

Does This Book Make Me Look Fat?

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Abstract: The sub-genre of romance that includes plus-size, or fat, heroines seems to open romantic possibility to fictional heroines of diverse body types, which would promote the acceptance of the sexuality and attractiveness of diverse body shapes and sizes for readers otherwise lacking in most popular culture. A thread on the website “Smart Bitches, Trashy Books” suggests, however, that these books often disappoint readers because of several tropes that subvert a potentially fat-positive message. Analysis of the text of several examples of plus-size romances, as well as of readers’ posts and arguments, ultimately reveals deep ambivalence about size acceptance, real and fictional.

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On July 26th, 2008, the website “Smart Bitches Trashy Books,” which reviews romance novels and related genres, featured a post from Smart Bitch (SB) Sarah, who pondered whether romance novels featuring so-called “plus-size”^[1] heroines were “GS v. STA” (“good shit” as opposed to “shit to avoid”). SB Sarah’s concerns are threefold: Problem 1) The heroine diets her way to her Happily Ever After, or HEA, which undercuts the idea that a “plus size” woman can have one; Problem 2) The fat character is a “plucky, plump sidekick,” who does not get an HEA; and Problem 3) The so-called “plus size” heroine gripes about her weight/size throughout the book only to reveal that she is really a size 10 “or some shit like that,” well within the range of “regular” sizes for American

women. Over the next two days, readers responded in enough bulk to cover over 100 pages of 8.5" x 11" inch paper when printed out. Readers like the idea of seeing "plus size" heroines in romance, yet feel dissatisfied with nearly all the current examples thereof. Their posts reveal ambivalence not only about the novels, but also about the acceptance of "plus size" people, fictional and real.

The idea of diversifying romances to promote size acceptance by featuring heroines whose bodies may not conform to slender ideals seems praiseworthy enough. Using genre literature for social commentary is not unusual. Science fiction writers (Herbert, Heinlein, F. Paul Wilson, etc.) use alternate realities and futuristic societies to critique contemporary ideologies. Romance authors also tackle social issues at times, as when Suzanne Brockmann includes a gay couple in her "Troubleshooters" series. "Plus size" romances challenge social expectations regarding women's body sizes and weight to advance the acceptance of real women's bodies that are larger than the current slender ideal, and whose potential as romantic subjects is typically ignored in popular media.

Though few television shows or movies include women of average size, much less larger than average size, size acceptance is a cultural movement, one with which readers of romance posting in response to SB Sarah seemed to have varying degrees of familiarity. In the late 1990's and early 2000's, nonfiction size acceptance narratives were published in numerous popular media outlets (Brown), and recent issues of the fashion magazines *Allure* and *Glamour* (2009-2010) have included "plus size" models, tips for dressing "at every size," and fashion advice for women whose size typically excludes them from designer fashion. Susan Stinson, novelist and author of "Fat Girls Need Fiction," writes eloquently to justify fiction for the purpose of size acceptance:

When I say that fat girls need fiction, I mean that we need to read and encourage the writing of a wide range of fiction about subjects both close to our various hearts and past the edges of our far-reaching imaginations. Beyond the desire to see our own lives and experiences reflected in fiction, we need those habits of mind and heart that deepen empathy with others and broaden our sense of both the just and the possible. (233)

Reader reactions to SB Sarah's post, as well as the post itself, suggest that though most readers like the idea of extending the range of heroines' sizes upwards—not an insignificant goal—truly fat women as romantic protagonists are currently "past the edges of" most readers' imaginations.

The term "plus size" itself is vague and euphemistic, but allows readers to avoid using the "f-word," *fat*, and the unpleasant medical term *obese*. Terms like *obese* and *morbidly obese* seem not only fact-based but immutable, when they are instead challenged and changeable. In 1998, for example, the American government changed the Body Mass Index (BMI), and millions shifted categories and became "overweight" or "obese" overnight. Twelve years later, the outcry over that move is mostly forgotten by the general public, but an increasing quantity of research in fat studies from a variety of disciplines suggests that fatness may often be wrongly demonized as a threat to health and longevity (see books by Kolata, Bacon, Campos, and Gaesser for a few examples). Other studies suggest that people whose BMI puts them in the current "overweight" category may actually live longer, in general, than those who are "underweight" or "normal"

(<http://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/87934.php>). Many argue that the real threat to fat persons' health is the widespread prejudice against them, including within health services, and the yo-yo dieting they frequently undertake as a result. A movement towards Health at Every Size (HAES) proposes that fitness and good nutrition are keys to good health, as opposed to weight loss for its own sake. At least one woman posting to the Smart Bitches thread (spinsterswitch) specifically argues from an HAES perspective, and another (Suze) mentions Campos' book to disagree with equating fatness, high mortality rates and illness. Such voices represent a minority, however. The typical romance reader, based on evidence from reader posts to this thread, seems torn between an emergent HAES perspective and the entrenched rhetoric that certain sizes or weights designated *overweight*, *obese* and *morbidly obese* are always detrimental to one's physical health and longevity.

Thus, though SB Sarah expresses disappointment that heroines who complain throughout the narrative about being "fat" are revealed to be "a size 10 or some shit like that," characters who are truly fat are rare in romance novels as well as chick lit. As Lara Frater suggests:

[S]ize 16 is a magical number. It is the maximum socially permitted size of a fat character....Size 16 protects the character, the readers, and the author from the dreaded size 20, where the character has to shop (gasp) at Lane Bryant and won't find anything at the Gap. Once a character reaches size 20, it seems that they are past the point of self-acceptance and are now considered unhealthy. (236)

As in chick lit, so in romance and on this thread: very few people claim to be larger than a size 20, and even fewer characters in recommended books are described as such. Characters who begin their romance novel at high weights may be perceived as "unhealthily" fat—even if those same characters are not described as exhibiting symptoms of physical impairment or disease based in their weight. Such characters' weight loss is sometimes seen as self-improvement, a necessary feat to gain their HEA's. Similarly, many readers mention that they have personally deliberately lost weight or decreased their clothing size.

