

FAT, CISGENDER, MALE PROTAGONISTS IN AWARD-WINNING, YOUNG ADULT
LITERATURE: AN ANALYSIS

A THESIS

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DEDICATION

This thesis work is dedicated to my husband, Michael, who has been a constant source of love and encouragement during the challenges of graduate school. Thank you for your unwavering support and the pride you take in me.

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ABSTRACT

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FAT, CISGENDER, MALE PROTAGONISTS IN AWARD-WINNING, YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE: AN ANALYSIS

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This thesis aims to examine fat, male, cisgender protagonists in award-winning young adult literature through a multifaceted lens. It will address the question: What structures of power shape fat, boy characters in young adult fiction and how do they shape them? This question seeks to gain a deeper understanding of these fat, male characters and to learn what happens when we apply multifaceted study to works that have been analyzed using a single lens or not analyzed at all. Chapter 1 discusses the function of gender in terms of athleticism and how it defines the desirable male, determines how undesirable males should be treated, and makes the protagonists' fatness more acceptable. Chapter 2 examines the role of male authority figures to the fat protagonists and how they worked to represent heteronormative, hegemonic masculinity. The final chapter discusses the racist and ableist roots of fatness as a choice in these novels.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

DEDICATION	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iii
ABSTRACT	iv
LIST OF TABLES	vi
I. INTRODUCTION	1
II. ATHLETICISM AND MASCULINE, HETERONORMATIVE DESIRABILITY	
STANDARDS	13
Athleticism and Desirability	13
Athleticism Creates Acceptable Fatness	18
Athleticism as a Bildungsroman Element	22
III. FAT PROTAGONISTS' AUTHORITY FIGURES	30
Coaches	30
Fathers	38
IV. FATNESS AS THE PROTAGONISTS' CHOICE	43
Binge Eating and Laziness: Evidence of the Protagonists' Blame	45
Examples of Progress	51
Fatness Deserves Consequences: Ableism and Healthism at Work	54
V. CONCLUSION	59
WORKS CITED	65

LIST OF TABLES

1. Selected Novels.....9

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

My first memory of being affected by literature was in third grade when, for our daily reading circle, my teacher read aloud *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* over the course of a marking period. When Augustus Gloop was introduced, she performed his dialogue in a slurred, breathless tenor to denote his immense size and stupidity. To add a visual element, she puffed out her cheeks and tucked her chin into her neck to create rolls. For Augustus's final scene, she went so far as to imitate him waddling over to the chocolate river and hunching over to meet his demise. I have never forgotten this particular reading circle because of how self-conscious I felt when everyone laughed at Augustus Gloop. I was a fat child just like him. If they found him so funny and disgusting, then did they look at me the same way?

Now, as a fat adult aware of fatphobia and how far it reaches, I know that the literary portrayal of Augustus Gloop was ghastly and the effect he had on children like me was negative. I can also assume that his effect on thin children was negative, because it gave them permission to make fun of their fat peers. As a fat, English master's student, I recognize that there were many reasons why my teacher's (and Roald Dahl's) portrayal of Augustus was problematic. The waddling and heavy breathing reflected discriminatory views of disability. The slurred speech denoting both stupidity and laziness bely notions of "acceptable" masculinity as defined by Western whiteness and gender norms. The fabricated neck rolls and puffy cheeks illustrated widespread disgust for fatness, or shapes that are not deemed "attractive." Now a teacher myself, I became curious — are the structures of power that shaped Augustus Gloop still present in contemporary books with fat boy characters?

Up to the present, most academic publications and conversations concerning fat characters in young adult literature have centered fat women and girls. This is partly due to there being fewer fat boy characters in young adult literature and partly due to society's fixation on women's size and appearance. For example, Nicole Ann Amato, in "I'm Fat. It's Not a Cuss Word," discusses what fatness means and has meant to our society and how we see that manifested in female characters whose main conflict centers their self-worth and peer acceptance. Lindsey Averill examines the representation of female bodies in young adult literature and how that plays into gender norms and stereotypes in her work "Do Fat-Positive Representations Really Exist in YA? Review of Fat-Positive Characters in Young Adult Literature." Linda Parsons, in her study "The (Re)Presentation of Fat Female Protagonists and Food Addiction in Young Adult Literature," compares the most recent fat female characters to previous ones in order to analyze the different levels of fat acceptance they represent. The abundance of fat female characters coupled with the higher demand for their study create ample opportunity for such in-depth works as these.

When fat, male characters are addressed, they tend to be viewed through a single-axis lens, wherein their fatness is the only perceivable quality about them. Unlike with more intersectional analyses of fat female characters, gender, disability(ies), and class all but disappear. For example, in "Appetites: The Construction of "Fatness" in the Boy Hero in English Children's Literature," Jean Webb analyzes the harmful characterization of fat boys in older popular literature. The fat boy characters in her case study were meant by each literary text's author to juxtapose or contrast characters that embody the "traditional," more socially acceptable definition of masculinity. Because of this, the fat male characters are portrayed as lazy, unintelligent, and in some cases, effeminate. Webb succeeds at discussing these characters

through a gender studies lens, but backtracks in the latter half of her article where she dictates that a positive fat boy character will be one who meets a “healthy” conclusion by successfully losing weight by the end of the book. This idea defeats the purpose of her criticizing the slim, athletic “boy hero” trope of past literature, as a fat male protagonist successfully completing a diet to show character growth still creates a slim, athletic “boy hero.” This idea also fails to acknowledge the types of critiques urged by disability studies scholars by defining “healthy” as losing weight and inhabiting a smaller body.

In another example, “As their waistlines recede”: Tracing and Challenging the Fat quest in Young adult Literature,” Sarah A. Shelton challenges Webb by discussing the ableist discourse surrounding the “fat quest.” While Webb lauded such a quest — wherein a fat character must lose weight in order to demonstrate positive character development — as appropriate representation of fat characters in young adult literature, Shelton instead pointed out the harm in equating character growth with weight loss and presented a list of books with dynamic, fat protagonists who did not need to lose weight to overcome their challenges. But her case study of books that “challenge” the fat quest are all led by fat, girl protagonists. The sole mention of a fat boy is that of a side character who gets gastric bypass surgery — a character who still embarks on the fat quest when the fat girl protagonist does not. This study, while employing disability studies and fat studies lenses, does not apply them to the only fat boy character mentioned. It also leaves out any gender studies lens. Lindsey Averill acknowledges the lack of what she calls intersectional studies of fat, young adult characters in her article “Do Fat-positive Representations Really Exist in YA? Review of Fat-positive Characters in Young Adult Literature.” She argues that “the genre that is fat accepting YA novels fails to forward a genuine notion of intersectional social justice and instead continues to forward oppressive kyriarchal

structures,” or multiple social systems built around oppression (30). While this is an accurate statement, it must be noted that Averill’s case study is limited by the fact that it does not include any books with fat boy characters. Even an article calling for more intersectional approaches to creating and understanding fat characters fails to fully acknowledge the role that gender plays in their construction.

The theory of intersectionality was developed by Kimberle Williams Crenshaw in 1989 as a way to study the intersecting forms of oppression that Black women experience. Intersectionality’s widespread application through Black feminist theory has led to what can be understood as “a consensus that homogenizing, essentialist, and exclusionary models of identity that falsely universalize relatively privileged experiences and identities to all ‘women,’ while centering others, are unjust and inadequate to building truly emancipatory theories and political movements” (Carastathis 2). The idea of rejecting readings of fat bodies that employ homogenizing and essentialist models of identity — those that ignore gender and/or disability, for example — appealed to me; therefore, when I began my study, my intention was to use Crenshaw’s notion of intersectionality to examine these characters. However, as I read the books, I came to discover that because of the lack of racial diversity among the protagonists, it was impossible for me to adequately use intersectionality as Crenshaw intended it to be used. Intersectionality refers to multiple forms of oppression, with racism being a key form, colliding to make a new, distinct type of oppression. As nine of the eleven protagonists I studied are White, I could not reasonably conduct an intersectional analysis. Although these protagonists do experience oppression, they do not experience intersectional oppression, in Crenshaw’s meaning of the term; they do not face racism while also facing ableism or healthism. Therefore, I employ what I call a multidimensional analysis, focusing on ways in which identity categories intersect

and interact with one another. I still discuss how structures of power and oppression present themselves in the novels, but I do not discuss any new form of oppression their overlap may create. I also use multiple intersecting or overlapping theories drawn from critical race theory, queer and gender studies, and disability studies to analyze the characters that intersect or overlap in the chapters.

To date, fat boy characters in young adult literature have not been analyzed for multidimensionality. One possible reason for the lack of analysis of fat boy characters in young adult literature could be that there are fewer fat boy characters in general. In order to investigate the range of books that include fat boy characters, I accessed the NovelList database, which is an EBSCO database containing reading recommendations for librarians. My search for fat characters in teen books brought up 212 books since 1995. Of those, only 50 books featured fat boy characters in a protagonist or supporting character role. Two books featured boy and girl fat characters. The remaining 210 books featured fat girl characters only. This result could be indicative of another possible reason that scholars have not given as much attention to fat, boy characters, connected to the fact that “obesity” has been historically defined in the West as a woman’s issue, and as such, it has been a focus of feminist scholarship since the 1970s. As Sander Gilman notes, “the theme of much of this work has centered on how patriarchal society (men) abhors fat women and thus causes all women to hate their own bodies” (1). In other words, a woman’s body size more obviously correlates to her worth and the treatment she receives in society. Research on fat girls in young adult literature is in higher demand simply because our society’s focus on female bodies is greater than that of males. With men and boys, it can be more difficult to recognize gender oppression, especially concerning bodies, because its presence is more subtle.

A look at the history of fat boy characters in books shows little variation from the more contemporary search results. Webb's work provides a brief but useful history of fat boys in popular twentieth and twenty-first century literature. The purpose of the twentieth century fat, boy character seemed to be to serve as an "anti-example" of the Boy Hero, defined as "manfull, godly, practical, enthusiastic, prudent, self-sacrificing ... athletic and sporty, and one would deduce not overweight" (Webb 107). For example, the character of Piggy from *Lord of the Flies* is only seen as heroic in his death, for while he was alive, he was seen as "overweight, physically inept; [having] poor eyesight; an asthma sufferer; ...educationally and socially limited yet conscientious and thoughtful" (Webb 112). Webb points out that Piggy's real name is never revealed, and it is implied that his fatness is his own choice because his aunt lets him eat candy. Because of this, William Golding positions the reader to believe his health problems are a consequence of his weight. Even though Piggy's death garners sympathy and reflection, his overall characterization serves as a lesson about what a Boy Hero is not and insinuates that good health and athleticism is something that can simply be chosen as a matter of strong will. In another example, Edmund of *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, while not physically fat, reflects the negativity connected to behaviors commonly associated with fatness. As Webb notes, "Edmund's preoccupation with food and his greed are his fatal flaws, for he is so tempted by the Turkish delight offered by the White Witch that he is prepared to betray his family, and by implication, his patriotic values" (113). His mere love of food is associated with overindulgence, which turns into deep-seated greed; it is his 'fat' behaviors that make him traitorous and morally failed. Similarly, Augustus Gloop of *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* serves to demonstrate poor morality through his food choices and his appearance. With descriptions like, "Great flabby folds of fat bulged out from every part of his body, and his face was like a monstrous ball of

dough with two small greedy curranty eyes peering out upon the world,” Dahl means for his readers to be disgusted with Augustus and to view him as a creature rather than a boy (Webb 34). His humiliating punishment and ultimate expulsion from the chocolate factory are due to his perceived greediness surrounding food and nothing else. The theme of greed associated with fatness and eating is seen again with the character of Dudley Dursley in *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*. It is implied that his weight is due to his overindulgence and being spoiled by his parents. His body type is a contributing element of his villainous character, in opposition to the hero Harry. Webb discovers a shift in fat boy characters in twenty-first century young adult literature, where they are more often the protagonists of the story and are not mal-characterized because of their weight. However, their weight is still viewed as a problem to be solved. Such examples from Webb’s discussion include Jimmy from *Fat Boy Swim*, Eric of *Staying Fat for Sarah Byrnes*, and Zero of *Holes*. All of these characters, however, are portrayed as being fat due to their choices and lose their excess weight by the book’s end as part of their character development. Even though these boys are not villainous, their fatness is still viewed as something to be fixed.

