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## THE GIRL BODY AT LARGE: EXAMINING FAT REPRESENTATION IN YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE

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### ABSTRACT

Fat representation of female heroines in young adult literature generally centers around the protagonist's struggle to accept her body or situates her body as vehicle for the message of body positivity. Both alternatives keep the narrative focus on the body, defining it as the most important part of the character. This essay examines in depth the pitfalls of fat representation by deconstructing Jennifer Niven's 2016  *Holding up the Universe*  and comparing to a more commendable more portrayal of fat representation in Rainbow Rowell's 2012  *Eleanor and Park* . In particular, this essay focuses on the fallacies of the body positivity movement, the correlation between the male gaze and body acceptance, the intersectionality of body image and privilege, and the complications of fat representation and sexual abuse. This is by no means a thorough scope of fat representation in young adult literature, but rather a means of beginning the conversation.

The stereotypical female heroine of young adult (YA) literature has been written about enough that there is almost no need to describe her. She is conventionally attractive, thin, white, cisgender, heterosexual, middle-class, and able-bodied. In recent years, however, YA literature has exploded with diversity, presenting a new heroine. She is black. She is transgender. She is poor. She is gay. She is Latinx. She is disabled. She is fat. She is Asian. She is deaf. She is they. She is he. The multiplicity of representation is beautiful, laudable, and encouraging. Yet, despite this, heroines who break the mold still seem to be unable to break away from the ghost of conventionality. A heroine defined by otherness is perpetually given the script of grappling with and/or celebrating her otherness. It is as though she can't have a narrative that isn't focused on what she is not. It's still currently difficult to find examples of nonnormative bodies in YA literature whose primary struggle isn't being thin, white, straight, or beautiful. Fat characters are particularly interesting to examine. Fat female protagonists have been staking their place more and more in YA literature, but almost always as vessels of the obligatory message of body positivity. I am interested in examining fat representation in YA literature by narrowing in on one book that exemplifies the struggles of fat representation, Jennifer Niven's  *Holding Up the Universe* , and one book that provides an example of narrative that moves beyond a focus on fat, Rainbow Rowell's  *Eleanor and Park* . I will examine the stereotypes of fat representation, the pitfalls of body positivity, myths of food and fatness, writing the fat body, male gaze and fatness, the intersectionality of body image and privilege, and the complications of fat representation and sexual abuse. This is by no means a thorough examination of any of these topics, as each could be an essay in and of itself. Rather, I will examine how these topics are handled within two particular

books with hopes of illustrating the current problems of fat representation and a projection of better representation.

There are a few matters to note before moving forward. I use the word “fat” throughout this essay, rather than euphemisms such as heavy, overweight, or curvy. I do so to destigmatize the negative connotation of fat and reclaim it as a neutral descriptor. As educator and critic Nicole Ann Amato explains, “Words such as obese and overweight pathologize fatness, implying one’s health is determined by one’s weight. Additionally, words like curvy, big boned, and chubby couch negative attitudes about fatness in positive euphemisms.” Fat activist Aubrey Gordon further reiterates the need to name fat as it is: “Fat stands in contrast to an endless parade of euphemisms—fluffy, curvy [...] big girl, zaftig, big boned, husky, voluptuous, thick, heavy set, pleasantly plump, chubby, cuddly, more to love, overweight, obese—all of which just serve as a reminder of how terrified so many thin people are to see our bodies, name them, have them.” Thus, I use the term fat to give dignity to all bodies, as a willingness to see the fat body as it is. Throughout this essay, when quoting directly from the books themselves, and simply to not overuse the term fat, euphemisms will occasionally come into play. As an additional note, I will use the pronouns she/her, as consistent with the texts referenced.

While I have chosen only two texts to focus on, my purpose is not to offer critique of a singular work, but rather to use the texts to illustrate fat representation in larger context. Author Zadie Smith advises “[to] read every line of a book with the same sense of involvement and culpability as if you had written it yourself,” and that is the approach I wish take here. Particularly in Niven’s text, I want to look beyond the overt message of body positivity and examine the messier undertones, as Niven’s handling of fat representation is just one example of many similar texts.

