The irony of disability, of course, is that any normal person may easily become disabled through accident, sickness, or simple aging. Even if the disability might have been caused by a perceived recklessness (riding motorcycle without a helmet, for instance), the disabled person is not usually blamed for the disability. The stare at obesity, however, rarely includes pity or relief. It is primarily revulsion, not tempered by guilt but exacerbated by self-righteousness (“how could anyone let themselves get so fat?”). Obesity is universally considered the fault of the obese, even when it can legitimately be attributed to glands, genetics, or medications. Whether pitied or blamed, both the disabled and the obese live in a world built for the society-defined normals, and it is the abnormal’s job to adjust, to fit in, to make themselves as normal as possible so that they don’t upset perceptions of normality. Society is rarely willing, without being forced, to make accommodations—note the necessity of a sweeping law, the Americans with Disabilities Act, to force such accommodations.

Disability exists because the world is constructed, both physically and in attitudes toward disabled bodies, to render a disabled body as abnormal. In much the same way that a society represents the “other” against a society’s concept of the normal, obesity is represented as the absolute ideal for body image, and the fat person, although willing to accept fat as integral to identity, undoubtedly prefers thin. Fat is still viewed as beautiful—or even as an alternative standard of beauty. Fat is still viewed as beautiful—or even as an alternative standard of beauty.

While this is not necessarily the worst way to perceive of one’s own body image, a more positive approach might call for appreciation of the fat body as something special, perhaps even worthy, like the plump—by modern standards—bodies in a Rubens painting. The question we will attempt to answer in our analysis of the following recent young adult novels about obesity and body image is: can fat bodies be more than those mentioned in Beineke’s article, providing positive role models of overweight teenagers and adults who are happy, self-accepting, and have many friends. The weight-loss message of earlier novels: being fat is portrayed as outside of the norm and often the result of deeper psychological problems. When the novels are taken together, the ending criticized by Beineke is no longer the dominant scenario. In some of the books, the fat character does indeed lose weight, which may lead to self-acceptance and the acceptance of others; the weight-loss message of earlier novels: being fat is portrayed as outside of the norm and often the result of deeper psychological problems. When the novels are taken together, the ending criticized by Beineke is no longer the dominant scenario. In some of the books, the fat character does indeed lose weight, which may lead to self-acceptance and the acceptance of others.

The Earth, My Butt, and Other Big Round Things (Carolyn Mackler)
Virginia Shreve is the only overweight member of a beautiful, brilliant, seemingly perfect family. Her mother is a successful and obsessively thin adolescent psychologist who constantly nags Virginia to lose weight. Virginia’s brother Byron is “big man on campus” at Columbia University; her sister Anais, slim and beautiful, is in Africa with the Peace Corps. Her father is a successful software executive who often expresses appreciation for the beauty of thin bodies.
A crisis, however, engulfs the "perfect" family when Byron is accused of date rape and suspended from Columbia. Virginia has always looked up to Byron and his fall precipitates a crisis in her attempts to lose weight and become what her family expects. When Virginia is invited to Seoul to visit Shannon, her recently moved best friend, her parents refuse, citing Byron's need for family. Here, Virginia carries out her first act of rebellion—she drains her savings and buys the plane ticket (nonrefundable) herself.

While in Seoul, Virginia begins a process of self-discovery, symbolized by getting her eyebrow pierced. As she stares at her newly pierced reflection, she notes it "was like I was seeing myself for the very first time" (178). This is her first time changing her appearance according to her own desires, rather than to fit her mother's very strict image about how one should look, dress, and behave. If you are overweight, rather than losing weight to fit in with her family, she makes a visible declaration of independence from the family norms, which definitely do not include an eyebrow ring. Students in school start to notice her. When her mother takes her shopping for a Christmas party dress, Virginia refuses the drab, old-ladyish dresses available in the plus-size section at Saks. Instead, she finds a purple dress at a funky secondhand shop and dyes her hair purple to match.