While this abbreviated history of fat characters covers only the twentieth and twenty-first centuries’ most popular fat characters, these themes surrounding fat boys have been present for much longer. Sander L. Gilman, author of *Fat Boys: A Slim Book*, explains that the connotations of fatness that we see in the aforementioned books derive from associations and stereotypes made hundreds of years ago

The quality of personality most closely associated with fat in the historical literature is stupidity. Today young children describe obese children shown in silhouette as ‘lazy,’ ‘dirty,’ ‘stupid,’ as people who ‘cheat’ and ‘lie.’ Physicians are not much better than the

children. They describe their obese patients as ‘weak-willed, ugly, and awkward.’ These power images seem to be part of the cultural vocabulary of male obesity. (45)

He goes on to point out that historically, “Fat, as a sign of gluttony, is a reflection of the prideful nature of humans. It is often linked to acedia, sloth, the deadly sin that is part of the tradition of the representation of madness in the West. The puffed-up body is also the spirit that is so unwilling to act as to be a sign of moral decay and mental instability” (Gilman 52). These social and cultural beliefs surrounding fatness in the West explicitly demonstrate their influence in the characters of Piggy, Edmund, Augustus, and Dudley and their playing the opposite of the Boy Hero. Jimmy, Eric, and Zero also exhibit these cultural beliefs about fatness, though their fate is less absolute. Hence, they get to ‘fix’ their fatness before their fatness does them in.

The goal of my work is to examine fat, male protagonists in young adult literature through a multifaceted lens. It addresses the following question: What structures of power shape fat, boy characters in contemporary young adult fiction and how do they shape them? For the purpose of this study, structures of power in question are gender, disability, and — to a much smaller degree — race, thus forming a multifaceted analysis of the characters. When I say “fat, boy characters,” I mean teenage, cisgender males whose weight who are considered “obese” or “overweight” by the author, other characters, and society. The word “fat” in my study is not pejorative and carries no meaning other than being a neutral descriptor of size. To select the specific artifacts for this study, I chose books published from 1995 to the present that featured a fat, male protagonist and which won a national award, honor, or recognition such as the American Library Association Best Books for Young Adults award, the Asian/Pacific American Award for Young Adult Literature, the Boston Globe-Horn Book Honor, the Parent’s Choice

Silver Medal, and the Carnegie Medal. The table below shows the novels in this study, their authors, publication dates, publishers, and national awards.

Table 1

Selected Novels

Title	Author	Publication Date	Publisher	Award
<i>Dough Boy</i>	Peter Marino	2005	Holiday House	CCBC Choices, 2006
<i>Fat Boy vs. the Cheerleaders</i>	Geoff Herbach	2014	Sourcebooks Fire	YALSA Best Fiction for Young Adults: 2015
<i>Flavor of the Week</i>	Tucker Shaw	2003	Alloy Entertainment	Junior Library Guild selection
<i>Food, Girls, and Other Things I Can't Have</i>	Allen Zadoff	2009	EgmontUSA	YALSA Popular Paperbacks for Young Adults 2012
<i>Playground</i>	50Cent	2012	Penguin Group	YALSA Quick Picks for Reluctant Readers 2012
<i>The Extraordinary Adventures of Alfred Kropp</i>	Richard Yancey	2005	Bloomsbury	Best Book of the Year, Publishers Weekly, Carnegie Medal Finalist
<i>Darius the Great is Not Okay</i>	Adib Khorram	2018	Penguin	Asian/Pacific American Award for Young Adult Literature, Boston Globe-Horn Book Honor
<i>Every Day</i>	David Levithan	2012	Random House Children's Books	YALSA Best Fiction for Young Adults 2013,
<i>Slob</i>	Ellen Potter	2009	Puffin Books	Junior Library Guild Selection
<i>Slot Machine</i>	Chris Lynch	1995	Harper Trophy	ALA Best Books for Young Adults, 1996; ALA Best Books for Reluctant Young Adult Readers 1996

<i>The Dark Days of Hamburger Halpin</i>	Josh Berk	2011	CNIB	Kirkus Reviews Best Books for Teens, 2010; Parent's Choice Silver Medal
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The eleven books award-winning books on this list are exemplary, therefore, because these accolades show the books are deemed noteworthy and impactful on a national scale by both the public and academia. Award-winning books are often the most purchased by librarians and they are the most advertised by booksellers, therefore they receive far more exposure than other titles. Within these case study books, then, I expected to find a representation of what society values in terms of race, gender, and disability, and how society views fat boys through these lenses. I also expected to find both differences and similarities between the fat boy characters in my case study and the fat boy trope of past literature. When I first approached this study, I intended to compare these more modern fat, male protagonists with fat characters featured in previous, popular literature, such as those mentioned above. Augustus Gloop of *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* or Piggy of *Lord of the Flies*. Upon beginning my analysis, however, it became clear that I lack the space in this study to add such a comparison. While the idea for this study was partly inspired by the opportunity to make such a comparison, it is important to note that this is not a comparative analysis. In each artifact of my case study, I examine the function of whiteness, disability, and heteronormativity in the texts so that I can produce a multidimensional analysis. This mode allows me to move beyond character identity analysis and relate the construction of fatness in these texts to bigger societal and cultural structures of power and oppression.

The overarching theoretical framework of this study is drawn from Fat Studies, which is defined in *The Fat Studies Reader* as “offer[ing] no opposition to the simple fact of human weight diversity, but instead looks at what people and societies make of this reality. The field of

fat studies requires skepticism about weight-related beliefs that are popular, powerful, and prejudicial” (Rothblum and Solovay X). Fat Studies acts as the umbrella in my work because of its intersectional nature; it includes analysis of how race, gender, disability, class, religion, sexuality, and more play into society’s treatment of fat people. Within the Fat Studies umbrella, I also draw from Queer and Gender studies. Queer and Gender Studies, used to analyze fatness in *Queering Fat Embodiment* by Pausé, Wykes, and Murray, “inquir[es] into the ways that bodies and desires are regulated through the system of compulsory heterosexuality” and “explores the productive potential of fat to denaturalize ideas about health, sexuality, desire, and embodiment” (10). I use this approach to analyze how heteronormativity functions in the novels of the case study and what effect it has upon the fat, boy characters. Also within the Fat Studies umbrella, I draw from Disability Studies, which “views disability not as a medical issue or physical limitation, but as a cultural construct” (Quick 55). In the field of Disability Studies, “disability exists because the world is constructed, both physically and in attitudes toward disabled bodies, to render a disabled body as abnormal” (Quick 55). I apply this lens to the fat, boy characters in the case study because their bodies are viewed as abnormal or “other” in the same way that disabled bodies are, and they face discriminatory medical treatment as a result of not conforming to a singular definition of “health.” The final approach I draw from is Critical Race Theory (CRT), which is defined by Richard Delgado et al. as “a collection of activists and scholars engaged in studying and transforming the relationship among race, racism, and power” (3). CRT places issues of race in a “broader perspective that includes economics, history, setting, group and self-interest, and emotions and the unconscious” (Delgado et al. 3). I use CRT to analyze how race as a structure of power works in defining and characterizing fat, male characters in

recent young adult literature while keeping in mind the role of race in Western culture's aversion to fatness and how whiteness has worked historically to demonize fat bodies (Strings).

The rest of this work is divided into three chapters dedicated to three recurring themes that I noticed during my reading of the eleven books. The second chapter discusses the trope of athleticism and how it defines male desirability, makes fat protagonists more acceptable to others, and even solves the characters' problems and shows their internal growth. The third chapter discusses the related theme, that of the role of father figures and athletic coaches in the lives of the fat protagonists to emphasize the relationship of authority to fatness. The final chapter discusses the way that fatness is portrayed as a choice in these novels.

CHAPTER II

ATHLETICISM AND MASCULINE, HETERONORMATIVE DESIRABILITY STANDARDS

In the novels within this study, athleticism works to define the desirable cis male body. Characters who fit the traditional heteronormative beauty standard for men — muscular, athletic, and “manly” — are understood to be desirable. This is overwhelmingly a result of how the Western world has and continues to define male desirability in the context of heteronormativity. Amy Erdman Farrell points to history to show that traditionally, the “ideal male body was firm, muscular, strong, able to participate in outside sport and recreation” (50). Researchers who analyzed 30 years (1967-1997) of images of men in the popular *GQ*, *Rolling Stone*, and *Sports Illustrated* magazines explain that “Sociocultural standards of beauty for males emphasize strength and muscularity,” showing that “the male bodies featured in these magazines became more lean, muscular, and V-shaped (featuring a broad chest tapering to a narrow waist) over the years” (Law and Labre. 697). Athleticism has a stronghold over the male body and its value to society both in real life and in the novels of this study, as it determines whether or not the protagonist is attractive to female characters.

Athleticism and Desirability

Most of the novels in this study present an athletic male side character that works as an example of everything the fat male protagonist is not. In *Flavor of the Week*, there are two male side characters whose presence defines the desirability that the fat protagonist Cyril lacks in order to capture the attention of Rose, his love interest. At the beginning of the novel, Rose is seen with Brandon Keifler, “the overgrown, letter-jacketed, prep-turned-meathead” (Shaw 9). Even though they break up, Brandon exists as a character in order to establish Rose’s “type” and to therefore establish Cyril’s main obstacle to winning Rose’s favor: he is not athletic like the

boys she is attracted to. Rose then dates Cyril's best friend Chris, a "beautiful six-footer ... gorgeous. Breathtaking. Stunning," who is a track and field athlete at school (Shaw 15). At the end of the book, Rose realizes she likes Cyril — not for his body type, but for his incredible cooking talent and how good of a friend he is to her. In fact, his body type is completely ignored when Rose acknowledges her feelings for him. Although she may possess romantic feelings for Cyril, his body remains undesirable to her, suggesting to readers that desirability is defined by body type.

Most of the novels in this study also follow a similar pattern. In *Food, Girls, and Other Things I Can't Have*, the football coach acts as a model of male desirability: "Coach Bryson ... [has] a big chest and a thick moustache like a seventies porn star. Some of the guys call him Magnum P.I." (Zadoff 47). His brawny chest and likeness to the athletic Magnum P.I. are what make him a model of heteronormative desire. Andrew, the fat protagonist, is meant to be the opposite of Coach Bryson and the boys he coaches until he joins the football team. Ultimately, Andrew's love interest chooses the more desirable, athletic team captain over him. In *Slob*, desirability takes form in the athletic side character of Andre Bertoni, who acts as an opposite to Owen, the fat, male protagonist: "I stood right next to Andre Bertoni. He was already stretching, even though he didn't have to yet. He swung his adult-sized muscle-bound arms from side to side and bounced on his toes, as though he was preparing for the Olympic 400-meter dash" (Potter 4). Andre's desirability is found in his large, athletic arms, which he purposefully flexes as if to flaunt his heteronormative manliness to the others. In *Fat Boy vs. The Cheerleaders*, desirability transcends age as long as there is the presence of an athletic build. The protagonist's grandfather, who "spent his youth wearing a banana hammock, making his oiled up pecs bulge for crowds of people" in the 1970s still has large pectoral muscles born from hours in the gym, which make

him desirable unlike his grandson Gabe (Herbach 55). Gabe's best friend-turned-enemy, Justin, develops an athletic body and starts dating girls and leaves him to feel abandoned: "Justin's grown from a pencil-neck geek to looking sort of like Clark Kent. He's on the swim team and he grew all these muscles out of no place...he said 'Chicks dig me'" (Herbach 63). These athletic characters act as examples of what is desirable to the female characters while also being physical foils to the fat male protagonists.

Consequently, the fat, male protagonists of these novels are treated poorly by the female characters, often being explicitly rejected by them. In *Every Day*, when the main character wakes up in a fat, male body named Finn, he is rejected by Rhiannon, his love interest. Rhiannon is known throughout the book by other characters for being kind, understanding, and accepting of others until she sees the body of Finn: "She spots me right away; it's not like she can miss me. The recognition's in her eyes, but it's not a particularly happy one" (Levithan 272). When Rhiannon sees Finn and his body's deviation from traditional heteronormative athletic desirability, her countenance shifts negatively. She is not attracted to him, and their date is an awkward and mostly silent one. Rhiannon explicitly blames her lack of interest and involvement on his body. "It's just that...I can't see you inside. Usually I can ... But not tonight ... I can't help it. I just don't feel anything. When I see you like this, I don't. I can't" (Levithan 274). Finn is unattractive to her because of his non-athletic build that she becomes emotionally detached from him. In *Playground*, Butterball describes his experience with the way girls treat him, and boys like him, based on his body type: "One thing I'll say about being fat: ... the girls like Nia, they're really friendly to you, even if it's probably just because they don't see you as a threat like other guys. They'll talk to you about shit they'd never say in front of guys they want to get with" (50Cent 164). Because Butterball does not fit the athletic mold, he gets treated more as a friend

by his love interest. This theme is also present in *Flavor of the Week* when Rose feminizes Cyril and treats him as one of her girlfriends, saying he is not a real boy: “Personally, I’m through with them ... They all suck...I’m talking about boyfriend-type guys, not friend-friend-type guys. Not you, Cyril” (Shaw 11). Here, Rose is talking about her disappointing experience with the athletic, traditionally desirable boys. In designating Cyril as a “friend-friend-type guy,” she demonstrates that she does not view him as an attractive boy she would like to go on a date with. Rose takes this sentiment further later in the novel, again saying “All boys suck,” (Shaw 106). When Cyril calls attention to the fact that he too is a boy, she again rejects his masculinity: “I mean boy-boys. Not you” (Shaw 106). When Rose says “boy-boys,” she means athletic, traditionally desirable boys. To Rose, the only type of bodies that are to be both considered and treated as male are the athletic ones. Because Cyril does not fit this body type that she is attracted to, she feminizes him by saying he is not one of the “boy-boys.”