The term "plus size" makes it unnecessary for an author to delineate a size, a refusal or evasion that SB Sarah praises. One critical poster reveals, in a to-the-point comment that several others agree with, that "[m]ost readers (not all, but most) don't want to encounter heroines beyond a size 12 any more than they want to encounter heroes and heroines beyond the age of 40" (Wryhag, 26 Jul 2008). Thus some readers put the blame for authorial failure to portray fat women (or older women) squarely on readers' shoulders.

Authors can't win for losing. If their characters are truly fat (beyond Frater's "magical size 16"), many readers may automatically imagine them as unhealthy and/or unattractive and therefore unworthy of a hero's romantic interest. If their characters are not truly fat, they seem unable to satisfy other readers' desires to read about characters that break the slender mold. By refusing to mention the exact size of a character, an author allows her readers to imagine whatever they wish to about the heroine's size, but doing so does not help readers do as they seem to want the novels to do, which is, in Stinson's terms, "broaden [their] ideas both of the just and the possible." Many readers no doubt wish to

challenge beliefs about fatness, health, and sexuality; readers are also at various stages in the process of accepting or rejecting size/fat acceptance ideals. This forum presented an opportunity to explore pros and cons towards real-life size acceptance via discussion of fictitious size acceptance.

At the very least, romance novel readers live in a society that stigmatizes fat women. Research demonstrates that fat people suffer from prejudicial treatment in the workplace and in social life, including romantic relationships (Baum; Bordo; Joanisse and Synnott; Lerner; Lerner and Gellert; Paulery; Register; Solovay). Indeed, research suggests that men may prefer women who struggle with drug addiction over their larger peers (Sitton and Blanchard). In the corporate world, men whose romantic partners are fat women may be judged badly as potential employees in contrast with men whose partners are slender women (Hebl and Mannix). As a result of this stigma, Samantha Murray puts it succinctly: “We do not talk about fat and sex. The two appear as mutually exclusive” (239). The inclusion of larger women in romance novels addresses and perhaps, as Stinson suggests, helps fight very real fears that readers’ own bodies may render them undesirable in the sexual marketplace or liabilities to male partners.

Yet those same societal constraints make it difficult for readers to imagine fat women (as opposed to women size 16 and under) as romantic heroines. As one reader commented about another reader’s desire to read about a happy, confident fat woman as heroine, “Considering I’ve never met a plus-sized, ‘average,’ or fat woman who isn’t obsessed or concerned or worried about her weight and society’s perceptions about her, I don’t know how realistic this heroine would be” (Jana 26 Jul 2008). Size acceptance novels, in theory, offer readers an opportunity to read about just such a woman, enjoying her body within the context of a faithful heterosexual relationship—a woman who enjoys her body regardless of the fact that it does not meet, or to put it in a more optimistic light, *is not constrained by*, social expectations about women taking up space and limiting their appetites in order to seduce men. The absence of this heroine from size acceptance literature is revealing about the ambivalence of publishers, authors and readers towards size acceptance and HAES, as well as towards what size acceptance might mean about norms that continue to affect heterosexual relationships, such as the function of women’s bodies as pleasing to men rather than as vehicles of the woman’s own pleasure.

Problem One: Heroines Who Diet Their Way to HEA

The book mentioned most often in response to SB Sarah’s first objection that a heroine must diet her way to her HEA is Susan Donovan’s *He Loves Lucy*. Donovan’s book was a best-seller published three years prior to the Smart Bitches 2008 post, making it fairly current. The eponymous Lucy works in advertising and public relations. To promote her client, a local gym, she agrees to work with a physical trainer there to lose 100 pounds and to have her weight loss chronicled in the media.

Some readers praised the book because, although Lucy loses a substantial amount of weight, they perceived that Theo, the gorgeous personal trainer hero, falls in love with Lucy before she reaches her target weight:

I’d like to see plus-sized being an ok HEA too, w/o losing weight. But I think at least LUCY addressed some of the issues and insecurities [sic], and did a better job than most books do. It was good for a few chuckles, too, which

never hurts. And at least Theo loved her long before she lost the weight, which is more than can be said for a lot of plus-sized books. (Anonym2857 26 Jul 08)

Other readers were not so pleased: “He Loves Lucy was one that angered me because she didn’t get her HEA until she lost weight” (Lori 26 Jul 08).

Textual analysis reveals that Theo gradually falls for Lucy, *as* she loses weight:

That’s when [Theo] saw an attractive woman seated on the edge of a table, talking on a cell phone, one leg bent, her hair falling in glossy waves...

“*Lucy.*” Her name came out like a gasp. Theo sat very still, realizing with confusion that his pulse was tripping.

Well, of course it was. He was just surprised. That was all. He was looking at the cumulative effect of a good balance of freestyle, cardio, and core strengthening along with lean protein, complex carbs, and fruits and vegetables.

He was merely reacting to all the changes in her numbers made visible. Her body fat mass was down. Her lean muscle mass was up. She’d lost a bunch of pounds and a bunch of inches from her upper arms, chest, hips, waist, thighs and calves. (Donovan 78)

Though Theo attempts to calm himself by putting Lucy’s startling new attractiveness in numerical terms, and Donovan maintains the humorous tone that keeps her books popular, it is easy to see why some readers would be disappointed. Theo’s attraction to Lucy surprises him, indicating that her body prior to weight loss did not attract him. Also, changes in her body prompt the newfound attraction, not her personality or shared experiences. Theo does not suddenly become attracted to Lucy because she is smart, kind, and funny—Donovan depicts her as all three—but rather because her appearance changes. This scene, arriving well into the book and well after Lucy (and through her, the reader) has noticed Theo’s attractiveness, undercuts the goal of having a “plus size” heroine who attracts the hero. Up until this point, Theo has been concerned that poor Lucy has been making “doe eyes” at him, when he was in the relationship for purely professional reasons.