Her final act of familial defiance is to visit Annie, the girl Byron raped, expecting to find a shattered shell. Instead, she finds that Annie is doing just fine. Annie tells Virginia that she refuses to let herself be defined by what Byron did to her. She will be more than just a rape victim; she will control her own destiny, not Byron. Virginia is stunned and inspired by Annie, realizing that she has been letting others—her mother, kids at school, her own lack of self-worth—determine her identity.

However, as she witnesses her perfect family fall off the pedestal, she comes to understand that she must accept herself, people included, for who they are—complex and fascinating, but with flaws as well as strengths. Because she didn't measure up to that impossible standard of perfection she thought was expected, she could only consider herself a failure—a fat failure. However, as she witnesses her perfect family fall off the pedestal, she comes to understand that she must appreciate herself, included, for who they are—complex and fascinating, but with flaws as well as strengths. By choosing to create her own sense of identity, she declares her independence from her overbearing family, but also feels more accepted as a vital part of it. She painfully accepts her fatness when she compliments her on a little weight loss (from kickboxing), that "my body is not yours to discuss" (227). However, she derives great satisfaction when her mother tells her, "you really are a Shrew" because she is doing what she wants, asserting her independence (244), a comment that had nothing to do with her weight.

The focus on self-acceptance is important. It's a first attempt to define herself, for herself. Even though Von will be a big part of that effort, she is not the cause of the effort. The night before rejoining the softball team, Emi-Lou remains an outsider and miserable, even at a size seven. Despite her constant insistence that she and Von are "normal" (that is, not lesbians), this turns out not to be true. They are fat and lesbian and live to demonstrate the very incompatibility of those norms to her life and identity. But she never really takes the next step, of seeing herself as being fat in a large body, rather than a brief appreciation of her cleavage. While Virginia's relation to her body image is much more positive and accepting than it started out with, the dissatisfaction, the desire to be thin, while pushed to the background, is still there.

Life in the Fat Lane (Cherie Bennett)

Life in the Fat Lane takes an unusual approach to the obesity novel. Lara Ardeche begins the novel as a 17-year-old beauty queen and the epitome of bodily perfection. But she develops a metabolic syndrome known as Crouzon syndrome which causes her weight to balloon from 118 to 218 pounds in just a few months. Despite the fact that she is not a naturally-fat, the story is very realistic in its portrayal of the struggles of an overweight teen. Lara experiences every difficulty, indignity, and emotion in her responses and the responses of others to the weight gain. She can't find clothes that fit. She has to wedge herself into movie theater seats. She feels isolated and ugly. She almost gives up piano, out of fear of showing her fat body front in a crowd. She overhears thin people say mean things about her weight. She is constantly given diet advice, especially by her mother, even though her mother is well aware that the weight gain is not in her own best interest. Her father grows distant; instead of calling her his "princess," he ignores her and eventually leaves the family—which eventually learns that his distancing from the family began long before she gained weight. In fact, gaining weight and becoming less than perfect in her own eyes opens Lara's eyes to the imperfections in other parts of her life. Her family is not perfect: her father has been an alcoholic for several years, and her mother is suffering from depression. Her perfect boyfriend, Jett, likes her new curves early in the weight-gaining process, but eventually becomes distant, too, not knowing how to handle the weight gain, her mood swings, and his discomfort at his own reactions. The only people remaining steadfast is Lara's铱ivalence best friend Molly, who at a size 14 was the chunky one before Lara's weight gain. Molly is smart, funny, and very much disliked by Lara's more perfectly fat and popular and popular. But part of Lara's growth is learning about real friendship.

Like an individual who suddenly becomes disabled due to disease or accident, Lara goes from normal to abnormal practically overnight. She becomes the "other," an object of disgust and ridicule from her own family, especially her thin-obessed mother and self-centered, egotistical father. The novel explicitly employs the language of freakishness to describe Lara's response to herself as she processes the changes in her body and the changes in reaction by others to her body.

