Carpe Librum: Seize the (YA) Book

My Big, Fat YA Lit: Plus-Sized Female Main Characters
Aimee A. Rogers
University of North Dakota
aimee.rogers@UND.edu

It could be said that this column was a lifetime in the making—you see, I have been overweight and/or obese, or at least I have perceived myself as such, since I can remember. In many ways my weight is the biggest (no pun intended) aspect of who I am. It is the first, and oftentimes only, thing that others see when they look at me. It is the first, and oftentimes only, thing that I see when I look into a mirror. All of the other aspects of my personality and accomplishments are superseded by my physical appearance, specifically my size. My weight has affected my relationships with others and, perhaps more damagingly, my relationship with myself. By the time this column is published I will have entered my 40s; that is nearly four decades of feeling ashamed of the way I look. I wrote this column about young adult literature that features plus-sized female main characters in hopes that it will help the young adults and adults who might read these books escape from the decades of self-abuse that I have put myself through.

A quick glance in any crowded public space will reveal that I am not the only obese female in the United States. According to 2013–14 data, almost 38 percent of American adults are obese (“Obesity Rates and Trends Overview”). Obesity rates are higher among women than men; women are almost twice as likely to be extremely obese than men (“Obesity Rates and Trends Overview”). The obesity rates among teens are shocking as well; from 1980 to 2014, the rates of obesity in those 12 to 19 years old have increased from 5 percent to 20.5 percent (“Obesity Rates and Trends Overview”). In fact, about one in four young adults from ages 17 to 24 are too overweight to join the military (“Obesity Rates and Trends Overview”).

What does it mean to be obese? The categories of underweight, healthy weight, overweight, and obese are determined by body mass index (BMI). BMI is a measurement of body fat in relation to height and body weight. Even though BMI doesn’t directly measure body fat, it has become the standard by which weight categories are determined because it is simple, inexpensive, and non-invasive (“BMI”). Healthy weight is indicated by a BMI of between 18.5 and 24.9, overweight is a BMI between 25 and 29.9, obese is a BMI over 30, and extremely obese is a BMI of over 40 (“Overweight and Obesity Statistics”).

We are at a critical juncture. Not only are the rates of obesity increasing, but the amount of body shaming is increasing as well. While I do not believe that we can pinpoint one cause for the increase in body shaming, I do believe that social media has contributed to the trend. In addition, new technologies, such as Photoshop and airbrushing, have resulted in the presentation of unrealistic ideas of what women’s bodies look like.

It is more important than ever that we include realistic looking characters in our media, including novels, films, and commercials, for all ages. Some have started using social media to push back against body shaming with messages of body acceptance and body positivity. For example, some Instagram users have posted pictures of themselves with visible belly outlines, and there are numerous hashtags on Twitter, such as #FatGirlsCanTravel, that support the ideas of body acceptance and body positivity. However, I believe that young adult literature is also a natural place to include multidimensional, plus-sized female characters. As Beth Younger indicates,
“Young Adult fiction reflects social anxiety about female bodies” (45).

I may sound like a hypocrite when I say that it is essential that we read and write high-quality young adult literature that features plus-sized female characters who are presented as more than just their weight, and, perhaps more importantly, that we provide to the young adults in our lives characters who might serve as mirrors. However, it is difficult to find books that feature overweight or obese female main characters for which the focus of the book is not on their weight. As I worked to find books for this column, I struggled because, when you are female and overweight or obese, the weight often becomes the focus of who you are. And in many ways all overweight or obese women follow the unspoken fat girl code of conduct. Carolyn Mackler, in her Printz Honor book The Earth, My Butt, and Other Big Round Things, refers to a “fat girl code of conduct.” She includes some of the items that the main character, Virginia “Ginny” Shreves, writes about in her fat girl code of conduct. For example, “2. Don’t discuss your weight with him. Let’s face it. You both know it’s there, so don’t start bemoaning your body and pressure him into lying, i.e., ‘What are you talking about? You don’t look fat at all’” (Mackler 14). Therefore, it is a double-edged sword to find books that feature plus-sized female main characters in a multi-dimensional light.

**Dumplin’ by Julie Murphy**

Willowdean Dickson, called “Dumplin’” by her mom and “Will” by her friends, is an overweight 16-year-old living in a small town in Texas. At 16, Willowdean has accomplished something that I have been striving toward for almost 40 years: she feels comfortable in her own skin. Being overweight has been a non-issue for Willowdean and she doesn’t work toward—or worry about—losing weight. Even with the pressure from her mom, a former beauty queen, and from watching her beloved 500-pound Aunt Lucy die of a massive heart attack at 36, Will doesn’t focus on losing weight. In fact, she embraces who she is. For example, when she introduces herself to Bo, the new hot, athletic guy at work, “I held my hand out and introduced myself. ‘Willowdean,’ I said, ‘Cashier, Dolly Parton enthusiast, and resident fat girl’” (Murphy 8). However, Willowdean’s self-confidence wavers when Bo begins to show an interest in her. Will is not surprised by her interest in Bo, but his reciprocal interest in her has caused her to doubt herself. She wonders what others might say if they see her and Bo together and what kind of taunts they may have to endure. She worries about what he might think of her body if, and when, he touches her. Even as Will struggles with these conflicting emotions, she doesn’t turn to weight loss, but rather engages in an internal struggle to regain her confidence.

In an effort to embrace herself in her entirety, Will does something that she never in a million years thought she would do—she enters the Miss Clover City beauty pageant. This is the pageant that her mother had won and that she now directs. Willowdean wants to prove that she belongs on that stage as much as anyone else. Her decision to compete in the pageant inspires other unlikely pageant participants to sign up as well. Ultimately Willowdean relearns to accept herself for who she is, and, in the process, she grows closer to her mother. Near the end of the book, Willowdean comes to the following conclusion: “I guess sometimes the perfection we perceive in others is made up of a whole bunch of tiny imperfections, because some days the damn dress just won’t zip” (Murphy 369).