This instance of feminizing a fat male body is not unique. In fact, fat men have frequently been feminized in the West. Sander L. Gilman explains that historically, “The meanings associated with the fat male body are produced in the spheres in which fat and masculinity are often seen as incompatible” (63). Farrell further explains that fat men have been feminized historically because they were (and are) perceived to “partak[e] too much in the comforts of modern life,” so they become “like women: anabolic, fat, corpulent ... clearly damaged men” (47). He goes on to note that in the late nineteenth century, “fatness became a sign of a deficient body, one linked to the primitive, to the female, to the African, to the Hottentot” (Farrell 118). Closer to the present day, Aubrey Gordon notes that one of the most common ways that fat men in media are portrayed is “sexless, emasculated, socially discomfiting, and repulsive to women ... On the rare occasion a fat man is depicted as lovable, his appeal is ... decidedly unsexed” (98).

Rose's "unsexing" of Cyril due to his non-athletic body has cultural and historic roots in the way that the West views fatness as feminine and is by no means unique within young adult literature. We can also see it in a number of other novels included in this study. In *The Dark Days of Hamburger Halpin*, the female math teacher, who is later caught in a scandalous and predatory affair with an athletic boy, treats Will the protagonist as a nobody by "ignore[ing] [him] 99 percent of the time" (Berk 30). She neglects Will's academic needs because he is not like the athletic, traditionally desirable boys. In *Food, Girls, and Other Things I Can't Have*, the protagonist Andrew does not want to be seen in front of his female classmates in gym class because of how they might view him: "We have to wear shorts in gym ... I wouldn't mind wearing shorts if I went to a school for the blind ... But in the middle of the day ... and the girls about to show up any minute?" (Zadoff 46). Andrew knows that his body does not fit the athletic build, and therefore will be less desirable to his female classmates. He is particularly worried about his love interest, April, and how she will perceive his body in shorts: "I need [Coach Bryson] to put April in a different gym class ... so she doesn't see me running in shorts. Then when she thinks about me, she can think about my brain rather than my blubber" (Zadoff 46). Andrew knows that April likely defines desirable boys as those who fit the heteronormative masculine mold. As mentioned previously, she ultimately chooses to be with the football team captain rather than Andrew.

Not only is athleticism used to define and cement heteronormative, masculine desirability standards, but it is also used to contrast the fat, male protagonists, further exemplifying just how undesirable they are. This is the norm concerning fatness and desirability in young adult literature:

It is rare for a young adult novel to portray fat, or even a little extra weight, as beautiful—or even as an alternative standard of beauty. The protagonist may accept herself/himself in the fat state and go on to live a happy life. But the protagonists love themselves in spite of their fat. Thin is still represented as the absolute ideal for body image ... Fat is still viewed as a decidedly negative body type. (Quick 54).

If the fat male characters are desired, it is in spite of, not because of, their bodies; rather, it is because of their talents or their personalities. When they feel desire from another character, it is seen as a rarity.

Athleticism Creates Acceptable Fatness

While fatness is never characterized as desirable, it becomes acceptable and even praised in some of the novels — though only when it is used in instances of athleticism or violence. Before the boys engage in athletics, their bodies are perceived as worthless or wasted opportunities. When they decide to use their fatness as an advantage in sports, their bodies become valuable and they are no longer viewed as fat, but strong instead. It is as if when a fat body is in intentional motion, it is no longer viewed as lazy and gluttonous. The fat is now seen as fuel for the activity and thus acceptable. Patrick McGann uses the example of American football players to illustrate this idea, noting that “hegemonic cultural meaning molds the body to serve the interests of masculinity,” which explains the “need to maintain or increase body size and strength” in athletes (Tuana et al. 87). When a man is athletic, fatness is acceptable because it serves the needs of the athletic body and ultimately masculinity.

In *The Extraordinary Adventures of Alfred Kropp*, Alfred’s large body is viewed by his uncle as full of promise and potential through the lens of athletic opportunity. His uncle forces him to try out for the team, saying “you’re some kinda force of nature! ... Ah, come on. They’ll

bounce off you like — like — pygmies! Gnats! Little pygmy gnats!” (Yancey 8). When he ultimately fails at football, his uncle views him as a waste of size until he can use him to help steal a prized sword for money. Alfred’s size is only useful in terms of his athletic potential or capability. In *Slot Machine*, Elvin’s fat body is useful when the coaches realize that he could be a valuable addition to the wrestling team: “The wrestling team had a built-in slot for me — junior heavyweight ... It was a world defined purely by weight,” (Lynch 68). Until this moment, Elvin had been rejected from every sport he was assigned at the summer camp because his body did not perform in the same way as the others. The moment his fatness becomes useful, even paramount, in a sport, then it becomes acceptable. While on the wrestling team, he gains more respect from others. When he ultimately gets kicked from the wrestling team, he loses respect and gets grouped with non-athletic outsiders. He is once again treated as “fat” instead of “big” or “muscular” by the coaches and other boys. Elvin’s fatness is only appreciated when he is wrestling.

In *Every Day*, the protagonist who wakes up in a different body every day expresses remorse upon realizing that he has woken up in the body of Finn, a fat male teenager. In describing his size, he is sure to differentiate between the “good” kind of big and the “bad” kind when he says “I am not a linebacker. No, I’m fat. Flabby, unwieldy fat” (Levithan 270). His use of the word “unwieldy” to describe Finn’s body denotes that because Finn’s fat cannot be used, then it is a disappointment. If Finn’s body were large in athletic terms, it would be acceptable. In fact, a few days earlier, he woke up in the body of a large football player and did not complain. Because Finn’s fat is not being used in sport, then it is deplorable. In *Slob*, Owen expresses that he wants to be a “Big oaf. ... Big oafs were frightening. Big oafs were the mean, sweating guys dressed in Speedos tossing other big oafs into the air inside pro-wrestling cages. Why wasn’t I

that sort of oaf? Why wasn't I that sort of fat?" (Potter 54). Owen knows here that fatness is acceptable when it is associated with athleticism or physical violence, which is athleticism in a more devious form. Even though Owen himself is never athletic, he reflects the cultural norm that fatness is good can be exploited for athletics. He deems himself unworthy because he is not a "big oaf" like the pro-wrestlers he refers to. His fatness has no athletic purpose and is therefore ugly and wasteful. In *Food, Girls, and Other Things I Can't Have*, Andrew tries desperately to impress April by introducing himself as an athlete: "You know the sumo wrestlers in Japan?... You know how they look big, but they're really not big? I mean they are big, but they're big in a muscular way. ... I'm like them" (Zadoff 19). Andrew understands that he cannot hide his body, but if he characterizes himself as athletic he will more likely be viewed as acceptable by April. She will view his fatness as fuel for masculinity: athleticism. When he eventually makes the football team and attends a party with other athletes, he perceives his own size differently: "It's like I'm normal. Even more amazing, I don't feel fat right now. ... With April next to me, at a party with the team, the rules are different. I'm not really fat. I'm big, like Jessica said," (Zadoff 147). His fatness here is defined by his proximity to and participation in athleticism. When he is with other athletes, he still inhabits his body, but he is no longer "fat." He is now acceptable, powerful even, as he uses the word "big" instead of "fat." At the pep rally before the big rival game, Andrew's coach introduces him to the crowd and announces his weight of 307 pounds. For a moment, Andrew panics, thinking that the students will laugh at his weight, then stops: "But here's the really crazy thing. The crowd roars. More than roars. They explode. My name, my size — everything about me gets a cheer ... team is applauding and the cheerleaders are jumping up and down. ... I'm big, and everyone knows it. Maybe they even like it," (Zadoff 230). Here, it is solidified that Andrews' fatness is acceptable under the cover of athleticism.

Before Andrew joined the football team, he was teased because he is the second fattest kid in school. But now that he is using his size for athletic purposes, he is praised. Now that everyone views his body as the greatest threat to their rival's offensive lineman, his fatness is valuable. This is an example of how designations of bodies being good or bad, based on body type, is merely a social construct. Andrew's body does not change significantly throughout the book, but the value of his body does based on what society deems useful.

In some of these books, fatness is acceptable for a more nefarious form of athleticism: physical violence. For example, Andrew gains respect when he uses his size to his advantage to fight with another student. After he engages in violence, he is no longer "the fat weirdo, a tub of lard, the invisible blob, Jurassic Pork," he is now "the guy who kicked Ugo Agademi's ass" (Zadoff 179). Violence makes his size acceptable and respectable. When his fatness fuels a beating, it garners more respect. Alfred of *The Extraordinary Adventures of Alfred Kropp* also gains respect when he punches another boy. Afterward, Alfred states that "that nobody teased me about my size ... People left me alone" (Yancey 338). When he uses his body size for violence, he is treated better by others. In *Playground*, Butterball experiences the same when he brutally beats his now ex-friend over a misunderstanding: "people, even teachers, looked at [him] differently in the halls all day long, like [he] was someone worthy of respect, not just another big invisible blob" (50Cent 27). Here, Butterball is aware of how he has more respect after being violent than he did beforehand. He also acknowledges that without violence, his fatness would make him invisible to others. When his father, who normally makes cruel jokes about Butterball's size, learns of his fighting, he tells him "I'm kind of proud of you ... maybe you're not such a worthless fatass after all, you know?" (50Cent 100). Butterball is now a source of pride for his father because he uses his body to inflict pain on another boy. His size was an

advantage to him in fighting, so now it is to be respected rather than mocked. In *The Dark Days of Hamburger Halpin*, Will engages in violent behavior when he breaks the “deaf child” street sign, referring to him, by his home. Using the full force of his body, he “grab[s] the sign like a throat” and “stomp[s] on the post ... shaking it, bending it ... until the metal becomes hot from the force” (Berk 49). After his violent outburst, he experiences pain everywhere, but says “I still feel great” (Berk 49). Will has respect for his body once he sees that he can use his body weight to break something. Even though his vandalism is illegal, painful, and destructive, it gives him self-confidence to see his weight as physically useful rather than a burden.

With these protagonists, fatness is rebranded by athleticism as a symbol of power, making their bodies more acceptable to themselves and others. The message behind this trend is that fatness cannot be valuable or useful in males unless it is being used to fuel intense physical activity. Fatness can only be acceptable if it aids a traditionally masculine endeavor like athletics and violence.

Athleticism as a Bildungsroman Element

In many young adult novels featuring a fat protagonist, there is a “fat quest,” a term coined by Sarah A. Shelton meaning “a culturally constructed set of steps a fat protagonist must take before he/she can be considered worthy” (172). The fat characters are shown as fat due solely to their own behaviors, “presented as problems to which there are solutions which are achievable both within the fictional text and in real life” (Webb 119). The character’s fatness is viewed as the source of the rest of the character's problems. In this way, weight loss, or the “fat quest,” is not just the answer to the protagonist’s fat body but it is also the solution to their other problems. In order for there to be character growth and achievement, the fat character must embark on this fat quest and lose some if not all of the weight by the novel’s end. Farrell

confirms this cultural construction in *Fat Shame* by commenting that in our society, “The loss of weight marks upward mobility, a gain of stature, a sign of one’s moral, physical, and psychological improvement” (118). This can be possible even when the novel’s main focus is not weight loss. In fact, “the meaning of fatness is so normalized as a ‘discrediting attribute,’ ...that it can be quickly tapped to convey something about the larger improvement or decline in a person’s life” (Farrell 118). In these novels featuring fat male protagonists, the fat quest takes the form of increased athleticism more so than weight loss, in order to redeem the character or prove character growth as in a traditional Bildungsroman novel. Some of the protagonists do not lose weight over the course of the novels, but they do develop athletic ability, even when they are portrayed as comfortable with their fatness. Once the fat male protagonist becomes athletic, he is redeemed and the rest of his problems improve or subside whether he loses weight or not.