So clearly I really had turned into someone else, morphed into some hideous, fat monster-creature, full of sizzling rage. (88)

"Well, look at me!" I blurted out. "I'm some kind of fat freak now!" (90)

I had become a seelie, ageless, faceless blob. I wasn't a pretty girl anymore. (96)

It was no use. I looked fat. Enormous. Grottesque. (54)

Thin is still the norm, and Lara, despite being "pretty" as a fat girl, will never be able to see her weight as part of her identity or anything remotely positive. When Lara moves home to her home city, Lara begins to have a new novel to a new story, sharing her body and self-image: not being popular. By default, she becomes a member of the "geekoid" crowd rather than the usual jocks and cheerleaders. Ironically, among the geekoids and fat freaks at her new school, Lara finds the kind of unconditional acceptance that she did not have with her popular friends at her old school. At the end of the novel, Lara has reluctantly accepted her place among the abnormalities of her social group. Lara begins to think that this is the disease gaining in remission or not. Neither do we learn if Lara retains her newfound wisdom about friendship, perfection, and human nature. The message about obesity and body image in Bennett's novel resembles that in Mackler's; the fat person decides to accept herself as she is and try to be happy as a fat person. Lara realizes that she likes the new friends she has made among the freaks of society. As she dresses for a party, wearing a new pale pink outfit, Lara looks in the mirror and decides she "looked pretty. . . . Round to be sure. Too round. But still" (237). The final statement in Bennett's novel aptly sums up the basic self-acceptance conclusion: "I wasn't perfect. But I was okay" (260). This realization and acceptance of self does not change anything—two sentences earlier, Lara expressed her longing to be thin. As Younger notes in her analysis of this novel: "[the reader's] will—Will's newfound self-acceptance be lost? Is it really better to be thin all the time? The book's answer is yes, thin is desirable." (53)

Thin is still the norm, and Lara, despite being "pretty" as a fat girl, will never be able to see her weight as part of her identity or anything remotely positive.

Name Me Nobody (Lois-Ann Yamakana)

Emi-Lou Kaya, self-described chunk and the fourteen-year-old narrator of Yamakana's novel, joins a softball team at her request of her best friend Von (Vyonne)—"where Yvonne to go, Emi-Lou go," as Uncle Charlie explains (1). Von has a chance for a scholarship, but Emi-Lou is not very good. She is picked on for her weight by some of the other players on the Hilo Astros team, called "Emi-Fat," "Emi-Lump," and referred to as Von's "baby shadow" (2, 19). Over the summer, Von helps Emi-Lou lose weight, mostly by enforcing drastic eating patterns and shopping diuretics and laxatives for her. Emi-Lou doesn't improve much in softball, but she does slim down to a size seven by the time school starts.

But the real problem by that time is not so much Emi-Lou's weight, although she never really feels thin or fits in with the group as anything but Von's shadow. The problem for Emi-Lou is the budding relationship between Von and Babes, a softball teammate. Emi-Lou, fearing both the idea of lesbianism and of losing Von, tries to keep them apart and insists to anyone who asks that Von is "normal." Emi-Lou finally understands Babes in the designated lesbian bathroom at school, futile because Babes is much tougher and stronger than Emi-Lou and it is Emi-Lou who gets hurt. More importantly, it alienates Von. In her despair over losing Von, Emi-Lou begins to gain weight again. In addition, her relationship to Sterling, handsome sophomore athlete, is unclear—she doesn't know if she really likes her or if she is simply "babysitting" to keep her out of Von and Babes' way. The end of the novel is a positive resolution—Emi-Lou accepts Von's lesbianism and her relationship with Babes, that Sterling really does like her. She also decides to rejoin the softball team, despite protests that she is not good. Not Von this time—she decides to join for herself, to prove that she can play the game decently.

In fact, the weight loss increases her sense of isolation, because now her weight can't be blamed for her problems: "I'm not fat. So it must be me. But who am I, if not Emi-oink?" (49).