**Gabi, a Girl in Pieces by Isabel Quintero**

Seventeen-year-old Gabriela “Gabi” Hernandez, like Willowdean of Dumplin’, doesn’t allow herself to be defined by her weight. I really like author Isabel Quintero’s realistic presentation of Gabi’s thoughts about her body. Gabi vacillates between accepting and not accepting her body, which, I think, is a realistic portrayal of
everyone's approach to his or her body. For the most part Gabi feels OK about herself and her body. However, her mother often points out Gabi's weight and encourages her to do something about it. Her mother's hounding results in Gabi hiding her favorite snacks in her room so that she can eat them without having to bear her mother's disapproving looks.

Gabi, a Girl in Pieces is Gabi's diary of her last year of high school. In it, she chronicles her struggles as a young Mexican American woman living in Southern California. Gabi's mother wants to keep her rooted in the traditional Mexican values she grew up with, but Gabi doesn't want to be tethered to what she sees as old-fashioned ideas.

Gabi's blossoming sexuality has put her at odds with her mother's ideas about sex (that good girls keep their eyes open and their legs shut). Gabi doesn't want to be considered a bad girl just because she wants to experiment sexually with her boyfriend. Throughout the book, she wrestles with this dilemma. Gabi's desire to go away to college also conflicts with her mother, who believes that good girls should stay at home.

In addition to these internal struggles, Gabi deals with a plethora of other issues during her senior year. One of the issues is her father's addiction to meth and his inconsistent presence in her life. What's more, both of Gabi's best friends experience life-altering events, and Gabi tries to support them even as she deals with her struggles.

Ultimately Gabi learns to balance her Mexican heritage with her American roots and to accept herself for who she is. Gabi writes, "I guess that there is more to this fat girl than even this fat girl ever knew" (Quintero 45).

Faith: Hollywood and Vine (Volume 1) and Faith: California Scheming (Volume 2) by Jody Houser, illustrated by Francis Portela (Volume 1) and Pere Perez (Volume 2)

And now for a different kind of text. Some facts about Faith Herbert: She is a self-professed fangirl who immerses herself in comic books, science fiction, and movies—and keeps up with all her favorite superheroes. She was raised by her grandmother after her parents died in a car accident. She is a blue-eyed, blonde, plus-sized girl. She works as a reporter for the website ZipLine. She has recently moved to Los Angeles to start a life on her own, and, oh, she is a superhero.

Faith is a psiot—a person born with amazing abilities. Her powers were latent until she was recruited by the Harbinger Foundation (which unlocked her abilities). Her skills include flight and the existence of a companion field that allows her to both move and protect objects. Faith's superhero name is Zephyr, and she has assumed the name Summer Smith as her secret identity.

Superheroes are nothing new. However, Faith is unique in that she is one of the first plus-sized superheroes and, as far as I know, she is the only plus-sized female superhero to headline her own comic book series.

Let me provide a bit more background on Faith and comic books in general. Faith originally appeared in the Harbinger comic books in the early 1980s, which were part of the Valiant Universe. Faith was a member of the Renegades. The Renegades were psiots who were discovered and recruited by the Harbinger Foundation. The founder of the Harbinger Foundation had evil plans to use the powers of the psiots to take over the world, but Faith and
other psiots rebelled against this idea and formed the Renegades to fight against this and any other evil they encountered.

The new Faith comic books feature just Faith. She has left the Renegades and moved to Los Angeles. She is eager to start a superhero career on her own. *Faith: Hollywood and Vine* (Volume 1) and *Faith: California Scheming* (Volume 2) are trades. A trade is a collection of comic books from a series or storyline that are republished together. A comic book, or floppy, are the 32-page books that often spring to mind when one hears the phrase “comic book.” *Faith: Hollywood and Vine* (Volume 1) collects issues, or comic books, #1–#4, in the Faith limited series. I think of each comic book, or issue, as a single episode of a television program, and the trade as the entire season. The limited series was a way for the authors, artists, and the publisher to test the waters before launching into a series, so, think of this as a television pilot. *Faith: California Scheming* (Volume 2) collects issues #1–#4 of the comic book series, which means that Faith’s pilot has been picked up and will continue until it is “cancelled.”

One of the reasons I really like Faith as a character, and appreciate that she is a plus-sized woman with her own comic book, is that her physical appearance is not the focus of any of the storylines, at least not yet, and I hope it remains that way. The advantage of the comic book format is that Faith/Summer/Zephyr never has to be described since readers literally see her. I also appreciate that Faith is drawn as a plus-sized woman. It is problematic that the covers of some young adult literature that feature plus-sized characters contain images of models that are average or below average in size. Examples include *By the Time That You Read This, I’ll Be Dead* by Julie Anne Peters and *Life in the Fat Lane* by Cherie Bennett.

One final comment about the way Faith is depicted: She is not drawn in an overly sexualized way, nor is she drawn in a way that portrays her as either hideously ugly or breathtakingly gorgeous. She simply looks like a regular person.

As Faith says, “Just because you know who you are doesn’t mean the world sees you the same way. I guess I never really fit the mold. The things I like, the way I look. And I was okay with that. I was happy with who I was.”

**Works Cited**


Murphy, Julie. *Dumplin’*. Balzer and Bray, 2015.


**Aimee A. Rogers** is an assistant professor in the Department of Teaching and Learning at the University of North Dakota. Her teaching and research interests center around children’s and young adult literature, particularly the graphic novel format and representation in children’s and young adult literature. She has been a member of NCTE since 2002.