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# Muffintops, Fat Rolls, and Self Love: Using Fat Young Adult Texts to Promote Body Positivity

LAURA M. DAVIS

**B**eing identified as the “fat girl” in high school is by far the worst memory I have when I think about being a student. At 18, I was nearly three-hundred pounds. I wore clothes a size too big to ensure no one could see my muffin top or the jiggle of my thighs. I hid behind people in photos instead of standing beside them so that proof of my obesity was scarce. For my senior pictures, I sat in the dressing room for fifteen minutes crying because the shawl did not cover my belly. This was my high school reality. In 2012, after a near-fatal health scare, I lost one-hundred pounds. Unfortunately, I held on to the practices I had developed all those years ago. Though the fat was gone, the “fat girl” mentality remained.

Stories help us understand our own emotions, our own experiences, and our own world, and they allow us to better understand other’s emotions, other’s experiences, and other’s worlds (Short, 2012), and the best place for these stories is on the bookshelves and in the curriculum. Including diverse representations, like fat body representation, open us to “wisdom, strength, and delight and make the richness of imagination available to all of us” (p. 17). As a high school English teacher, I encouraged my students to turn to books when they could not find answers in the real world. However, books representing my emotions, my experiences, and my world were not included; instead, the characters who looked like me were “passive, depressive” girls or the often-ignored plucky sidekicks (Neary, 2016, para. 2). They were depicted as “oafish, as villains, or, most commonly and most problematically, as characters who have to overcome their weight in order to be

seen as worthwhile or able to achieve their dreams, whatever they may be” (Jensen, 2015, para. 1). I did not have a character I could ask for answers. I had my own depression to deal with—I did not need theirs. I needed a fat character who embraced her body: someone proud of her muffin top. As young adult literature has shifted into a more complex genre, characters like those I needed in high school have slowly emerged. Authors like Julie Murphy and Maggie Ann Martin write characters who are no longer the plucky sidekicks. They have their own identities, their own stories, and their own successes. The stigma surrounding “fat girls” has begun shifting, allowing girls like me to not only identify with protagonists, but to embrace our own identities.

## Literature Review

The two key concepts driving this critical content analysis are body image and its prevalence and the use of young adult literature (YAL) as a tool for powerful discourse. First, then, I briefly review body image and its social construction. Second, I explore how YAL can be implemented in the classroom, either via curricula or inclusion in a classroom library.

## Body Image

Body image issues are not a new phenomenon. Studies throughout the nineties and early 2000s focused on the concept of how body image was truly impacted by social constructs and how those constructs affected the mentality of a person. These social constructs depict fat people as disgusting,

disgraceful, and demoralizing, and ultimately, perpetuate negative body image. It is no wonder teenagers turn to derogatory names as a symbol of power: shaming one another based on a number on a scale or the way someone looks. Ridicule is the forerunner. Phillips (2015) maintains even though girls are “gaining access to an unprecedented amount of choice,” she:

remains both trapped within a body and constrained by surveillance and discipline so pervasive that she freely, or so it seems, chooses to enact [society’s] mechanisms of control (spray tans, SPANX[R], nose jobs, and gym visits) upon herself, that is to say, upon her body. (p. 41).

This socially driven physical construct has overtaken so much of her identity that she is no longer unique, rather she is “a product of the media and social media culture emanating from the West [...] and its culture of celebrity [as well as] the often digital, and always visual, space of social media [...] and its ubiquitous repetition of a particular image [...] that establishes the ideal body” (p.41). Now, the word “fat” is more pejorative—instead of its intended use: a descriptor—which raises the question how can we combat this construct?

