

The Fat Girl Short Guide

The Fat Girl by Marilyn Stickle Sachs

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Overview

As the title indicates, one of the major characters in the novel has a weight problem. But that is not really the main issue. While Ellen eventually does overcome her obesity, it is not a weight-loss story. The plot of the novel revolves around the efforts of Jeff, a teenager, to recreate and transform Ellen into his own image of beauty.

Jeff, in spite of his seeming confidence, has problems with his overly domineering mother who, so far, has destroyed all his relationships with girls.

Focusing on Ellen as an object which he can turn into a "show piece" makes him feel powerful. He embarks on a Pygmalion-like adventure, totally disregarding Ellen's needs as a human being with feelings of her own. Ellen eventually rebels, and Jeff loses her because he sees his relationship only as a way to control her life.

The teen-age years are a time of intense preoccupation with one's role in society, with peers and with oneself.

Physical appearance, and doubts about one's attractiveness and social acceptance plague many girls like Ellen. In this novel, Sachs has created some compelling and realistic young people who find themselves seeking their own identities. Like Ellen, Jeff ultimately looks for the understanding he does not find at home, but he is also driven by a need to compensate for his own insecurities caused by his manipulative and clinging mother. Many teens search for an ideal partner, and like Jeff, find that reality is not always kind. Jeff finds ultimate satisfaction in creating a dream girl for himself, and he forces Ellen to accept his ideas. At first, Ellen goes along with his plans, which give her a new sense of attractiveness and confidence. But since he is in love with the "picture" rather than the girl, he is not able to cope with reality. Sachs has the ability to create characters who are interesting as well as realistic. The psychological undertones and implications are fascinating and thought provoking.

About the Author

Marilyn Stickle was born on December 18, 1927, in the Bronx, New York City. She married Morris Sachs in 1947 and has two children, Anne and Paul. In 1949 she received her bachelor's degree from Hunter College of the City University of New York, and a master's degree in library science from Columbia University in 1953.

Although her education led to a career as a librarian, first with the Brooklyn, New York Public Library (1949-1960), and then with the San Francisco Public Library (1961-1967), her main avocation has always been as a writer of children's books, writing one or two books almost every year since 1964.

She received an American Library Association Notable Book award for *Veronica Ganz*, and *A Pocket Full of Seeds*.

Peter and Veronica, *Call Me Ruth*, *Fourteen*, *Secret Friends*, and *Underdog* were Junior Literary Guild Selections.

While Sachs was still working for the Brooklyn Public Library system, part of her job was traveling with a bookmobile in Brooklyn and telling stories to children in parks, playgrounds and hospitals. This experience resulted in her first book, *Amy Moves In*, which at the time was somewhat controversial because it was considered too realistic.

No publisher would accept it unless Sachs would agree to make some revisions to bring it more in line with the contemporary attitude of the 1950s and 1960s, which held that children's books should not be burdened with problems.

Since Sachs declined to change her novel, it took ten years before it was finally published. By then, social realism was no longer unusual in books for young readers. Since 1965, Sachs has published numerous books for children, many of them dealing with serious social issues in a setting familiar to younger readers.

Setting

Like most of Sachs's books, the story takes place in an ordinary setting, a high school that could be found anywhere. Jeff, handsome, cocky, and unmotivated, is trying to avoid taking an algebra class from a teacher who has a reputation for being tough. Instead, he opts for something easy, and takes pottery, even though he has no particular interest in the subject. The ceramic class, however, offers more than Jeff expects because he meets Norma Jenkins there, and he promptly falls in love with her. At first, Norma returns his interest, and the romance goes well.

At home, things are less happy as Jeff is dominated by his bored and lonely divorced mother who has managed so far to destroy all of his relationships with girls. Pottery class is also the place where Jeff comes across the fat girl, Ellen, and it is Ellen who unwittingly interferes with Jeff's romance with Norma.

Social Sensitivity

The plot of the novel involves obesity, an issue that many young people and adults see as a social stigma. It must be pointed out, however, that Ellen's weight is not as much of a problem as becoming a target for Jeff's fantasies and plans. Even the title with its crude reference to Ellen as "fat"—she is not even referred to by name—reveals chiefly the attitude of Jeff who sees her mostly as the object of an experiment.

Ellen's problem of over-eating is shown to be an emotional one. Whenever she hurts, she eats, following her mother's recipe for dealing with all problems. As she gains confidence, food is no longer a needed crutch.