Jennifer Niven’s 2016 novel, *Holding Up the Universe*, is the story of America’s Fattest Teenager, Libby Strout. At thirteen years old, 653-pound Libby had to be cut out of her house and hauled off in a truck to hospital after experiencing a panic attack. She couldn’t fit in the ambulance. Libby’s story picks up few years and some 302 lost pounds later, when she is entering high school for the first time after years of homeschooling. There Libby encounters Jack, a handsome, popular guy who hides behind an arrogant façade so no one will know his true secret: he has prosopagnosia, the inability to recognize faces. *Holding Up the Universe*, falls squarely into an opposites attract, enemies to lovers trope, told in alternating voices. The primary focus of the novel, however, is Libby’s fatness and the response of others to her body.

By setting up Libby as America’s Fattest Teenager, Niven creates an almost hyperbolic example of fatness. Niven states she wrote the novel based on her own “teenage struggles with [...] weight” (qtd by Te) but the novel feels a little like what sociologist Roxane Gay might describe as “...a skinny person imagining only one possible existence for a fat person.” That one possible existence of a fat person is to act as model of self-love. The character of Libby herself is almost overshadowed by her role as Body Positive Fat Heroine. Niven explicitly spells out that Libby is not “the Sassy Fat Girl” (17), or the “Badass Fat Girl with Attitude” (79), yet that’s exactly the character she’s created. Libby is bold and feisty, and though she does struggle with anxiety and fear, she’s not afraid to fight her bullies and stand up for those around her. She’s not afraid to go after what she wants, despite her weight and the prejudices and harassment she experiences. While Libby’s character is admirable, and in many ways well-written, it also feeds into the exact stereotypes Niven attempts to avoid.

On the surface, a body positive fat heroine ought to be celebrated, but body positivity itself steps into complex territory. First, the focus on Libby's body continues to perpetuate patriarchal notions that a woman's power is located in her body. Libby is a product of a culture where, as researcher and writer Renee Engeln phrases it, "young girls are taught that their primary form of currency in this world involves being pleasing to the eyes of others" (7), a culture "that tells women the most important thing they can be is beautiful" (Engeln 1). Libby is more of a girl than a woman, but, reflective of societal norms, her body is held to the same standards as a woman's. Her narrative emphasizes the importance of maintaining an acceptable body, particularly when examined through the male gaze, while simultaneously accepting the body as it is—two conflicting messages that young girls get caught between.

The body positivity movement keeps the societal lens focused on a woman's body and away from who she actually is outside of a body. Jia Tolentino, cultural critic and author of *Trick Mirror*, articulates the problem with the body positive movement as such: "The default assumption tends to be that it is politically important to designate everyone as beautiful, that it is a meaningful project to make sure that everyone can become, and feel, increasingly beautiful. We have hardly tried to imagine what it might look like if our culture could do the opposite—de-escalate the situation, make beauty matter less." In other words, body positivity feeds into the patriarchal ideals that beauty is personally and politically important, and that it ought to be of top priority in a woman's life. Body positivity primarily focuses on the woman's body, not the man's. It is "the female regarded as enmeshed in her bodily existence," (Lennon) in ways the male body is not. What is needed in YA literature is a book that focuses less on body positivity and more on what a world would look like if the most important thing about a girl wasn't her body.

