
Editorial note.

A group of my friends decided to get together and read some feminists books. The first text suggested was *Fat is a Feminist Issue* — and frankly I didn't believe it was. After three fiery meetings I knew I was wrong. And when CWS/CF received two reviews of this same book I knew I was really wrong. This is a 'burning issue' for women! So the editorial board decided to print both of them. ENJOY.

Fat is a Feminist Issue, Susie Orbach,
Paddington Press, 1978, pp. 193, hardcover \$11.25.

Judith Posner

A few years ago I came across a fascinating article in the Journal of Radical Therapy called *The Fat Story or Eating as an Act of Revolution*. The authors of the piece (Cathy Fat-woman and Deborah Berson) linked obesity to women's lib, arguing that fat women have opted out from the traditional weak and passive feminine role. In letting their bodies go they assert their physical territoriality and thumb their nose at the slim femme fatale convention. Around the same time that this article appeared the mass media was reflecting increasing interest in a strange and controversial disease called anorexia nervosa, a psychosocial malfunctioning of the appetite which affects girls around the time of puberty. Anorexics starve themselves in an effort to become unbearably thin. It is within this context that Susie Orbach's recent publication should be viewed.

Orbach, a feminist psychotherapist and women's studies lecturer describes herself as first and foremost an X compulsive eater. Her book reflects her egocentric interest. It rings true. All women who have ever questioned their figures should be able to identify with it. And while the book is too brief, a little repetitive and lacks depth from a theoretical or conceptual point of view it definitely offers a new model for looking at weight problems, one which Orbach calls demystifying. In the final analysis, however, her book will be more useful to those with pragmatic rather than academic interest in weight loss although it is no mere diet guide.

In fact Orbach's major theoretical contention is that all existing diet approaches are inadequate due to their failure to redefine one's relationship to food. Existing diet programs actually exacerbate one's symbolic attachment to food by treating foods as good and bad, legal or illegal, treats, rewards, etc. Therefore diets accentuate one's food obsession as anyone who has ever dieted can tell you (all you *do* is think and talk about food all day long — boring yourself and your friends). Thus, diet plans and workshops fail to help the individual alter her relationship to food in a substantial way, accounting for the high rate of recidivism among fat people.

... the compulsive dieter knows two realities; compulsive eating (out of control) or compulsive dieting (imprisonment). p. 106

Orbach contends that the only way out of this neurotic food dichotomy is through examination of the roots of the problem — and the roots are not surprisingly societal and sex role related.

It is the thesis of this book that compulsive eating in women is a response to their social position. As such, it will continue to be an issue in women's lives as long as social conditions exist which create and encourage inequality of the sexes. Any treatment for overweight women must address this fact. p. 165

Some of her contentions include the notions that gaining

weight is rejection of the female role; that women's sex object role in our culture causes such severe self-consciousness that women cannot help being fixated on their bodies and its nutrients; and that the role of wife and mother necessitates so much nurturing of others that one way in which women learn to cope with daily life is through extreme self nurturing in the form of food intake. While Orbach's arguments are convincing one cannot help but wonder about male obesity which she never mentions and which is likely more statistically prevalent than female obesity. We can assume however, that its causes are quite different, reflecting discrepant sex-role socialization problems.

In addition to the issue of the psycho-social roots of over-eating, Orbach offers a variety of therapy techniques that can be used in breaking the neurotic food chain. For example, she reiterates what obesity experts have told us for years, that fat people seldom experience hunger because they are eating for other reasons and tend to preempt this primary experience. Gradually then, they lose touch with their own physiological sensations and desires. Since diets tend to dictate when and what you eat they don't alleviate the problem. So Orbach suggests non-structured anti-diet eating which enables the individual to get in touch with her desires and learn to exercise discrimination. She also suggests doing therapeutic work on a variety of 'guided fantasies' — imaginary situations involving food into which members are supposed to project themselves. The main purpose of the therapy is to demonstrate to women that they have an interest in being fat. Until they recognize this fact all attempts at permanent weight loss are doomed to failure.