In *Slot Machine*, Elvin redeems his otherwise lazy, jokester character traits through athletics. The summer before he begins high school, he attends an athletic camp that intends to organize the freshmen boys into the most fitting sport for their abilities. Elvin, fat and decidedly not athletic, spends the first week of the camp in and out of the sick bay. When he is slotted into wrestling and he discovers he has raw talent, however, his attitude shifts. Elvin’s athletic friend Mikie begins training him so that he can increase his chances of succeeding on the wrestling team. Mikie takes Elvin for early morning runs where Elvin claims to feel “more efficient” and like he is “accomplishing something before breakfast” (Lynch 113). Elvin’s character goes from snarky and lazy to focused and persevering. Even though Elvin no longer participates in wrestling, or any sport, by the novel’s end, he maintains his workouts and is a more sophisticated character because of it. He finds that his “slot” in high school is to participate in the arts, but it is his newfound athleticism that is the catalyst for his personal growth and improvement: “I ran and

ran harder, pushed myself, panted ... I almost wish I did have football players to smash into” (Lynch 199). When Elvin becomes athletic, he becomes redeemed as more mature, and his internal and external problems are solved.

In *Darius the Great Is Not Okay*, the protagonist begins the novel as a teen with an uneventful life who has emotional connection issues with his father. Even though his doctor has confirmed that Darius’s antidepressants causes his weight gain, his father insists that his diet and quitting soccer are to blame for his fatness, causing further tension between them. The positive turning point for Darius is when he begins playing soccer with his new friend while visiting family in Iran. After the introduction of soccer, Darius’s life starts to change for the better. He makes a new friend (and possible love interest) and becomes more focused, and his relations with his father start to improve. When he returns to the US at the end of the novel, he joins the school soccer team. Darius’s participation in soccer parallels his growth as a character. In the final chapter, titled “Darius the Great,” insinuating that Darius is only now capable of living up to his historical namesake, Darius meets his friend Chip after soccer practice, who observes that he “just seem[s] different somehow,” by the way he is more positive and relaxed than he was before his trip to Iran (Khorram 309). Even though Darius does not lose weight, his rekindled athletic ability is viewed as the catalyst that sets in motion the solutions for all his problems. Despite the book highlighting his father’s error in blaming his fatness on dropping out of soccer — contrary to medical evidence explaining otherwise — soccer is still somehow the solution to Darius’s problems. His athleticism is responsible for an emotional recovery that his antidepressants could not achieve and for an improved relationship with his father.

In *Dough Boy*, the protagonist Tristan also acquires athletic ability as part of his character growth. While Tristan is not interested in losing weight, his soon-to-be stepsister, Kelly, is

nutrition-obsessed and polices the entire household about their diet and exercise habits. The book's conflict centers on Tristan having to emotionally and physically deal with being aggressively confronted by Kelly while coming to terms with his best friend becoming romantically involved with her — and to make matters worse, him partaking in the harassment. Towards the end of the novel, when he and his stepsister are separated and he has parted ways with his best friend, Tristan joins the school skiing club. Joining the ski club is the catalyst for his positive character growth. Once he begins skiing, he starts to gain confidence and repair his emotions. At the end of the novel, Tristan skis off into the moonlight, a play on the classic happy ending: “The moon was big-full and fat and in command and I thought of how Mom and Dad would hate that I was out alone so late at night. I glided on and on, almost unafraid” (Marino 221). Part of the proof that Tristan has made progress as a character is his joining the ski club and his newfound athleticism. Despite Tristan staying true to himself after months of Kelly harassing him to become more athletic in order to lose weight, it is still athleticism in the end that is responsible for his inner peace. One could argue, however, that it is not athleticism per se that solves his problem, but rather his choosing a new hobby and meeting new people. However, the author could have chosen for Tristan to meet new people in any number of school clubs involving various hobbies. Tristan's choosing an athletic hobby to clear his mind and repair his emotions mimics Elvin and Darius's improved mental clarity after taking up sport. It is as if with male characters, the message to readers is that athletics is necessary to growth and is the answer to their emotional and interpersonal problems.

In *Food, Girls, and Other Things I Can't Have*, Andrew has low self-esteem and wishes that he could capture the attention of April. After he becomes a football player and performs well in practice, however, Andrew is treated with more respect by the popular students, makes more

friends, and impresses April. Andrew is happier and has a more pleasant life as a high schooler. He is also treated better by his father. When Andrew tells him that he made the football team, his father uncharacteristically bursts into praise, saying ““Son of a gun. I wouldn’t have guessed that in a million years ... My son made varsity!’ I hear people congratulating him in the background. Great news. You’ve got a jock now” (Zadoff 105). His father is usually impatient and distant with him, but at the mention of Andrew’s newfound athleticism, he becomes more proud of him. Later in the novel, Andrew wants to quit the football team when he learns that he was only put on varsity squad because his immense size makes him an ideal offensive lineman against the school rival’s biggest, most dangerous player. His choice to stay on the team despite his feelings and compete in “the big game” is portrayed as a form of character redemption. Even when Andrew ultimately does quit the team after the big game, he maintains respect from the student body and his father because he put his team first over his feelings and chose athleticism, demonstrating that he has matured enough to understand the value of sacrifice.

Athleticism shows character growth in *Fat Boy vs. the Cheerleaders* when Gabe, known throughout the book as “Chunk,” works out with his former bodybuilder grandfather. Prior to this, Gabe is a band geek with problematic friendships, a self-described Code Red Mountain Dew addiction, and suppressed abandonment issue. Gabe experiences anxiety when the school board announces that funding for the school band will be cut in order to support the dance team. It is only when Gabe begins exercising with his grandfather that his relations with his father improve and he becomes more focused and determined to lead his fellow band members to protest. After he leads an impactful student protest to regain funding for the band, he describes “a hellacious kettlebell workout” and is excited to report that “Not only didn’t [he] cry, but [he] rocked it, man. Grandpa’s right. Using anger to fuel a workout is killer” (Herbach 97). His

improved leadership skills and his increase in exercise occur simultaneously. By the end of the book, Gabe's issues with his father have been resolved, he has found better friends, and the school band is saved. Gabe makes sure to note to the reader that he has made a point of continuing exercise with his grandfather. The final chapter is an account from the police officer who interviews Gabe about why he vandalized the school's soda machine to spite the school board. He gives a visual description of Gabriel in the present day: "The last time I saw Gabriel ... he looked healthy and content. He wore shorts. He held hands with a very tall girl all in black" (Herbach 311). The marker of Gabe's contentment here, his redemption, is having an athletic body that is desired by and being with a girl. Athleticism is clearly viewed as the answer to Gabe's problems.

In one novel, the pain from athletic activity itself is meant to signal a character's growth. In *The Dark Days of Hamburger Halpin*, Will, the protagonist, transfers from a school for the deaf to the local public high school and experiences stress and isolation because he is not properly accommodated as a deaf student. The only student who tries to be his friend is a "nerd" that he has no real interest in. Because of this, Will is irritable, depressed, and frequently binge eats. The turning point in the novel is when, stressed and unable to sleep, he sneaks from his home and goes on a run in his neighborhood. The way Will describes the pain from running is as if it is improving him as a person: "It's been a long time since I ran, and in a minute or two, my chest and legs send queries to my brain ... But the pain feels useful" (Berk 48). This pain from his athletic feat is responsible for relieving his anxious and stressful feelings and is juxtaposed to an earlier eating binge. After his midnight athletic excursion spurs a more positive outlook on his environment, Will befriends the "nerdy" student and gets involved in solving the mysterious death of another student. By the end of the novel, he is the hero for having helped solve the

murder case. The pain from Will's run is portrayed as a constructive character-building tool. It is his turning point — a catalyst that leads him to find friendship at his new school and help his community.

Athleticism in these novels possesses a power of redemption in that it is strongly associated with positive character development and the plots' resolution. While the fat quest is a common occurrence in novels featuring fat female protagonists, especially young adult novels, this added layer of athleticism to the fat quest seems to be the norm for fat, male characters. This is influenced by heteronormative masculinity — the idea that men should be muscular and athletic so they may appeal to their female counterparts — because it implies that for the boys to grow into men, or to at least mature, they must take on a form that is traditionally thought to be desired by women. Athleticism, coded here as a means for men to display power in order to attract women, is the evidence that the fat, male protagonists have made growth. It is as if before a character can grow and solve his problems, he must develop physical strength (or the impression of it), even if his problems are solely internal. Being that athleticism is intertwined with the protagonists' journey to internal growth and success, it must be that this is a result of a cultural construct that the athletic male body is evidence of a successful, ideal male. As these are Bildungsroman novels, the message then to the readers is that athleticism, and appealing to heterosexual girls, should be a part of a boy's journey to maturity, further solidifying our Western concept of the desirable, ideal man: he is athletic.

Throughout these novels, heteronormative masculinity is reflected in their use of athleticism. The protagonists are defined as undesirable to the female characters if they are not athletic. Sometimes, they are even feminized for not being athletic, or characterized as feminine simply for not performing masculinity corresponding to this specific definition. The feminization

of the male characters is meant as an insult and is thus an example of homophobia, as “heterosexual men’s motivation to avoid female stereotypic behaviors seems to be driven by the specific desire to avoid being misclassified as gay” (Falomir-Pichastor et al. 210). Athleticism and — including when it bleeds into its more extreme counterpart, violence — has the power to change fatness from undesirable and unmasculine to acceptable and powerful. It even has the power to redeem characters and prove character growth if they achieve it by a novel’s end. It is as if the protagonists’ problems are solved once they become desirable by heterosexual standards. Ultimately, most of these characters and their worlds are informed by heterosexism, the assumption that heterosexuality is the norm.

CHAPTER III

FAT PROTAGONISTS' AUTHORITY FIGURES

The majority of the fat protagonists in this study have problematic male authority figures whose primary purpose is to uphold hegemonic masculinity standards. Hegemonic masculinity is defined as “an honored form of masculinity that stipulates competition, an inability to express emotions other than anger, an unwillingness to admit weakness, and the devaluation of women and subordinate forms of masculinity” (Matos et al. 503). The fat protagonists are primarily excluded from taking part in this form of masculinity because of their bodies, but their male authority figures nevertheless represent and enforce it. As authority figures, they are responsible for teaching the protagonists to be men, or at the very least assisting them with character growth; in doing so, however, they often exclude the protagonists from masculinity. These authority figures are either verbally and physically abusive athletic coaches or verbally and emotionally abusive fathers. As this thesis as a whole is meant to examine the protagonists through intersecting critical lenses, this chapter relies on Queer and Gender Studies to examine the words and actions of these authority figures. This chapter, then, illustrates how these novels reflect not only heteronormative masculinity, but also hegemonic masculinity.

Coaches

In these novels, a common trope is that of the mean or abusive athletic coach. These coaches, rather than being supportive adult figures, act as symbols of and gatekeepers to the world of hegemonic masculinity. They are symbols of hegemonic masculinity because of their display of attributes such as athleticism, violence, aggression, and competitiveness. They act as gatekeepers to masculinity by being barriers to acceptance within the masculine realm for the fat protagonists because they decide if the protagonists are ‘acceptable’ or not. Additionally, these

coaches' behaviors mimic those seen within what is known as Masculinity Contest Culture, "norms, rituals, and belief systems valorizing social dominance, prioritizing work above all other parts of life, gratuitous displays of physical strength, and the avoidance of weakness" (Matos et al. 501). This further perpetuates ableism and healthism through their words and actions, particularly in their harassment of the protagonists. Though they are always portrayed as antagonist figures, these coaches somehow still define masculinity to the readers; they are never admonished or punished for their treatment of minors. Rather, the fat protagonists either fall in line with their demands or they abandon athleticism; in both cases, the coaches' behavior is seen as a constant and is not challenged.

