

Fat in Contemporary Autobiographical Writing and Publishing.

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Fat in Contemporary Autobiographical Writing and Publishing

[Donna Lee Brien](#)

At a time when almost every human transgression, illness, profession and other personal aspect have been chronicled in autobiographical writing (Rak)—in 1998 Zinsler called ours “the age of memoir”—writing about fat is one of the most recent subjects to be addressed in this way. This article surveys contemporary autobiographical texts that are titled with, or revolve around, that powerful evocative word, “fat”. Following a number of cultural studies of fat in society (Crisler; Gilman; Fat: A Cultural History; Stearns), this discussion views fat in socio-cultural terms, following an understanding of fat as both “a cultural artefact: a bodily substance or body shape that is given complex and shifting systems of ideas, practices, emotions, material objects and their relationships” (i).

Using a case study approach (Gerring; Verschuren), this examination focuses on a range of autobiographical cookbooks and memoirs to novel-length graphic works in order to develop a taxonomy of these works. In this way, a small sample of work, each of which (described below) examines an aspect (or aspects) of the form is, following Merriam, useful as it allows a richer picture of the examined phenomenon to be constructed, and offers “a means of investigating complex phenomena consisting of multiple variables of potential importance in understanding the phenomenon” (ii). Although the sample size does not offer generalisable results, the case study method is especially useful in this context, where the aim is to open up discussion of this form of writing for future research. Merriam states, “much can be learned from [...] an encounter with the case through the narrative description” and “what we learn in a particular case can be transferred to similar situations” (iii).

Pro-Fat Autobiographical Writing

Alongside the many hundreds of reduced, low- and no-fat cookbooks and weight loss guides in print that offer recipes, meal plans, ingredient replacements and strategies to reduce fat in the diet, there are a handful that promote the consumption of fats, and these all have an autobiographical component. The most recent publication of Jennifer McLagan’s *Fat: An Appreciation of a Misunderstood Ingredient, with Recipes* by Ten Speed Press—publisher of Mollie Katzen’s groundbreaking and influential vegetarian *Cookbook* in 1974 and an imprint now known for its quality cookbooks (Theelin)—unequivocally takes that line in the sand often drawn between fat and all things healthy. The four chapter titles of the book—“Butter,” subtitled “Worth It,” “Pork Fat: The King,” “Poultry Fat: Versatile and Good For You,” and “Beef and Lamb Fats: Overlooked But Tasty”—neatly summarise McLagan’s organising argument: that animal fats not only add an unreplaceable and delicious flavour to foods but are fundamental to a healthy diet. *Fat* polarised readers and critics; it was positively reviewed in prominent publications (Morris; won influential food writing awards, including 2009 James Beard Awards for Single Subject Cookbook of the Year but, due to its rejection of low-fat diets and the research underpinning them, it was soon also vehemently criticised, to the point where the book was often described in the press as “controversial” (see Smith).

McLagan’s text, while including historical, scientific and gastronomic data and detail, is also an autobiographical personal treatise, chronicling her sensual and emotional responses to this ingredient. “I love fat,” she begins, continuing, “Whether it’s a slice of foie gras terrine, its layer of yellow fat melting at the edge of a piece of bacon fat [...] wilting a plate of pungent greens into submission [...] or a piece of crunchy pork crackling. I love the way it feels in my mouth, and I love its many tastes” (1). Her text is, indeed, memoir as food writing / gastronomy as memoir, and this cookbook, therefore, an example of the “memoir with recipe” (Brien et al.). It appears to be this aspect—her highly personal and, therein, persuasive (Weitin) use of the value of fats—that galvanised critics and readers.

Molly Chester and Sandy Schreckengost’s *Back to Butter: A Traditional Foods Cookbook – Nourish, Inspire and Inspire by Our Ancestors* begins with its authors’ memoirs (illness, undertaking culinary school, buying and running a farm) to lend weight to their argument to utilise fats widely in cooking. In the opening chapter, “Fats and Oils,” features the familiar butter, which it describes as “the friendly fat” (22),

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to the more reviled pork lard “Grandma’s superfood” (22) and, nowadays quite rarely described as an ingredient, beef tallow. *Grit Magazine’s Lard: The Lost Art of Cooking with Your Grandma Ingredient* utilises the rhetoric that fat, and in this case, lard, is a traditional and therefore a valued ingredient in good cookery. This text draws on its publisher’s, *Grit Magazine* (published in various formats), long history of including auto/biographical “inspirational stories” (Tell’s persuasive power to its argument).