While the book offers many useful suggestions in the practical realm, it is deficient in taking into account existing relevant material. For example, Orbach only gives brief discussion to the topic of anorexia nervosa which is very centrally relevant to the notion of fat as a feminist issue. For those who would like to look more deeply into the issue of women's body image and culture they will not find a wide range of bibliographic materials available here. (You would do well to consult recent books on anorexia nervosa in this regard). But if you want to have your interest nudged on some fresh feminist insights or you're just interested in losing weight, Orbach's book is well worth the cost (10.57 at Toronto Women's Bookstore). Less than a spaghetti dinner at *George's*!

Fat is a Feminist Issue, Susie Orbach, Paddington Press, New York, 1978, pp. 193, hardcover \$11.25.

Greta Hofmann Nemiroff

Susie Orbach sees fat as an issue faced by many women and as one which calls for a feminist interpretation. My own observation has also indicated to me that obesity is a condition experienced by many feminists. Over the ten or so years that I have been actively involved in Women's Studies and women's issues, I have gained about forty-five pounds. Not that I was emaciated before, let us say that I was always somewhat ample and cannot recall a time this side of childhood when the Standard Life Insurance Company would have been totally enchanted by my height/weight index. In the 'movement' however, I was not alone. Many of us were overweight and if we weren't, as a group we were not over-solicitous about our general appearance. Concomitantly I—as were so many other women of my vintage—was rising in a managerial hierarchy due primarily to the vast bureaucratic expansion of the late '60's and early '70's in Canada. We women were being asked (in small numbers, mind you) to 'fill' more important or 'weighty' jobs than we'd had before. A cursory review of upwardly mobile female contem-

poraries I know shows a weight gain at this particular intersection of contingencies: participation in some aspect of the women's movement plus increased responsibility in the workplace. To be sure, everyone didn't become obese; rather there was a noticeable weight gain for most of us.

In my own case, I tried various diet régimes as so many of us do. I went up and down, but ultimately my status increased from what I privately called 'ample,' to 'fat' to 'hopelessly fat.' The latter condition I categorize in my heart as being of a size which can only be accommodated by 'specialty' (what a euphemism!) departments. Meanwhile my mother, also obese, was suffering increasingly severe diabetes. Well aware of the connection between obesity and diabetis (not to speak of me and mother), over a five year period, I helplessly watched her deterioration: first one leg was amputated; then the other. Then deafness and partial blindness set in. Finally she lost the sensation in her hands and unknowingly burned her left hand (she, as I am, was left-handed) over her steam kettle. Infection set in and her hand never healed; slowly her body gave way and she died in the summer of 1978. What astonishes me in retrospect is that I could watch this terrible process and not develop instant anorexia nervosa. However, this was not the case; while I mourned her losses punctiliously with her, it was only when her left hand gave way to infection (with the hovering spectre of amputation) that I bestirred myself to register at a much publicized Obesity Clinic in a Montreal hospital.

A slow dieter, I have been on a protein supplement (300 calories per day) programme for seven months and lost 52 pounds. I have been rigorous and I have also cheated. Sometimes I want to be a wraith; other times I can't bear to part with one more cell. Nonetheless I pay a weekly visit to the doctor. There my blood is tested, blood pressure taken, I have a brief visit with the doctor, pay \$50 for a week's supply of Optifast (the protein supplement) and leave. Sometimes I have a brief conversation with some other 'fat mommas' in the waiting room (where *are* the men?), but it is usually of a cursory 'and how are *you* doing?' nature. There is no attempt at therapy in the programme, and obesity is treated as an illness (if not a moral weakness) which must be 'controlled.' The ultimate penalty is being eliminated from the programme. There is a long waiting list; after all, in Canada as in the U.S.A., it is estimated that about 50% of the female population is overweight.

It is because of my own observations and experience that I am so interested in Susie Orbach's very provocative book. An American psycho-therapist, living in London, England, Orbach has treated many obese patients and emerges from her practice with interesting theories. While she examines both psycho-analytic and medical explanations of obesity in some detail, she dismisses any mutually exclusive therapeutic treatment of obesity by either medical or psychiatric doctors as ineffectual *per se*. 'Fat,' she claims, 'is a social disease, and fat is a feminist issue. Fat is *not* about lack of self-control or lack of will power. Fat *is* about protection, sex, nurturance, strength, boundaries, mothering, substance, assertion and rage. It is a response to the inequality of the sexes,' p. 18. Hence, she sees women's propensity to obesity as an 'adaptation to (their), oppression' and a condition which must be treated as a psychological condition but also as a response to very clearly oppressive social realities in growing up female.