The novel's title, Name Me Nobody, comes from two places: First, Emi-Lou does not know who her father is, and her mother left her to be raised by her grandmother. Emi-Lou refers to herself as a "nobody bastard girl" (2). Second, Emi-Lou does not seem to have much of an identity apart from Von or her image of herself as fat. Even after losing weight, Emi-Lou is only marginally accepted on the fringes of Von's group. In fact, the weight loss increases her sense of isolation, because now her weight can't be blamed for her problems: "I'm not fat. So it must be me. But who am I, if not Emi-oink?" (49). Weight loss does not change her sense of herself as a nobody. This is why her determination to succeed in softball for her own sake is so important. It's a first attempt to define herself, for herself. Even though Von will be a big part of that effort, she is not the cause of the effort. The night before rejoining the softball team, Emi-Lou finally offers her own name and proclaims it good: "Good is a name. My name. Not Jery Rapezo's name. Not Rosanne Kaya's of the named. My name. Name me: Emi-Lou Kaya" (21).

Yamakana's novel demonstrates that weight loss alone does not bring happiness and popularity, a definite change from Beineke's claims about earlier novels focused on fat teenagers. Emi-Lou remains an outsider and miserable, even at a size seven. Despite her constant insistence that she and Von are "normal" (that is, not lesbians), this turns out not to be true for either of them. She must learn to accept Von's abnormality (abnormal in the sense of the typical societal binary). But she must also accept her own abnormality—not so much the weight, but her lack of any self-identity. The weight is a symptom, not the disease. She gets the freak/loser/outsider label because she never attempts to define herself as anything else. Rejoining the softball team will probably not change the label—she realizes she is never going to be a great player. But she decides to accept the label and the teasing and torments that may go...
with it in order to develop her own identity. Ironically, it is through this act of acceptance of her freak status that the rest of the team may be willing finally to accept her, as many agree to coach her, to help her out. The end of the novel, however, still indicates Emi-Lou’s desire to lose weight again, even on Von’s rather dangerous diet. She may be willing to play the role of outsider, but definitely not a fat one.

**Myrtle of Willendorf (Rebecca O’Connell)**

In the present, Myrtle Parcittadino is a college sophomore art major and in the past, a relatively friendless high school junior who is invited by Margie to join a coven. At both times, Myrtle is obese. As for the coven, Margie is a true believer in Wicca. Myrtle enjoys the friendship and the meetings, but is not quite sure what to think about the spiritual aspect, the celebration of a divine feminine. To one meeting, Margie brings a small statue, an ancient image of an obese woman with ponderous breasts. It is Venus of Willendorf, a figure found in Austria, and possibly worshipped as an ideal of femininity and fertility by prehistoric peoples. Myrtle observes that the figure looks exactly like her own body. Yet the significance of this observation, and of Margie’s friendship, doesn’t immediately register with Myrtle. She and Margie have a falling out when classmates accuse them of being lesbians. Heitler are, but Margie does not try to deny it. She instead speaks a litany of praise for great lesbians from the past. Mortified, Myrtle pulls away from her friend—not because she fears lesbianism per se, but she fears the unwanted attention to her overweight body, attention that implies that it is sexual. Now in college, Margie constantly sends Myrtle postcards. Myrtle never answers them.

