

'Fat Girl Best Friend', by Sarah Grant

Review by Gemma L. Gibson



Sarah Grant, the author of *Fat Girl Best Friend*, is a self-identified plus-size filmmaker. Her experience in both makes her well placed to author *Fat Girl Best Friend*, which explores the often-negative representations of plus-size (or fat) women in cinema. Grant claims that, despite living in the era of body positivity, many fat women characters on our television and film screens are side characters who are assigned unflattering tropes that rely heavily on some of the worst stereotypes about fat people.

In *Fat Girl Best Friend*, Grant sets out to give language and definition to some of the well-known tropes associated with fat women characters, including, of course, the fat girl best friend (FGBF). Using case studies that include *Stranger Things*, *Pitch Perfect*, and *Friends*, Grant outlines the qualities that make up these easily recognisable and often repeated tropes. She explains how many plus-size characters, even those with significant screen time, often have little role in the plot, primarily exist to be friends with thin people or for comedic relief which, in some of the worst instances, is provided through their fat bodies.

The strengths of *Fat Girl Best Friend* lie in its author's particular expertise. Grant, as we learn throughout the book, has spent a significant amount of time living as a plus-size person and, in addition to being a filmmaker, is also a passionate film

and television fan. This vulnerable desire to see characters like her (and us) projected onto the film screen is relatable and we find ourselves connecting with Grant as she effortlessly slides anecdotes of her own life as a plus-size person between analysis of the fat characters that disappointed, embarrassed, or, in the case of Geraldine from the *Vicar of Dibley*, excited her.

The book ties humour (if readers flip to the back of the book, they can find a game of 'FGBF bingo') with thoughtful analysis of television and film productions that include fat characters. There is a particularly sticky part around halfway through *Fat Girl Best Friend* where Grant grapples with the difficulty she feels around the characters Melissa McCarthy has played. Grant recalls that despite Sookie being a 'best friend' to Lorelai in the *Gilmore Girls* she is not a FGBF. She has her own plot, she is not hyper-focused on her weight, and, perhaps most important for a show that has comedic undertones, Sookie's body does not ever become the butt of a joke. Compare Sookie with the character of Megan in *Bridesmaids*, also played by McCarthy, and the contrast is stark. Megan, although proven to be compassionate in the film, is still regarded as a joke throughout. Grant is careful not to blame McCarthy, however, and her frustration with an industry that gives talented fat actors so few opportunities is evident throughout.

Grant's analysis of film and television is accessible to a person working outside of the industry. She focuses on popular case studies that many people may have come across. *Fat Girl Best Friend*, though, is not the only writing or thought on fat television tropes. Although Grant mentions body positivity several times, she does not ever really touch on fat activism, or indeed, fat positivity. Work like this does not happen in a vacuum and the book would have been strengthened if it could have drawn on and acknowledged the work being done by fat activists and scholars. A single book does not have to be, nor should it try to be 'everything'. However, fat women (and people) are not a homogenous group. While it may seem sensical to call for more fat characters, like Sookie, where weight is not a focal point, for many people, their fatness is a significant part of their identity which impacts how they experience the world, and the world experiences them. *Fat Girl Best Friend* grapples with some of the difficulties that arise when trying to present 'faithful' fat characters on screen, but the experiences of fat people are not universal. An acknowledgement of the work that has been done previously to *Fat Girl Best Friend* would have strengthened some of Grant's claims and a resource list at the end of the book would have been gratefully received. Grant is

right when she argues that fat people need language and definition to tackle the harmful approaches to fat characters and representations in film, but the beauty of a fat activist community is that one book does not have to make that change alone.

Grant closes *Fat Girl Best Friend* by claiming the word fat as an identifier for herself, something she did not feel comfortable with at the beginning of the book. She makes an impassioned argument for fat people to claim their space and a hopeful suggestion that female friendship may be our saviour. In that, I think, Grant is right. *Fat Girl Best Friend* is an excellent addition to the ever-growing body and fat-positive community resources. Grant set out to provide easy-to-reach-for definitions that can help fat people defend themselves in the design and persistent use of harmful, lazy stereotypes. The publication of this book is, I believe, a sure and deliberate step towards the eradication of the negative fat representations that harm us.