Orbach traces various reasons why women eat compulsively. Some of the reasons she puts forward (at length and with illustrative case-histories) are: women want recognition in their work settings; mother daughter relationships with the mother's ambivalence about nurturing a future second-class citizen; dealing with and burying competitive feelings; the protection of feelings and women's socialized ambivalence about our sexuality where we are loved for our bodies but also made to feel guilty

about our attractiveness. It is her thesis that women have an unconscious desire to be fat because this fat can define our relationship to the world for us. We are absolved from any decisions and conflicts by our appearance, and this extra poundage can either distance or bring people closer to us. We attribute much power to the fat, and we have a prevailing fear that its loss will render us naked and powerless non-presences whose thinness could lead us astray into mindless promiscuity and sexual rejection unattributable to our fat. She also examines what thinness means to women, and through the course of therapy she attempts to get women to reassess our situations, reappropriate the power we attribute to our fat and learn to assert our real needs. We would be asked to . . . 'sort out what emotional need (we) are asking the food to carry for (us) and ask (ourselves) whether indeed it works.'

The main focus of this book is on compulsive eating and how to change this devastating habit. 'Our view is that compulsive eaters are terrified of food (once having invested it with magical properties—for instance, comfort against loneliness, boredom, anger or depression—it is hard to see it as just food, a source of nourishment) and are constantly eating or avoiding eating in response to this terror. Just because you feel out of control when near food does not mean you are not entitled to eat,' pp. 151-2. Her section on compulsive eating is exhaustive and she cites many different causes for this urge. Over-eaters are immune to the usual hunger cues. 'Eating becomes so loaded with other meaning that a straightforward reaction to a hungry stomach is unusual,' p. 105. As well many other needs can be rationalized: it is sociable; one desires taste stimulation; it is prophylactic because we might not be eating for a while; it offers guaranteed pleasure; the eater is nervous, is celebrating, is bored. Beneath all this, however, is someone whose . . . 'fat says "screw you" to all who want (her) to be the perfect mom, sweetheart, maid and whore. Take me for who I am, not for who I'm supposed to be. If you are really interested in *me*, you can wade through the layers and find out who I am,' p. 21.

Orbach sees the most effective way to weight loss and restructuring ones eating habits to be through self-help groups. It is essential that women sharing this problem form a consistent support system with the intentions of examining their situation through a feminist perspective. The main objective is to solve one's addiction to food. Weight loss, she believes, will follow naturally. It is her belief . . . 'that our bodies can tell us what to eat, how to have a nutritionally balanced food intake and how to lose weight,' p. 122. This particular view of hers is not substantiated by my own experience; I do not have the faith that we can simply rely on our bodies for nutritional omniscience. There is much knowledge to access about nutrition and healthful eating and I find her rather *laissez faire* attitude in this connection disturbing. Certainly attitudinal change is necessary, but it also seems to me that rapid initial weight loss is a significant encouragement which could motivate obese people to undertake the rigorous self-examination suggested by Orbach. For this reason, I would like to see her techniques adapted for use in *conjunction* with a structured diet of some sort. There is also the issue of physical exercise and movement, very important for health, energy, and well-being, which is not addressed here at all. Fat people have crucial and difficult feelings about embarking on exercise. I would be interested in Orbach's view of some discussion of physical exercise being integrated into a self-help group.

On the other hand, she does provide some very interesting Gestalt-based exercises on body concept and the function of fat in the lives of her women clients. I find myself wishing she would provide more such exercises with variants. Frequently what one exercise cannot accomplish in a particular group, another can. While the exercises she describes can certainly be adapted for specific groups, it might be difficult for a neophyte self-help group to know *how* to adapt them most effectively.

