories” (Dowell, 2012, p. 84). “Calories in, calories out. That’s the formula, Ab. You have to burn more calories than you take in. That’s all there is to it” (p. 84). Admonishing young girls in this way perpetuates the myth that long-term weight loss is possible, that the ideal, thin body is attainable through dieting and exercise, and that a fat body is necessarily unhealthy (Burgard, 2009; Farrell, 2001; Kulick & Meneley, 2005; Lyons, 2009). These negative interventions do nothing to help the fat female protagonists overcome their obsession with food nor their ability to control their eating. It does nothing to help them see their fat bodies as potentially beautiful.

Other characters also bully the protagonists because of their obsession with food and their resultant weight. Angie’s male classmate pokes and prods her body, seeming to think that a fat body is a public body; others yell fat-shaming insults, and her female nemesis harasses her for having the audacity to try out for the basketball team. She lists her classmate’s abuses: pantsing, egging, mooing, spitting, yelling obscenities, and stealing from her (Charlton-Trujillo, 2013). Meghan is constantly harassed and humiliated by sexually explicit slurs from an ex-childhood friend: “I want you to have my babies, Butter Ball” (George, 2008, p. 6); “Come on, gorgeous, you know you want me. Say you want me. Tell me you *want* me, Butter Ball” (p. 7); and “I bet you feel like a big waterbed, don’t you, beautiful. I just want to flop down on top of you and bounce all night long, boing, boing, boing – ” (p. 7). Abby ravenously eats candy bars from a bowl believing she is alone during a sleep-over, but two girls make a secret video of her and threaten to post it on YouTube. Abby internalizes their harassment thinking “she was still a girl who stuffed herself with candy bars, a girl everyone else laughed at. ... Stupid, fat Abby stuffing her mouth. No wonder people hated her. She deserved it” (Dowell, 2012, p. 211).

Even medical professionals belittle and humiliate these fat female protagonists. This is consistent with research that “has identified weight bias in virtually all health professionals – physicians, nurses, dietitians, and therapists – including those who specialize in obesity treatment” (Lyons, 2009, p. 85). A nurse, unable to get a blood sample from Ever, makes it clear that it is because Ever is so fat – not because of her own ineptitude or because of inadequate medical equipment (Cooner, 2012). Virginia bemoans that the paper robe is “smaller than a

cocktail napkin” (Mackler, 2003, p. 63) and hears the nurse groan when she weighs her. Jamie’s experience is also fraught with gowns that do not fit, difficulty taking a blood sample, and a blood pressure cuff that is too small. Her doctor assumes she is sexually inactive because of her weight and, despite the fact that her blood pressure and blood work are good, tells her she “hasn’t tried hard enough” (Vaught, 2008, p. 241) and that if she changed her “mind-set [she] might have better results with weight control” (p. 242). When the doctor leaves the examination room, Jamie says, “I cry, and hate him and hate that I’m crying” (p. 245). It is of note that none of these fat female protagonists have weight-related health issues; they are actually portrayed as healthy adolescents. The treatment they receive from health professionals seems to be prejudicial punishment for not being thin. These experiences of medical equipment that is not designed to accommodate fat bodies, medical professionals who neglect tests such as pap smears or gynecologic exams, disrespectful treatment, and unsolicited advice to lose weight is common in the embodied world as well (Lyons, 2009; Wann, 2009). Females are treated insensitively simply because they are fat, and this treatment increases their sense of worthlessness and their obsession with food.

Hitting Bottom

Following the protagonist's painful and often extensive period of self-loathing and desperate behavior, a traumatic event occurs that constitutes the character’s “bottom.” This event causes many of the girls to admit and address their obsession with food. The protagonists may still experience grief and self-loathing after hitting bottom, but this climactic event is a turning point. Meghan finds solace while binge eating in solitude. In a secluded barn, she gorges on a tremendous amount of junk food:

And she is eating with both hands now, supply pocket starting to empty out—panicky feelings fluttering in her chest: *What if there’s not enough?* Smartfood, salty cheese handfuls, Reese’s pieces, crunchy melty mouthfuls, and at last Meghan starts to feel the stirrings of anesthesia tingling at the ends of her fingers and toes. (George, 2008, p. 141)

Food acts as a drug for Meghan, and she feels a “buzzing blackness” that will eventually “drown her in nothingness” (p. 143). As she nears the end of her binge, she cannot stop eating although she wants “to both gobble it down and hurl it away at the same time” (p. 143). Meghan hits bottom when she literally eats herself into a food-induced blackout.