Myrtle rooms with Jade, who has a stereotypically perfect body and is obsessed with physical perfection. Jade spends two hours in the bathroom each morning getting ready, and constantly pesters Myrtle to use make-up and lose weight. Jade’s equally perfect boyfriend Keith, nicknamed Goat, frequents their house, and Myrtle, much to her embarrassment, often witnesses sexual encounters between Goat and Myrtle. Myrtle submits a detailed and secretly made drawing of Goat to a local art show. Goat’s upper half is drawn as a life portrait, but the bottom half as pole legs; Myrtle draws it saying “Satyrsfaction.” At the exhibit, Jade and Friends are surprised at the drawing, and Curt Myrtle “hymn of psycho-lebs” (88). Once again, Myrtle’s art represents her rebellion at the attention to her body and its sexuality. Myrtle flies the opening and embarks on an all-night food binge—not the first time she has done so. When she awakes the next morning, she finds Jade’s most recent postcard, which reminds Myrtle of the obese Venus figure. Myrtle strips naked in front of a mirror and begins to paint her own body with blue flowers, swirls, and patterns, recalling that blue is the color of the goddess. She then paints her own self portrait—a naked, obese woman in blue, titled “Myrtle of Willendorf.” She substitutes this portrait for “Satyrsfaction” in the show. This new painting is purchased and displayed by the Women’s Studies department as an artful representation, albeit without controversy, of timeless feminine beauty. Myrtle sends a newspaper clipping about the portrait to Margie, letting her know that she now understands what it means to connect with the divine feminine and to celebrate her own beauty.

While all the novels discussed so far question the normal/abnormal, thin/fat binary, Myrtle of Willendorf perhaps goes the furthest in breaking it down and attempting to define fat as beautiful, not just something to accept and live with in the thin-obessed society. Myrtle never really attempts to lose weight or to fit in. She is embraced by her fat, but seeks to be invisible more than to be thin, thus her dismissal of the outspoken, radical Margie as a friend. Margie never asks Myrtle to lose weight, instead encouraging her to celebrate her fat as an honor to the goddess—to celebrate and love, not just accept. Celebrating and loving her body is what Myrtle finally accomplishes with her self portrait. The novel also forces the thin-fat, beautiful-guilty question into the public sphere when the portrait is displayed. Through her two artworks, Myrtle not only celebrates fat as potentially beautiful and feminine, she exposes the conventional ideals of beauty as a hidden ugliness. The portrait of Goat shows his upper half as an ideal—handsome face, thin body, sculpted biceps, ripped abs. The bottom half, however, is ugly—hairy, crooked, and sexually predatory. The stereotypically beautiful, in other words, is cast into the role of deformed freak, the object to be stared at with revulsion and fear. The satyr is predatory and rapacious, destroying in order to get “Satyrsfaction.” For beauty to be “beautiful” it must continually reinforce its superiority by degrading and dominating its opposite; if it is beautiful and sexually desirable, fat has to be ugly and undesirable. By representing her own fat body as beautiful, Myrtle refuses to be forced into that side of the opposition, instead, turning it on its head. The display of her painting in the women’s center is questioned by some, but the painting remains and a conversation begins.

**Fat Kid Rules the World (K.L. Going)**

In contrast to the above novels, Going’s protagonist is male. Troy Billings is unusual in another way—he’s 17 and weighs 300 pounds: “I’m a fucking three-hundred-pound teenager living in the most unforgiving city on earth. I’m ugly and dumb and I make stupid noises when I breathe. I annoy and bewilder my only living parent, mortify my little brother, and have no friends” (9). As he stands on the subway platform contemplating what would happen to a fat body if a train hits it, a dirty, emaciated homeless boy confronts him. This boy is Curt MacCraw, a dropout from Troy’s school, but a talented punk guitar player and a musical legend among the students. Claiming he saved Troy’s life, Curt talks Troy into buying him a meal. Before Troy realizes what is happening, he finds himself the drummer for Curt’s new band. The problem? Troy doesn’t really play the drums and is terrified of placing his 300 pound body in front of people. Curt offers lessons, but in his first performance, Troy roams all over the drum set. He flees offstage, refusing to return, although the audience thinks it’s a fabulous opening to a punk rock show. Despite Troy’s questionable music skills and obese body, the strange homeless musician still wants Troy as his drummer. Curt sees something special in Troy, believing that he can be a punk rock star because of his size, not in spite of it: “you are punk rock, T. You just don’t know it yet, and I don’t know how to convince you” (143). In an attempt to explain what he means, Curt has Troy watch a physically attractive couple eating in a diner. At first, all Troy sees is their perfection and hates them for it. But as he watches, he notices a

... “And me?” I choke. Curt smiles... “You live that moment,” he says. (148)

At the end of the novel, Troy finally embodies, largely and happily, his punk rock destiny on stage.