At this point in my own diet, I still have a way to go; however, I hope never again to grace a specialty shop. It has been tough going and as I read *Fat is a Feminist Issue*, I felt cheated that I have no such support group although I am blessed with supportive friends, family and colleagues. In any event, I found myself identifying with many of the examples she cites. For instance, right now I'm having difficulty in turning that penultimate corner: the last lap to my ideal weight. Suddenly it seems saddening and depressing to continue, to let go of another ounce. To some extent I found a helpful explanation for this reluctance in these lines: 'The compulsive eater does not develop confidence that she will remain thin. She has become a thin woman, someone who looks different and acts in different ways from her fat self, but a new woman whom she does not know very well. She is someone she is not sure she can trust or really get to know because she is unsure of how long she is going to be thin. . . . She really does not believe that her thin self is going to be around that long, so she develops a suspicious relationship with it,' p. 81. That's it! There is a double-edged mourning experience in weight loss: first, the loss in part of one's fat self evaporating into 'thin' air; secondly the possibility of losing or submerging the new thin self in more acquired fat.

Clearly, then, obesity is a very complex and emotionally charged subject. This book is not only important for the 'fat majority,' but also for everyone. We all have feelings which could bear clarification on this subject. As well, *Fat is a Feminist Issue* offers a good example of how psychological and social forces combine to establish the politics of our physical lives. I can't help wondering about fat men, though. What's *their* reason? Is someone going to write about them? What constants do we share as men and women in this affliction? On the other hand, perhaps one of the best hypotheses about being a fat feminist is that you get to find out why.

Role Call A TVOntario series. 13 half hours. Colour.

Anna Prodanou

In the January 1979 issue of *Saturday Night* magazine, editor Robert Fulford writes 'You would have to be a very dull journalist not to notice that within western society the great story of this epoch is feminism and its consequences'.

TVOntario's new series *Role Call* is based on the premise that the Women's Movement has had an irreversible impact on our roles as men and women. Be it a father who stays at home to raise a family, a woman who chooses to remain childless and single, or a young girl who brings a case before the Supreme Court to gain admittance to the all-boy Ontario Minor Hockey League.

Role Call's thirteen half-hour magazine programs look beyond our traditional roles to explore how our attitudes are changing, and poke fun at some time-worn male and female stereotypes.

The series host is television journalist Naomi Loeb. Satirical singer Nancy White, the 'civil-service songwriter', is a regular *Role Call* contributor.

In addition to songs and commentary, each program features a comedy sketch and two personal lifestyle stories.

The drama has a provocative feminist edge, but the real power of the show comes from its interviews. They are probing and intimate, passing quickly by the pleasantries, they zero in on the guests and their situations.

Two of *Role Call's* interviewers Erna Paris and Irene Parikhail

are journalists who have written extensively on women's subjects. Doug Lennox is a radio interviewer. Naomi Loeb, Maria Mironowicz and Patrick Conlon are television broadcasters.

And who are *Role Call's* guests? To all appearances they are 'just ordinary people'. We are now beyond the stage of proudly parading 'the first woman to . . .'. The series is not concerned with the celebrities and stars in the Movement. Nor does it dwell on those who have resisted change, and conform to traditional role expectations. Within the spectrum of these two extremes *Role Call* features men and women whose attitudes, self-insights and lifestyles show a greater awareness of choices and a willingness to act on these choices.

Here are some examples of *Role Call* interviews:

- Bank manager Patricia Bartlett and her male assistant Bob Gardner talk about their working relationship and how they are perceived by the public.
- Deidre Gallagher of Organized Working Women and Marge Carroll a participant in the Fleck strike speak about women and unions.
- Dan Howard and his wife Judith, who is 12 years his senior speak about an older woman/younger man marriage.
- Bill Confiss, a single father on welfare, tells about his efforts to obtain Family Benefits Allowance which has been traditionally a means of support to single mothers.
- Maryanne, a lesbian mother, appears anonymously to describe the custody battle which allowed her to be reunited with her children.
- Susan and David Naylor are happily married, yet they lived apart for close to a year in order to pursue separate careers in two different cities. They describe this period in their lives.
- Lawyer Mordechai Ben-Dat talks about the pre-natal classes he attended with his wife and how he assisted in the birth of his baby.



Naomi Loeb, OECA TV