While it's refreshing that *Holding Up the Universe* is not a weight loss narrative, Libby's 302 pounds weight loss journey is breezily summed up as "two and a half years of fat camps and counselors and psychologists and behavioral coaches and trainers" (18), and only touches lightly on what it might mean to lose half of one's self. This massive support team Libby had to help her lose weight is largely ignored throughout the rest of the novel and instead embodied in one single fairy-godmother-like figure, Rachel, who is confusingly not only Libby's counselor, but also acted as her "tutor and [...] caregiver, the one who stayed with [Libby] while [her] dad went to work. Now she's [Libby's] best friend" (64). Rachel's sole role is to step in with chirpy support as Libby continues to struggle with anxiety and the urge to overeat. Niven does well to situate Libby's weight in context of anxiety and grief, but still steps into some of the myths surrounding weight loss. While Libby's weight loss was undoubtedly necessary to her health and well-being, limiting her to "years eating nutritiously and boringly without a hiccup" (64) perpetuates myths that weight loss is achieved through willpower and limited food intake, and denies Libby the privilege and pleasure of learning to enjoy all food in a mentally healthy manner. Furthermore, such an approach only sets up Libby up for potential future failure. Rather than reducing Libby's body, perhaps what is needed is "reducing the overvaluation of weight" (Matacin, Simone). Libby is denied a narrative beyond the realm of her own body because of how much value is given to her weight.

Beyond her weight, Libby could be placeholder for any generic female YA protagonist: white skin, "medium-longish brown hair" (11), large and "very clear light brown" eyes (146). She's middle-class suburban, heterosexual, cisgender, and in many ways, she could be anyone. Keeping Libby as close to normative standards as possible is perhaps an effort to write her as more appealing, as "[the] ideal woman has always been generic" (Tolentino), or perhaps to make her more relatable to a wider audience. With little to give Libby's image nuance or particularity, the

focus on her body is still yet further enlarged, even as Niven avoids writing the body with any specificity.

Throughout the novel, there is almost a hyper-focus on the positive qualities of Libby's body, as though allowing Libby to grapple with her own body image would negate the overarching theme of body positivity. Libby proudly proclaims, "I've lost 302 pounds. The size of two entire people. I have around 190 left to go, and I'm fine with that. I like who I am" (8). Libby's body is vague at best, described primarily by a number on the scale, reinforcing societal focus on weight and numbers. She is a 351-pound smudge, a blank slate for scrawling messages of body positivity. This is made overtly clear in a climactic scene where Libby parades in front of her classmates, wearing only a purple bikini, the words "YOU ARE WANTED" (317), scrawled onto her body. While the scene is meant to be read as empowering, instead it enforces the underlying message that Libby's body exists only as a vehicle for fat acceptance. Furthermore, it situates Libby as though she is responsible for the ways in which others perceive her body. Libby "deserve[s] a paradigm of personhood that does not make size or health a prerequisite for dignity and respect" (Gordon), but instead she is forced to fight for basic dignity at every turn.

What is needed is a narrative of "the body *as lived*, as yielding the sensory experiences and lived intentionality of a subject negotiating its world" (Lennon). Such a narrative requires a level of honesty and vulnerability beyond the realm of positivity. It requires a frank examination of what it means to inhabit an individual body, with all its strengths and weaknesses, felicities and flaws, and abilities and limitations. In the words of essayist Megan Daum, "We need to recognize that to deny people their complications and contradictions is to deny them their humanity." As large as Libby's body is, her identity is thinly written, denying her of her whole self. Highlighting only what's positive and merely skimming over what's difficult only diminishes the positive in that it's not fully appreciated in context.

As self-accepting as Libby is portrayed, her body is ultimately only acceptable when perceived as such through the male perspective, consistent with the cultural assumption that "women live their bodies as objects for another's gaze" (Lennon). Libby's body is portrayed as an object of lust from the moment she reenters high school, as though simply existing in a public space cues her availability. Writing Libby's body as sexually desirable is meant to counteract the normative narrative that fat is not sexy, but what it does is instead enforce the idea that sexual desirability is key to a girl's worth, even at sixteen. As Gay words it, "Women are their bodies and what they can offer men." In her very first class at high school, Libby catches the interest of Mick from Copenhagen (as he is referred to throughout the novel). Mick's sole role in the novel is to validate the desirability of Libby's body. The emphasis on his foreignness seems not incidental, and is almost treated as fantastical, as though Mick's attraction to Libby is dependent on him being removed from mainstream American culture.