In 2009, researchers at Ohio State University completed an intense research survey attempting to define body positivity. Wood-Barcalow, Tylka, and Augustus-Horwath’s (2009) main goal was to clarify the definition of positive body image through interviews with fifteen college women who self-identified as body positive. Through their research, Wood-Barcalow, Tylka, and Augustus-Horwath determined two main ideas: (1) most interviewees “revealed that they endorsed negative body image during adolescence” and it was not until participants experienced a mindset shift did they fully appreciate their bodies; (2) there are nine unique characteristics of body positivity: appreciation, unconditional acceptance from others, body acceptance, spiritual/religion, finding others who are accepting of themselves, taking care of the body via healthy behaviors, filtering information in a positive manner, inner positivity influencing outer demeanor, and broadly conceptualizing beauty (pp. 109-111). Ultimately, Wood-Barcalow, Tylka, and Augustus-

Horvath (2009) distinguished body positivity as:

an overarching love and respect for the body that allows individuals to (a) appreciate the unique beauty of their body and the functions that it performs for them; (b) accept and even admire their body, including those aspects that are inconsistent with idealized images; (c) feel beautiful, comfortable, confident, and happy with their body, which is often reflected as an outer radiance, or a “glow;” (d) emphasize their body’s assets rather than dwell on their imperfections; (e) have a mindful connection with their body’s needs; and (f) interpret incoming information in a body-protective manner whereby most positive information is internalized and most negative information is rejected or reframed. (p. 112)

With a powerful definition such as this one, we can read critically to determine if a novel promotes or chastises body positivity.

### Young Adult Literature and Critical Engagement

With young adult literature, YAL, being used as a vehicle for readers to explore “social imagination” and experience lives and cultures that are unlike their own, as Greene (2000) implies, introducing books showcasing body positive characters has the potential to be highly impactful for those who do identify and those who do not identify with the protagonists (p. 5). Coats (2011) suggests YAL “participates in the vibrant and constantly shifting cultural dialogue” shaping readers’ values and responses (p. 320). Ivey and Johnston (2013) found that students who engaged with YAL “experienced transformed interactions with their social environments” (p. 271). Parsons (2017) asserts YAL “may perpetuate or contest these social constructions, and critical reading enables readers to consider their implicit messages” (p. 193). Greene (2000), Coats (2011), Ivey and Johnston (2013), and Parsons (2017) all indicate the same findings: YAL is a powerful tool for empathy, and through literary exposure, readers can move away from individual empathy, in which compassion remains at the individual level and promotes status quo, and move toward critical civic empathy, recognizing constructs and pushing back against them to create

transformative social dialogue (Mirra, 2018).

Bittner (2020) said it best: “As educators, we are often considered gatekeepers [...] our choices for classroom libraries, books used in various capacities within curricula, and suggested readings are all curated through our own personal lenses and experiences” (p. 66). We have the unique opportunity to introduce our students to various systems of power and privilege using young adult literature, YAL, and encourage them to disrupt the social constructions set by dominant society (Glasgow, 2001). We can go beyond the basic literary study “as an exercise in analyzing” literary devices and “expose students to life experiences that reflect and/or differ from their own” (Mirra, 2018, p. 14). While it is difficult to stay up to date in our own reading and read texts that meet the needs of the diverse students under our tutelage, there are resources for educators who seek to provide students with the opportunity to examine texts with diverse perspectives. The Young Adult Literature Services Association (YALSA) annually produces lists of the best YAL books for readers. Dr. Bickmore’s YA Wednesday blog, YA Books Central, and the Cooperative Children’s Book Center (CCBC) regularly post recommendations for diverse titles from various readers, authors, and scholars. For this project, I used Goodreads (2021) to find titles. They have “Plus-Size YA Heroines,” an ever-changing list featuring novels with plus-size female characters. Other helpful body positive lists include BookRiot’s (Strolle, 2021) “19 YA Books on Fat Acceptance That Are 100% Worth Reading,” UnitedbyPop’s (Oldfield, 2021) “20 Body Positive YA Books to Read in 2021,” Common Sense Media’s (McMahon, 2017) “5 Books to Help Teens Explore Body Image,” and AMightyGirl Blog’s (2021) “Celebrating Every Body: 30 Body Image Positive Books for Mighty Girls” which has books ranging from picture books to YAL titles. These lists will provide teachers with options to stock their classroom libraries and options for curricular decisions.