So, readers who notice that Lucy doesn’t merit the lust of the hero or her HEA until she loses weight are correct. Donovan attempts to address this concern in the final pages. Theo and Lucy discuss their future when she shares her fear: If Theo didn’t love her when she weighed 230 pounds, how can she be sure his love will hold true should she regain the weight? Theo replies:

I liked you back then. You intrigued me. You made me laugh. But I didn’t know you well enough to love you, and you changed so fast that for me to love you at your starting weight it would have to have been love at first sight . . . Luce, I just love you. You have to trust me on this. I mean, hey, how would

it sound if I told you I was worried that you'd leave me if I started going bald?
Or when hair started to grow out of my ears like with Uncle Martin? (332)

The narrative deflects from the issue of the “plus size” woman and the potential rejection she faces in romance real and fictitious, onto the bodily quirks that might someday appear on the heretofore-perfect body of the hero. Theo also never says he was attracted to her fat body. Lucy remains dissatisfied with Theo’s answer until he proves he intended to propose before she lost all of the weight. Meanwhile, Theo continues to appraise Lucy’s body right up to the final lovemaking scene: “[H]e loved her gorgeous ass and the two little dimples at the base of her spine, and her shoulders—so straight and strong—and the way her waist curved in just at the flare of her hips” (329). Borrowing from Laura Mulvey, we might say that the novel focuses on Lucy’s “to-be-looked-at-ness,” rather than primarily on Lucy’s pleasure in her own sexual feelings. *He Loves Lucy* reinforces the notion that, even to have the pleasure of being enjoyed, women must achieve an ideal slenderness.

By reassuring Lucy—and the readers who may identify with her fears—that Theo both loved and will love Lucy regardless of her size, the book gives some hope to real-life “plus size” readers and may thereby have staked its claim to popularity. The book also, however, reassures readers that weight loss like Lucy’s is possible and desirable. Though readers may readily identify with Lucy’s body image concerns and the trouble inherent in changing one’s body so radically, *He Loves Lucy* hardly seems to advance the cause of accepting “plus size” women as heroines in romance. By the end of the novel, there is no “plus size” heroine. At best, Donovan’s novel asserts that “plus size” women can fulfill their fantasies on all three romance novel accounts: the achievement of being beautiful (at least to the hero); a satisfying romantic/sexual relationship; and the career success that is the contemporary romance answer to marrying the hero of historical romances, who so often possesses wealth, if not an aristocratic title. Yet the book suggests that they may do so only by first losing weight.

Problem Three: Whiny Heroines Who Aren’t That Big

Although SB Sarah mentions a second problem, that the fat character is only a friend to the heroine, no reader remarks on that topic on the list. Many readers do respond to the third issue of the heroine who complains excessively about her weight, especially when readers perceive that the character is of average rather than larger-than-average size. One romance mentioned by three separate readers as an example of a good “plus size” romance was Cathie Linz’ *Big Girls Don’t Cry*. Linz’ novel features Leena Riley, who has returned to her hometown after failing to be successful as a “plus size” model. Although such models are usually really a size 10 or 12 (still one size smaller than the average American woman’s size 14) and so fall into the category SB Sarah laments, Leena is perceived by other characters in the book as larger than average. One female character even viciously berates Leena for her body shape and calls her “fat” each time they meet.

Despite the fact that Leena now works at the front desk in a veterinarian’s office, her putative success as a model seems to make all her female relatives and friends eager to discuss body image as a pressing social problem. One conversationalist mentions that she “read a recent study that showed eighty percent of ten-year-olds worry about their weight . . . Society does that. These kids view celebrities who are painfully thin and think that’s what

they should look like. Skeletons. It's so unhealthy" (163). While it is not unrealistic to imagine women discussing the effects media images have on children, especially considering the overwhelming response to this thread on "Smart Bitches," a well-informed discussion is replayed almost every time Leena's career is mentioned, making body image woes central to the novel. This tactic seemed to annoy some readers. One woman who mentioned it as a good book still noted that the novel "irked [her] because [she] felt like [Linz] banged the reader upside the head with the 'love your body' message, but it was refreshing to see a plus-sized heroine in a romance novel" (Aubrey Curry, 28 Jul 2008). Clearly, any social message about diversity must be more obviously subservient to the goal of entertainment and fantasy-fulfillment for this reader.

Even as conversations about the importance of representing "plus size" women in the media build Leena as a heroine whose body and would-be career challenge the slender ideal, Leena herself seems constrained by body image issues in ways that restrict the sensuality of the novel. She sneaks food, a potential sign of disordered eating. She also agonizes during lovemaking:

She liked focusing on him. It prevented her from worrying about her own body and what he might think of it. She wanted to come to him as an all-powerful Goddess of Love, but the reality was that confidence was still something she faked sometimes. Like now. He sure helped matters by being so irresistible.

What woman could turn away? Which got her thinking about the other women . . . whom he'd seen naked. All of them probably skinnier than she was.

She took a step away. (253-4)

Leena's self-doubt, while perhaps realistic, inhibits her enjoyment of the sex that the genre promises will be fantasy-fulfilling, interfering with readers' potential pleasure in the novel. Linz' novel realistically depicts the difficulty Leena has in her role as "plus size" heroine, but simultaneously calls into question the legitimacy of feeling beautiful and sexy at any size, or even at a slightly less than average size. Like *He Loves Lucy*, *Big Girls Don't Cry* focuses on the "to-be-looked-at-ness" of the heroine rather than her pleasure in her (big) body.