In *Slot Machine*, one of the coaches is named Thor, a reference to the ultra-strong and masculine Norse god or Marvel superhero. His name alone designates him as a symbol of hegemonic masculinity as it denotes strength, dominance, and mercilessness by connecting him to these mythologies. Thor acts as a gatekeeper to hegemonic masculinity when he declares to Elvin the protagonist that he will "find what you're hidin' inside there," referring to his fat body, as he "grab[s] two fistfuls of fat at [Elvin's] beltline and yank[s him] around... like a hundred people had done before him" (Lynch 25). This sentiment that Elvin is hiding an athletic body inside of him means two things: one, that his fat body can be changed if he changes his dietary and athletic behaviors, which insinuates that fatness is a choice — an idea that is addressed at length in Chapter 4. The second is that he is not fully masculine yet, but the coach has the power as the gatekeeper to masculinity to bring him to his full male potential. His grabbing of Elvin's body and jolting him about is nonconsensual, and points to Thor having a sort of bodily control over Elvin. Later, another coach harasses Elvin for showing emotion when he feels sick and in pain from athletic activity: "'Stop crying,' he screamed. 'Jesus, I hate that,' He lunged at me as

he spoke, like he was going to hit me himself” (Lynch 26). This violent display by his coach enforces the norm that masculine males do not cry and Elvin’s crying shows he is not capable of being fully masculine like the coach. The coach’s screams and abrasive body language toward Elvin is abusive behavior and is indicative of toxic leadership found within Masculinity Contest Culture wherein “leadership style distinguished by abusive behaviors [is] used to bully or control others” (Matos et al. 501). Further, it denotes that if Elvin wishes to express emotion in response to pain during football practice, he will be punished and reminded that he is not masculine. This is a dimension of Masculinity Contest Culture called “Show No Weakness (a norm of avoiding the display of ‘soft’ emotions, admitting lack of knowledge about something, or displaying lack of confidence” (Matos et al. 502). While the coaches in *Slot Machine* are portrayed as antagonistic, their actions and words still act as a barrier to masculinity, as they are symbols of masculinity themselves. The fact that they succeed in “defeating” Elvin when he is unsuccessful at football shows that Elvin is not yet meant to be seen as masculine. When it becomes clearer that Elvin is not interested in becoming athletic, a coach pulls him aside for a talk meant to be motivational. He tells Elvin that if he doesn’t find a sport to compete in, “it could be a long four years ... It’s better for a guy like you, in a big school. You want to have a place. You don’t want to not have a place. Just advice. Okay, Elvin?” (Lynch 67). This coach acknowledges the bullying that might take place if Elvin does not become athletic. Rather than condemning the bullying, however, he suggests that Elvin do his best to fall in line with athleticism and traditional masculinity to avoid the bullying. As an adult and educator charged with the care of students, the most he does to help prevent bullying is encourage Elvin to adopt traditional male qualities of strength and athleticism. In this moment, the coach is not portrayed as an antagonist, but rather a caring person as he tells Elvin “You’re a funny kid, and I like you. You don’t take

the whole slotting thing seriously, and that's cool" (Lynch 67). This is meant to be a moment where the coach helps Elvin and ceases to be abrasive and mean. It still, however, upholds masculinity standards because it supports the concept of competitiveness. It is as if Elvin must compete and earn the right to not be bullied. This shares similarities with hypercompetitive work environments upheld by masculinity contest culture in that Elvin must earn and "maintain [his] own status at all costs (a so-called 'win-or-die culture')" (Matos et al 501).

In *Fat Boy vs. the Cheerleaders*, the protagonist Gabe is brutally insulted by his coach when he jokes around in gym class. During a moment when Gabe behaves as a class clown, "shaking [his] ass while [he] jogged," his coach becomes violently angry: "He freaked. Way out of control. His face turned dark red and sweat streamed down his forehead. He started yelling ... 'God, I'm sick of it ... I'm so sick of your baloney. Sick of your face ... Your fat face! Get out of my gym you sack of shit. Get your fat ass out of here'" (Herbach 7). In this instant, the coach is a symbol of hegemonic masculinity when he attacks Gabe's fatness and calls him names as a display of strength and violence. Further, his disgust with Gabe as a "fat ass" is evidence that he views him as having a lesser form of masculinity. The coach then acts as a gatekeeper, literally and figuratively, to masculinity when he says to leave "his" gym. Not only is he physically removing Gabe from the space designated for displays of masculinity, but he is also figuratively banishing Gabe from the masculine world. He denotes that the gym belongs to him and not the school. It is his world, not Gabe's. This symbolizes the coach's ownership over the athletic and thus masculine world of this novel. By kicking Gabe out for being a "fat ass" and a "sack of shit," he is kicking Gabe from this exclusive realm of masculinity. Only the males who take athletics seriously are worthy of respect and to be in "his" gym. Later in the novel, Gabe's grandfather, as a former body builder, takes on the role of being his coach when Gabe expresses

interest in dieting and exercising with him. Normally a supportive character, when his grandfather becomes an athletic coach, he adopts physical violence and forceful insults that transform him to a hyper-symbol of hegemonic masculinity. When Gabe struggles to lift a medicine ball, his grandfather slaps him on the hips to encourage him. As Gabe loses strength and begins to slow down, his grandfather “slapped [his] hips again” as Gabe “slammed the ball onto the floor ... ‘Bullshit!’ he shouted” (Herbach 59). Later, he washes his hands of Gabe for the day when he tells him that he’ll “die a fat ass ... So don’t ask for help, fat ass” when Gabe declines to use his anger to “pump out the reps” (Herbach 59). As long as Gabe is not willing to behave as a hegemonic male, exhibiting strength fueled by only anger, he is not welcome to his grandfather’s help. In this way, the grandfather is acting as a gatekeeper in that he is deciding if Gabe is welcome to exercise or participate in this display of masculinity and damning his future. Both Gabe’s gym teacher and grandfather exhibit a toxic leadership style that is common within masculinity contest cultures because they both have a “lack of empathy and insensitivity” and they both “berate, belittle, and bully their subordinates” (Matos et al. 503).

In *The Extraordinary Adventures of Alfred Kropp*, Alfred experiences physical and verbal abuse from Coach Harvey, the football coach: “He proceeded to punctuate his questions with a hard slap against the side of my head. ‘Are you stupid?’ Slap. ‘Are you stupid, Kropp?’ Slap. ‘Are you thick, is that it, Kropp?’ Slap-slap... ‘Are you sure you’re not stupid, Kropp? Because you act stupid. You play stupid. You even talk stupid. So are you absolutely sure, Kropp, that you are not stupid?’ *Slap-slap-slap*” (Yancey 11). Coach Harvey’s actions here reflect his belief that if Alfred cannot perform like the other players on the field, then he must be “stupid.” In other words, if he cannot perform as a masculine male should, then he is “stupid.” Coach Harvey’s words perpetuate an ableist point of view, and although he is not meant to be liked by

the reader, the message remains that Alfred is not good enough for football and is therefore not as intelligent and masculine as the football players. Coach Harvey's violent behavior and toxic leadership style make him a symbol of hegemonic masculinity, as he displays "a leadership style distinguished by abusive behaviors used to bully or control others" (Matos et al. 501). The coach in *Food, Girls, and Other Things I Can't Have* also exhibits ableism when he reacts to Andrew's accident on the field by placing him "in modified gym ... for [his] own safety" (Zadoff 79).

Rather than making accommodations to Andrew himself, the coach sees fit to move him to a gym class meant for students in the Special Education program. It is as if he washes his hands of Andrew and considers him intellectually disabled because he cannot demonstrate the masculine trait of being athletic. In the process of doing so, he denies Andrew equal access to the education that the rest of his classmates are entitled to. If proper accommodations were made for Andrew in the gym class, he would have been able to participate in the sport with no problem. Instead, he is banished to Modified Gym, which is meant for students with mental disabilities.

One of the most abusive coaches in these novels is Mr. Wooly, Owen's gym teacher in *Slob*. Owen prefaces Mr. Wooly's class by explaining that "In gym class the school motto reverses itself. Competition, not compassion" (Potter 3). This lets the reader know immediately that Owen does not feel safe in Mr. Wooly's class because he feels he should be named "Mr. Hates Unathletic Kids and Enjoys Seeing Them Suffer" (Potter 4). Mr. Wooly feminizes the unathletic students, including Owen, by making cruel jokes. When Owen is talking with Andre, a student athlete, Mr. Wooly calls him out by saying "Whenever Mr. Birnbaum is finished flirting with Mr. Bertoni, we can get started on our stretches!" (Potter 6). He does not call out Andre, the athletic student, who was also guilty of talking. Mr. Wooly's comment of Owen flirting with Andre is meant to be an insult, as boys flirting with boys is to be laughed at in his class. Mr.

Wooly then addresses the class by saying “Alright ladies and gentlemen!” insinuating that only some of the students are worthy enough to be called boys (Potter 7). This behavior of feminizing a student who identifies as male can be classified as sex-based harassment as it is “unwelcome behavior” that is “based on the target’s sex or gender presentation” (Alonso 478). Alonso further notes that sex based harassment stems from the need “to demonstrate and reinforce the harasser’s masculinity” (479). Mr. Wooly’s feminizing Owen is a way to exert his dominance as a more masculine male. It is also a way to gatekeep masculinity as he purposefully classifies Owen as female, which to him is an insult. Lastly, it is also an example of homophobia and heterosexism, similar to that discussed in Chapter 2. It seems that often in this world of masculine athleticism, homophobia and heterosexism are used to define masculinity. As class continues, Mr. Wooly uses hegemonic masculinity to insult Owen and other nonathletic kids by being intentionally cruel and violent. During a lesson on gymnastics, if a student has an athletic body, “Mr. Wooly hardly gave them any instruction at all. However, when one of us nonathletic types came to the mat, Mr. Wooly would bark out all these instructions about where to put their head and how to adjust their hips” making the student look “stiff and unnatural as if he were playing a game of twister” (Potter 9). Owen notices that instead of helping the students, Mr. Wooly is actually “setting these kids up. The way he had them place their bodies, they were all bound to fall in some weird way” (Potter 9). Mr. Wooly uses sport as a way to mock unathletic and therefore unmasculine students. When it is Owen’s turn to attempt a somersault, “Mr. Wooly was already snickering. A pre-guffaw snicker. He was really looking forward to this. The fattest kid in the class, flopping on the mat like a giant ravioli. Hysterical” (Potter 9). In an attempt to avoid embarrassment, Owen points out that if he positions his body in the way Mr. Wooly commands, he will fall due to the rules of basic physics. Mr. Wooly’s response to being challenged in this

way is severe physical and emotional abuse as he puts Owen on a leash and harness like an animal:

He had put me in a halter, like a dog, and he was holding my leash ... For the next ten minutes, I was yanked across the mat and forced to slop around in the most degrading way. I caught fleeting glimpses of my classmates' faces as I tumbled around. Most of them were pink with hysteria. And of course there were the comments. They didn't even bother to lower their voices, knowing instinctively that Mr. Wooly wouldn't care (Potter 14).

Mr. Wooly quite literally takes control of Owen's body in order to make him perform athleticism and to demonstrate the power of his own masculinity. This display of violence and aggression make Mr. Wooly a symbol of hegemonic masculinity that is unwelcoming and harmful to Owen as a fat male.

Notably, the vast majority of the emotions that readers see from these coaches is anger, a tenet of hegemonic masculinity. It is telling that these coaches, tasked as leaders who are responsible for teaching the protagonists to be men, demonstrate limited and dated definitions of masculinity. In fact, they represent the traditional western male ideal, which is athletic, strong, and aggressive. As leaders to the protagonists, they must teach the boys to live up to this ideal or reject them altogether. Even though these coaches are portrayed as antagonists the majority of the time, it remains that they go unchallenged. None of these coaches change their teaching styles by the end of the novels and none of them are reprimanded by their superiors. Their behavior is accepted as a norm and the protagonists either adapt and adhere to their standards, or get booted from the world of athletics altogether. In fact, none of these novels focus primarily on creating a new definition of masculinity outside of the world of the athletic coaches. Because of

this, it stands to reason that while the coaches are portrayed as antagonists, they are still meant to be representatives of masculinity to the protagonists and to the readers.

Fathers

In these novels, the protagonists' fathers are not as outwardly violent as the coaches. Their displays of masculinity lean more toward verbal harassment and emotional neglect. While not violent, they still uphold hegemonic masculinity by valuing heteronormative desirability, lacking emotional support and tenderness for the protagonists, or being outright absent in any situation involving emotional depth. As both parental figures and male authority figures entrusted with leading the protagonists to manhood, they fail to teach the protagonists alternative definitions of masculinity or support the protagonists' being different from traditional masculine males. Like the coaches, their purpose as characters is to uphold hegemonic masculinity.

In *Playground*, Butterball's father joins in on the jokes his girlfriend, Diane, makes about his fatness. When Diane asks him "How'd a good-looking man like you get such a fattie for a kid?" his father "busted up laughing and told her it was a real good question" (50Cent 37). Butterball notes that this behavior "was always how my dad had acted around women in his life" (50Cent 37). Here, the joke about Butterball is dependent on his lack of heteronormative desirability. When Diane says that Butterball is, unlike his father, a "fattie" and therefore undesirable, rather than defending Butterball, his father condones and joins in on the harassment. Here, his father is acting as a symbol of heteronormative masculinity because it is as if he is winning a competition against Butterball. He has been deemed the most acceptable in comparison with his own son. Later, Butterball's father feminizes him as a way to make fun of his body: "'Who knows — you might even get yourself a girl, and any brother with titties like yours is gonna need as much help as he can get in that department.' My dad thought this was

pretty funny” (50Cent 102). Similar to Mr. Wooly’s behavior towards Owen in *Slob*, this is sex-based harassment as it is “asserting the perpetrator’s masculinity” while feminizing Butterball for not being desirable enough by heteronormative standards (Alonso 482). His father, while being portrayed as a kind of antagonist in the book, is still not challenged. Similar to the abusive coaches, Butterball’s father remains a symbol of masculinity, even when Butterball chooses to stop seeing him. At the end of the novel, the parental or authority figure that Butterball’s father represented is replaced with his mother’s girlfriend when she moves in and plays a more caring role in his life. The masculinity of Butterball’s father is not called into question; rather, Butterball simply does not choose it. There is no discussion about a need for a new kind of masculinity.

