

Fat: A Love Story Short Guide

Fat: A Love Story by Barbara Wersba

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Contents

Fat: A Love Story Short Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Overview.....	3
About the Author.....	4
Setting.....	5
Social Sensitivity.....	6
Literary Qualities.....	7
Themes and Characters.....	8
Topics for Discussion.....	11
Ideas for Reports and Papers.....	12
For Further Reference.....	13
Related Titles.....	14
Copyright Information.....	15



Overview

Fat: A Love Story is not simply a book about an overweight girl, although that subject is treated sensitively and realistically. It is about the qualities of friendship, self-esteem, identity, class structure, and even the nature of the universe.

The fast pace of the book makes it an absorbing, easy read, and the mixture of quirkiness with realism makes the characters memorable. Rita Formica, Nicole Sicard, and Arnold Bromberg may be unusual in many respects, but the thread of their humanity is strong.

The central struggle of the book is Rita's attempt to come to terms with her weight. A fat child and now a fat teen-ager, Rita simply likes to eat. Part of the action of the book is Rita's exploration of why she eats and how she begins to overcome her obsession. Her eating binges may speak to many teenagers, and the self-awareness that Rita begins to develop creates a forum for thinking about other addictions as well.

Wersba does a good job of weaving together Rita's weight problem with issues of identity and self-esteem.

Thus, while Rita's weight is important, it is not an isolated problem. It is symbolic of all teen-agers' struggles for self-identity and self-esteem.

About the Author

Barbara Wersba was born August 19, 1932, in Chicago, Illinois, the only child of parents who divorced while she was young. She was a writer in her childhood, an actress at twelve, and a published author at age twenty-nine.

The Boy Who Loved the Sea, Wersba's first book, was written in 1960 after her theater group folded. When she contracted hepatitis and faced a long recovery period, a friend suggested she write to pass the time, and thereafter Wersba turned her considerable energy and talent into writing books for children and young adults. In addition to writing, she reviews children's literature for the New York Times and teaches writing.

Wersba has won numerous awards for her young adult novels. *Tunes for a Small Harmonica* and *The Carnival in My Mind*, her two most popular novels, were on the American Library Association Best Books for Young Adults lists for the years they were published.

Wersba often uses first-person narrators to tell stories of self-discovery.

Her disillusioned, sensitive teen-agers and their quirky companions travel some rocky roads but emerge older, wiser, and generally more self-aware and self-accepting.

Setting

Wersba deftly weaves a contemporary setting into the fabric of plot and theme. *Fat* is set on Long Island, New York, in a town called Sag Harbor (where Wersba herself lives). It is a small town deluged by tourists in the summer and deserted the remainder of the year. Rita laments the crowded highways, grocery stores, and beaches during tourist season in Sag Harbor, calling summer "an interlude that we locals have to grit our teeth to endure."

Wersba provides ample description of Rita's adventures in shops, a health club, the mansion district, and the countryside.

The setting of the book complicates Rita's love for Robert Swann by illustrating the division of economic classes. Rita finds the rich "very annoying": "Every summer they swarm out to Long Island, where they crowd the beaches and where their kids get busted for drunk driving, and then they depart—leaving the rest of us to board up their houses, drain their swimming pools, and protect their property over the winter." The simultaneous animosity and attraction binds the setting inextricably with other elements of the book.



Social Sensitivity

There is no doubt that Wersba tackles some sensitive issues: virginity, lust, first love, and a May-December romance. But her treatment of those issues is positive, providing a good springboard for discussion. In addition, the major characters in the book have strong values to help them deal with the issues they face.

Rita curses occasionally and lies to grownups about her eating habits and her whereabouts. Her invented stories about Skylar Cunningham have a whimsical aspect, perhaps excused by Rita's longing to be a writer. Her personal values allow her to follow her heart unequivocally but prevent her from taking sex lightly. She believes that sex and love should be the same thing. Nicole, on the other hand, takes a more casual view of sex, saying things like, "It is not a question of love, it is a question of lovemaking.