Readers' personal examples confirm that Leena Riley's thoughts accurately reflect the body image concerns of real readers. They also tend to confirm that having fat or "plus size" women in romances, enjoying the pleasures promised by the genre, would help many real women feel better about their own bodies during sex. For instance, when Jana opines that

If women are looking to their fiction to feel better about themselves, and they need "average" looking women to attain that—that's a problem. You can have all the fat women you want in a book or movie happily fucking away with no regard to their appearance, but that won't actually make anyone feel good about their own bodies or lives if they didn't already have that confidence to begin with. (26 Jul 2008),

other readers quickly disagree, including Esri Rose, who believes “[i]t would be great if our confidence about our looks were completely separate from what society considers attractive, but I don’t know of any culture where it is. I think [the scenario you describe] would make a huge difference” (26 Jul 2008). Jana’s comment not only dismisses size acceptance in romance novels as a viable route to size or self-acceptance, but also seems to equate being fat to having “no regard to” one’s appearance, which suggests typical stereotypes of fat people as being lazy. Other posts suggest that women claiming “plus size” status care very much about their appearance as well as health. The online conversation among real women about “plus size” heroines thus parallels the fictional conversations and self-doubts in Linz’ novel, where female characters have different degrees of size acceptance, and therefore different reactions to Leena’s body and heroine status.

Readers also debate popular beliefs about fatness, which some, like Gail, hold as true. Gail argues that the novel *He Loves Lucy* initially depicts Lucy as unhealthy, and posits that there are healthy “curvy” bodies and “unhealthy fat” bodies. She likes Donovan’s book because it seems to her that Lucy’s quest is for greater control over her life overall, which is manifested initially through her desire to lose weight (Gail 26 Jul 2008). Other readers use physical descriptions of themselves as evidence to support the opposing argument that people can be classified as “overweight” and be both sexy and healthy. These readers cite their own height and weight statistics, defend themselves as healthy, and claim to be in fulfilling sexual relationships, to argue that “plus size” romances are realistic, not mere fantasy or wish fulfillment, and therefore are worth reading when written well. One woman even posts “pictorial proof” that her measurements don’t equate to a perception of fatness (Angelia Sparrow 26 Jul 2008).

The nature of a thread like this is that some readers will respond to particular posts on particular issues, and ignore others, perhaps because those other posts did not appear online until after she had already begun a reply/post, or for any number of reasons. However, it becomes clear as one reads the posts on this topic, in order, that those who argue that fat is unhealthy and those who argue from an HAES perspective do not respond to each other equally. For example, Cat Marsters writes:

I’m not generally a fan of the plus-sized heroine, because quite often it just seems to be a shorthand for saying it’s okay to be fat. Well . . . again this depends on your definition of fat, but hands up who actually thinks it’s a good idea? Any doctor will tell you it’s unhealthy. Unhealthy and sexy are really unmixy things. (27 Jul 2008)

Other posts later react against her post and similar ideas, using personal evidence to the contrary, but Cat Marsters and other similar posters do not reply to defend their anti-fat views. When Jennifer Armintrout claims to be a fat woman (not “plus size” or “curvy”), only others like spinsterwitch who espouse an HAES perspective seem to reply.

Other than a vocal and not-to-be-ignored minority who already had a pro-size-acceptance mentality, then, authors and readers alike generally—though not universally—accept moving the range of accepted sizes for heroines up, but not embracing fat bodies above a certain point. While doing valuable work for women in a range of sizes, such reader

narratives of personal size acceptance still, perhaps paradoxically, marginalize other, fatter women.

In “Deterritorializing the Fat Female Body,” Jana Evans Braziel theorizes that the fat female body is “defined by a benign asexuality that is marked by a paucity of representation and exists as the unrepresentable, or near-representable (that which is located on the margins of representability), because of an exclusion that [she] calls the *corporeal mark of absence* . . . [This] is difficult to grasp, because it renders visible what does not appear to be present at all” (232-3). Braziel suggests that the *absence* of images of the fat female body actually “evoke[s the fat female body] as outside the frame of signification and representation, while remaining structurally present” (233). Braziel illustrates by describing a lean cover model on a magazine promoting a diet plan; a fat woman’s body is present as an absence justifying the idea of dieting to look like the thin model. A recent issue of *Fitness* magazine (July/August 2010) provides a real-world example. A lean woman in a bathing suit smiles at viewers while bold black type proclaims “Slim. Sexy. Confident!” The (absent) fat woman is the opposite of the thin woman’s body and, one must assume, every adjective used to define her. For viewers/readers of the magazine, desiring to be(come) like the slim woman by adopting methods recommended within the magazine’s pages is a simultaneous rejection of the absent, unrepresented fat female body—the body they want to be(come) *unlike*, the body that does not merit anyone’s gaze.

Fat women’s bodies are similarly at the edge of the discussion on “Smart Bitches,” as when SB Sarah laments fictional women who complain about their size but are really only a size 10. Because few women escape body image consternation and fear of fat, a size 10 still isn’t big enough to be viewed as fat, it still isn’t even the average woman’s size in the US, much less the kind of fat that finds ridicule and disgust in the public sphere. Size 10 doesn’t break what Frater calls the “size 20 glass ceiling” (240). Here, contrast may be useful. In “Locating Aesthetics: Sexing the Fat Female Body,” Samantha Murray opens with personal narrative that describes her feelings as a fat woman listening to a story of the brutal gang beating of another fat woman:

I sat in the audience, listening to this story in horror. I suddenly became acutely aware of my own fat bulges and folds. I imagined every eye in the room on me, shaking their heads in pity, revulsion and even morbid curiosity. I pulled my shirt surreptitiously away from the bulges of my belly and my hips, trying to separate the appearance from the reality. I shifted in my chair, and felt my cheeks burn hot and my stomach churn. I was angry, so angry, so humiliated for the fat girl who had suffered . . . she was just a girl, a girl like I was and had been, and she had been made into a ravenous, libidinous, ridiculous creature. And yet I was ashamed. I was aware of the disgust my body inspired, its complete unacceptability and invisibility in the sexual domain, apart from as a figure of ridicule. (238)

Murray’s argument is similar to Braziel’s: the fat woman is expected to be asexual and therefore unrepresented; when she dares to become sexual, her sexuality may be viewed as hypersexual, her appetites for pleasures, both alimentary and sexual, grotesque. By describing her conflicted feelings and describing her body itself, Murray places herself

in the category of the fat woman. Very few who post personal information to the thread about “plus size” romance are similarly staking a claim to that category and arguing that their fat bodies, replete with “bulges and folds,” are attractive and healthy. Instead, they reject the fat female body by leaving it unvoiced, or by refusing to respond to voices claiming it, even to argue against those voices. Their silence confirms what Murray goes on to argue:

We do not almost plough into the car in front of us as we ogle a billboard displaying a fat woman in lacy lingerie. We do not gaze lasciviously at a bulbous bottom in tight jeans. We do not fantasize about the fleshy jiggles and wobbles of a fat body in the throes of sexual passion.

