

Where we all fit: Body-inclusive library collections

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By Elaine Su (she/her), teacher-librarian and equity and diversity consultant

If you have any picture books lying around near you, I invite you to open up a few right now. Take a look at the illustrations, including any scenes with a whole host of background characters, like a stroll through a park or a day at school. I invite you to pay attention to the characters you see, and in particular to the *bodies* you see. Because if the books you have are anything like the books on most children's bookshelves, I can guess what you likely won't see: fat bodies.

I preface this article with the acknowledgement that I am a thin person with all the accompanying privileges, and I am still very much learning about and unpacking antifatness both around me and internalized in me. I learn daily from fat activists like Marquisele Mercedes, Evette Dionne, Roxane Gay, and Angie Manfredi. One of the things I've learned is that using the word "fat" as a neutral descriptor the way thin, tall, and short are descriptors, is a powerful way to begin destigmatizing the word. As Hunter Shackelford wrote, "Fat is not an indication of value, health, beauty, or performance. ... Fatness does not have to be fixed, eradicated, shrunk, hidden, silenced, or shamed."

But looking at most of the books that surround our young students, you wouldn't know that.

Take a look at many of the so-called classics in children's literature, and you might start noticing that so often, fatness symbolizes negativity.

There are fat bullies, like Dudley Dursley, and Crabbe and Goyle, in the Harry Potter books, whose size and physical descriptions are wielded as indictments on their character. There are also fat victims, like Linda in Judy Blume's *Blubber*, whose body size becomes a code for weakness and helplessness.

Books equate fatness with greed, gluttony, villainy, and a whole score of other moral failings. Just consider the character Augustus Gloop in Roald Dahl's *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, described as a "great big greedy nincompoop" whose entire character arc is based on the understanding that he deserves what happens to him simply because he eats a lot. So seldom are fat characters centred in stories, relegated much more often to one-dimensional comic relief, where their fatness is frequently the butt of the jokes. Jokes where fat is code for lazy, greedy, infantile, or stupid are pervasive throughout children's books and the media we consume in general.

In all of these cases, a fat character's worth is tied to the way they look, and the message is clear: fat is bad.

The fact that these stereotypes and tropes are everywhere in kids books is bad enough. But it is made infinitely worse by the other fact that there is almost no positive representation to counter the negative.

The sheer absence of fat bodies in kids' books is a thunderous indictment of the antifatness we live in. Even in otherwise very progressive stories where there is diversity of race, gender identity, and ability, the one glaring absence is diversity of body. There are whole neighbourhoods, whole schools, whole orchestras, whole families, without a single person who is not thin.

These are the seeds from which anti-fatness grows. These books tell fat kids that they are lesser than, that their bodies are signs of moral flaws, that they need to do better and work harder to be thin. They tell thin kids that they are the protagonists of stories, that they are the heroes, that they are better than their fat classmates.

We need to do better. We need to tell stories with fat characters at the centre, where their fatness is not the point of the story or a moralizing plot device. Kids deserve to see people with a diversity of body size and shape in their books just as they do in real life. Our students need us to be comfortable having conversations about antifatness in culture and media, but they also need to be surrounded by positive examples of fat, diverse bodies living life and having adventures.

A great way to begin is by taking an audit of your own book collections. How many books do you offer your students with positive fat representation? And how many fall prey to harmful tropes and stereotypes? If you don't like the answers you get, perhaps begin by considering adding this list of picture books to your bookshelves.

Books with fat bodies on the page

Princesses versus Dinosaurs

by Linda Bailey and Joy Ang

A hilarious showdown between two storybook titans. Just a fabulous representation of diversity across the board. Come for the excellent story, stay for a collection of princesses whose diversity of gender, race, and body are truly exemplary.

***Fry Bread* by Kevin Noble Maillard and Juana Martinez-Neal**

A love letter to the family dinner table and the gift of breaking bread with loved ones. An #OwnVoices book by an author from the Seminole Nation. Absolutely vital to see diverse bodies enjoying food with a complete absence of shaming and judgment.

***Abigail the Whale* by Davide Cali and Sonja Bougaeva**

Fantastic story about Abigail, who turns a taunt of “Abigail the Whale” on its head by channeling a whale (and other animals) in her successful quest to be an amazing swimmer. A lovely story that does the rare thing of showing a fat character as beautifully sporty, agile, talented, and graceful.

***I Really Want to Win* by Simon Philip and Lucia Gaggiotti**

A terrific book to teach about perseverance and the unique gifts we each have. Perfect for those all-important “winning is not everything” conversations we have. A great example of a fat character excelling at sports and dance with confidence and flawless pizzazz.

***Our Little Kitchen* by Jillian Tamaki**

A warm, heartfelt celebration of food and community. An example of background spreads and crowds done right, with a richly diverse cast of characters. An excellent segue into conversations about how food nourishes our bodies but also our hearts, families, and communities.

***All of Us* by Kathryn Erskine and Alexandra Boiger**

A gentle book about kindness and making space for everyone. This is one of the few books I’ve seen with good representation of masculine-presenting fat characters. A really sweet book about acceptance, and one that is filled with joy and hope on every page.

Books about fat positivity and normalizing body diversity

***Beautifully Me* by Nabela Noor and Nabi H. Ali**

A poignant and well-written story about self-love and the ways that adults, sometimes unwittingly, teach their kids antifatness. A good read for families and classes as we learn to give more care to our own and each other’s bodies.

***The Bare Naked Book* (new edition) by Kathy Stinson and Melissa Cho**

The new edition of this 1986 celebration of the human body is excellent. The much-improved illustrations by Melissa Cho and the amended wording around gender make this one of my favourite books for body positivity. Exemplary diversity of body, race, gender, age, and ability, with representation of vitiligo, stretch marks, tattoos, and lots more variation of appearance seldom seen in illustrations.

***Bodies are Cool* by Tyler Feder**

Like *The Bare Naked Book*, just phenomenal representation of diverse community. This one is also great for older students as there is so much richness in the lyrical text. Lots of vocabulary and detail to go along with the excellent illustrations.

***Her Body Can* by Katie Crenshaw and Ady Meschke**

A truly lovely poem of self-love and body normativity. Page after page of all the things that this girl can do, defying all the worst stereotypes of fat bodies. Such a gentle and powerful ode to loving our own bodies, however they look and feel.

***The (Other) F Word: A Celebration of the Fat and Fierce* by Angie Manfredi**

A magnificent collection for young adult and middle-grade readers. Art, poetry, essays, fashion tips, all centring the love, acceptance, and celebration of fat bodies.

Further reading

To read about why I’ve used the term “antifatness,” the racist history of antifatness, and concern trolling (a common response to body-normative and fat-positive conversations) visit linktr.ee/LearnAboutAntifatness or scan the QR code.

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