This brings us to the character of Jack, the novel's male protagonist and Libby's love interest. Jack's character provides good representation of a lesser-known disability, prosopagnosia, the inability to recognize faces and thus the challenges of existing in a world where literally everyone looks like a stranger. He is given the narrative Libby should have had, in that he is distinct in appearance, hobbies, and interests. He is allowed to wrestle with the difficulties of his unique challenges, and not pigeon-holed into constant positivity. And while his story provides a lot of insight into prosopagnosia, he is not held to any standard of educating others about his disability, nor he is meant to represent others struggling with the same.

Jack's character arc throughout the story trends upwards, as Jack progresses from insecure, proud, and hurting to confident, vulnerable, and open to healing. Libby, on the other hand, remains a strangely flat character throughout the novel, especially considering she's the protagonist. Libby has presumably already overcome her biggest challenges prior to the start of the story. While she is faced with horrible incidences of bullying (Jack being as much at fault as anyone else), she is ostensibly already equipped with the emotional strength to handle these challenges and it seems her role is now to be the benevolent educator to her bullies. Libby names her own narrative as such: "It is my job in life, apparently, to teach gawking, laughing girls a lesson about kindness" (310). Libby is positioned as responsible for reforming the behavior of her own peers, whereas Jack is never held to a similar standard.

Jack and Libby's relationship adheres to the classic *Pride and Prejudice* trope. The title of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* reflects the moral failings Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth Bennett must first overcome before a relationship can flourish. Jack and Libby's relationship is similarly situated. It's hate at first sight, and even more loathsome than Mr. Darcy slighting Lizzie at the dance. Jack jumps on Libby's back in the middle of the cafeteria and "rides" her in a game of Fat Girl Rodeo that his friends dared him to participate in. His deplorable behavior, however, is quickly excused, as it is only a mask for deeply rooted insecurity and an effort to hide the large secret of his struggle with prosopagnosia, all of which he explains in a confessional note to Libby. (As Austen writes in another novel of hers, "Let us never underestimate the power of a well-written letter.") Like Darcy, Jack must overcome his pride and open himself up to greater vulnerability if he is to have any chance at pursuing Libby. While there's much about his character arc that doesn't involve Libby, she is both his motivation and his ultimate obstacle. Opening up about his disability and seeking help is only the beginning for Jack. The final proof of having overcome his pride is ignoring the opinions of his peers and acknowledging that he "likes the fat girl" (230). As Jack himself words it, "It's like I need to prove to myself once and for all that she's fat and I don't care" (262). The narrative, however, doesn't feel like Jack ever fully overcomes his hesitations in this regard.

Jack's attraction to Libby is meant to show the fat body in a positive and desirable light, but the manner in which his attraction is handled is problematic on several levels. Reinforcing the narrative that "women must be thin to be attractive or valued in society," (Matacin, Simone), Jack initially finds Libby attractive by seeing in her qualities that are typically more associated within thinness. Jack notes that even though Libby "is big, she's much more delicate in person" (146). Similarly, he later comments, "She's graceful, especially for someone so large" (208). It comes as a revelation to Jack that Libby is more than fat and that fat is more nuanced than he previously supposed. Jack finds himself taken with the way Libby handles her body, particularly in dance. Niven does well in this regard to "[challenge] the stereotypes that fat women cannot be physically agile" (Matacin and Simone), but the narrative still gets mired in the stickiness of adjectives such as delicate and graceful, which reinforce narrow notions of womanhood and acceptable body types. Furthermore, Jack initially feels safe with Libby because, due to his prosopagnosia, she's one of the few people he can reliably identify, namely because she's so large. As his feelings develop further, rather than acknowledging the problem of this reliance to begin with, he worries about a day when he might not be able to rely on her size. He asks Libby, "What happens if you lose weight? You'd need to stay large forever, and that's your identifier, but you're so much more than your weight" (289). The words, "that's your identifier," seem true not only for Jack's perception

of Libby's, but everyone else's. Her identity is fatness, and the narrative doesn't allow for her to untangle herself from her fatness.