### Critical Framework

This study derives from a larger research project analyzing protagonists’ body image in YAL books

mostly published after Julie Murphy’s (2015) *Dumplin’*—the first book I read with a body positive message. In trying to include male body image, I did include a text published in 2009. After reading *Dumplin’*, I began searching for plus-sized characters using Goodreads to find titles. In all, I read eight novels; three of the eight books were eliminated because while they may have been body positive momentarily, most of the book was rooted in body shaming and negative body image. The five remaining titles were *Puddin’* (2018) by Julie Murphy, *Fat Girl on a Plane* by Kelly DeVos (2018), *The Summer of Jordi Perez and the Best Burger in Los Angeles* by Amy Spalding (2018), *To Be Honest* by Maggie Ann Martin, and *Food, Girls, and Other Things I Can’t Have* (2009) by Allen Zadoff which made up the text set. Each title provided unique examples of how body image and body positivity ebb and flow. For the purposes of this article, I focus on Spalding’s *The Summer of Jordi Perez and the Best Burger in Los Angeles* and Martin’s *To Be Honest* as they provided the best examples of the themes that emerged (Saldaña, 2016) from my critical reading of the text set.

Critical content analysis has the potential to alter the perceptions of children’s and young adult literature by promoting and encouraging discourse about the complexity of the genre. It also highlights the researchers’ responsibility to provide, with fidelity, a strong, well-developed, theory-rich analysis. In this study, the critical framework relies on Short’s (2017) critical content analysis which focuses on exploring “the possible underlying messages within those texts, particularly related to issues of power” (p. 6) and how the text positions the reader (Bradford, 2017, p. 17). Short (2017) encourages the researcher to identify and deep dive into critical theories to influence their reading of the text set and establish tenets to frame the analysis. She offers three aspects for a first examining of a text through a theoretical and contextual lens:

1. Focalization: Whose story is told? From whose point of view?
2. Social processes of characters: Who has power? Who has agency?
3. Closure: How is the story resolved? What are the assumptions in the story closure? (p. 11)

In my readings of each text, I read with Wood-Barcalow, Tylka, and Augustus-Horvath's (2009) nine characteristics of body positivity in mind. As I read, I left theoretical memos (Short, 2017) in the margins to demarcate significant passages that affirmed or contradicted the theoretical lens. I focused on how each character was situated in the story, how their story incorporated their weight and body image—centering fat joy or centering body image—and how those characters interacted with the rest of the cast. For instance, I questioned how Savannah's relationship with her mother impacted not only her body image, but the decisions she made throughout the text and how Abby's friends impacted her spontaneity. Because one of the aspects of positive image is surrounding ourselves with positive influences (Wood-Barcalow, Tylka, & Augustus-Horvath, 2009), Short's (2017) focus on social processes provided me with language to analyze how power and agency played into the relationships, platonic, familial, and romantic, in which Savannah and Abby partook. Lastly, I looked at how the overall message of the text detailed body image. I questioned if the character started with a positive self-image or did the image evolve and solidify as the text progressed. After referring to the theoretical memos to determine how each character and therein each book embodied body positivity, I noticed three of Wood-Barcalow, Tylka, and Augustus-Horvath's (2009) characteristics of body positivity recurred across the texts: 1) accepting and loving the body no matter its imperfections; 2) having a strong support system that provides unconditional love and reinforces body positivity; and 3) experiencing moments of self-realization and love.

Using critical content analysis (Short, 2017), this study will analyze two novels that challenge body image issues by promoting body positivity through their protagonists: *The Summer of Jordi Perez and the Best Burger in Los Angeles* by Amy Spalding (2018) and *To Be Honest* by Maggie Ann Martin (2018). Additionally, this study will explain how these texts can be used in the classroom as a vehicle for transformative social discourse.