Some of us might. But most of us do not. Or at least we know we are not supposed to. (239)

The comparative “silence” that greets most of the posts from women who use the word *fat* to describe themselves without indicating regret or an intention of losing weight bolsters Murray’s assertion that to believe a fat female body is sexy is to transgress social norms.

The minority of fat-positive readers posting to the list are, on the other hand, extremely “vocal.” Several express frustration with arguments that fatness necessarily equates to unhealthiness. In particular, such readers argue with WandaSue, who describes her different experiences and reading habits and implies that others’ posts are mere bravado. WandaSue notes that she used to be a diabetic size 16 at 5’0”, but is now a happier, healthier size 6. She indicates that she formerly read “plus size” fiction but now refuses to spend her time and money on such novels. Several readers reply directly to WandaSue. One, Stephanie, suggests that WandaSue has missed the point: “[w]e don’t care what size you are. We care what books you read.” And WandaSue suggests in turn that Stephanie has missed the point: readers read and enjoy romances based partly on what they wish to identify with and hope for:

When I was a Size 16, there existed inside of me a very wistful and hopeful Size 6 . . . but if anybody asked me, I’d deny it til [sic] I was blue with indignation. I told myself—and anybody patient enough to care—that I was “happy” and “content” and “secure” being fat. (Deep inside, I wasn’t). So I’d read the “Plus size” heroine romances to feed that sentiment, and searched high and low for a heroine with whom I could identify—**and who could validate my fatness**. It fed the fantasy OF THAT TIME IN MY LIFE. (Emphasis hers, 27 Jul 2008)

WandaSue’s comments are perceived as hurtful to the many others who have described their own bodies (Spider 27 Jul 2008; Stephanie 27 Jul 2008). WandaSue’s comments refute not only the boldest “fat = sexy and healthy” claims. She also denies the many others who identify with “plus size” heroines the (sexy, confident) status of the *Fitness* cover model they covet and claim. She implies by her example that many other

readers inwardly acknowledge their kinship with the unrepresentable and unrepresented fat woman whose absence and asexuality underlie their desire to ally themselves with the smaller, thinner women who grace the covers of magazines and romance novels alike. Reading “plus size” romances, she seems to say, makes other readers look *fat*.

The covers of “plus size” romances also refuse to depict the large(r) female body, more evidence for the ambivalence of readers and publishers towards those bodies. The absence and veiling of women’s bodies in size acceptance literature is actually typical (Brown 248), suggesting that *reading about* and *discussing* “plus size” women is one thing, and *looking at* them is another, more difficult thing to do. Some novel covers depict what appear to be standard cover models, despite the description offered within the narrative of a heroine with a larger-than-typical-cover-model body. The model depicting Josie of Eloisa James’ *Pleasure for Pleasure*, for example, is not distinguishably “curvier” than the models used to depict Josie’s sisters on their novels’ covers. Other covers depict only images or cartoons of women’s feet or calves, and these body parts are never obviously those of a “plus size” woman. Some cartoons, like the cover for Julie Ortolon’s novel *Too Perfect*, depict nearly the entire body, yet suggest a slender rather than a “plus size” body. Despite the fact that *He Loves Lucy* focuses on the heroine’s dietary restrictions, the cover features cupcakes.

To be fair, many contemporary romance covers avoid physical representations of the heroine altogether and instead suggest the feminine focus of the story through use of pastel colors, fonts whose curlicues suggest femininity, and/or images of accessories, such as shoes.

The disappearance of couples on the covers of romances is a trend that predates the emergence of the “plus size” romance subgenre. It seems the desire to escape the “bodice ripper” image of previous generations of romance novels has led to fewer images of heroines on the book covers overall. The message sent by the covers of “plus size” romances is therefore ambiguous, suggesting in some ways that the “plus size” romance is no different than a typical romance but simultaneously suggesting that a “plus size” woman could not sell a romance novel if she appeared on the cover. Similarly, only about half of the plot summaries on the back covers or inside flaps of “plus size” romances suggest that the heroine is a “plus size” woman.

Good for the Gander?

SB Sarah’s post about “plus size” women in chick lit and romance prompts a related reader concern, the issue of whether “plus size” [\[2\]](#) *heroes* would be welcome, and therefore whether or not readers who prefer “plus size” heroines are holding up a gendered double standard. AnimeJune is the first to pose the question: “Should we have fat heroes then?” The double standard question becomes a key point that many posts revolve around, as readers struggle to recall heroes who were not tall, muscular and/or lean, and handsome, regardless of the size and shape of the heroine. Very few heroes are recommended as such, though many readers claim they have physically imperfect but sexy male partners themselves in real life and would be happy to read about the same in romance novels.

Among the books surveyed for this project, from a variety of romance genres including contemporary, historical, romantic thrillers, and paranormal, none of the heroes could remotely be described as “plus size.” Over and over, the hero is tall and muscular, with chiseled features and a full head of hair. The only variations in mainstream heroes tend to be chest hair (yes or no), scars (yes or no), hair length, and hair and eye color.^[3] Just to prove the point, here are a trio of descriptions of heroes in romances with “plus size” heroines, beginning with an excerpt from an Eloisa James’ Regency romance: “[B]efore she could say anything, he stripped off his shirt as well . . . He was all smooth, sharp-cut muscle, beautifully defined” (*Pleasure for Pleasure* 92).