Returning to the supposition of Jack as a Mr. Darcy figure, Libby, unlike Austen's Lizzie, has no such similar pride to overcome. While she has some initial prejudice against Jack (he did, after all, climb on her back and "ride" her in a game of Fat Girl Rodeo), she is remarkably forgiving and quick to let go of her prejudices. Instead, her body itself is the hurdle that must be defeated. She, like many fat heroines of YA lit is "positioned in conflict with [her] body, a conflict [she] must overcome to find happiness, success, and internal peace" (Amato). Having already accepted her own body, her challenge now is finding someone else to do the same.

The great twist of the novel is that Jack realizes Libby's face is actually the only face he can recognize, and Jack marvels, "All this time, I thought it was her weight that made me see her. But it's not her weight at all" (375). This is meant to be read, again, in a body positive light, that all of this was never about her weight. But this supposition is complicated by the fact that Niven feels it necessary to create such an elaborate revelation in order to explain Jack's attraction to Libby. In other words, if Jack never had the convoluted backstory of a secret battle with prosopagnosia in which there's only one face in the entire world that he can accurately identify and it just so happens to be Libby, it is unlikely he would have ever pursued her. For all the overt messages of body positivity, the underlying message is that it takes a unique set of circumstances for a fat girl to find love, no matter how much she loves herself.

*Holding Up the Universe* could have much to learn from an earlier novel that succeeds in many of the ways Niven's work stumbles. Rainbow Rowell's 2012 novel, *Eleanor and Park*, is similar to Niven's, in that it's an opposites-attract-romance told in alternating voices in which both characters are grappling with their identities, and the female protagonist is fat. This is as far as the similarities go, as *Eleanor and Park* uses those elements to a far different end.

The titular character and protagonist, Eleanor, is clearly regarded as fat. Yet, the reader is never given a number to quantify *how* big, easing the emphasis away from numbers on the scale. Unlike Libby, Eleanor fully inhabits her body. She exists as Eleanor, not as any vehicle for body positivity, in fact, if anything, Eleanor leans more towards body *passivity*. This is in part because Eleanor is dealing with many challenging issues, including bullying, abuse, poverty, and harassment that limit her scope of focus. If considering her narrative in context of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, in a very real sense, Eleanor is struggling with the basics of survival and doesn't have the freedom to consider an identity of the self. Struggles with body image rank well below larger concerns such as safely taking a shower, brushing her teeth, keeping her clothes clean, and avoiding emotional and possibly physical and sexual abuse. Essayist Melissa Faliveno explains, "families with little money and many mouths to feed [...] don't have time for the kind of trouble that dwells in the brain or the heart." Eleanor's focus is on the practical, not the emotional. That isn't to say Eleanor doesn't consider her body and isn't aware of her size, only to say that her fatness is not the dominant feature in her narrative. Eleanor's story suggests some interesting intersections between body image and privilege in that there is a certain degree of privilege necessary for the body positivity movement to exist at all.

Returning to Libby's story briefly, her narrative provides a good example of what privileges may be necessary to the body positive narrative. It is worth examining the ways in which, as queer theorist Alison Kafer explains, the body is "inextricably bound, and differentially bound, to race/class/gender/nation." Acknowledging privilege in no way negates the validity of

