

Editorial: Magical Vessels: Size in Children's Literature

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In mid-April of 2022, I awoke to a metallic pain in my left hip, as though the joint where my leg met my torso was chewing on tin foil. Within a week, this slight annoyance began shooting down my leg and, within another week, I was unable to walk whatsoever, taking office hours over Zoom from my bed. By the end of those two weeks, there was no comfortable contortion and I found myself sobbing in an ER waiting room, exhausted and at wit's end. To the credit of that medical team, I found myself having back surgery the very next day, waking up from the procedure without pain but also without full use of my body. For more than three months, throughout the late spring and early summer, I was forced to slow down - literally - and rethink the ways in which I thought about my body. Securely in middle age, I had assumed I had worked through the issues I'd had surrounding my body in my teens and twenties but, in this period of somewhat suspended animation, they bubbled to the surface. How I allowed myself to use my body and which activities I had self-imposed bans upon. Which parts of my body I allowed to be seen and why. How I allowed myself to move and in which spaces. I was struck by the intersection of my size and perceived abilities. These inner dialogues fuel this issue of *First Opinions, Second Reactions*, seeking to explore the ways in which children's literature address the body, particularly around size.

Size is of paramount importance to children; they spend countless hours imagining the freedoms they will experience when they are big and lamenting the barriers placed upon them because they are little. Size is indexical, a unit of comparative measurement that is all encompassing in childhood, the root of much emotion. In this way, we have all been small, but

few have been large, at least not in the ways often depicted in children's literature. At six-foot-four-inches, I am hardly a giant, but I have experienced a doctor's subtle shake-of-the-head when my body mass index is calculated. I suspect the doctor assumes this action goes unnoticed; it does not and never has. As a child who was both little as well as large, or overweight, I'm all too familiar with the subtle and not-so-subtle demands of a world that demands smallness. Research tells us that negative attitudes toward overweight bodies develop in children as early as three years of age (Cramer & Steinwert, 1998) and children's literature has not always been particularly supportive in interrupting that thinking, though there has been change. Comparisons of Wedwick's 1998 analysis of children's series books reads quite differently from Amato's 2019 content analysis of young adult novels featuring fat female characters, though troubling characterizations persist. That overweight characters have shifted from comedic secondary characters to main characters themselves is progress, isn't it?

The characters within this collection of books are large in a world that demands they be small. Ellie, Garvey, Zubi, and Hudi respond to these demands in varied, interesting, and sometimes problematic ways, as explored by the issue's authors. When selecting books for this issue, I wanted to reflect how recent children's literature portrayed size while also attending to the intersections that experience exists within. We experience these intersections alongside Garvey, a Black boy, and Hudi, who is a Jewish Mexican-American boy, as they both experience the demands to join sports teams, partially as a way to take up less space. Zubi, a Bangladeshi girl, notices how those around her interpret their own size and begins to question hers. Ellie, a Texas teen, wrestles with bullying within her own home while learning to take up the space she needs and is entitled to. While the majority of the books included in this collection tell the story

of particular characters, *Bodies are Cool* (Feder, 2021) is an informational text, moving beyond size to all the ways bodies can be both different and valued.

There is much to be said about these titles and all the work they do to interrupt negative attitudes about overweight bodies, but no text is perfect. Within this issue, contributors take on critical stances to think about these texts and their affordances and constraints, where they succeed and where they require the support of a skillful teacher to truly do the work to disrupt fatphobia.

Works Cited

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About the Editor

Nicholas E. Husbye is a teacher educator and literacy education researcher at the University of Nebraska - Lincoln. Nearly a year out of surgery, he's recently started personal training to strengthen not only his back but his body as a whole. Regardless of its size, it has truly been, and will continue to be with maintenance, a truly magical vessel.