The following is a description of the hero of Sherrilyn Kenyon’s supernatural romance, *Night Play*: “Oh, dear heaven! Bride couldn’t breathe as she had her first look at his bared chest. She’d known he had a great body, but this . . . It exceeded anything from her dreams. His broad shoulders tapered to a washboard stomach that could do enough laundry for an entire nation. Forget six-pack, this man had eight, and they rippled with every breath he took” (39). Finally, Lisa Kleypas’ historical romance heroine in *Suddenly You* views the hero nude for the first time:

Devlin was as sleek and muscular as the black-and-gold tiger she had seen on exhibition at the park menagerie. Divested of his clothes, he seemed even larger, his broad shoulders and long torso looming before her . . . His midriff was scored with rows of muscle. She had seen statues . . . of the male body, but nothing had ever conveyed this sense of warm, living strength, this potent virility. (103)

While the time period and narrative style of these novels varies, the hero’s requisite physical leanness remains the same. Intriguingly, not all the criticism of this aspect of the books is aimed at the obvious double standard, but is instead launched at its believability. JenB writes, “I’m plus size, and I don’t see the ‘plus size girl gets the super mega hottie’ storyline as realistic” (26 Jul 2008). She also suggests that the truth is that attractiveness in heterosexual couples is usually the reverse, with the female partner being more attractive than the male.

In typical romance novels featuring heroines with slender figures, the hero’s requisite height and muscularity is often juxtaposed against the heroine’s fragility or delicacy. In the “plus size” romance, the hero’s muscularity is similarly juxtaposed against the heroine’s softness. She is “all woman—with sexy curves” (Linz 50) and “abundant pink-and-white flesh” (Kleypas 325), while he is rigid and powerful. Such opposition parallels sexual organs during arousal, a synecdochal way of implying both partners are physically aroused without necessitating terms for body parts that may make some readers of mainstream romance uncomfortable. Such complementary body part descriptions (soft/hard, abundant/lean, curvy/rigid) make the heroine and her hero right for each other, as authors are quick to point out in scene after scene. Thus the heteronormative assumption that, for successful pleasure, male and female bodies ought to have complementary rather than similar physical characteristics is maintained into the “plus size” romance subgenre.

Perhaps no novelist makes clearer exactly how inappropriate the paunchy hero is for his role than Eloisa James. James’ novels deliberately feature diverse heroine body

types, from the slender and small-breasted to the plump and well-endowed.^[4] Enter Josie, the heroine of *Pleasure for Pleasure*, whose tendency to dress her plump body unwisely in fashionable corsets earns her the nickname “the Scottish sausage” on London’s aristocratic marriage market—until, that is, the Earl of Mayne, who thinks of her as “ripe and delicious as a peach” (147), teaches her to dress her figure seductively and use her voluptuous body to flirt. Josie fits into the category of the woman who whines about her size—through several books featuring her elder sisters no less—but she isn’t really fat if a change of garment can miraculously render her irresistible to so many men. While helping Josie learn the seductive arts, the Pygmalion-like Mayne predictably falls for her. Mayne, however, is lean. His body is repeatedly described as elegant but muscular, sleek and hard; he features in several of James’ novels as a sought-after bachelor before finally meeting his match in Josie.

By contrast, two characters in other James books demonstrate the problems associated with fat male characters. The first of these is Rafael, the Duke of Holbrook, the guardian of Josie the Scottish Sausage and her sisters throughout the series of four books that detail the sisters’ romances. Initially, Rafe—as the duke obligingly allows his friends to call him—drinks to mask his pain at the death of his older brother. Grief-stricken, he overlooks his duties and appearance, as his flabby gut attests and threadbare clothing implies. Rafe’s interest in life is renewed when he must care for his four female wards, including Imogen, with whom he is destined for romance. In *The Taming of the Duke*, Rafe realizes he must resist the temptation to drink heavily. He begins to exercise by horseback riding and other activities, and he loses the gut. Finally sober and appropriately muscled for a duke of such wealth, he woos Imogen, who believes herself in love with the Duke’s illegitimate younger brother:

Imogen stared at Rafe. He had the same dusting of black stubble that he always had by noon, but the skin of his cheeks was pink and healthy, and his eyes didn’t have that half-awake, hooded look that he used to have. He shook back a fall of chestnut brown hair, smiling up at the sky He was a beautiful man [S]he couldn’t help noticing the way his old shirt pulled free of his trousers as he leaped. What happened to that gut that used to hang over his trousers? Could it have disappeared in a mere few weeks? Because now that body looked as lean and hard as his brother’s . . . even more so, perhaps. (265)

Rafe merits the sexual regard of his paramour only after a physical and mental transformation. Though Josie needs only to work with her curves more adeptly through fashion and flirtation, Rafe must make physical alterations to earn his HEA. While Josie’s softness is revealed to be *feminine* and therefore *appropriately* sexy in the heteronormative world of these novels, Rafe’s initial physical softness is inappropriate and marks him as weak.

In another novel, *Duchess in Love*, James experiments with another fat male character, here not the hero. Miles is the husband of a secondary heroine, Esme Rawlings, whose real romance will occur in a later James novel. Miles and Esme agree their sex lives are better fulfilled elsewhere. Miles has a mistress whom he loves, and Esme has several affairs, earning her the nickname “Infamous Esme,” yet both want a legitimate heir to Miles’

estate. The fat Miles' physical repulsiveness to Esme is the subject of much query in the book. She wonders if she can bear to have him on top of her long enough to get through the sex act. Finally, they manage intercourse that goes completely undescribed; sex with a fat man is as unrepresentable as the fat female body. When one of Esme's admirers bolts into the boudoir after the coupling is complete, Miles *dies*, his fragile heart unable to bear the strain of intercourse followed by the shock of an intruder entering at night. Like Rafe's, Miles' fatness is a sign of physical weakness and of his obvious unsuitability to be the hero. This unsuitability justifies Esme's sexual affairs with unnamed other men when ordinarily the heroine of a romance is expected to maintain chastity unless and until her hero claims her. Visible fat, for men in a romance novel at least, is a sign of something mentally and/or physically wrong, whereas the "curvy" and "lush" heroine is a creature on the brink of seductive discovery.