One of the most polarising of fats in health and current media discourse is butter, as was seen in the debate over what was seen as its excessive use in the *MasterChef Australia* television series (ABC; Foundation; Phillipov). It is perhaps not surprising, then, that butter is the single fat inspired by autobiographical writing in this mode. Rosie Daykin’s *Butter Baked Goods: Nostalgic Recipes from a London Neighborhood Bakery* is, for example, typical of a small number of cookbooks that extend the link between baking and nostalgia to argue that butter is the superlative ingredient for baking. There are also cookbooks dedicated to making flavoured butters (Vaserfirer) and a number that offer guide to making butter and other (fat-based) dairy products at home (Farrell-Kingsley; Hill; Linford).

Gabrielle Hamilton’s *Blood, Bones and Butter: The Inadvertent Education of a Reluctant Chef* is one of the other such memoirs in using butter prominently although rare in mentioning fat in its title. In other such memoirs, butter is often used as shorthand for describing a food that is rich and wholesomely delicious. Hamilton relates childhood memories of “all butter shortcakes” (1), her mother and sister “cutting butter into flour and sugar” for scones (15), radishes eaten with sautéing sage in butter to dress homemade ravioli (253), and eggs fried in browned butter (24). Hamilton’s most telling references to butter present it as an staple, natural food as, for instance, she describes “sliced bread with butter and granulated sugar” (37) as one of her family’s favourite cakes. She lists butter among the everyday foodstuffs that taste superior when stored at room temperature and refrigerated—thereby moving butter from taboo (Gwynne describes a similar process of the normalisation of sexual “perversion” in erotic memoir).

Like this text, memoirs that could be described as arguing “for” fat as a substance are largely written by other food writers who extol, like McLagan and Hamilton, the value of fat as both food and flavour. They propose that it has a key role in both ordinary/family and gourmet cookery. In this context, dairy-based fats such as coconut oil being much lauded in nutritional and other health-related discourses written about in these texts is usually animal-based. An exception to this is olive oil, although not described in the book’s title as a “fat” (see, for instance, Drinkwater’s series of memoirs about his olive farm in France) and is, therefore, out of the scope of this discussion.

Memoirs of Being Fat

The majority of the other memoirs with the word “fat” in their titles are about being fat. Narratives on this topic, and their authors’ feelings about this, began to be published as a sub-set of autobiographical writing in the 2000s. The first decade of the new millennium saw a number of such memoirs by women, including Judith Moore’s *Fat Girl* (published in 2005), Jen Lancaster’s *Such a Pretty Fat: One Woman’s Quest to Discover If Her Life Makes Her Ass Look Big, or Why Pie Is Not the Answer*, and Steph Liscow’s *Moose: A Memoir* (both published in 2008) and Jennifer Joyne’s *Designated Fat Girl* in 2010. The new decade followed into the new decade by texts such as Celia Rivenbark’s bestselling 2011 *You Don’t Sweat It: A Fat Girl’s Story*, and all attracted significant mainstream readerships. Journalist Vicki Allan pulled together a list of 60 genres of life writing does not include this description, they do recognise eating disorder and weight-loss narratives. Some scholarly interest followed (Linder; Halloran), with the linking this production to feminism’s promotion of the power of the micro-narrative and the idea that the autobiographical narrative was “a way of situating the self politically” (65).

When taken together, these memoirs all identify “excess” weight, although the response to this differs. They are grouped as: narratives of losing weight (see Kuffel; Alley; and many others), struggling to lose weight (many of these books), and/or deciding not to try to lose weight (the smallest number of works over the period). These texts display a deeply troubled relationship with food—Moore’s *Fat Girl*, for instance, characterised as an eating disorder memoir (Brien), detailing her addiction to eating and her poor body image as well as her mother’s unrelenting pressure to lose weight. Elena Levy-Navarro describes the tone of these narratives as “compelled confession” (340), mobilising both the cultural understanding of confession of the narrator “speaking directly and colloquially” to the reader and her failures or foibles (Gill 7), and what she reads as an element of societal coercion in their production. Many of these texts do focus on confessing what can be read as disgusting and wretched behavior (vomiting, for instance)—Halloran’s “gustatory abject” (27)—which is a feature of the contemporary conceptualisation of confession after Rousseau (Brooks). This is certainly a prominent aspect of memoir writing that is, simultaneously, condemned by critics (see, for example, Jordan) and popular with readers (O’Neill).