Angie's bottom occurs when she finally acknowledges that her sister is dead and rushes to her girlfriend's house for solace. However, she discovers her girlfriend cutting herself in her bathtub. In an attempt to dull her emotional pain, Angie:

... tore at the Swiss Roll package with her perfectly straight teeth.

As if famished, she jammed the rolls into her plump cheeks. A wave of panic swam from her gut to her heart. Ripping at package after package, she stuffed one Little Debbie after another into her body. Tears streamed down her face. She sobbed, face full of Little Debbie's sweet Swiss Rolls.

Fat Angie beat her temples with her palms. Harder and Harder. Threw her elbows into the concrete store wall. Then leaned forward and upchucked. (Charlton-Trujillo, 2013, p. 239-240)

Not all of the traumatic events that constitute a protagonists' bottom involve food. Ever hits bottom during the spring awards assembly at her high school when the chair she is sitting on breaks, and she falls to the floor in front of the entire student body. In that moment, as her peers stare at her with looks of disgust and/or concern, Ever decides to effect change through bariatric surgery. In that moment of humiliation she thinks:

I don't care. If I die, I die. I will do whatever it takes. I will let them cut my stomach open and change my internal organs forever. Even if I have to have a stomach the size of an egg for the rest of my life, I will never feel this way again. (Cooner, 2012, p. 49)

When Jamie's boyfriend decides to have bariatric surgery, Jamie is secretly concerned that he will not want to be with her after he loses weight. After he loses a significant amount of weight, he tells Jamie he can help her "bring those curves down to a manageable level" (Vaught, 2008, p. 211). She says, "My smile stays stuck on my face even though I feel flat and cold all over and almost sick. *Manageable level?* Burke never found my curves unmanageable before. All of a sudden, I feel twice as huge. And out of place. ..." (p. 211). Jamie is humiliated and furious, and she realizes she has not been true to herself or anyone else. The trauma involved in the protagonists' turning points is relative in its intensity. What distinguishes the event is that the character can no longer deny her addiction to food and begins the process of recovery and identity transformation.

Recovery and Identity Transformation

After hitting bottom, the protagonists experience a revelation that results in an identity transformation. Prochaska, DiClemente, & Norcross (1992) assert that “helping relationships, consciousness raising, and self-liberation” (p. 1107) are key to recovery from food addiction. These elements are evident in the recovery and identity transformation of these fat female protagonists. Virginia visits her best friend in Seattle and returns with an eyebrow piercing and proceeds to dye her hair a bold shade of purple. She asserts, “It was like I was seeing myself for the first time” (Mackler, 2003, p. 176). She also eschews clothes that hide her body in favor of “More colors. More curves. Maybe even a little flesh exposure” (p. 188). Virginia eventually loses weight as a result of her new interest in kickboxing, but the catalyst for her transformation is that she realizes she uses food to seek comfort when she’s lonely and depressed and that she wants to “learn healthier ways to deal” (Mackler, 2003, p. 238). She gives up trying to fit in to her perceived perfect family and starts doing things she finds personally fulfilling. As part of her transformation, Virginia denounces the “fat girl code of conduct,” starts a webzine with like-minded classmates to “voice the things that people don’t ordinarily talk about” (p. 232), and enters into an honest and respectful relationship with her boyfriend.

Most of these protagonists receive help during their transformation. Rosemary has the support of friends and of a therapist. She is befriended by a popular, athletic peer who takes a genuine interest in Rosemary and helps her see how self-destructive she has been, and Rosemary’s love interest helps her “peel her spikes away” (Supplee, 2008, p. 253). Dr. Wallace, Rosemary’s therapist, helps her grow as a person. She discloses to Rosie that she was “at her fattest” when she got married, and wants Rosemary to know “that it’s possible to be fat and still be loved. You don’t have to wait until you lose weight to have a life” (p. 81).

Similarly, Kirsten achieves self-acceptance as Dr. Markovitz helps her identify and explore the issues she has with her parents rather than addressing surface, physical concerns through dieting. She tells Kirsten that although Kirsten has gained thirty pounds in four months, she will not recommend another diet. She asks instead, “Is it possible that eating is a way to divert attention from your parents’ problems?” (Choldenko, 2007, p. 75). Her newly discovered half-brother also encourages Kirsten to stick up for herself against her harassers and sets an example of the importance of knowing and being oneself.