In *Darius the Great is Not Okay*, Darius’s father, Stephen Kellner, acts as a constant reminder to Darius that he is not acceptable because of his body. Darius explains that Stephen used to be a really supportive figure in his life when he was younger, but has since become harsher towards him since he started gaining weight. As mentioned previously in this study, Stephen has been told by Darius’s doctor that his weight gain is due to his depression medication. Even still, he harasses Darius about his food and exercise choices throughout the book. Stephen, who is tasked with the responsibility of teaching Darius how to become a man, defines a man as one who is thin and athletic, so he constantly monitors Darius’s food choices in order to make Darius a more “acceptable” man. Over dinner, Stephen “pressed the salad bowl into [Darius’s] hands” when he tried serving himself more pasta (Khorram 17). While the family is making the long trip to Iran and Darius orders pizza during an airport layover, he notes that Stephen was “watching me at every bite, flaring his nostrils” and was angry because “there weren’t even any vegetables on it,” (Khorram 45). Later, Darius eats a salad to try to appease

Stephen who was “unhappy [he] had finished off the cold pizza for breakfast” (Khorram 55). When Darius wants to order a chicken tikka masala sub from Subway, Stephen sighs in annoyance and protests, saying “There’s nothing with vegetables that sounds good?” (Khorram 59). Stephen does all of this even though Darius’s doctor has informed him that his weight gain is not due to his food choices. This shows that Stephen strongly abides in the belief that body size is a choice and depends on the amount of self-control one has. He believes that because of his body size, Darius is lacking in self-control. Similar to the coach from *Slot Machine*, Stephen also acknowledges that Darius could be bullied for his body type. Rather than condemning the bullying, he expresses a desire to his wife for Darius to conform in order to avoid it: “You know how he gets treated ... You really want that for him? ... he’s got enough going on with his depression all the time too. He wouldn’t be such a target if he fit in more” (Khorram 60). When Stephen says “fit in,” he is referring to shrinking in size. His way of teaching Darius to become a man is by enforcing that he should work hard to lose weight so that he can fit in and not be bullied.

Other fathers in these novels tend to be more emotionally distant because of who their sons are, which results in a lack of a male authority figure for the protagonist. In *The Dark Days of Hamburger Halpin*, Will’s father is more emotionally absent as he shows little interest in Will’s life. Will, who is deaf, explains that his father is not as good at sign language as his mother because he “never attended Camp Arrowhead,” a sign language camp for families (Berk 42). This results in Will’s father being less present in conversations and making Will feel like he is not wanted or is a burden. During a conversation with his mother, Will notices that his father “is trying to keep up” but ultimately “heads into the kitchen, presumably to drown his sorrows in ice cream” (Berk 42). Will expresses his feelings of loneliness in relation to his dad by saying

“He never gets me. He never gets what might make me crazy and what is no big whoop” (Berk 47). Because of this, Will does not have a male authority figure he can rely on. He is denied someone whose job is to welcome him to manhood as he grows up.

Similarly, in *Fat Boy vs. the Cheerleaders*, Gabe’s father is emotionally absent throughout the novel as he spends most of his time in his bedroom, leaving Gabe’s grandfather to do the majority of the parenting. Gabe describes his father as “such a loser” who “chased [his] mom away and got [them] fat as hell” (Herbach 118). Here, Gabe sees his father as less of a man because of his weight gain and because of his wife’s infidelity, meaning that masculinity is defined by having a woman and being physically fit. While Gabe’s father is not the one pushing the hegemonic masculinity norms here, he serves as an example of a failed man in Gabe’s eyes and to the reader. As Gabe’s father is not capable of being the male authority figure in his life, the alternative is his grandfather. As discussed above in the passage about coaches, Gabe’s grandfather projects hegemonic masculinity norms with his harsh words. In terms of a male authority, Gabe has access to either a hyper masculine ex-body builder or a depressed cuckold, both of which uphold hegemonic masculinity standards.

Given Chapter 2’s discussion of the major role of athleticism and heteronormative masculinity in the protagonists, it is not surprising that hegemonic masculinity would also rear its gruffy head in the novels of this study. Heteronormative masculinity requires hegemonic masculinity, after all. As the male authority figures of the novels set the standards for masculinity, it is unsurprising that their actions produce similar ones both on the field and in the gym. These authority figures are tasked with helping the boy characters to transform into men, either through coaching or parenting; therefore, they are a part of the Bildungsroman growth process marked by an increase in athleticism. They are an essential part of the framework of

masculinity in these novels and a major reason why the gender expectations are heteronormative. Ultimately, these authority figures form a dated, hegemonic example of masculinity that not only goes unchallenged by the protagonists et al. but more crucially plays a pivotal role in the character growth of the protagonists. If the protagonists' masculinity is measured against that of the male authority figures in these books, we can assume that the outcome of these novels would radically change if said authority figures were not hegemonically masculine.

CHAPTER IV

FATNESS AS THE PROTAGONISTS' CHOICE

In both history and the present day, fatness has been primarily viewed as a choice. If a person is fat, then it must be a result of decisions influenced by laziness and little self-control. Nine out of the eleven books studied presented fatness as a result of the protagonists' choices. A look at the Western perception of fatness shows that this is not a new concept; in fact, the presentation of these protagonists as having chosen fatness is very much a direct result of Western history. Sander Gilman observes that "Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin would write as late as 1825 that 'obesity is never found either among savages or in those classes of society which must work in order to eat or which do not eat except to exist,'" meaning that those who are fat are so solely because they have chosen to eat too much and not to work (94). Even in the medical realm, the term "obese" is derived "from the Latin *obesus*, meaning 'having eaten oneself fat,' inherently blaming fat people for their bodies" (Gordon 11). Sabrina Strings writes that the "rise of the transatlantic slave trade and the spread of Protestantism" caused "a phobia about fatness" and "linked fatness to 'greedy' Africans" (6). From the beginning of the enslavement of Africans in England in 1555, the sentiment grew that Africans were like animals with insatiable appetites, both food and sexual wise, that they did not care or want to control. Later, "by the early seventeenth century, the perception that Africans freely gratified their animal appetites was expressed by some of the most elite members of English high society" (Strings 53). Arthur de Gobineau, an aristocrat who further developed the theory of the Aryan master race, "placed Black people at the bottom of the hierarchy" saying that they have a "gluttonous nature" and "All food is good in his eyes, nothing disgusts or repels him. What he desires is to eat, to eat furiously and to excess" (Strings 149). Strings observes that Buffon theorized that since Africans

came from rich and plentiful lands, which he perceived required little work to harvest and maintain, they were “‘well fed’ but also ‘simple and stupid.’” (Strings 77). Because fatness was associated with enslaved Africans, the racially-motivated stereotypes of Africans were then associated with all fatness.

Fast forward to the twentieth and twenty-first century, and fatness is still viewed as a choice and associated with variations of the same perceptions and stereotypes. Amy Erdman Farrell, author of *Fat Shame*, cites the American physician, Dr. Leonard Williams, who argued that “obesity” was linked to modern civilization because people no longer need to perform physical labor as their ancestors did in the past. “‘Alimentary’ obesity, he further argued, was ‘contemptible and disgusting’ because it denoted ‘self-indulgence, greed, and gormandizing; and most are disgusting because they represent an unsightly distortion of the human form divine, and a serious impairment of the intellectual faculties’” (Farrell 80). Disability scholar Anna Mollow uses the state of Georgia’s infamous 2011 campaign against childhood obesity to show fatness is still perceived as a choice. Georgia “launched a hard-hitting poster campaign against ‘childhood obesity,’ on billboards with large red ‘WARNING’ signs, it pasted images of sad-faced children above slogans like ‘Big bones didn’t make me this way. Big meals did’” (202). Mollow notes that the tone of these billboards, “in contrast to the emblems of innocence featured on March of Dimes posters,” frame the fat children “as guilty of eating ‘too much’” (202). Gordon points out that all of these feelings about fatness being a choice take place in spite of medical evidence showing that fatness, or obesity’ cannot be controlled as much as the public thinks it can. In her book, Gordon cites evidence from Dr. Lee Kaplan of the Obesity, Metabolism, and Nutrition Institute showing that there are 59 types of obesity, meaning there are 59 ways that someone can become fat rather than simply overeating. She also cites Stephen O’Rahilly’s (of Cambridge

University) research showing there are 25 genes that can contribute to obesity, something that willpower or determination cannot control or change. In light of this evidence, Gordon concludes that “With fifty-nine types of obesity and twenty-five contributing genes, calories in, calories out can hardly be a ‘cure’ for them all. Still, thanks to our BMI-fueled unforgiving cultural attitudes toward fatness and fat people, we are regularly held to account for the only bodies many of us have ever had” (Gordon 51). This idea that fat people are to blame for their bodies is an idea present in healthism. Healthism, which implies a singular definition of health, is also defined by Fall Ferguson, the former president of the Association of Size Diversity and Health as “the assumption that people should pursue health. It’s the contempt in the nonsmoker’s attitude toward smokers; it’s the ubiquitous sneer against couch potatoes. Healthism includes the idea that anyone who isn’t healthy just isn’t trying hard enough or has some moral failing or sin to account for” (Gordon 10). Because of healthism, fat people are viewed as “parasitic” and “their responsibility as good neoliberal citizens” should be “to enact ‘proper’ self-management through weight loss. Fatness [is] constructed as moral failing” (Pausé et al. 2). These attitudes about fatness being a choice are reflected and often encouraged in the books in this study through the narrative voice or the voice of other characters. In this chapter, I analyze and discuss the ways that historically racist and ableist views of fatness play a role in informing the fat protagonists of this study.

Binge Eating and Laziness: Evidence of the Protagonists’ Blame

In *Every Day*, the narrator wakes up in a different body every day; one day, they wake up in the fat body of Finn Taylor and are disgusted by choices he assumes led him to be fat. After he looks around the character’s messy room and peers into his mind, he states that “Finn Taylor has retreated from most of the world; his size comes from negligence and laziness, a carelessness

that would be pathological if it had any meticulousness to it” (Levithan 270). This echoes the historical beliefs mentioned previously that fatness was associated with laziness. The narrator is so disgusted with Finn’s body that they consider “plant[ing] a traumatic memory in Finn’s brain, something so shocking that he’d stop eating so much. Then I’m horrified at myself for even thinking such a thing” (Levithan 272). The narrator believes the solution to Finn’s size is merely to control what he eats and if he would simply eat less, then his body would change. This passage is meant to be a cue for the reader to be disgusted with Finn along with the narrator.

In *Flavor of the Week*, the fat protagonist Cyril has several binge eating episodes throughout the book that work to explain his size. The episodes happen when he is feeling upset or anxious and the narrative voice describing the episodes is laden with disgust and judgement. In one binge, Cyril “raise[s] his third grilled cheese to his mouth. Or was it his fourth? He lay down on the couch to eat it” (Shaw 74). Not only has he lost count of how many sandwiches he had eaten, but he is too lazy to sit up and eat them. After Cyril fails his culinary school audition, he partakes in another binge by “Stuff[ing] his face with butter-and-sugar sandwiches” — using up an entire loaf of bread. The narrator describes Cyril “slather[ing] butter on all the slices, soft, gooshy butter” and “heap[ing] sugar on all the slices and brusquely slapp[ing] together nine sandwiches.” When he begins to eat, “he ate the leftover piece first, open faced, folding it in half and choking it down in two bites without even tasting it” (Shaw 166). The words “stuffing,” “slathering,” “gooshy,” “heaping,” “slapping,” and “choking” denote a hasty recklessness. It reveals that the narrating voice believes Cyril to be messy with no self-control and no refinement. His actions here are meant to be responsible for a body that is equally disgusting and unrefined. Both Cyril and Finn are meant to be perceived as being lazy and gluttonous, and therefore responsible for their fatness. The narration of their looks and actions

are a cue for the reader to feel not pity but contempt for them because of what they have chosen to do with their bodies. The attitude the reader is meant to have towards Cyril and Finn echoes the attitudes that the English held towards fat people, particularly enslaved Africans, and that modern society holds towards fat people in general. Both of these characters are White, however, so it shows that racist views of fatness from history have the power to negatively impact people of any race today.