And they are different things" and "He makes the love most beautifully . . . In the sack, he is a little Mozart."

There is frank language throughout the book. Rita describes her body, her urges, and her sexual relationship with Arnold in straightforward terms. There is some discussion of Overeaters Anonymous as "a superb organization" filled, however, with women whose main preoccupation is this: "If they get thin, truly thin, will they be raped?"

Generally Wersba neither trivializes nor belabors sensitive issues—she simply shows us contemporary situations and candidly shows her characters dealing with them. The characters in *Fat*, particularly Rita, do not shirk from frank discussion, and they offer a forum for readers to engage in similar discussion.

Literary Qualities

Wersba skillfully weaves together setting, characters, and plot with the themes of friendship, self-esteem, self-identity, class structure, and universal benevolence. In addition, she uses a variety of other literary techniques, including allusion, metaphor, and symbolism.

Allusions to classic pieces of writing put Fat in the context of a broad literary tradition, and Wersba places these allusions in the appealing character of Arnold Bromberg. Arnold cites philosophers like Spinoza, Heidegger, and Jung, and he mentions Isak Dinesen as his favorite author. When Rita wonders what to do about Robert Swann, Arnold reads the whole of Hamlet to her over the phone. He quotes T. S. Eliot as he and Rita sit by the ocean talking about friendship and life. Even if the reader is unfamiliar with such references, they add richness and depth to the novel, and they can create an impetus for further reading.

Wersba likewise has a deft touch with metaphor in the book, ranging from comic to cosmic. For instance, Rita imagines other characters as food: Robert Swann is a white cake with vanilla frosting, Nicole is a mushroom and cheese omelet, and Arnold is a deep red wine at a medieval banquet.

Rita also treats herself metaphorically.

When her diet counselor asks her to draw a picture of herself, she draws a bug—an image full of lowly connotations.

Fat, predictably, is a powerful symbol, representing the main obstacle which Rita must overcome in her quest for fulfillment. It acts as both a barrier and a shield, simultaneously isolating and protecting Rita. She conquers her obstacle not by dominating it but by understanding why it exists and letting go. Her victory over fat, then, offers a unique model for confronting difficulties in life.

Wersba deals with the contemporary world, creating realistic characters and themes. Using a first-person narrator, Wersba draws the reader immediately into the story and creates a bond between narrator and reader.

Wersba's down-to-earth treatment of issues also contributes to the book's readability. Rita describes her weight, the grownups around her, politics, sex, and love in straightforward terms. The story is fast paced throughout, but particularly toward the end when Arnold and Rita's romance spans nearly two years in three brief chapters.



Themes and Characters

The title character of *Fat* is Rita Formica, a sixteen-year-old, two-hundred pound teenage girl. She says, "I had always been fat—a fat baby, a fat child, and now I was a fat teenager." While she talks forthrightly and even humorously about her weight, Rita also struggles with it, and the novel is a record of her internal struggle. She deplores her name, her weight, and her chances for romance—leading her to create an alter ego: Skylar Cunningham, a rich, thin (on the inside, at any rate) health club devotee.

Rita believes she is in love with Robert Swann, who is "tall, beautiful, upper-class, aristocratic. And thin." Looking like he just stepped out of *Esquire* magazine, Robert is a health nut and car fanatic who "was going to be a stockbroker like his dad, and make millions to add onto the millions they already had." Despite Rita's obsession with Robert, he remains a distant character, shallow both to her and to the reader.

Nicole Sicard, Rita's purported best friend, is likewise somewhat shallow and stereotypical. She is French and "outrageously sexy." Some readers may find her stilted English charming.

(She mutters things like, "Men . . . Women. It is the bafflement of all time.")

Her unlikely friendship with Rita is handled well: "All of a sudden we had a million things to say to each other.

There was no introductory period, no tryout time, we were simply friends on the spot." The two spend their days walking on the beach and talking, and Nicole serves as a good basis for discussing the foundation of friendship.