Unlike the doctors in other novels, Virginia's doctor focuses on health rather than weight. As he examines her, he murmurs “very healthy” and “excellent” (Mackler, 2003, p. 63). Promoting a Health at Any Size philosophy, he tells Virginia’s mother that weight is “about fitness and nutrition and feeling good. Once those things fall into place, Virginia will become her natural body type ... which is different for every person” (p. 65-66). Virginia later admits, “I can’t believe what a relief it is to hear this out loud, like I’m not a factory defect or something” (p. 194). The positive support of allies helps these protagonists overcome their obsession with/addiction to food.

Teachers play an important role in supporting several of these fat female protagonists. Virginia’s former English teacher allows her to hang out in her office instead of hiding in the restroom during lunch. When Virginia begins dieting by skipping meals, Mrs. Crowley asks if she is okay because her “eyes don’t have their usual sparkle” (Mackler, 2003, p. 218). When Virginia tells her about her diet, Ms. Crowley cautions her and tells her about her own dieting experiences. Meghan is unexpectedly befriended by Mr. Handsley, also an English teacher, who encourages her to stand up for herself against the people who harass and humiliate her. He assures her that although she tries to be invisible, he sees her. He says, “When I look at you, Ms. Ball, what I see is a lovely young woman who is bright and strong and sensitive, and so observant I can actually observe you observing sometimes” (George, 2008, p. 218). These young women eventually hear their teachers’ messages, and it helps them during their recovery and transformation.

The protagonists' identity transformations frequently include a successful attempt at weight loss. Ever loses a total of 117 pounds after gastric bypass surgery, yet her real transformation occurs when she learns to believe in and love herself. Only then is she able to silence the voice of Skinny:

Skinny only exists inside my own head. She is part of me, but she’s only one part. There’s also an elephant part of me that is big and proud. And a singer part of me that people would love to hear. And a daughter part of me that misses her mother and loves her father. And maybe, there’s a friend part of me, too. (Cooner, 2012, p. 225)

Rosemary has a similar transformation that includes successful weight loss, yet losing weight does not ensure her inner transformation. She still sees herself as fat:

A horrible thought ran through my mind. Maybe I could weigh 110, look like whatever Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie's daughter is gonna look like one day, but I'd still feel this way. Maybe, no matter how hard I tried, I'd always be fat on the inside. (Supplee, 2008, p. 213)

It takes time and support, but Rosemary eventually focuses on belief in herself as the key to true happiness.

Angie loses weight in the process of training for and playing basketball. The narrator tells us: "Fat Angie may not have had a body worth promoting according to any number of fashion magazines on the market, but it was a healthier, stronger, and quite honestly, ready-to-kick-ass-and-take-names body" (Charlton-Trujillo, 2013, p. 134). Angie's inner transformation comes through opening herself up to accepting the realities of her life and to friendship. Many of these protagonists realize they contributed to their isolation and that there are people who have always loved and cared about them.

Other protagonists transform without weight loss. Jamie resists gastric bypass and any pressure to lose weight. Instead, she identifies the underlying cause of her insecurities and ends her false public bravado. While still embracing the title "Fat Girl," she no longer lets that aspect of her identity define her or her relationships. "Fat Girl" is part of who she is - not *all* of who she is: "a writer and an actress ... a decent student, a friend, a daughter, maybe an activist. ... [and she happens] to be fat" (Vaught, 2008, p. 302). Similarly, Meghan does not attempt to lose weight. In fact, she never acknowledges that her obsession with food may be a problem, but she does achieve happiness through friendship (George, 2008). For each protagonist, transformation of self is accompanied by transformation of self-in-relationship as she recovers from her food addiction and begins to live a more satisfying and fulfilling life: as she become the person she wants to be.

Problematizing the Addiction Model

We are often unaware of the powerful ways literature influences our thinking and our beliefs. Critical analysis allows us to consider its impact on our sense of self and on our perceptions of others, on how we define and redefine our relationships, and on the perceived deterministic nature of socially constructed and sanctioned versions of reality that permeate our thinking (Apol, 1998; Koppelman, 2009). Critical analysis allows us to consider the influences

that contribute to constructed narratives and to go beyond these narratives to consider alternative possibilities and alternative responses. This study reveals that fat female protagonists in these novels are (re)presented as obsessed with and/or addicted to food. The latent content reveals a trajectory of obsession with food and self-loathing with increasingly desperate behavior and negative interventions. The protagonists hit bottom and then enter a period of recovery and self-transformation with or without weight loss.