Fat Girl Best Friend is published by Tippermuir Books



Sarah Grant, the author of *Fat Girl Best Friend*, is a self-identified plus-size filmmaker. Her experience in both makes her well placed to author *Fat Girl Best Friend*, which explores the often-negative representations of plus-size (or fat) women in cinema. Grant claims that, despite living in the era of body positivity, many fat women characters on our television and film screens are side characters who are assigned unflattering tropes that rely heavily on some of the worst stereotypes about fat people.

In *Fat Girl Best Friend*, Grant sets out to give language and definition to some of the well-known tropes associated with fat women characters, including, of course,

the fat girl best friend (FGBF). Using case studies that include *Stranger Things*, *Pitch Perfect*, and *Friends*, Grant outlines the qualities that make up these easily recognisable and often repeated tropes. She explains how many plus-size characters, even those with significant screen time, often have little role in the plot, primarily exist to be friends with thin people or for comedic relief which, in some of the worst instances, is provided through their fat bodies.

The strengths of *Fat Girl Best Friend* lie in its author's particular expertise. Grant, as we learn throughout the book, has spent a significant amount of time living as a plus-size person and, in addition to being a filmmaker, is also a passionate film and television fan. This vulnerable desire to see characters like her (and us) projected onto the film screen is relatable and we find ourselves connecting with Grant as she effortlessly slides anecdotes of her own life as a plus-size person between analysis of the fat characters that disappointed, embarrassed, or, in the case of Geraldine from the *Vicar of Dibley*, excited her.

The book ties humour (if readers flip to the back of the book, they can find a game of 'FGBF bingo') with thoughtful analysis of television and film productions that include fat characters. There is a particularly sticky part around halfway through *Fat Girl Best Friend* where Grant grapples with the difficulty she feels around the characters Melissa McCarthy has played. Grant recalls that despite Sookie being a 'best friend' to Lorelai in the *Gilmore Girls* she is not a FGBF. She has her own plot, she is not hyper-focused on her weight, and, perhaps most important for a show that has comedic undertones, Sookie's body does not ever become the butt of a joke. Compare Sookie with the character of Megan in *Bridesmaids*, also played by McCarthy, and the contrast is stark. Megan, although proven to be compassionate in the film, is still regarded as a joke throughout. Grant is careful not to blame McCarthy, however, and her frustration with an industry that gives talented fat actors so few opportunities is evident throughout.

Grant's analysis of film and television is accessible to a person working outside of the industry. She focuses on popular case studies that many people may have come across. *Fat Girl Best Friend*, though, is not the only writing or thought on fat television tropes. Although Grant mentions body positivity several times, she does not ever really touch on fat activism, or indeed, fat positivity. Work like this does not happen in a vacuum and the book would have been strengthened if it could have drawn on and acknowledged the work being done by fat activists and scholars. A single book does not have to be, nor should it try to be 'everything'.

However, fat women (and people) are not a homogenous group. While it may seem sensical to call for more fat characters, like Sookie, where weight is not a focal point, for many people, their fatness is a significant part of their identity which impacts how they experience the world, and the world experiences them. *Fat Girl Best Friend* grapples with some of the difficulties that arise when trying to present 'faithful' fat characters on screen, but the experiences of fat people are not universal. An acknowledgement of the work that has been done previously to *Fat Girl Best Friend* would have strengthened some of Grant's claims and a resource list at the end of the book would have been gratefully received. Grant is right when she argues that fat people need language and definition to tackle the harmful approaches to fat characters and representations in film, but the beauty of a fat activist community is that one book does not have to make that change alone.

Grant closes *Fat Girl Best Friend* by claiming the word fat as an identifier for herself, something she did not feel comfortable with at the beginning of the book. She makes an impassioned argument for fat people to claim their space and a hopeful suggestion that female friendship may be our saviour. In that, I think, Grant is right. *Fat Girl Best Friend* is an excellent addition to the ever-growing body and fat-positive community resources. Grant set out to provide easy-to-reach-for definitions that can help fat people defend themselves in the design and persistent use of harmful, lazy stereotypes. The publication of this book is, I believe, a sure and deliberate step towards the eradication of the negative fat representations that harm us.

Fat Girl Best Friend is published by Tippermuir Books

(c) *The Bottle Imp*