In *Slob*, Owen, the narrating protagonist, views his fatness as evidence of his personal failure. He explains that “I had started out with fine biological potential and through my own weakness had wrecked it” (Potter 33). He keeps a bag of his smaller clothing in his closet, even though he cannot bear to look at them, because “they reminded me of what I once was. Consequently, they just sat there, taking up too much space. Much like myself” (Potter 33). Not only does he believe he has chosen his fatness, but the clothes act as a physical reminder — proof that his choices are responsible for his body as it is now. Later, Owen has a binge eating episode where he eats a “PB&J, a bowl of cereal, and a hunk of cheddar cheese,” then he “scaled the chair and phone book and the dictionary to the Stop-and-Think Cabinet without stopping to think, and I grabbed five Oreos out of the package and devoured them in less time than it took me to get them” (Potter 49). His actions here show him as lacking self-control and willpower, which must be the only conceivable reason that he is fat. This perception of Owen carries remnants of the English view of enslaved Africans and their larger bodies. As the English believed that Africans were larger because of their insatiable appetites, Owen’s size is explained through descriptive passages of his wild cravings. Like Cyril and Finn, Owen is also White and proves that the racist beliefs used to oppress fat people of color linger in something as innocent as a children’s book.

In *Fat Boy vs. the Cheerleaders*, Gabe's fatness is explained by his self-described obsession with Code Red Mountain Dew. Gabe is the narrator for the majority of the novel and describes himself as drinking "a hell-ton of Code Red Mountain Dew every day — four bottles, five bottles — and the only pants that fit me were stretchy pants" (Herbach 5). His habit of drinking Code Red is likened to that of alcoholism. When he becomes upset, he "tried to hold it together by overdosing on the Dew" and "went to the machine again and again. Six times in total. Almost fourteen bucks worth of Code Red in a day" (Herbach 20). Gabe even goes so far as to steal money from his Grandfather's wallet to pacify his need for Code Red, and exclaims that his "knees and back hurt all the time! I poured Code Red into my body, which made me want even more Code Red, which made me need more money and made me fatter!" (Herbach 23). Not only is he blaming himself for his fatness, but he is likening himself to an addict by stealing money to obtain the drink that causes him pain but he continues to crave. Later in the novel, Gabe does ponder for a moment why his friend Austin drinks as much Code Red as him but is still thin. For a moment, it seems like he might consider that something else might be at play in regards to why he is fat, but then he shrugs it off by saying "lucky guy. He might be on Meth, but I don't think he is" (Herbach 155). Instead of considering that his fatness might not be as much under his control as he thought, he considers Austin lucky and continues to bear the onus for his size. The novel is also peppered with Gabe's eating habits and binges as if to explain his size. He claims to "never [eat] the green beans or the salad," but instead "suck[s] down ... Grandpa's cream-cheese infused mashed potatoes" (Herbach 10). When his grandfather makes lasagna, he says he "ate the whole pan by [him]self" (Herbach 27). When he asks his grandfather to help him diet and is given a salad, he describes his love for the cubed ham, cheese, and ranch dressing, "But the lettuce — I will choke down the lettuce because I need roughage.

Roughage for health” (Herbach 75). As a fat person, Gabe is characterized as being so repelled by salad leaves that he must struggle to swallow them, fueling the stereotype that fat people must not eat vegetables and other healthy items. When Gabe’s plan for a school protest goes awry, he deviates from his strict diet and binge-eats countless nachos, burritos, ham sandwiches, and Mountain Dew. Gabe reflects that even though he “didn’t even taste them,” he “inhaled the crap out of them” (Herbach 242). His binge behavior is meant to be interpreted as “fat” behavior. “Fat” behavior is meant to be associated with his failure, as he engages in it when he is in an emotionally low state due to his failure at school.

In *The Dark Days of Hamburger Halpin*, Will, the narrating protagonist, describes to the reader his many binges and “unhealthy” food choices as evidence of his size. When he eats, he describes himself as lacking self-control. During an after-school binge, he “suck[s] it all down like a stoner on a binge. It doesn’t make me feel better. Just fatter. My pants (which are already designated ‘fat pants’) are tight, and I feel gross about the whole thing. But I eat one last giant scoop of ice cream anyway. Damn” (Berk 33). Will further explains his lack of self-control when he eats fried ravioli that “is a strange food that does strange things to my normally ironclad gut ... I go back for seconds” (Berk 91). Even though the food is “strange,” he cannot help but get a second portion, showing his lack of willpower. During another binge, he describes himself as almost animal-like as he “trudge[s] to the kitchen to stuff my stomach. There is a bowl of chicken wings in the fridge. I eat every bit and proceed to lick the bottom of the bowl” (Berk 122). When he describes his food choices at the school cafeteria, he more literally compares himself to an animal when he says “Lunch today: hot dogs, some sort of broccoli casserole thing, and ... apples? It is unnatural to eat anything green, and apples are just pointless. Seriously, what am I, a horse? A pig? Don’t answer that. While wolfing down several hotdogs...” (Berk 67).

Later in *Hamburger Halpin*, fatness as a choice is momentarily put into question when Will's father, who is fat, shows him a photo of his grandfather who was "one ample ancestor" (Berk 221). Here, fatness is almost acknowledged as genetic, until the end of the novel when Will declares that he is "just like my dad and grandfather and great-granduncle Dummy Halpin. Some people simply like to eat. Get over it" (Berk 244). Even though Will's fatness would appear to be out of his control, being that his father, grandfather, and great-granduncle are all fat as well, it is still portrayed as a choice that he makes by eating too much. Will's fat and deaf great-granduncle, Dummy Halpin, is related to Purple, the popular, fat girl who knows sign language because some of her family members are also deaf. Here it is implied that the deafness that Will genetically inherited from Dummy has also been genetically inherited in Purple's family. Deafness is acknowledged as being out of one's control, but the concept of genetically inheriting fatness is lost on the narrating voice, Will Halpin, and the rest of the characters.

Something similar happens in *Food, Girls, and Other Things I Can't Have* when Andy, the fat, male protagonist and narrator acknowledges that his size may not be under his control. He surveys his family tree acknowledging that most of his maternal relatives are fat and mentions that his "Mom says being fat is not my fault. She says I have a glandular problem" (Zadoff 1). For a moment, it seems that fatness is not going to be seen as a consequence of Andy's actions and there might be a message about bodies being naturally fat. Later in the book, however, Andy is seen binge eating: "Whole pies are missing from the tray, and still others have circles punched out of the center where I stuck my massive hoof and licked the results" (Zadoff 169). This behavior is meant to be seen as proof of his fatness. Glandular problem or not, Andy's choices have made him fat. It is important to note that Owen, Gabe, Will, and Andy, as the fat, male protagonists, are also the narrators. As the ones telling the story, they have the power to

defend their existence and change how people perceive them; yet, they still convey that their fatness is a result of their actions. As the trusted storytellers, the readers are meant to believe and agree with them. Therefore, these novels perpetuate the idea that fatness is a choice, the result of laziness and uncontrolled appetites. Although all of the novels discussed so far have featured White protagonists, they have displayed variations of the historically White view of fatness in enslaved Africans: if one is large, then one must be choosing to overeat and be dormant. It is telling also that all of the authors of the books discussed thus far in this chapter are White. The narrative voice, created by White authors, which tells the readers what to think about the White, fat protagonists, characterizes fatness as a result of choosing laziness and overindulgence. This is not a coincidence. While I am certainly not claiming that the authors intended for the characters to exemplify racist definitions of fatness, it does make sense that they would naturally reflect historically White, colonizer attitudes about fatness, even if those attitudes are more watered down than they were in the 1500s. The perception of fatness being a result of bingeing and laziness has been passed down for hundreds of years and has integrated into Western society's view of bodies to the point that it can be shocking for someone outside of this discipline to learn of its racist origins. These books are an example of how a structure of power meant to oppress a specific group of people, Black people, can in the end oppress the very descendants of the oppressor: White, fat boys.

Examples of Progress

While the concept of fatness as a choice is always upheld by side characters in this study, it is sometimes challenged by the protagonists. In *Darius the Great is Not Okay*, the fat, male protagonist Darius, who is also the narrator, comments on his father's persistence that he can control his weight with dietary choices when he cannot. When his father often recommends he

eat salad, Darius says “As if salad would counteract the weight gain from my meds. As if lack of discipline was the root of all my problems. As if all the worry about my weight didn’t make me feel worse than I already did” (Khorram 37). Darius is able to acknowledge that his weight gain is due to his antidepressants and that it is not his choice, even when his father refuses to see that. In fact, when Darius’s doctor explicitly says his weight gain is due to his antidepressant medication, his father persistently blames his fatness on his food choices. Darius as the narrator vents his frustration to the reader that his father believes his fatness is a choice in spite of the medical evidence in front of him:

It wasn’t like I ate sweets all the time or anything. I couldn’t, not with Stephen Kellner constantly monitoring me for dietary indiscretions. But even when I only ate dessert once a month, I never lost any weight. Dr. Howell said it was a side effect of my medications, and that a little weight gain was a small price to pay for emotional stability. I knew dad thought it was a lack of discipline. That if I ate better (and hadn’t given up soccer), I could have counteracted the effects of my medication. Stephen Kellner never struggled with his weight. (Khorram 127)

Darius must further confront attitudes about fatness being a choice when he arrives to Iran and meets the customs officers. When they ask him why he is taking antidepressants, Darius explains that ““My brain just makes the wrong chemicals is all’.” Rather than moving on, the customs officer says ““Probably your diet,’ ... He looked me up and down. ‘Too many sweets,’” (Khorram 69). These interactions serve to point out the problem with assuming that fatness is a choice and should be associated with laziness, lack of willpower, or determination. When other characters imply this to Darius, the reader sees how it negatively impacts him. Readers have the opportunity to either identify with him or learn from him.

In *Dough Boy*, Tristan is a fat male who is at peace with his size. He does not express any major desire to lose weight, and his parents do not pressure him either. Everyone in his family is accepting of his size and does not blame him for it, including his mom's boyfriend, who is fat himself. That is, until Kelly, the daughter of his mom's boyfriend, begins to visit and eventually moves in. She is a health enthusiast who has experienced weight loss and now pressures everyone around her to adopt her lifestyle; she is an example of healthism in the flesh. As the antagonist, she is the character who places blame and shame on the fat characters. She blames her father for her weight gain and his diabetes when she says "He encouraged me to eat because he couldn't control his own self. I kept begging him to work out more and to stop eating crap. But he wouldn't listen. Never has"" (Marino 27). In an effort to inspire Tristan to exercise, she comments on America's "Obesity Epidemic" during dinner by saying "'Some people do nothing but watch TV,' she said. 'Couch potatoes. America is getting fat and lazy.' She had used the F-word. The air was poisoned now" (Marino 23). Kelly's view is that anyone who is fat is fat because of their choices; those choices must be eating too much and being lazy. Because she is the antagonist, however, her views are seen as harsh and offensive, and the reader can see the error in her judgments through Tristan's point of view as the narrator.

Similarly, in *The Extraordinary Adventures of Alfred Kropp*, Alfred describes how he was "born big and just kept getting bigger" (Yancey 2). As the narrator, he explains that his size was naturally more accelerated than most, as he was at five years old, "over ninety pounds and stood four feet tall. At ten, I hit six feet and two hundred pounds. I was off the pediatrician's growth chart" (Yancey 3). But even with his large size being entirely genetic and out of his control, his mom "put me on special diets and started me on an exercise program" (Yancey 3). This inner monologue is meant to show the ridiculousness of thinking diet and exercise can alter

something like genetics. While *Dough Boy*, *Darius the Great*, and *Alfred Kropp* contain passages that portray fatness as a choice, the positive difference is that they challenge this way of thinking rather than promote it. While it remains that the majority of the books in this study furthered the notion that fatness is a product of laziness and gluttony, these three books showed potential for positive change because they challenged the notion of fatness as a choice.

Fatness Deserves Consequences: Ableism and Healthism at Work

A tenet of healthism is that fat people deserve the poor treatment they get because of their choices; if they would simply make better choices, their treatment by others would improve. In some of these novels, fatness as a choice serves as justification for maltreatment by others, as if the protagonists are deserving of insult because they chose the bodies they inhabit. In *Every Day*, the protagonist observes how cruel others can be towards Finn's body, but still blames it on Finn himself:

The looks I get — such undisguised disgust. Not just from other students. From teachers. From strangers. The judgement flows freely. It's possible that they're reacting to the thing that Finn has allowed himself to become. But there's also something more primal, something more defensive in their disgust. I am what they fear becoming. (Levithan 271)

While he acknowledges that people are cruel toward Finn, he does not feel remorse for him because he is perceived to have caused his fatness and thus deserved the cruelty. This is an example of healthism because it justifies Finn's bullying from others. Notably, it is the narrative voice that uses healthism to justify the bullying to the readers. The protagonist is not the only one meant to accept Finn's bullying; the actual, flesh-and-bone readers outside the book, who most likely interact with fat people on a daily basis, are meant to justify the bullying due to Finn's choices.