Although none of the readers posting to "Smart Bitches" comments on this, the virtual nonexistence of the fat hero even in "plus size" romance may stem not merely from women fantasizing more readily or often about heroes with six- (or eight-?) pack abs and a full head of hair. Indeed, many readers describe in their posts that they find their own lovers' and husbands' "flaws" sexy. It is difficult not to argue that another reason fat or merely chubby heroes are absent is the hypocrisy, if not of readers, then at least of authors and/or publishers. Heroes with "a gut" are absent even in books by Elizabeth Hoyt, whose trilogy of romances (*The Raven Prince*, *The Serpent Prince*, *The Leopard Prince*) are noted by "Smart Bitches" readers for containing not-so-handsome heroes, including a pock-marked, big-nosed Earl.

This absence stems partly from perception of the hero as trophy. A traditional HEA, from fairy tale to *Jane Eyre* to Disney cartoon to contemporary romance novel, includes true love and passion, as well as a resolution of whatever issue provided the other narrative element in the book (such as a mystery), plus career satisfaction and/or wealth. Generally, the hero is expected to aid in the resolution of other narrative issues while providing the love/passion and at least some of the money. If a "plus size" heroine were to receive a hero who could be perceived as somehow *less than* the typical hero, then the "plus size" heroine may be perceived by readers as correspondingly less deserving than the dainty lasses on the cover of most of the books. Such deficiency might undercut the social goal of including a diversity of body types in the first place. However, viewing a lean hero as the only possible physical specimen who can be a trophy for the heroine betrays a size-ist bias.

Conclusions: Everybody Loves Crusie

One book seemed to please nearly all the readers on this thread who mention it: *Bet Me* by Jennifer Crusie. Why so beloved? Crusie's novel sidesteps nearly every trope discussed and denigrated by SB Sarah and the readers of "Smart Bitches, Trashy Books."

Heroine Min Dobbs is halfheartedly trying to lose weight to fit into a bridesmaid's dress for her sister's wedding, an attempt lamented by every character in the book with whom readers are encouraged to relate, and advocated by characters readers are encouraged to dislike, including Min's controlling mother and her unappreciative ex-

boyfriend. If Lucy in Donovan's novel seems expected to lose weight to earn her HEA, Min is expected to realize that she is sexy as is to earn her HEA.

No specifics of Min's size, such as weight or height, are offered, only varied characters' opinions on whether Min is voluptuous or fat. Min seems to occupy the border territory many readers are concerned with pushing into the country perceived as healthy, sexy and confident. The debate over Min's size grounds the novel in a reality most of the readers who post to "Smart Bitches" can appreciate, in which the range of acceptably sexy body sizes is under debate and subject to change.

Crusie's novel completely avoids any hint that her heroine must or even should lose weight to earn the hero's sexual attention. The (gorgeous, lean) hero, Cal, is a gourmand with a friend in the restaurant business. Cal is in no way put off by Min's body or appetite, but rather thoroughly aroused by both, and put off instead by her grumpiness. Readers know what Cal doesn't: Min's grumpiness stems from having overheard Cal make a bet with Min's ex that Cal can easily get Min to go to bed with him. Cal, the perfect mate for Min, redresses her grumpiness by offering her food—the good stuff—once he learns that doing so not only appeases her short temper but also arouses him by causing Min to sigh and swoon suggestively. Crusie's narration emphasizes all forms of pleasure. When Min's attempt at cooking a low-fat version of an Italian classic goes predictably awry, Cal scoffs and brings her a proper dinner they both enjoy.

By encouraging Min's dietary as well as sexual desires, and enjoying her body and her pleasure, Cal validates feminine desires often seen as taboo or subjugated to patriarchal norms. In contrast, books like *He Loves Lucy* and *Big Girls Don't Cry* present a less feminine-centered view of pleasure. Readers themselves sigh and swoon over a scene in which Cal feeds Min a Krispy Kreme doughnut. Although the narration is at this moment from Cal's perspective, the scene allows readers to interpret Min's physical feelings while glimpsing Min as desirable through Cal's eyes:

[H]e popped another piece of doughnut in her mouth and watched as her lips closed over the sweetness. Her face was beautifully blissful, her mouth soft and pouted, her full lower lip glazed with icing, and as she teased the last of the chocolate from her lip, Cal heard a rushing in his ears. The rush became a whisper—*THIS one*—and he breathed deeper, and before she could open her eyes, he leaned in and kissed her, tasting the chocolate and the heat of her mouth, and she froze for a moment and then kissed him back, sweet and insistent, blanking out all coherent thought. He let the taste and the scent and the warmth of her wash over him, drowning in her, and when she finally pulled back, he almost fell into her lap.

She sat across from him...her dark eyes flashing, wide awake, her lush lips parted, open for him, and then she spoke.

"*More,*" she breathed and he looked into her eyes and went for her. (90)

Min first gets what she wants without asking and then asks for what she wants and receives it. By contrast, Leena Riley's timid passion for her hero, and desire to please him in order to feel worthy, come across as tepid; her frequent, guilty snacking when she is alone and depressed seem decidedly lacking in fantasy fulfillment when viewed against Cal's

intimate feeding of Min. Similarly, Theo's surprised internal description of the lower-fat version of Lucy seem less likely to evoke reader pleasure than Cal's besotted description of kissing an impassioned Min. The emphasis on how things *feel* versus *look* in this passage is typical of the book overall, which avoids portraying Min's body mostly as object "to be looked at" by Cal. There is something to be said in favor of the alternative strategy, which would be representing the fat(ter?) body through description as a challenge to the imagination and willingness to represent that body, though given the responses on "Smart Bitches," such a strategy may be received as too transgressive to be popular.

Still, Crusie's novel does persuasively suggest that Min is a larger than average woman who does not lose weight yet enjoys sex. There is never a doubt that Cal desires and deserves Min. Readers know what Min doesn't: he never wanted to make the bet about bedding her, and isn't trying to win money by so doing. He really just wants her, which is the stuff that romance is made of.