Suicide is another sensitive topic. In this novel, it plays a part in the manipulative relationships between the various characters. When Ellen first storms out, threatening to kill herself, her mother reassures Jeff: "She won't. You don't have to be afraid. She's always saying she's going to kill herself. It doesn't mean anything." Later, Jeff's mother actually attempts suicide, again as a tool to draw attention to herself and make her family feel guilty. For both threats of suicide are really cries for help. In the end, Ellen discovers a better way to improve her life and be noticed, but Jeff's mother, only happy when she is in control, is not able to break out of her self-inflicted misery.

Sachs handles these sensitive topics with realism but also with compassion and hope. By giving even her most disagreeable characters the abilities to save themselves, they become human beings and not just judgmental stereotypes.

Literary Qualities

Sachs has developed an extraordinary modern novel about a complex theme. It deals with human relationships, and it is supported by some very well drawn characters. Jeff, insecure, insensitive, and egotistical, can see a relationship only in terms of domineering and self-centeredness. But the author does not simply make him a villain. By showing us his problems at home with his mother, we gain an understanding of his attitudes and mind set. The same is true for Ellen; we see why she is a fat slob, and how her family has helped make her what she is.

The sort of relationship that Jeff and Ellen have is often found in adult literature. The best known treatment of the theme is probably Bernard Shaw's play *Pygmalion* (1913) about a professor of linguistics who tries to change the personality and life of a poor, uneducated young girl by teaching her manners and proper speech. Sachs has managed to take a psychologically complex story and make it meaningful for young adult readers.

Underlying the story is another interesting literary device—that of a pattern whereby the main characters change places during the plot. When Jeff meets Ellen for the first time, he considers himself popular, has friends, and has a strong social image. Ellen is lonely, insecure, and hates herself. As Ellen grows, Jeff, too, changes, but not for the better. In the end, he is the one who feels alone, has lost all his friends, and is dominated again by his mother.

Ellen has made friends, is happy with her world, and sees herself in a positive light. Literary patterns such as these are not the most important element in a novel, but they create additional satisfaction for the reader who feels that the solution of the plot is just right. Other famous "role reversal" patterns are found in the novel *Thais* (1890) by Anatole France, and the play *Summer and Smoke* (1948) by Tennessee Williams.



Themes and Characters

This is a novel about human relationships, so that well developed characters are important to the themes. The main character is Jeff, a good-looking boy who has had a number of romances with different girls—all of them pretty, as he emphatically states.

Looks are important to him, and when he first meets clumsy, overweight Ellen, he is simply disgusted. The events are seen through Jeff's eyes, and he reveals himself as a shallow character with little sensitivity or thought for others.

Jeff's mother is the person who has probably the most influence on her son, even though she remains on the sidelines. Readers do not get to know her except from Jeff's point of view.

She is clinging and manipulative, and she manages to make her son do whatever she wants by playing on his feelings of guilt. Somehow, he always feels that he is, or rather fails to be, responsible for his mother's happiness since his father has left her.

At first, Jeff sees Ellen only as a repulsive person. In addition to her size, she is also clumsy. She has no talent whatsoever for pottery, but that does not stop her from creating ugly pots.

All in all, she is a disaster. Ellen is only seen through Jeff's eyes. She is not a developed character in spite of the fact that she is part of the book's title.

Of secondary importance is Norma, the girl Jeff admires and with whom he considers himself in love. Unlike Ellen, Norma is beautiful, and a very talented potter. Pottery is her passion, and she feels sorry for poor Ellen. When a thoughtless remark from Jeff drives Ellen to tears, Norma is angry, and to please her, Jeff tries to make amends, and to be kind to the fat girl.

For the first time, a boy seems interested in Ellen, and she totally misconstrues his pity and guilt as romantic love. Under Jeff's attentions, Ellen blossoms. Jeff, in turn, discovers that all her blubber hides a pretty face. He is flattered by her total devotion and decides to make her into what he calls his "African Queen," a majestic, stately figure. He helps her select the "right" clothes, picks a hairdo for her, teaches her to walk, and dreams of the day when he will take her to the school prom under the envious gaze of the entire class; she would be a beautiful, large goddess.

Without knowing it, both Jeff and Ellen have embarked on an ancient pursuit. The author has used the myth of Pygmalion in a modern setting familiar to young readers. Pygmalion was a Greek sculptor who fell in love with Galathea, the statue of a girl he had created. When his prayers to bring her to life were answered, he was happy, but he soon discovered that she did not fit his image and dreams of her. Jeff, too, is mostly interested in his image of Ellen, and when she begins to regain her self-confidence and even starts losing weight, he does not even notice. It is an awakening when Ellen, now



a pretty but ordinary girl, confronts Jeff before the dance. She is no longer his creation, and he angrily tells her so, hurting her feelings. In the end, the roles are reversed—while Ellen is now coping with her life and making friends, Jeff feels like an outcast, forever doomed to be manipulated by his mother.