## The Novels

In this analysis, Martin (2018) and Spalding (2018) offer two different scenarios for characters struggling with body image. Savannah is pressured by her mother to be thin and healthy, while Abby is pressured by her own inner struggles with body image issues. Over the course of both novels, Savannah and Abby reflect the varied spectrums of body positivity. In *To Be Honest*, Martin (2018) showcases society's obsession with shows like *My 600-lb Life* and *Extreme Makeover*. Before the novel begins, Savannah's mother participates in *Shake the Weight*, a televised, eight-week weight loss competition, in which she comes second place. However, post-*Shake the Weight*, Savannah's mother becomes obsessed with keeping the weight off and imposing her beliefs on Savannah. This obsession creates a toxic atmosphere of insecurity and self-hate. Savannah, in trying to combat the constant negativity, spends most of the text challenging her mother's beliefs and choices in her post-*Shake the Weight* journey. With snarky remarks and internal hashtagged monologues such as “#LoveYourBody” and “#AllBodiesAreGoodBodies,” Savannah tries to remain grounded in her own identity and size and wishes her mother could do the same. Though her resolve is constantly challenged, Savannah is a truly body positive character who champions her body and leaves readers with the message both metaphoric and literal: “You look gorgeous, you feel gorgeous, so wear the dress” (p. 270).

Spalding (2018) presents a different kind of body positive narrative in *The Summer of Jordi Perez and the Best Burger in Los Angeles*. Abby Ives, the protagonist, is not outwardly body positive at the beginning of the novel. She lives a double life: on her blog, she is supremely body positive, but in her everyday life, she questions her appearance and others' opinions of her. In her everyday life as a queer teenager and fashionista, she sees herself as undesirable because of her fatness. But as the novel progresses and Abby finds herself face to face with Jordi Perez, the quiet Gothic chick she is working with, Abby begins seeing herself in a different light. They begin to share their interests and grow closer together. While the novel centers Abby and Jordi's

budding relationship—a first for Abby—the story ultimately emphasizes how love is multifaceted and acknowledges how importance of self-compassion.

### Textual Analysis and Emerging Themes

Through the critical content analysis of *The Summer of Jordi Perez and the Best Burger in Los Angeles* (Spalding, 2018) and *To Be Honest* (Martin, 2018), three characteristics of body positivity were evident: 1) accepting and loving the body no matter its imperfections; 2) having a strong support system that provides unconditional love and reinforces body positivity; and 3) experiencing moments of self-realization and love.

#### Accepting and Loving the Body No Matter the Imperfections

Wood-Barcalow, Tylka, and Augustus-Horvath's (2009) definition of body positivity emphasizes that body positivity is rooted in accepting and loving the body we are in. Appreciation and body acceptance and love both discuss how focusing on the positive attributes of and expressing gratitude for the body promote positive body image. For Abby, appreciation manifests through *+style*, her plus size blog that highlights fashion for girls of all shapes and sizes. At a young age, she “kept finding more clothes that [she] loved. More dresses, sweaters, and boots to wear during L.A.’s brief winter—shirts, shoes, tights, and jeans that looked and felt great. [She] was in love with how clothes made [her] feel [and] was designing how other people saw [her], and that felt powerful” (Spalding, 2018, p. 15). This sense of power—designing other’s perception of her—allows her to create an image of how people view her outwardly. As this helped grow her confidence, she felt it necessary to spread this power to others by influencing what girls like her wore daily. Abby wants her readers/followers to understand that fat is not an insult—it is a state of being—and by dressing confidently, others will see that confidence.

Unlike Abby, Savannah’s appreciation for her body is not rooted in her clothing. From the start of the novel, Savannah is presented to readers as body positive. Rarely does Savannah reference not liking

her body or feeling uncomfortable in her own skin. Several times throughout, Savannah references her abilities: she is good at math, she is a decent journalist, and she is a good friend (Martin, 2018). The bulk of *To Be Honest* implies Savannah’s body positive stance in its depiction of Savannah’s turbulent relationship with her mother. In their relationship, Savannah represents body positive messages. Rarely does Savannah reference not liking her body or feeling uncomfortable in her own skin. While Martin openly discusses the opposing views between Savannah and her mother, Savannah finally stands up for herself and addresses how much she appreciates and loves her body in a confrontation following a study date with George in which her mother throws away a pizza George had brought for dinner. After her mother criticizes her for wanting to eat “processed sugar and fatty food,” Savannah confronts her:

News flash: *fat* isn’t a bad word, Mom. It’s the twenty-first century. I have blue eyes. I have blonde hair. I’m fat. Literally nothing about my life is changed because that word is associated with my physical appearance. I’m sorry someone taught you to hate yourself because of your body somewhere along the way, but I’m not letting you pull me down with you.” (pp. 149-150)

In her declaration, Savannah not only shows appreciation for her body, but she emphasizes that just because her appearance does not fit the socially constructed standard does not make her any less of a person. Savannah acknowledges that someone taught her mom how to hate her own body, and therein, hate Savannah’s body, but Savannah will not allow her mom to perpetuate self-hate. Though inspired by her mother’s behavior, Savannah’s speech perpetuates Wood-Barcalow, Tylka, and Augustus-Horvath’s (2009) assertion about body positivity. When a person focuses not on the negative but on the positive attributes of their body, they form and maintain a positive body image.

#### Having A Strong Support System that Provides Unconditional Love and Reinforces Body Positivity

One of the main elements of Wood-Barcalow, Tylka, and Augustus-Horvath’s (2009) definition

of body positivity is unconditional love and support from friends, family, and spouses as central to the formation and maintenance of positive body image (p. 110). Surrounding one's self with a strong support system that provides unconditional love reiterates and reinforces body positivity. Although Abby (Spalding, 2018) acknowledges her size and encourages others to accept themselves and show their power through their appearance, in the real world, she struggles with the concept of body image. Throughout the entirety of the narrative, she argues vehemently against using her own pictures on *+style*. She has her voice as her strength on the website to combat the fact that she feels it is "hard to see [herself] as beautiful. [...] People *hate* fat girls. The way they talk online. The way they just *stare* sometimes" (p. 269). This crippling view of her physical self is detrimental to her state of mind. Spalding surrounds Abby with friends like Maliah, Zoe, Brooke, Jordi, and Jax to act as her foundation when she does not feel she is worthy of attention. An intricate player in Abby's summer of Jordi Perez is jock-turned-best-friend, Jax Stockton. He instills in her a sense of confidence. In a moment of doubt, Abby questions how Jordi could possibly find her attractive. He challenges her self-doubt with "you're [...] cute [...] you know that. You wouldn't wear all your weird fruity clothes if you didn't think that" (p. 76). Throughout their relationship, he continues to reinforce her positivity with affirmations such as "You know your girl likes you. We all do. She watches you like you're the most interesting thing on the [...] planet" (p. 210) and "You're cool! I think you're, you know. Funny and shit" (p. 259). Their relationship helps her grapple with the constant ebb and flow of her body positivity.

Savannah (Martin, 2018) also has a friend who supports her: Grace. Throughout Savannah's entire narrative, Grace is present. Always fighting for Savannah in her time of need, Grace's unconditional love is what gets Savannah through the hardest moments she with which she has ever had to deal. Savannah projects herself as highly powerful and strong-willed—a product of her body positivity and pride. Unfortunately, these two attributes make her very intimidating to those around her. Savannah admits she does not understand why she cannot find

anyone who will love her. Grace admits that Savannah is a big personality with a lot of impact: "You can be intimidating at times [...] You're so smart, and quick on your feet, and have this 'Savvy against the world' attitude that makes it hard for me to even feel like I know the right thing to say back to you sometimes" (p. 200). With a character as extroverted as Savannah, it is hard for her to understand the impact she has on others. Grace helps her realize this. As Grace continues, her words hold a significant amount of power: "I wish you believed in yourself in the same way you project yourself to the world, because you're fierce, funny, and hella loyal. There's no one on this planet that I'd rather have in my corner" (p. 200). This exchange extenuates the relationship between Savannah and Grace creating an unbreakable bond of mutual love, encouragement, endorsement, and comfort.