Like Myrtle, Troy does not, in the end, simply accept his body as a life as a fat person in a thin world. Instead, he embraces his size as the essence of punk rock and as a legitimate, 300-pound representation of an ideal:

> *That moment when you see through the bullshit?* he says a moment later. “That’s what punk music is all about. That’s what anything great is all about. We’re all just stuffing our faces, no matter what we look like, and people need to figure that out when you can play that moment, you’ve got it.”

... “And me?” I choke. Curt smiles... “You live that moment,” he says. (148)

In this punk rock context, being a freak is the ideal. While skinny people pierce themselves and shape their hair into Mohawks to become freaks, Troy is the natural freak, the embodiment of a punk rock ideal, what they all want to be—a living defiance of the societal norm. His size, rather than being a disability, is his greatest asset and, even more so than his role as drummer, the basis of his identity as punk rocker. He is indeed the king of the freaks.

**Conclusion**

Of the five novels discussed here, we find that two, Myrtle of Willendorf and Fat Kid Rules the World, move beyond the simple acceptance message and attempt to break down societal attitudes that say only thin can be truly beautiful. The other novels fortunately do advance well beyond Beineke’s justifiably criticized happy weight loss ending. But for overweight youths, perhaps the most radical interpretation of the stories presented here is the one made by Emi-Lou Kaya. Emi-Lou’s story is the one that says, in the end, if one really wants to experience being beautiful, it is not necessary to lose weight. It is not necessary to “be” thin, as the novels insist. It is possible to experience being beautiful without losing weight or convincing anyone that one is beautiful. It is possible to exist as one’s self, allowing the self to define what it means to be beautiful, without any pressure to be thin.

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**Works Cited**


Obesity means having excess body fat. Adults 35 years of age and older with a BMI greater than 30 are obese. Obesity is not just a cosmetic consideration. It is a chronic medical disease that can lead to diabetes, high blood pressure, obesity associated cardiovascular disease such as heart disease, gallstones, and other chronic illnesses. Obesity is a risk factor for a number of cancers. Obesity is difficult to treat and has a high relapse rate. Even though medications and diets can help, the treatment of obesity cannot be a short-term "fix" but has to be a lifelong commitment to proper diet habits, increased physical activity, and regular exercise. The goal of treatment should be to achieve and maintain a "healthier weight," not necessarily an ideal weight. Over the last several decades, authors of young adult novels have been challenged to reflect this concern in their work and have responded with varying degrees of success. In Learning Curves: Body Image and Female Sexuality in Young Adult Literature, Beth Younger examines how cultural assumptions and social constraints are reinforced and complicated through common representations of young women. Each chapter analyzes a recurrent theme in the history of young adult literature, including issues of body image, pregnancy, abortion, lesbianism, and romance. Objective: Young women in the United States and Western Europe are notoriously concerned about weight but less is known about attitudes to weight in other regions of the world. This study explores the associations between body mass index (BMI), weight perceptions, and attempts to lose weight in male and female university students from 22 countries. Methods: Data were collected from 18,512 university students, using standardised methods, as part of the International Health Behaviour Survey. Measures included weight, height, perception of overweight, and weight loss status. BMI was calculated from The basic cause of obesity and overweight is an energy imbalance between calories consumed and calories expended and maintaining your current body weight indicates you are in caloric balance and to gain or lose weight, will need the balance scale to tip in one direction or another to achieve a goal. The terms overweight and obesity refer to an excess amount body of fat that may be detrimental to health. Image Credit: Suzanne Tucker / Shutterstock. Recent estimates from the World Health Organization (WHO) show that in 2014, about 39% of adults globally were obese, about 13% were overweight and that there had been a doubling in obesity prevalence, compared with 1980.