the struggles Libby does experience, but simply notes the place of privilege within that complicated equation. Libby has a stable family life. Though she has lost her mother, her father is supportive, loving, and emotionally steady. She has the financial means and security to access an unlimited supply of food, which contributes to some extent to her use of overeating as a means of coping with grief and anxiety. Later, she has the resources both to deal with her obesity and her mental health issues. There is never a point in the novel where Libby does not have the support of a loving adult and the additional professional help she needs. To Niven's credit, this portrayal is laudable, as YA characters are often left marooned without any adult support. If anything, these dynamics deserve further examination. Beyond the stability and support she has, Libby is a white, suburban teenager. She has resources to buy clothes that both reflect her personal style and help her fit in with her peers. Other than her weight, Libby is portrayed as conventionally attractive in other regards. She doesn't have to question her sexuality or gender representation. She is never faced with racism. She does well in school. She has confidence in a future. All this is to say, in the hierarchy of needs, Libby is well-situated. She has the freedom of working towards self-actualization. For Libby, this journey centers namely around her body, and learning to accept it.

In contrast, Eleanor's acknowledgments of her body are practical and passive, as she does not have many of the same privileges. Though there are models of positive adult mentors throughout, Eleanor's relationships with her father, mother, and stepfather are far from stable and safe. Beyond her weight, Eleanor does not fit the generic bland standard of beauty. She is easily recognized by, and teased for, her mass of red, curly hair and her abundance of freckles. She doesn't try to assimilate into mainstream culture in the same way Libby does, in part because she doesn't have the resources to do so. All her clothes are secondhand, and she wears primarily men's clothes that mask her body, both as a matter of preference and practicality. She doesn't initially have access to makeup, nor does she feel the need to use it, even if she had full permission to do so. Furthermore, she doesn't have consistent resources to address basic hygienic needs, such as soap, shampoo, and a toothbrush. Eleanor's narrative emphasizes that "quality of life [...] is affected by one's access to resources" (Kafer). Nowhere within Eleanor's life is there room for body positivity, as that seems to be a movement reserved for middle to upper class lives.

Eleanor does, at times, examine her body as any other teenage girl would, but never moves beyond acknowledgement to acceptance, let alone celebration of her own body. "Eleanor knew she was fat, but she didn't feel that fat. She could feel her bones and muscles just underneath all the chub, and they were big, too" (126). Eleanor's body is also an example of the variety of bodies that fall under the broad label of fat. Her build is as much a matter of bone and muscle as it is fat and curves, not something to be tamed through diet and exercise. "Fat" does little to accurately name many bodies, and perhaps that's part of the reason why euphemisms are commonly and clumsily used.

In one passage, Eleanor reflects on her childhood in earlier years when her mother baked frequently. She considers this briefly as a cause for her heaviness, but then reflects on the present when food in the home is limited and she is regularly hungry, "...she was starving all the time, and she was still enormous" (197). Here, Rowell presents a counter narrative to the myth that body size is all about food intake, and "debunks the myth that there is a connection between being fat and being unhealthy" (Matacin and Simone). If anything, what Eleanor needs is to eat more, not less, or rather more nutrient-dense food than is often available to families living in poverty.

What I find commendable about Rowell's representation of Eleanor is that the story does not revolve around her fatness, nor does Eleanor spend time wallowing in shame over her size. Amado words this well in articulating her vision for fat representation in young adult literature:

I want to see [...] fat women who “get to just be.” This is not to say I want to ignore or silence the very real ways in which fat women experience marginalization and degradation as they move through the world, but instead I want to see young adult literature that disrupts narratives of fatness rooted in shame as a way for young readers to imagine a world in which one does not need to equate fatness with shame, unhappiness, or an unhealthy lifestyle.

Rowell does well in all these regards, in that while she doesn't ignore the marginalization and bullying that Eleanor experiences, Eleanor's fatness is not equated with “shame, unhappiness, or an unhealthy lifestyle” (Amado). In contrast, Niven's novel centers entirely around fatness, never allowing Libby to “just be.” While Niven does assign “women's bodies a positive value which induces pride rather than shame” (Lennon), she still gets mired in the false connection between weight and health, and leans almost too heavily into emphasizing how happy Libby can be in her body. Rowell, on the other hand, “avoids assimilationist rhetoric, in that [...] she is not interested in creating positive or even normative images, but the opposite” (qtd in Matacin and Simone). Freed from the obligatory message of body positivity, *Eleanor and Park*, interestingly enough, has the grounds for a narrative that is more typical of belonging to a stereotypical thin, conventionally attractive, middle-class protagonist. A nonnormative body such as Eleanor's in that role is worth exploring.