#### Experiencing Moments of Self-Realization and Love

Both Abby and Savannah's stories are considered YA romance. As Wood-Barcalow, Tylka, and Augustus-Horvath (2009) suggests, there are moments even for the most secure in her body positive image that waver when love is involved. Outer influences, such as romance, sometimes penetrate the psyche and cause self-doubt (Wood-Barcalow, Tylka, & Augustus-Horvath, 2009, p. 114). Both girls experience wavering body positivity when traversing their respective romances. Abby's love interest is seventeen-year-old Jordi Perez (Spalding, 2018). After meeting at Lemonberry, a boutique where both girls work as interns, their relationship blossoms into romance. Jordi's unconditional affection influences Abby's body positivity. The way Jordi speaks to Abby and acts around her forces Abby to acknowledge and appreciate what her body has to offer. In a moment of passion, the two girls move closer to having sex. Abruptly Abby stops all activity to address how uncomfortable she is being naked in front of Jordi. She says she is "not ready to take off any of [her] clothes yet" and wonders if she "was thin if [she] would" be having the same concerns around Jordi. When Jordi responds that she feels the same way about taking her clothes off, Abby's confidence grows; immediately, "[she]

feel[s] less like [her] fatness is some kind of problem” between her and Jordi (p. 150). This acceptance continues throughout their relationship. She begins to understand that when someone loves another person, she knows everything about that person. For Abby, this allows her to look at herself differently: “I stop worrying if my butt looks big or if my upper arms are too chubby, because I also look happy. It shows in my smile and my eyes and even how I’m standing with an ease I have never actually felt in my bones.” She recognizes and embraces that she is “falling in love at seventeen” without her “apparent flaws fixed” (p. 185). She openly accepts who she is.

Savannah’s romance involves George whom she met at Grace’s family barbecue (Martin, 2018). When they are unexpectedly paired up for the games portion of the afternoon, Savannah’s confidence in who she is temporarily dissipates. As she and George prepare for the three-legged race, Savannah admits “I suddenly felt self-conscious about the short shorts I chose to wear over my swimsuit. Imagining my jigging thigh having to be tied up to a stranger’s was my version of a nightmare. Would he notice the stretch marks that striped my inner thighs? Would he be disgusted by me when he saw them?” (p. 26). As she internally debates how he will view her, she begins to hyperventilate which ends her adventures. As their relationship grows, there are more moments that challenge her positive resolve. At a party where she is sure George is going to admit he is interested in moving to an exclusive relationship, she misconstrues seeing him on the “make out” couch with another girl, which leaves her confused and hurt. Then after reconciling that event—he was helping the girl with her hair—he rejects Savannah’s invitation to the homecoming dance. “His pause was deafening” she said. Her confidence shot: “I wanted to curl into myself. For once in my life, I’d put myself out there completely with someone who I thought would reciprocate” (p. 247). As she tries to overcome this feeling of embarrassment and rejection, she turns her attention on what she is good at: journalism. As Wood-Barcalow, Tylka, and Augustus-Horvath (2009) argues, Savannah focuses on what she can control and what she is good at which brings her great joy. Martin emphasizes how important it is for us to find what brings us joy and

happiness and embrace it.

## Discussion

As educators, we are tasked with challenging students to critically question how society propagates dominant ideologies. Body image “has been conceptualized as a multidimensional construct containing both positive and negative features with perceptual, attitudinal, and behavioral aspects” (Wood-Barcalow, Tylka, & Augustus-Horvath, 2009, p. 106). *The Summer of Jordi Perez and the Best Burger in Los Angeles* (Spalding, 2018) and *To Be Honest* (Martin, 2018) introduce us to two characters who invite readers to engage in an intriguing dialogue about self-perception and social perception of fatness. Bittner (2020) and Mirra (2018) both emphasize the important roles teachers play in initiating transformative discourse. Whether it is through the books included in the curriculum or books on the bookshelves, teachers provide students with entry points to hard conversations.

Spalding (2018) brings internal dissatisfaction and outward expression to the conversation with Abby’s desire to be a designer but not the subject of photography for public consumption. Though Spalding does not start *The Summer of Jordi Perez and the Best Burgers in LA* with a character who is solidly body positive, Abby’s story represents the journey of body positivity. She is seventeen. She is experiencing love for the first time. For any young woman in Abby’s stage of development, insecurity in appearance is not only relevant but it is acceptable. Spalding captures this concept and emphasize acceptance when Abby thinks: “Of course my girlfriend thinks I’m beautiful, of course Maliah thinks I look great when I spend so much effort on my looks, of course Jax thinks I’m [...] cute. They have something invested in me while this world doesn’t. [...] As if fat makes you anything other than ... fat” (p. 204). Abby recognizes that the people who matter to her are the opinions that matter. The rest of the world sees her as fat, and that is okay. Abby’s journey acknowledges that a focus on what is important in life can promote happiness and body positive lifestyles.