Aspects of this analysis are consistent with other analyses of young adult literature featuring fat female protagonists (Beineke, 1998; Glessner, Hoover, & Hazlett, 2006; Quick, 2008; Younger, 2009), yet this is the only study to identify the implicit addiction model. Quick (2008) found that a character's weight was often the result of deeper psychological problems, but this does not imply an obsession with and/or an addiction to food. Glessner, Hoover, and Hazlett (2006) found that fat characters suffer from low self-esteem and anxiety as well as strained relationships with their parent(s). They also identified that fat female protagonists commonly experience a "defining event, circumstance, or epiphany" which occasions a "newly found sense of purpose" and that they "come to understand that their happiness must be addressed by action on their part" resulting in weight loss through "the exercise of strength and determination" (p. 120). Yet they did not associate this trajectory with obsession/addiction.

Although the fat female protagonists in this study recover from food addiction, transform their conception of self and self-in-relationship, and achieve self-acceptance with or without weight loss, I believe this (re)presentation must be problematized. The novels perpetuate rather than deconstruct the ideal female body and the lengths to which fat females should go to attain it. Only two characters, Jamie, the daughter of obese parents (Vaught, 2008), and Ever, who notes that she and her mother had the "same rounded, curvy, pear-shaped bodies of *her* mother and two sisters" (Cooner, 2012, p. 29-30) subtly present the role of genetics in body type and weight. Although several novels include interaction between the protagonist and a medical professional, only Virginia's doctor emphasizes overall health rather than a number on the weight scale (Mackler, 2003). All other doctors belittle or censure the protagonist despite her healthy vitals. Although Jamie and Angie specifically state that the ideal body is socially constructed, none of the protagonists overtly mention the Health at Every Size movement (Vaught, 2008; Charlton-Trujillo, 2013). Presenting overeating as addiction stigmatizes fat females who are already

blamed for contributing to the obesity epidemic, and it fails to explore other contributors to body type.

Implications for Teachers and Adolescent Readers

Adolescent readers are neither passive nor are they naive, yet it is imperative that we guide them as they engage with (re)presentations of fat female protagonists. Based on a review of the literature and on this analysis, I suggest raising the following questions as starting points for critique:

- What position is the reader encouraged to take up in relationship to the fat female protagonist?
- Who is (re)presented as "normal"? Who is (re)presented as "other"? How are these constructions accomplished?
- What language does the fat female character use in relation to herself? What language do others use in reference to her?
- Is the ideal body standard upheld or challenged? Is it presented as naturalistic or as socially constructed?
- Does the narrative position multiple body-types as acceptable, beautiful, and worthy?
- Is fat presented as a sickness, a character flaw, or an addiction? Are multiple and complex reasons presented for differing body types?

Guiding adolescent readers in a critical reading of novels with fat female protagonists presents an opportunity to introduce them to the alternative Health at Every Size (HAES) model of public health. This is an approach for people of *all* sizes that differs from the conventional treatment model in that it emphasizes self-acceptance, self-nurturing, and healthy practices that lead to optimal physical and mental health; “HAES is not against weight loss; it is against the pursuit of weight loss” (Burgard, 2009, p. 44). Adolescent readers may be invited to consider how these novels and their personal lives would be different if we embraced body size diversity rather than stigmatizing and discriminating against those who are fat and if we stopped striving to attain the illusive ideal body. Wann (2009) observes that fat is a “floating signifier ... not a physical measurement” (p. xv). Women anywhere on the weight spectrum may experience fat oppression since it seems we can never be thin enough. Engaging in discussions about alternative

models of self-care may expose the prevalence of fat-hatred.; it may help each of us move toward acceptance of our bodies.

I also want to emphasize the importance of studying adolescent readers' engagement with and response to novels with fat female protagonists. I have provided a qualitative analysis that I hope will be of interest to teachers of middle and high school students, to those involved in teacher education, and to teachers of young adult literature. It is important to go beyond my literary analysis to learn how adolescent readers understand the ways fat female characters are portrayed in young adult literature. At this point, we have no indication of what impact this (re)presentation of obsession with and/or addiction to food and its resultant stigmatization has on adolescent readers. I agree with Hubler (2000) who believes it is important to shift from an initial focus on texts and their messages to a focus on adolescent readers and their unique meaning constructions. By analyzing adolescent readers' responses to these novels, we may identify their impact and the ways readers accept and/or challenge the social construction of the ideal body. Such studies could serve as a catalyst for critique and, perhaps, lead to activism for change. It is crucial that all generations of women, particularly our younger generation, develop positive body image in response to their strong, healthy bodies without censoring shape and size.

Acknowledgement: My sincere thanks to Bianca Ianzito for her significant contribution to this work. It was she who first recognized that these characters "hit bottom." Her insight focused our analysis on the discourse of food addiction, whereupon we returned to the literature to read research on disordered eating to (dis)confirm our interpretation.

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