One difficult point that Rowell handles particularly well is the sexual harassment Eleanor experiences from her stepfather. The fact that Rowell addresses sexual harassment is, in and of itself, not groundbreaking, but addressing it as coexisting with fatness and poverty is rare in the body of YA literature. In looking at how sexual abuse is addressed in YA literature, Laurie Halse Anderson's 1999 book, *Speak*, is a pioneering text in that regard. As New York Times columnist Julia Jacobs explains, “it set something of a precedent for the industry. In the nearly 20 years since its debut, novels for young adults have explored issues of sexual violence like never before.” Just a few examples of such novels include, Sarah Dessen's 2006 *Just Listen*, Patty Blount's 2014 *Some Boys*, E.K. Johnston's 2016 *Exit, Pursued by a Bear*, Amber Smith's 2016 *The Way I Used to Be*, and Jennifer Mathieu's 2018 *Moxie*. The #MeToo movement in particular seems to have spurred a slew of YA narratives focused on overcoming and addressing the effects of sexual violence. While each book does well to give voice to victims and create a space for conversation, what each of the previously listed narratives has in common with each other, and with *Speak*, is that the protagonist is thin, conventionally attractive, cisgender, heterosexual, middle to upper class. This commonality, particularly of normatively attractive bodies, is problematic in that it suggests a certain correlation between sexual abuse and desirability, in that only certain bodies are deemed sexually attractive enough to warrant that negative attention. It steps into complicated territory of suggesting some culpability on the part of the victim, simply for inhabiting the body they do. Rowell's 2012 novel is important in that it gives representation to a nonnormative, fat body. The truth of sexual violence is that it does not discriminate based on body type. Representation of this reality is important in YA literature. Though recent years have continued to present more diverse narratives that address sexual violence, Rowell's work is notably a forerunner in this regard.

The negative sexual attention Eleanor receives from her stepfather is not glossed over, but Rowell does not fixate on it either. She simply weaves it as one part of a complicated narrative. In doing so, Eleanor is not defined by this harassment any more than she is by her weight. Despite all the challenges she faces, she is still given an identity independent of her struggles. She gets to “just be” in many regards. She likes comic books (as long as it’s not Batman) and she loves exploring music of her era. She has her own sense of style. She is tough, but not invincible. She doesn’t need male validation to complete her narrative, and that in and of itself is what makes her relationship with Park, the male protagonist of the story, so interesting.

Similar to Jack’s conflict in dating Libby, Park initially struggles with wondering what his peers will think about him dating Eleanor but more so because of Eleanor’s nonconforming, almost eccentric ways, and less so because of her body. Park’s interest in Eleanor is not centered around his perception of her body. He doesn’t like Eleanor *despite* her body or *because* of her body. Park likes Eleanor because, as he explains it to her, “I want to be with you all the time. You’re the smartest girl I’ve ever met, and the funniest, and everything you do surprises me. [...] I think it’s got as much to do with your hair being red and your hands being soft...and the fact that you smell like homemade birthday cake” (110). Park and Eleanor bond on the bus rides to school, sharing comic books and mix tapes, and learn what it means to fall in love for the first time. While both characters grow together and provide support to each other, neither’s character arc nor identity is dependent on the other.

Though *Eleanor and Park* is not perfect, it is a hopeful example of what fat representation can look like in YA literature, and how to invite fatness into the narrative without letting it dominate. And though *Holding Up the Universe* has many strengths to offer, it serves as a good counterexample of ways fat representation can be better handled. Characters like Libby and Eleanor deserve to be more than vehicles for body positivity. Such a heroine deserves a narrative not defined by her otherness, but rather, a story that allows her to just be, regardless of her size.

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