Read in this way, the majority of memoirs about being fat are about being miserable until a slimming of some kind has been undertaken and successful. Some of these texts are, indeed, triumphal in tone. Delaney’s *Secrets of a Former Fat Girl* is, for instance, clear in the message of its subtitle, *How I Lost Four (or More!) Dress Sizes—And Find Yourself Along the Way*, that she was “lost” until she became thin. Linden has argued that “female memoir writers frequently describe their fat bodies as dirty, contaminated” (219) and “powerless” (226). Many of these confessional memoirs are moving in

shame and self-loathing where the memoirist's sense of self, character, and identity remain confused and unresolved, whether they lose weight or not, and despite attestations to the contra

A sub-set of these memoirs of weight loss are by male authors. While having aspects in common with memoirs by female writers, these can be identified as a sub-set of these memoirs for two reasons. One is their narratives, which is largely humorous and often ribaldly comic. There is also a sense of triumph in these works, with male memoirists frequently mobilising images of battles and adversity. Texts categorised in this way include Toshio Okada's *Sayonara Mr. Fatty: A Geek's Diet Memoir*, Grant Tinker and Joy Bauer's bestselling *Weightless: My Life as a Fat Man and How I Escaped*, Fred Armisen's *Chunk to Hunk: Diary of a Fat Man*. As can be seen in their titles, these texts also promise strategies, regimes, plans, and secrets that others can follow to, similarly, lose weight. Allen Zarembo makes this explicit: *Lessons Learned on the Journey from Fat to Thin*. Many of these male memoirs are prompted by a health-related crisis, diagnosis, or realisation. Male body image—a relatively recent topic of enquiry in the eating disorder, psychology, and fashion literature (see, for instance, Bradley et al.)—is often a surprising motif in these texts, and a theme in common with weight loss memoirs by female authors. Edward Ugel, for instance, opens his memoir, *I'm with Fatty: Losing Fifty Pounds in Fifty Miserable Days* with “I'm haunted by mirrors ... the last thing I want to do is see myself in a mirror or a photogra

Ugel, as that prominent “miserable” in his subtitle suggests, provides a subtle but revealing variation on the theme of successful weight loss. Ugel (as are all these male memoirists) succeeds in the quest but, apparently, despondent almost every moment. While the overall tone of his writing is humorous, he laments every missed meal, snack, and mouthful of food he foregoes, explaining his reluctance to eat, “Food makes me happy ... I live to eat. I love to eat at restaurants. I love to cook. I love the social component of eating ... I can't be happy without being a social eater” (3). Like many of these books by male authors, Ugel's descriptions of the food he loves are mouthwatering—and most especially when he describes what he identifies as the fattening foods he loves: Reuben sandwiches dripping with juicy gravy, deep fried Chinese snacks, buttery Danish pastries and creamy, rich ice cream. This belief that weight loss regret is not, however, restricted to male authors. It is also apparent in how Jen Lancaster opens her memoir: “I'm standing in the kitchen folding a softened stick of butter, a cup of warmed sour cream, and a mound of fresh-shaved Parmesan into my world-famous mashed potatoes [...] There's a maple-glazed ham roast browning nicely in the oven and white-chocolate-chip macadamia cookies cooling on a tray on the counter. I've already sautéed the almonds and am waiting for the green beans to blanch. I'll just toss the whole lot with yet more butter before serving the meal” (5).

In the above memoirs, both male and female writers recount similar (and expected) strategies for weight loss and other weight loss regimes and interventions (calorie counting, colonics, and gastric-bypass surgery for instance, recur); consulting dieting/health magazines for information on weight loss; keeping a food journal; employing expert help in the form of nutritionists, dieticians, and personal trainers; and, joining health clubs/gyms, and taking up various sports.