The problem of human beings trying to control others according to their own wishes is a strong theme that makes this novel unique, but there is also a positive note—the possibility for anyone to be able to change and control his or her own life.



Topics for Discussion

1. The title of the book is *The Fat Girl*, which is the crude and insensitive nickname for Ellen. Why does the author use it? And is it really Ellen's story?
2. Jeff is the narrator of the events, and we see them through his eyes. His choice of language and topics tells us quite a bit about him. What sort of boy does he think he is? What sort of person does his narrative reveal?
3. What sort of relationship does Jeff have with Norma Jenkins? Is he really interested in her as a person or just in her looks? Does he have a real friendship with her? Does he understand her? Does he want to understand her?
4. Why does the author place so much importance on Jeff's mother? In many books for young people, parents just play a minor role. What sort of person is Jeff's mother? What is her purpose in the story?
5. When Jeff first notices Ellen, he only sees her clumsiness and unattractive appearance. What changes his mind? What feelings replace his disgust? Is he really seeing her now?
6. Ellen is deeply flattered by Jeff's attentions, but she mistakes them for love. Does Jeff realize this? Why is he not honest with her? Or does he really understand his own emotions?
7. In some ways, Ellen's mother is just as manipulative as Jeff's mother.

Does the author imply that children's problems are generally caused by parents? Do you agree?

8. What are Norma's feelings for Jeff?

Why does she call him "poor Jeff"?

Does she see him as her "project"?

How does Jeff react to this?

9. Jeff's sister Wanda has the same problems with her mother as Jeff, but she manages to break away. Why is it easier for her than for Jeff?
10. Both Ellen and Jeff's mother try suicide, but for different reasons. Who is more serious about it?
11. This story has a nice balance to it—Jeff meets Ellen through pottery class, and it is through her pottery he loses her. Would it have been the same if they had met in Mr. Wasserman's chemistry class? In what way is the location important?

12. Will Jeff ever truly break loose from his mother?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. The Pygmalion theme is an old one. What is so fascinating about it?

Study the Greek legend and George Bernard Shaw's version. What are the goals of the main characters?

2. The relationship in most Pygmalion-type stories is between a man and a woman. The man dominates; the woman is passive. Could the theme be reversed with the dominant character being a woman and the passive one a man? Why or why not? What does your answer tell us about attitudes of modern society?

3. Jeff loses Ellen, Pygmalion loses Galathea, and George Bernard Shaw's play also has a dubious ending. Why could such a relationship not succeed?

Or could it?

4. Sachs uses Jeff to tell the story.

What do you think Ellen would tell if she were the narrator?

For Further Reference

France, Anatole. *Thais*. New York: The Book League of America, 1938. This is a novel about a holy man who successfully converts a sinner, only to discover that he is now hopelessly in love with her.

"The Loves of Aphrodite." *New Larousse Encyclopedia of Mythology*. New York: Paul Hamlyn, 1968: 131. The description of various mortals who loved the goddess of love, Aphrodite. Includes the story of Pygmalion.

"Marilyn Sachs. *The Fat Girl*." In *The Best in Children's Books*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979-1984: 371. This is a short evaluation of the novel, and compares it to Sachs's other works.

Shaw, George Bernard. *Pygmalion*. New York: Penguin, 1977. In this ironic play, Shaw redraws the ancient story of Pygmalion by creating a man who tries to change a woman to suit his image.

Southerland, Zena. "The Fat Girl." In *Children and Books*. 8th ed. New York: HarperCollins, 1991: 357. This is a brief evaluative discussion of the novel.

Related Titles

Marilyn Sachs's books deal realistically with everyday problems and ordinary children and young people. The problems of obese people are also treated with sensitivity and humor in Barbara Wersba's novel, *Fat, A Love Story* (1987), and its sequel, *Love Is the Crooked Thing* (1987). Like Ellen in Marilyn Sachs's *The Fat Girl*, Rita Formica tries to change her image when she falls in love. But in this novel, the story is seen through her eyes, and the solution comes not through her boy friend but because of her own strong personality. Whereas Ellen is seen through the eyes of manipulative Jeff, *Fat* examines the trials of an obese teenager through the eyes of her spunky, lovable female character.



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