*To Be Honest* (Martin, 2018) lives up to its name. The story revolves around Savannah, who, in her



home life, must bite her tongue and fight to remain body positive, and who, in her academic life, must embrace her identity as a math-loving investigative journalist. Martin provides readers with an alternative look at what it can mean to be pressured by society to conform to a certain standardized and unrealistic image. Unlike the characters previously discussed who have 'thin' parents pushing for 'healthy' lifestyles for their children, Martin writes a body positive character championing her body image and wishing for the same for her mother. It is not the child suffering from an eating disorder but the mother. Body positivity, at least for Martin through Savannah, means accepting, loving, and showing off what you have. When brought together, Abby and Savannah's stories highlight the existing issue surrounding body image. They both embody Wood-Barcalow, Tylka, and Augustus-Horvath's (2009) findings concerning body positivity.

#### Implications for Educators

Body image is one construct that unites all people. While colloquially, body image issues are relegated to girls who do not conform to the "narrow Western beauty ideals that privilege the white, thin, cis-gendered and able-bodied," body image impacts everyone (Sastre, 2016, p. 56). More YAL is being published which examines the intersectionality of body image and other traits such as race, ethnicity, ability, etc. I can only hope that books showcasing body positivity become as important to readers as they have been to me. We live in world where fat is not the societal norm. Using texts that challenge the size construct status quo not only give voices to those girls and boys like me who suffer from a lack of body confidence but allow for readers to step outside the text and apply the knowledge they learned within the text to the outside world (Mirra, 2018; Glasgow, 2001). Looking at the two novels analyzed above, the protagonists contend with their own understanding of their bodies. Spalding (2018) and Martin (2018) push back against the constructs and act as models for the students to push back, as well.

The following suggestions for prereading, during reading, and post-reading activities align with

the 9-10 and 11-12 Common Core State Standards (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010).

#### Prereading Activities

Parsons (2017) explains that critical reading "leads us to interrogate our personal prejudice through self-reflection" (p. 205). Teachers can encourage students to turn to popular culture and analyze the social constructs regarding body image to understand how the novels may push back against the constructs. This can be achieved individually, in small groups, or as a whole class. Examples of this could be looking at Tess Holliday's (2018) UK *Cosmopolitan* cover in which she wears a bathing suit and blows a kiss at the camera, analyzing the lyrics of Lizzo's (2015) "My Skin" from her sophomore album, *Big Grrrl Small World*, and other instances of body positive messages that have appeared in the media, on social media, etc. It will be important for teachers to emphasize body shape and body image is diverse; therefore, analysis is not limited to fat bodies, and while the novels in the selection above feature plus-size protagonists, pairing them with other novels representative of body image may be beneficial. Other prereading activities include mini-research projects/presentations defining terms such as #BoPo Movement, thinspiration, body shaming, body positivity, the history of body constructs, and other terms and historical moments related to body image.

#### During Reading Activities

Gallagher and Kittle (2018) emphasize the significance of students comparing "their thoughts and theories and feelings to those of others because doing so gives them insight into themselves and into the world" (p. 63). This student-to-student interaction creates strong environments for discourse. To promote student-to-student interaction during the body positive unit, teachers can do such activities as FlipGrid book talks. Using the FlipGrid app, students respond to given prompts about the texts such as *What shocked you? What surprised you? How does this*

make you feel? What language do you see promoting/contradicting body image? Then, students can respond to their classmates with support/counterarguments. As mentioned above, body image can be a sensitive subject, so teachers should remind students to be constructive and not critical with their responses to their classmates. Another fun activity for students to do to keep them reading actively is #BookSnaps. Using SnapChat or TikTok, have students document reactions to the text as they read. Encourage them to include hashtags, stickers, phrases, emojis, bitmojis, gifs, etc. to represent their feelings about the text. The same questions from FlipGrid can be used here as guided #BookSnaps (Martin, 2018). Teachers can create Padlets or use their schools' online platform (i.e. Canvas, Blackboard, Google Classroom) for students to post their #BookSnaps or TikToks and respond to others using the discussion features. This is a fun way to incorporate technology, their interests, and critical thinking into the reading of the texts.

