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A Fat Girl's Manifesto: A Thin Book on Living FAT in America, by Cyr V. Daniel

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BOOK REVIEW

***A Fat Girl's Manifesto, A thin book on living FAT in America*, by Cyr V. Daniel. Portsmouth, New Hampshire, Peter E. Randall, 2015.**

Reviewed by Julie Parsons

On the cover of Cyr Daniel's book is a white woman's arm raised with fist clenched, reminiscent of the "Rosie the Riveter" / "We can Do It," Second World War poster, widely assumed to be a call to women to join the labor market as part of the war effort (1943) and later appropriated by (some) feminists as a symbol of sisterhood. Here the image is posed alongside the book's title, *A Fat Girl's Manifesto*, and the caption "Every Revolution Needs One!" The purpose of the book is therefore clear; it is positioned as a consciousness-raising rallying cry to engage in ending the "war on obesity." Indeed, despite the subtitle *A thin book on living FAT in America*, Daniel has a big bold voice and provides a veritable romp through some of the key discourses that proclaim the myth that "fat is bad," which she abbreviates as FIB. This is not an academic text, although there are some interesting and useful sources drawn upon throughout the book. Nor is it, as Daniel claims, a pity memoir, excuse for fatness, or a search for sympathy. Far from it, indeed. Daniel argues that she has from childhood always been "fighting back," through the use of clever witticisms. This book is further evidence of her vivacity and verve, a celebration of life as a "self-loving fatty" (40).

In order to achieve the twin objectives of the book, to document a journey from self loathing to self loving and to dispel the FIB myths, especially the health risks of "obesity" and the benefits of weight loss, Daniel fuses anecdote, memoir and a range of sources. She focuses on Gaesser's (2002) *Big Fat Lies: The Truth About Your Weight and Your Health*, alongside other statistics and studies. However, the main thrust of the book is a kind of quest narrative or how fat acceptance can be achieved despite overwhelming fat prejudice, stigma and shame attached to fat bodies in the U.S. Indeed, Daniel argues, drawing on Gaesser's book, that fat prejudice or weight bias is more prevalent than prejudice based on race, sex, or religious belief.

The focus on “fat is bad” myths or FIBs is a clever play on acronyms and a useful discussion tool. Hence, Daniel counters the “longevity FIB”; that being fat will decrease mortality (26), by recourse to female average life expectancy statistics from countries that celebrate fat women, such as Samoa, Kuwait, Fiji, Jamaica and Tahiti (28), alongside data on the high levels of sports, exercise and recreation injuries that cost the healthcare system millions of dollars. Daniel also includes references to studies that have demonstrated that moderately “obese” people live about 3.1 years longer than “normal weight” women and men and that healthy fat people are at no greater risk than thin people. Another FIB is the notion that “fat is a burden on the healthcare system” (28), referencing studies that demonstrate how “bodyweight (apart from extremes) is unrelated to health status and death rates” (36). Further that it is not fatness itself but the psychological burden, stress and trauma of being fat in a fat phobic society, which is the problem; “stress kills” (27). Thus the health risks of dieting are repeatedly ignored, with the rise in eating disorders a consequence of a cultural obsession with thinness at the expense of health. Hence when living in a country that is waging “war on obesity,” the FIB messages are promulgated through uncritical exposure in the media.

Daniel describes her personal journey from fat shaming to fat acceptance. She received mixed messages from her parents that “size doesn’t matter,” when it clearly did to them, which left Daniel feeling unloved and insecure. There was a repeated threat or expectation that if you were fat you should not expect to lead a “normal” life (boyfriend, husband, children) nor have access to good medical care. However, Daniel has since enjoyed all of these “normal” (read heterosexual) life trajectories and more. She has had a successful and varied career, a handsome renaissance man for a husband, and is evidently proud of her two daughters. Thus, she clearly articulates the implications of fat shaming on a young persons’ self esteem, especially when this originates from those who are supposedly charged with providing love, care and support.

Overall, despite the notion of having written a “thin” book, Daniel has a big voice on the issue of living FAT in America. Where the book is thin is on the impact of other structural factors on the experience of living FAT in

America (or indeed any other Westernised neo-liberal society). Indeed, although Daniel claims to have experienced FIBism, sexism, ageism and anti-Semitism, the notion how one's experience of fatness intersects with these factors is under-explored. Nor does Daniel identify her privilege; she is clearly an educated, white, upper-middle class woman and this must have had an impact on her experience of fatness, especially her ability to say "I don't let society's fat rules, rule me" (11). This is much more difficult when fatness intersects with poverty, class, race, dis-ability or any combination of these factors. Indeed, while the cover of the book clearly nods to notions of sisterhood, there is little reflection on the power of gender differences in attitudes to fatness; for example Bergman (2009) has clearly articulated the additional prejudice experienced when identified as a fat woman, rather than when considered to be a fat man. There are therefore limitations here, because there is no recognition of the potential hierarchies in experiencing fat oppression.

Also, it is not clear why Daniel decided to call her book 'a fat girl's' manifesto rather than a fat woman's'; was this to appeal to younger women blighted by fat shaming? If so this is a laudable aim and Daniel does a great job of describing her "manifesto," which I can't reveal as this would spoil what is an enjoyable read about Daniel's experiences of fat prejudice, but also about finding love, being loved, flirting and, most importantly, fat pride. This is a playful book with a serious message. The raised clenched fist on the cover is perhaps a little disingenuous, but then the notion of its use as a means of encouraging women into the factories for the war effort in the 1940s has been widely dispelled as a myth (Kimble and Olsen 2006, Sharp and Wade 2011), so in many ways this is actually quite fitting.

Bergman, S. (2009) *Part-Time Fatso*. Sometimes I'm fat and sometimes I'm not. In Rothblum, W. and Solovay, S. (eds) *The Fat Studies Reader*, New York: New York University Press.

Gaesser's (2002) *Big Fat Lies: The Truth About Your Weight and Your Health*, Carlsbad (CA) Gurze Books,

Kimble, J.J. and Olson, L.C. (2006). "Visual Rhetoric Representing Rosie the Riveter: Myth and Misconception in J. Howard Miller's 'We Can Do It!' Poster". *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 9 (4): 533–569.

Sharp, G and Wade, L. (2011). "Sociological Images: Secrets of a feminist icon" (PDF). *Contexts* 10 (2): 82–83. ISSN 1536-5042.

Bio: Dr Julie M. Parsons is a sociology lecturer with research interests in food, fat and feminism and author of *Gender Class and Food, Families, Bodies and Health* (2015) Basingstoke, Palgrave MacMillan.

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