



# 'MOST WOMEN STILL HAVE A TERROR OF FAT, EVEN IF THEY ARE ALLIES': WHY FEMINISTS STILL CAN'T HANDLE FAT GIRLS

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Books About Fat

**For many women, fat remains the stubborn last sticking point in the argument for equality. Three new books explore the topic in detail...**

Unable to accept our fear of fat and sidetracked by straw man arguments about public health, many of us fail to see the vital role of self-acceptance in our politics – not to mention the many unique wisdoms and strategies that third wave feminism has yet to learn from fat activism.

Nowhere is this issue more engaging than in contemporary writing, and – for American authors **Sarai Walker** and **Mona Awad**, fat characters in *Dietland* and *13 Ways of Looking At a Fat Girl* – have been a source of huge creativity.

Remarkably, both authors describe the same experience when they sat down to write: their lead characters appeared to them out of the blue as visual images.

Walker started writing what was to become *Dietland* on an MFA but initially abandoned the draft. Years later she was walking down Lamb's Conduit Street in London when, she says, she had a strong sense of the presence of **Plum**, the lead character in *Dietland*, confronting her: "It was like I could see her. She was all of a sudden in my head, really clear, and she said, 'you'd forgotten about me'.

"I don't know what to make of it. She was clearly just in my subconscious and fought to get out."

Awad recalls: "I first started with the image of a young woman in a dressing room staring at a piece of clothing she already knew wouldn't fit while her mother and a saleswoman waited outside.

"She actually sort of appeared to me during a long car ride in Utah. She wasn't particularly specific in terms of her exact body size and her physicality. But I knew this was a woman for whom body image was a deep struggle."

Awad's confrontational title already starts to unpack issues around body image before the reader opens the collection: "That was very important to me. I wanted to challenge and complicate all of the assumptions, images, and simplifications that come with this term, to explore how "fat girl" isn't simply a question of flesh.

"It's a far more dynamic, psychological and relative state than this, one that can hold contradictions, is internally and externally constructed."

Walker wrote most of *Dietland* in London – a city she's now widely reported as calling the worst place for fat-shaming she's ever lived in.

She recalls: "There were overtly sexualised images of women, fuckable women, all over the place and if you don't fit into that mould in some way you are open to attack.

"It was like: 'Why do you exist? I don't find you pleasing, so why are you here walking down the street?', and [strangers] feeling this sense of entitlement to actually say that to a person."

The fear of fat she experienced, she says, creates an environment in which it's nearly impossible to actually be fat. Fat people face endless talk about diets, as well as people comparing fat-shaming to skinny-shaming, pathologising or 'reading' fat as something 'bad' and assuming that the default person is thin.

Walker also warns that body positivity – which has been a breakthrough for many women – is not the solution it's been hailed as. Co-opted by fashion brands, marketing and advertising – it becomes a kind of positivity where any size is OK, as long as it's an hourglass (and not too, you know... fat).

One of the big influences Walker cites is the activist **Charlotte Cooper**, who has just written a new guide to [fat activism](#).

Asked about how fat activism does (and doesn't) intersect with feminism, she says that movement has struggled to gain acceptance and recognition, particularly when writers (originally, **Susie Orbach**) pathologise fat as a sign of something being 'wrong' with a person.

She warns that there's an agenda behind 'fat panic' (often outed by anxiety about an 'obesity epidemic'), which makes fatness out to be an issue of personal responsibility. Fat people are branded a 'burden' on the NHS and urged to 'treat' their size with surgery – risks for which are often played down.

She recommends that people learn how better to advocate for themselves at the doctor's, and to practice acts of radical pushback – refusing to have BMI data gathered on you, for example. And the age-old argument that people are just worried about their health? "The question is irrelevant and controlling," Cooper says. "Don't engage."

Sarai Walker also warned of feminists who struggle to accept or listen to fat women.

"I know lots of thin women who are so supportive of fat activism and everything but I know that they themselves never want to become fat," she reveals. "They would be very upset if they were all of a sudden fat. You know: 'Fat activism: that's great for you but I don't want to be fat myself!'"

"It's not condescending but it is a little bit like, 'Oh that's great, I'm so glad you're doing that, but I would never want to be like that'. That goes unsaid.

"Fat phobia is just so ingrained. Most women still have a terror of fat, even if they are allies to people in fat acceptance."

Charlotte Cooper's book *Fat Activism* is published by HammerOn Press.

Sarai Walker's *Dietland* is published by Atlantic.

Mona Awad's *13 Way of Looking At A Fat Girl* is published by Penguin Random House.

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## BY ELLIE BROUGHTON



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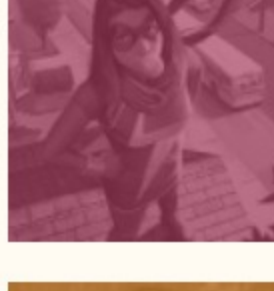
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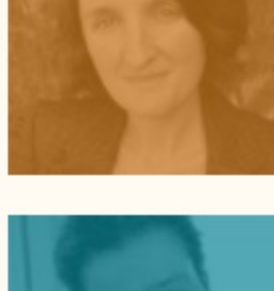
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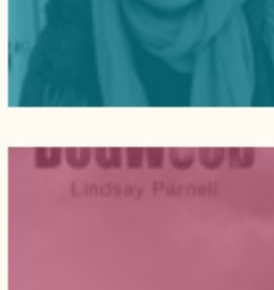
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