### Post-Reading Activities

At the completion of reading, the students can return to their discussion groups from the pre-reading activities and revisit their analyses of popular culture and how they align with the messages in the novels. Because the students have completed the novel, they can work together to answer the questions posed in Wood-Barcalow, Tylka, and Augustus-Horvath (2009):

- How do you define body image? Negative body image? Positive body image?
- How do you describe your attitude toward your body?
- Tell me the story of how you feel about your body.
- How has your understanding of your own body image changed or not changed over time?
- What important information have you learned from others about your body (such as family, peers, romantic partners, and society)?
- How do your relationships with others affect your body image?
- What kinds of messages do you think society promotes about the female body (TV, movies, magazines, newspapers, etc.)?
- How do you understand your body in relation to these messages?
- Is there one experience that stands out for you related to how you feel or what you think about your body?
- What does your body provide you?
- How do you care for your body?
- Could you use a metaphor to describe how you feel about your body?
- What advice would you give to others who are struggling with body acceptance? (p. 108)

These questions are phrased for self-reflection, but teachers may rephrase them to steer the conversation toward character analysis. For example, teachers may choose to substitute “character” or the character’s name” for “you” in question A. This will still allow for conversation, but it will also keep students from feeling obligated to self-reflect on their own body image verbally. If students are comfortable, they can also answer the questions based on their own experiences. After exploring the character’s perspectives, they may feel less embarrassed to address their own body image perceptions. Upon completion, teachers should consider opening the discussion to whole class participation to synthesize conversations regarding the character’s answers to the questions.

To further engage in conversations about body positivity, teachers can provide students with a list of titles centered around body image and body positivity or encourage students to find their own novels. With the novel, students partake in a critical content analysis. Using Short (2017) as a critical guide, students read their novel to determine how the author enhances the conversation surrounding body positivity. Parsons (2017) provides guided analysis questions such as *Is the idealized body standard upheld or challenged? Is it presented as naturalistic or as socially constructed? Does the narrative position multiple body-types as acceptable, beautiful, and worthy? Is discrimination and the marginalization of fat bodies presented as naturalistic or challenged? Who reveals constructions and how? If/how/when is discrimination challenged?* (p. 206). Using questions such as these encourage the

students to not only evaluate the novel that they have chosen, but it also promotes self-reflection. Teachers should consider having students revisit their earlier responses to Wood-Barcalow, Tylka, & Augustus-Horvath's (2009) body image questions to reflect on how their perceptions of body positivity have shifted.

## Conclusion

In a time of social unrest, it is important to promote civil discourse in our classrooms. Students need a safe space to interact with topics they encounter in the world and exposing students to novels that challenge anti-fat bias and champion positive body images has the potential to influence social change. I often wonder how different my body image would have been had I had a positive influence like Savannah or Abby—or any body positive character—in my life as I was growing up. As Willowdean (Murphy, 2015) says in *Dumplin'*, “All my life I’ve had a body worth commenting on and if living in my skin has taught me anything it’s that if it’s not your body, it’s not yours to comment on. Fat. Skinny. Short. Tall. It doesn’t matter” (p. 33). Considering how impactful they were to read at 30, Will’s words would have given me such a positive outlook when I was younger. Powerful words have powerful ramifications, and we need to teach our students how to embrace powerful discourse.

## Limitations and Future Research

In researching titles to read and analyze for this critical content analysis, it became very clear that there are gaps in representation. Books in the original text set primarily contained white, cisgender females as their protagonists. This is problematic as representations of male characters, characters of color, transgender characters, and characters with varied abilities are limited or non-existent. While this article does include a lesbian character, there is room for further research into wider representation. The body positive canon is constantly growing and

adding diverse representations.

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