The novel acknowledges Min's social situation as a potential fat person through unique situations rather than endless inner turmoil for the heroine or endless discussions of how morally improving it is to see a larger-than-average woman's body in the media. Cal likes Min and thinks she's attractive, while observing in a confused way that other people don't necessarily find her so. He discusses his perplexity with his lesbian neighbor, Shanna. These conversations are held out of Min's earshot—but well within that of readers, of course. Shanna helps Cal understand Min's insecurities about dating a man who is considered as physically desirable as Cal, and Shanna simultaneously provides a second sexual character who sees how outrageously sexy Min is but does not vie with Cal for Min because Min is heterosexual.^[5] Those conversations combine romantic ideals (Cal doesn't see Min as in any way lacking) with reality (Shanna, a woman, understands Min's social situation). In this way, readers overhear someone in the novel explain that the dating world does unfortunately work against plump women, but it isn't Min lamenting the cruel world and thus risking heroine status by becoming too whiny, or by putting herself too firmly in the category of fat woman.

Bet Me also avoids over-reliance on physical opposition and instead stresses that both hero and heroine have complementary personality traits, traits that others perceive as flaws. Both Cal and Min stand up for each other against families who don't appreciate their assets. In Min's case, Cal insists that she dress to reveal rather than conceal her shape, despite her mother's wishes that Min would camouflage her body. His appreciation of Min in these new clothes helps Min feel sensual rather than tyrannized anew in her wardrobe selections. In return, Min stands up against Cal's uptight, wealthy parents in defense of his choice not to go into the family legal practice.^[6] Thus, Crusie shrewdly avoids featuring Cal as the hero who rescues Min from a sex-less fate as a "plus size" woman, because Min also rescues Cal. The reciprocity seems emotionally more satisfying to readers than reliance on typical descriptions of the soft female body pressed against rigid masculinity. In fact, Crusie's descriptions of the couple's sexual interaction avoids describing their bodies in physical detail while focusing instead, as in the quote above, on gestures, reactions, and feelings.

Finally, the book is full of women thinner and/or younger, but unhappier and far whinier and less virtuous than Min, who possesses confidence and smarts, as well as the traditional Cinderella-like virtues of patience, generosity, and self-control, which all earn her the eventual pleasure and security she feels in her relationship with Cal. The book

seems to have just enough body image paranoia and family/friendship issues to feel realistic, and enough allusions to fairy tales and enough sexual attraction overcoming insecurity to put it in the realm of fantasy. As one reader concluded, "I think *Bet Me* has become my major comfort novel when I think the whole world is being crappy to me" (Vivian, 26 Jul 2008).

Crusie's novel suggests a "plus size" romance that is successful with readers will find ways to sidestep the tropes identified and bemoaned by SB Sarah and the many readers who commiserated. Not only was *Bet Me* celebrated on this thread, but it is also included in lists of good "plus size" romance created by enamored readers on Amazon.com and elsewhere. Finding new ways to avoid similar authorial missteps may therefore be key to any novelist hoping for economic success in this sub-genre that promotes Happily Ever Afters for women of size.

As Kathleen LeBesco points out, it may not be possible to change social standards of beauty without "producing [a] subset of unthinkable, unlivable and abject bodies" (5). When readers of magazines targeted towards "plus size" readers called larger women "real women," for example, there were occasional outcries that petite and slim women were also "real."

Frater, in her discussion of chick lit, argues in favor of its efficacy for fat acceptance, despite the "size 20 glass ceiling" and other failures. For one thing, she notes, fat bodies are virtually invisible everywhere else in the media (240). "Plus size" romance novels similarly adhere to problematic tropes, in part because their readers seem unready to accept truly fat bodies, female or male, as sexual bodies. Yet these novels still promote the health and attractiveness of bodies larger than those of the slender models and actresses whose images are so ubiquitous in popular media. The eager responses to the "Smart Bitches" post suggest, too, that in the reading and considering these novels, women of many shapes and sizes are encouraged to stake claims to being sexy and confident and healthy, and to imagine pleurably inclusive possibilities.

[1] The term "plus size" usually refers to women's clothing sizes (American) above the range of 0-16, but there is some overlap between "regular" and "plus" sizes; for example, the "plus size" clothing store Lane Bryant sells sizes 14+, and many "regular" department store sizes go up to 16 or 18.

[2] Women who respond to this blog maintain the term "plus size" to describe men, but clothing stores typically refer to men whose sizes fall above those considered "normal" as "big and tall."

[3] At least one reader mentions *The Raven Prince*, by Elizabeth Hoyt (Grand Central Publishing, 2006), in which the hero is described as ugly and pock-marked, with a large nose. The heroine, though not fat, is also described as an average-looking rather than beautiful woman. The hero, however, is in every other way a typical hero: tall and muscular and has a full head of dark hair.

[4] James posts monthly updates to her website section of "Books to Love." Her September 2005 post praises two books on body image issues, including a romance by Elizabeth Bevarly entitled *You've Got Mail*. In her post, James writes "I'm tired of perfect heroines. Surely I'm not the only one? I love romance; I really do. But if there's one thing I don't like about it (other than the manifest truth that my marriage doesn't seem as perfect as the

ones I create in fiction), it's all these perfect women. Perfect teeth. Perfect waists. Perfect breasts — that goes without saying" (<http://www.eloisajames.com/pillow.php?id=84>).

[5] Shanna's presence as lesbian is not only non-threatening to Min and Cal's relationship, but also may be Crusie's nod to the lesbian community's generally more accepting attitude toward women with diverse body shapes. A few readers also note that lesbian romances seem to include more body size diversity with less anxiety than a heterosexual "plus size" romance.

[6] Cal is also dyslexic, which disturbs his family though of course Min is untroubled by it and explains how the condition, combined with being a younger son, would make Cal less likely to pursue his father and brother's profession.

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