In *Slob*, Owen's sister begs him to lose weight so that people will stop making fun of him. Rather than placing blame on the bullies, she insinuates that Owen could help stop the bullying when she says "I defend you, I do, but could you at least try to lose the weight? You weren't always fat" (Potter 119). Earlier in the novel, Owen tells us that the bullying he receives is his fault, saying "feel[s] like a boulder. A huge fat boulder that people write curse words on or pee on. And I just stand there, letting it happen, because I'm a boulder and that's what boulders do" (Potter 45). He believes that because he is responsible for his fat body, he deserves the bullying he gets. Again, the narrating voice, which readers are meant to trust, is using healthism to defend Owen's bullying. There is no criticism of the bullying itself, but rather, criticism of Owen's actions and inactions to change himself.

Along with poor treatment, one protagonist is believed to be deserving of inaccessibility or insufficient accommodations because of the perceived actions that created his body. Gordon writes: "Should my body cost an airline more, it is my responsibility to pay them. Should my body cause discomfort for anyone around me, it is my responsibility to apologize and to comfort them. ... And should these problems become untenable for me, it is my responsibility to 'just lose weight'" (29). When our world is made to accommodate only thin people, fat people are expected to pay the price, and this is evident in one of the study's novels. As Zadoff calls attention to in *Food, Girls, and Other Things I Can't Have*, Andrew comments on the accessibility of the classroom desks to his body and Warner's, a student fatter than him "Over the summer, the school replaced desks with pull-out chairs for desks with attached chairs: 'you either fit or you don't'" (Zadoff 24). Warner does not fit in the new desks, so he must stand in the back of the room, as if the price he pays for his fatness is humiliation and unnecessary physical exertion. Andrew shares with the reader the ins and outs of accessibility that he faces

daily, explaining that “Each new situation is a science experiment. Chairs, desks, doorways, amusement park rides, airline and movie theater seats, pants, elevators — they all raise the same question. What mass will fit into what volume of space, and what amount of force will it take to get it there?” (Zadoff 25). But even while Andrew understands the problem with the world not being accessible to him because of his size, he still demonstrates internalized healthism and ableism when, relieved, he discovers that he can squeeze into the new desks. When his teacher calls his name for attendance, he says “‘Here,’ I say proudly and from a sitting position. I fit, and Warner doesn’t. For now” (Zadoff 27). As the narrating protagonist, Andrew cues readers to cheer for him for fitting in the desk and shame Warner for not. The message is that because he is not Warner’s size and can fit in the chair, he is somehow better than him. He is not as out of control or hopeless as Warner; he is not a lost cause. Quick defines the type of inaccessibility in the scene as a cultural construct similar to what is analyzed in disability studies: “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 views a disabled body as abnormal, so too is the obese person viewed as abnormal” (Quick 55). Andrew and Warner are only “different” than other students once the desks get replaced with more inaccessible ones. During the last school year, when they had accessible desks, Andrew and Warner did not stand out as “others” and were able to participate in class as everyone else. It was only when the school introduced the smaller, nonadjustable desks that they became outsiders. This is similar to instances when businesses choose not to have a wheelchair ramp, causing people needing those accommodations to be outsiders labeled as “disabled.” If they had ramps, then people with chairs would no longer be “disabled” because they would have accessibility like everyone else. Quick does point out, however, that although we see similarities between fatness

and disability, fatness is often viewed more severely than disability because it is perceived as a choice:

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 a 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 ... Obesity is universally considered the fault of the obese, even when it can legitimately be attributed to glands, genetics, or medications.

(55)

It is worth noting, however, that Quick is referring to physical, visible disabilities, or disabilities that other people can clearly see. This comparison does not account for cases of invisible disabilities because many times, those with invisible disabilities are in fact accused of “faking” them and/or are blamed for them.

Indeed, Andrew exhibits the same sense of self-righteousness described by Quick when he praises himself because he is able to just barely fit in the new desks, insinuating that he is better than Warner who cannot. Because Warner cannot fit in the new desks, he must be morally lower than Andrew — because, of course, his size is his fault. Andrew is portrayed as having clearly internalized these ableist, sizeist assumption, as he — only centimeters away from being othered himself — criticizes Warner instead of the school personnel who chose the desks. Not only that, but Andrew cues the readers to criticize and look down upon Warner as well. The belief that Andrew and Warner are capable of shedding their fat as easily as they gained it makes them alone appear responsible for their inability to fit in the desks.

The majority of the fat protagonists of this study are subject to historically racist, White, and ableist opinions of fatness, reinforced via their novel's narrating voices. These narrators cue readers' judgments of the protagonists, using these discriminatory views to encourage the readers to blame and vilify the protagonists for their body size and to justify any poor treatment they receive. The message sent to readers, then, is that as long as one "fits" into the parameters of a singular definition of health, then they will not have to face discrimination or bullying. While few of the novels superficially challenged the notion that fatness is a result of "poor" choices, the use of Critical Race Theory and a Disability Studies lens reveal that the majority of them encouraged and reinforced fatness as a choice deserving of harsh consequences.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

In this study, I set out to examine fat, cisgender, male protagonists in recent young adult literature using overlapping critical lenses in order to learn how structures of power — namely race, gender, and disability — function in the chosen novels. In the second chapter, “Athleticism and Masculine, Heteronormative Desirability Standards,” I discussed how these novels construct athleticism and how it defines who is a desirable male in heteronormative terms and how undesirable males should be treated. I also discussed the way that athleticism, as a sign of masculinity, has the power to make the protagonists’ fatness more acceptable to other characters and even to the readers. In virtually all of the novels, athleticism functioned as a Bildungsroman element, signaling growth and maturity in the fat protagonists and even worked as an answer to their internal and external conflicts. In the third chapter, “Fat Protagonists’ Authority Figures,” I examined the role of male authority figures and how they worked to represent heteronormative, hegemonic masculinity in the novels. I found that the male authority figures acted as gatekeepers to the world of masculinity and often determined whether or not the protagonists fit into that world based on how they measured up to hegemonic gender norms. These authority figures, as symbols of hegemonic masculinity, played a critical role in the Bildungsroman process and helped to define positive character growth as conforming to hegemonic masculinity. In the fourth chapter, “Fatness as the Protagonists’ Choice,” I discussed first the history of fatness being perceived as a choice, a distinctly White, westernized view influenced by the cruel enslavement of Africans and subsequent Western perception of African bodies. I also discussed how these views manifest in the modern day as fat people are characterized in much the same way as the enslaved Africans, highlighting how the novels portray fatness in a similar way, emphasizing the

stereotypes of laziness and overindulgence. I also discussed the ableism that lies at the root of the belief that fat people deserve the poor treatment they receive because they have chosen it, which is a theme common in these novels.

This study is not without its limitations. One limitation is that I could not read every book with a fat, male protagonist since 1995. I narrowed down my NovelList search by choosing to read only novels featuring a fat, male protagonist that had earned national accolades. This was not only for time and space, but also because I felt that the award-winning novels may have greater impact, as they would be more popular with readers and more frequently purchased by school librarians. I also did not read any potential award-winning novel featuring a fat male protagonist that was published after March of 2021 when I began reading. I acknowledge that since that time, there could have been another novel published that would have fit the parameters of this study. Related to this, I only examined protagonists as opposed to examining supporting characters or antagonists, and I did not compare the fat male protagonists with other types of protagonists, such as fat female protagonists, or thin male protagonists. I also did not examine these novels in terms of historical context, meaning that I did not include social or medical discourse surrounding young adult fatness from 1995 to present. While I did mention an example of an anti-childhood-obesity campaign in Chapter 4 as a way to discuss fatness as a choice, I did not place my entire study within the context of popular obesity campaigns and medical discourse from the time period in which these novels were published. When discussing disability in these novels, I focused primarily on physical disability, such as the protagonists' physical accessibility. While I touched on some discussion of mental disability and the way that fat people (and characters) are often portrayed as having a mental disability due to their fatness in Chapter 3, I

only discussed it in relation to athleticism. I did not dive as deep as I could have, as that topic could comprise an entire chapter on its own.

Other limitations resulted from factors outside of my control. For example, in terms of racial diversity, there existed a natural limitation: of the eleven protagonists studied, only two were not White. Therefore, my study does not represent fat male protagonists of diverse races. I would like to also acknowledge that this study was naturally limited to only fat cisgender male protagonists and could not include fat, transgender male, male-presenting, or gender queer protagonists. At the time of my search, there existed no young adult novel in English that featured such characters. I should also acknowledge that I am a fat, cisgender, woman writing about fat cisgender male characters. I do have in common with the characters my own experience of being a fat teen, but I do not share their gendered experience. While I have tried to eliminate my own bias in earnest, this is still a natural limitation.

I would also like to acknowledge that there are other methods of research that I could have utilized in this study. I used an intersectional or multidimensional approach when conducting this study, which included race, gender, and disability. As a result, my study works as a sampler of sorts, as it scratches the surface of three different intersecting areas of study. I could have conducted this study by diving deeper into just one of the three areas. For example, I could have solely used a Queer and Gender Studies lens by only focusing on the way that masculinity works in terms of gender in the novels. I also could have analyzed these books using a Decolonial perspective, by delving deeper into the relationship between the way the protagonists were portrayed and the historical view of fatness born from colonization and the enslavement of Africans in England and the United States. Additionally, I could have conducted this research using only a Disability Studies lens by focusing on the protagonists' abilities adjacent to their

surroundings. I could have also used a Formalist or New Criticism approach by focusing more on the structural elements of the text, particularly the use of narrative voice. All of these exciting methods that I did not use prove that there is much potential for growth in this topic.

Now that this research has provided this outcome, we have the opportunity to make changes. Researchers in the field of literary studies have the opportunity to further this topic by continuing to research fat, male protagonists in young adult literature using any of the methods I mentioned and more. Also, as I mentioned in the introduction, this study was partly inspired by the fat characters of more classic, popular literature (such as Piggy of *Lord of the Flies*), but is not a comparative analysis. A natural next step from this work would be to apply critical lenses of study to fat male characters of the past, and complete such a comparison. This research is meaningful to literary studies scholars because it provides an opening to a potential new sub-genre of study: fat boy literature for young adults and children. As I mentioned in the introduction, while plenty of research centers on fat girls there is very little work that centers fat males in young adult literature. This is an opportunity to fill in that research gap. This opportunity for more research in the field of literary studies is especially exciting because it has the potential to affect material bodies, which literary scholarship rarely has the opportunity to do. Scholars in the field of psychology, child development, medicine, and education could also build from this research. An increase of scholars examining this topic could result in an increase in awareness, and more awareness creates change. Ultimately, fat bodies can be treated better as a result of continuing this research.

When the caretakers of kids and teenagers — parents, teachers, librarians, etc. — become aware of how fat males are presented in this literature, they can take action to oppose and contradict it. Teachers, librarians, and curriculum writers and developers can also take action

from this research by choosing books with positive fat representation for students. As an educator myself, I know that teachers do not always have the power to choose which books will be part of the curriculum. In that case, teachers could ask those who do have that power to include books with positive fat representation and to avoid books that present fatness as something wrong. Teachers also have the power to point out harmful representations of fatness in texts and use it as an opportunity for discussion with students.

Finally, authors have a great opportunity to make a change in the perception of fatness reflected in young adult literature. When creating fat characters, and more specifically fat protagonists, authors should make a conscious effort to challenge the aforementioned structures of power. They should create characters who are not defined by gender norms or characterized as having wrongly chosen their body type. These characters should have more diverse struggles, like any child or teen, that have nothing to do with fatness at all. I would like to see fat characters whose main conflict in the novel does not involve their weight. Their fatness should not be their primary character trait. Additionally, there should be more gender-diverse fat characters. When searching for fat characters in the early stages of my research, I found that the characters' fatness often marked them as diverse enough already. The reality is that fat people come in all genders, and therefore all genders should be able to see themselves represented in literature, especially fat children and teens. Similarly, I would like to see more diversity in the races and ethnicities of the fat characters, as all but two characters in my study were White.

My original motivation for focusing this study on fat boys in young adult literature was due to there being a significant gap in both the research and existence of fat boys in the field. Fat girls in this genre have been researched and analyzed in abundance. This research is sparking change, and as a result, fat, female characters in young adult literature are becoming more

positively represented: they are portrayed as desirable to others because of, not in spite of, their bodies; their character growth is marked by their resilience and ability to problem solve, not weightless; their bodies are not viewed as outliers or a problem but rather a normal part of society. Fat girl characters are finally being liberated! I want this for fat boy characters, too. I cannot help but think that fat boy characters have not evolved as much as fat girls because there has not been as much research and attention paid to them. With this work, I aim to open a door that will lead researchers to analyze and criticize the fat boys that are present in young adult literature. My ultimate hope is that when authors create fat boys in the future, they will be aware of the systems that affect them and choose to oppose those systems rather than maintain them. If researchers fill this gap and authors make these changes, they will positively affect real bodies in the real world outside of the novel.

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