Her offer to help Rita snare Robert Swann has overtones of *Cyrano de Bergerac*, and her eventual elopement with Robert is in keeping with the broad strokes of her character.

The most interesting character, aside from Rita, is Rita's employer Arnold Bromberg. Mr. Bromberg, as Rita calls him, is around thirty years old and filled with quirky charm. His grace, openness, and hope make him a fascinating character. He is a romantic, a Kansas native drawn to Sag Harbor by the sound of the name and the image of sea birds. He plays the organ and pays sentimental visits to his goat, Daisy.

The relationship between Arnold and Rita is delightful, full of respect, good humor, and serious talks. Their relationship turns out to be a model for friendship and a foil for the betrayal by Nicole.

Young readers will find a number of themes of personal interest in the book, such as friendship and betrayal, the development of love, and of building self-identity and self-esteem. Broader themes such as the class structure of society and the nature of the universe are well integrated into the text.



The idea of friendship and betrayal is played out in the parallel relationships of Rita and Nicole and Rita and Arnold. Nicole is Rita's friend, until a man enters the picture. When she is supposed to be "the bait" who gains Robert's attention and then directs it to Rita, Nicole betrays Rita's trust by marrying Robert Swann.

Arnold Bromberg provides a better model of friendship, telling Rita, "Friendship is sacred, and one of the most important things in this world."

He listens to Rita's tales of woe, comforts her, and leads her to see that Nicole is perhaps not a true friend after all.

The friendship between Arnold and Rita turns into love. Arnold loves Rita from the moment he sees her but says nothing about it. One night, in the depths of despair over Robert Swann, Rita blurts out, "I love you, Mr. Bromberg . . . I just didn't know it before."

Thereafter, the two find themselves locked in a passionate embrace. This May-December romance creates a significant subplot at the end of the book.

Rita does fall in love, but in an unexpected way.

A major theme of the book is, of course, Rita's weight. Throughout *Fat*, Rita describes what it is like to be overweight and tries to discover why she eats the way she does. She deals matter-of-factly with her weight, saying that her weight problems "always received a lot of attention, but the more they tried to help me—my parents, I mean—the fatter I got. I didn't want help. What I wanted was to eat." Rita feels like two people, one who perpetually diets and one who continually sabotages any attempt to lose weight.

Fat: A Love Story 3137 Public reaction to Rita's weight is also illustrated. Rita says, "You have no idea how fat people are discriminated against in this world, and how people stare at you the first time they meet you." People at the health club feel sorry for her, while people on the street holler unkindly as she delivers cheesecake.

Occasionally Wersba looks at Rita's weight from a feminist point of view, as when alter ego Skylar berates Rita for her weight: "No man in the world will ever want you unless you get thin, and work on your hair, and learn how to put on makeup. No man in America will ever love you if you are smarter than he is. Transform yourself, Rita!"

The implication, here, is that society is sexist and cruel in demanding that Rita pretend she is someone she is not in order to be loved.

Rita's fat complicates her sense of self-esteem and self-identity, but those themes will speak to all teen-agers. Her problem is exaggerated, but most readers will identify with her quest for acceptance. Rita is perhaps more overtly inventive than most people, creating Skylar Cunningham at the health club, but her motives are universal—she wants to be accepted, to fit in. Likewise, when Rita imagines herself as a thin person, she demonstrates that the inner person and the outer person can have different identities.



Arnold is the person who sees Rita's true identity, telling her that she is "beautiful," "sensitive," and "amusing." Having been fat himself, he helps Rita to see that she eats in order to protect herself; she has created a layer of fat—like armor—to protect the fragile person inside.

Following her own realization that she does not have to overeat, Rita lets go of Skylar Cunningham and takes control of her life. With Arnold's help, Rita learns to let go of her compulsion to eat. Wersba, through the character of Arnold, also raises the question of universal benevolence. Arnold believes that the universe is invariably benevolent and that "right action" is always taking place. Rita, struggling through her obsession with Robert Swann, heartily doubts it. Arnold's belief has a calming effect, however, and Rita's questions about the meaning of life become less frantic.