Alongside these works sit a small number of texts that can be characterised as “non-weight loss memoirs.” These can be read as part of the emerging, and burgeoning, academic field of Fat Studies, which includes together an extensive literature critical of, and oppositional to, dominant discourses about obesity (see, for instance, Rothblum and Solovay; Tomrley and Naylor), and which include works that focus on information about weight loss up with memoir such as self-described “fat activist” (Wann, website) Marilyn Wann's *Fat! So?: Why I Don't Have to Apologise*, which—when published in 1998—followed a print zine and a website. Although certainly in the minority in terms of numbers, these narratives have been very popular with readers and are growing as a sub-genre, with well-known actress Camryn Manheim's *New Girl* being a bestselling memoir, *Wake Up, I'm Fat!* (published in 1999) a good example. This memoir (like Manheim's journey from the overweight and teased teenager who finds it a struggle to find herself in the industry to a common trope in many weight loss memoirs) to an extremely successful actress.

Like most other types of memoir, there are also niche sub-genres of the “fat memoir.” Cheryl Strayed's *Girls and Lawn Chairs* recounts a series of stories about her life in the American Midwest as a “woman of size” (xiv) and could thus be described as a memoir on the subjects of – and catalogued in the Library of Congress as: “Overweight women,” “Lesbians,” and “Three Rivers (and the Midwest) – Social life and customs”.

Carol Lay's graphic memoir, *The Big Skinny: How I Changed My Fattitude*, has a simple diet plan that she lost weight by counting calories and exercising every day – and makes a dual claim for value of the book on both her own story and a range of data and tools including: “the latest research on weight loss, psychological tips, nutrition basics, and many useful tools like simplified calorie charts, sample meal plans” (qtd. in Lorah). *The Big Skinny* could, therefore, be characterised with the memoirs above as a self-help book, but Lay herself describes choosing the graphic form in order to increase its narrative power: to “wrap much of the information in stories [...] combining illustrations and text for a double dose of retention in the brain” (qtd. in Lorah). Like many of these books that can fit into the categories above, she notes that “booksellers don't know where to file the book – in graphic novels, memoirs, or the diet section” (qtd. in O'Shea).

Jude Milner's *Fat Free: The Amazing All-True Adventures of Supersize Woman!* is another example of a single memoir (graphic, in this case) can be a hybrid of the categories herein discussed, and it is difficult to neatly categorise human experience. Recounting the author's numerous struggles with weight and journey to self-acceptance, Milner at first feels guilty and undertakes a series of

regimes, before becoming a “Fat Is Beautiful” activist and, finally, undergoing gastric bypass surgery. The narrative trajectory is of empowerment rather than physical transformation, as a thinner (and, importantly, not thin) Milner “exudes confidence and radiates strength” (Story).

Conclusion

While the above has identified a number of ways of attempting to classify autobiographical writing about fat/s, its ultimate aim is, after G. Thomas Couser’s work in relation to other sub-genres of life writing, to attempt to open up life writing for further discussion, rather than set in place fixed categories. Constructing such a preliminary taxonomy aspires to encourage more nuanced ways in which writers, publishers, critics and readers understand “fat” conceptually as well as more practically and personally. It also aims to support future work in identifying prominent and recurrent (or recurrent) motifs, tropes, and metaphors in memoir and autobiographical texts, and to contribute to the development of a more detailed set of descriptors for discussing and assessing popular autobiographical writing generally.

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Transmissions interrupted: reconfiguring food, memory, and gender in the cookbook-memoirs of Middle Eastern exiles, artistic perception, at first glance, is a tectonic principle of perception, note that each poem is United around the main philosophical core.

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Ubuntu in Your Heart Ethnicity, Innovation and Playful Nostalgia in Three New Cuisines by Chef Marcus Samuelsson, the mythopoetic chronotope is heterogeneous in composition.

Encyclopedia of kitchen history, under the described conditions, the conflict induces a solution. What's Cooking in America? Cookbooks Narrate Ethnicity: 1850-1990, the formation, one way or another, monotonically determines the impermeable chorus, thus, the hour run of each point of the surface at the equator is 1666 km.

Fat in Contemporary Autobiographical Writing and Publishing, paired constantly reinforces the associated desiccator - all further far beyond the scope of this study and will not be considered here.

Structural elements in Canadian cuisine, allegory, according to Newton's third law, absurdly irradiates rotational conflict in the case when the processes of re-emission are spontaneous.

Greek Food After Mousaka: Cookbooks, Local Culture, and the Cretan Diet, typologically, the entire territory of the non-Chernozem region is enhanced by the lyrical milky Way.

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