

Book Review

Title: *Historicizing Fat in Anglo-American Culture*

Author: Edited by Elena Levy-Navarro

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Reviewer: Anna Kirkland, University of Michigan

Elena Levy-Navarro's *Historicizing Fat in American Culture* is an edited volume of ten essays plus Levy-Navarro's introduction. I greatly enjoyed all the essays, but they vary widely in their accessibility to a non-expert in the field and in their topic and coverage, making it hard to imagine any single course in which this book could be assigned. None of the essays is situated within disability studies explicitly, though all frame fatness as a site of knowledge and power in ways that accord well with disability studies' aims.

Six of the ten essays focus on the representation of the fat body in works of literature such as Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis* poem or on the fat bodies of famous writers such as Ben Jonson. The literary essays are written for an audience of graduate students or professors in the humanities. Of these, the most accessible to a broader audience is Zeynep Atayurt's chapter on Piggy from *Lord of the Flies*, a widely read classic with an ill-fated fat character. These discussions are historical in the sense of seeing the past through fiction and poetry. Cookie Wooler's essay on Lillian Russell is a culturally focused (as opposed to literary) chapter, and it offers a richly detailed treatment of the meaning of the popularity of Russell's nearly 200 pound body and her decline as an icon of female beauty by 1920. From my perspective situated in the social sciences, Greta Rosenbrink's essay about the early founding of the fat feminist movement in the 1970s and 1980s and Alex Evans' piece on fat and class in contemporary Britain are exciting contributions. There has been a lot of writing about the early fat rights movement, but Rosenbrink's contribution is the most detailed I have seen. This chapter could easily be excerpted in an undergraduate syllabus in Women's Studies or LGBTQ studies and is written in quite readable prose.

The best features of this collection are its constant reminders that we ought not simply hearken back to a lost past when fat bodies were unstigmatized. We often hear that back when food was scarce, being fat was good and now that there is abundance, it is bad. Many of the essays show how the meanings of fat have changed across time and place while nonetheless showing how stigma has endured. The book achieves this subtle balance that has also been the hallmark of much of the best work in disability history. The pieces are so detailed and in some cases so different from each other, however, that the collection does not hang together very well. Because the price is relatively high and it is only available as a hardback book, it will probably be available mostly in libraries, and scholars will have to select out chapters most relevant for their work or courses. It would be very well worth the time to do so, however, since the pieces are of high quality and in some cases represent the best treatment of their topic in print.

Anna Kirkland, J.D., Ph.D., is Associate Professor of Women's Studies and Political Science at the University of Michigan. She is the author of *Fat Rights: Dilemmas of Difference and Personhood* (New York University Press, 2008) and is currently working on a second book on the vaccine injury compensation court and the autism litigation.