Topics for Discussion

1. Rita uses her fat as both a barrier and a shield. What other devices do people use to protect themselves? Can these devices have both negative and positive aspects?
2. There is a large age difference between Rita and Arnold. Do you find their love believable? What difficulties do they face in such a relationship?
3. Rita makes a distinction between rich and middle-class inhabitants of Sag Harbor. Is Rita fair in her judgments?
4. Is Nicole a good friend to Rita?

What do you think of Nicole's relationship with Robert Swann—did she betray Rita?

5. Think about the problems Rita has which stem from her weight. How did Rita become overweight? Why does she overeat?
 6. Do you believe that fat people are discriminated against in our society?
- Are people in the United States obsessed with thinness? Are Rita's problems exacerbated because she is female?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Some reviewers have said that the characters in *Fat* are improbable or undergo unrealistic transformations.

Do you agree? What in the characters makes them believable or unbelievable?

2. Do some research on people with weight problems like overeating, anorexia, or bulimia. Do you see any common threads among these problems?

3. Interview a range of people about their weight. How do people of different sizes and weights feel about their bodies and their place in society?

4. Read about *Cyrano de Bergerac* and compare his story with *Fat*. What parallels do you see in the romances?

5. The relationship between Rita and Arnold becomes a whirlwind in the final chapters of *Fat*. Write your own sequel to *Fat*, showing what happens as Rita and Arnold get older. Then read *Love Is the Crooked Thing*, Wersba's own sequel. Is the relationship between Rita and Arnold what you expected?

For Further Reference

Andersen, Beth E. *Voice of Youth Advocates* 10 (December 1987): 239. In this review, Andersen argues that *Love Is the Crooked Thing* is not suited to the publisher's targeted age (twelveyear-olds).

Children's Literature Review. Vol. 3. Edited by Gerard J. Senick. Detroit: Gale Research, 1978: 213-220. This article includes a brief introduction to Wersba's work as well as lengthy excerpts from numerous reviews.

Commire, Anne, ed. *Something About the Author*. Vol. 1. Detroit: Gale Research, 1971: 224-225. In addition to a listing of biographical information, this piece quotes Wersba talking about her background and goals.

Contemporary Authors, New Revision Series. Vol. 16. Detroit: Gale Research, 1986: 430-431. This segment lists information on Wersba's career and gives a short commentary on themes in her books.

Janeczko, Paul. "An Interview with Barbara Wersba." *English Journal* (November 1976): 20-21. In a fascinating interview, Wersba discusses a variety of topics, including young adult literature, influences on her career, how she writes, and her themes and dreams.

Locke, Deborah. *School Library Journal* 34 (December 1987): 106. Locke gives a mixed review of *Love Is the Crooked Thing*.

"Sexuality in Books for Children: An Exchange by Barbara Wersba and Josette Frank." *Library Journal* 98 (February 15, 1973): 620-623. This discussion of sexuality in children's books may be of interest to people concerned about censorship.

Sutherland, Zena. *Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books* 41 (October 1987): 39. Sutherland gives a generally positive review of *Love Is the Crooked Thing*.

Vandergrift, Kay E. "Barbara Wersba."

American Writers for Children Since 1960: Fiction. Edited by Glenn E. Estes. Detroit: Bruccoli Clark, 1986: 374-379. (*Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Vol. 32). This is a complete biography of Wersba and the most thorough critical analysis of a number of her books.

Related Titles

Love Is the Crooked Thing is the sequel to Fat. Rita finds that her relationship with Arnold is more complicated than she had expected. Arnold goes off to Europe, and Rita writes romance novels to earn money to go after him. Reviews of the sequel are mixed. Zena Sutherland finds it "just as adroit as the first book and just as witty, but a bit more bittersweet." Beth Anderson calls the novel "reader titillation at its worst." Deborah Locke writes, "The events of the story are absurd, but with a kernel of truth about romantic ideals and expectations. Expect to hear more from Rita Formica."



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