



Fat: The Anthropology of an Obsession

Don Kulick (Editor) , Anne Meneley

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An eclectic and highly original examination of one of the most dynamic concepts-and constructs-in the world.

With more than one billion overweight adults in the world today, obesity has become an epidemic. But fat is not as straightforward-or even as uni-versally damned-as one might think. Enlisting thirteen anthropologists and a fat activist, editors and anthropologists Don Kulick and Anne Meneley have produced an unconventional-and unprecedented-examination of fat in various cultural and social contexts. In this anthology, these writers argue that fat is neither a mere physical state nor an inert concept. Instead, it is a construct built by culture and judged in courts of public opinion, courts whose laws vary from society to society.

From the anthropology of "fat-talk" among teenage girls in Sweden to the veneration of Spam in Hawaii; from fear of the fat-sucking pishtaco vampire in the Andes to the underground allure of fat porn stars like Supersize Betsy-this anthology provides fresh perspectives on a subject more complex than love handles, and less easily understood than a number on a scale. Fat proves that fat can be beautiful, evil, pornographic, delicious, shameful, ugly, or magical. It all depends on who-and where-you are.

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From Reader Review Fat: The Anthropology of an Obsession for online ebook

Rachael MacLean says

Fascinating reads from different anthropologists on the history, science, and cultural importance of fat in its various forms. As with any anthology, some essays are more interesting and in depth than others. This is a great book for picking up and putting down because each chapter is self contained.

Nicole says

I might not have otherwise picked up this book were it not assigned reading for my graduate course on the anthropology of food, but I found it to be a fascinating read. After I read the eight assigned essays (out of 14), I continued to read them all and was glad I did. I think the compilation of essays is a very interesting way to present and explore the concept of fat, representing a complex and diverse array of views.

Some of the ways fat is explored is as an aesthetic, as a substance to be guarded or discarded, valued and desired, or abhorred. Most importantly, the essays examine the social, political, psychological, and historical contexts in which "fat" is constructed. I would recommend at least a few of the essays to friends (and have), in particular the essays on olive oil and Starbucks.

While I thought some of the essays might be a little dated (the book was published in 2005 and I read it in 2011) (e.g. the essay titled "Phat"), the book nevertheless presented valuable and intriguing points of view. I think it challenges people to think about fat in new ways.

Jessica says

I could not put this book down! The authors observe the concept from so many interesting perspectives and definitions and blew wide-open my understanding of anthropology and the sociological functions of fat.
READ IT!

Korri says

Really fascinating anthropological essays about fat as substance, as food, and as an ideal. Covering diverse topics like lard and extra virgin olive oil, the cultural & symbolic capital of 'fat talk' among teenage girls, fat pornography, and fasting as a path to holiness, this collection gave me plenty of food for thought.

Jane says

I just started this yesterday while waiting for a friend at lunch - just the introduction was (riveting might be too strong, interesting not strong enough) captivating.

Essays by anthropologists about fat. While we all know that obesity is unhealthy, and, that many cultures value "curvy" women, there was still lots of interesting thoughts in here. I was especially interested in fat in the Rap culture as well as the thought that being overweight is an environmental issue, like having a too big car or house, and while plenty of people abhor those things, they are still status symbols, whereas being fat is the opposite, at least in mainstream white american culture.

Melissa A. Fabello says

This accessible collection of essays is a must-read for anyone interested in the social construction of fat.

The book contains fourteen essays written by various anthropologists who were asked to discuss an aspect of fat related to their studies in various cultures (many of which are Western, btw) – and these folks take that prompt and run with it, covering some of what you might expect (beauty ideals, hip hop culture, and body talk) and some of what you might not (religion, coffee, and olive oil). It gives a really interesting look at how fat doesn't mean any one thing, and how where you are in space and time helps to form your understanding.

The essays are more or less objective, if one believes in the concept of objectivity at all. There are certainly moments where it feels like the author is relating the cultural phenomenon they're telling you about to whatever base assumptions already exist for them. Sometimes they do that very explicitly (in the essay "Ideal," for instance), and sometimes it's implicit. The moments where I feel like the author is objectifying, exotifying, or appropriating their culture of study are rare (again, to the extent that one believes anthropology able to avoid those traps).

This would make a really interesting addition to a class looking at cross-cultural concepts of bodies.

My favorite essays are "White," "Talk," "Leaky," and "Indulgence."

I highly recommend it.

Cindy Leighton says

Wow. I read this as I am reviewing new curriculum for an IB Social Anthropology class I teach high schoolers. But I found many of the essays fascinating even beyond classroom use. Unfortunately the essays were uneven or I would have given it a five - more than half the essays were mind blowing WOW - but then too many paled in comparison.

I particularly enjoyed "Heavenly" which looks at relations between religion and eating - using "non-eaters" as an illustration. These young pubescent Catholic women stop eating, except for taking The Host. Fascinating discussion of how women have no power in the Catholic church, except that they can become

Saints. They can control their eating. Men can give up power and wealth to show their devotion - women traditionally have neither of these, so can only give up eating.

Lots of great discussions of the association of thinness with wealth and upper class; Brazilians showing off plastic surgery as a sign of wealth; the highly racialized association of whiteness and wealth and thinness in many countries; Globesity; how women use "fat talk" to bond with other women and "perform" their identity as girls; Phat and fat in male rappers - consuming power, food and richness; and even fat porn (can't use that in high school!)

And I really enjoyed the first essay "Ideal" which explores where our differing ideals about the human body come from around the world. The anthropologist studies in Niger where stretch marks are considering beautiful and women are fattened intentionally as a sign of wealth and beauty. Obviously in places where food is scarce, being fat is a sign of luxury and of successful men who can afford to fatten up their women. But it is more than a sign of wealth. Thin women are considered to "look like a man" just as rounder men are considered feminine. "In the West, by contrast, where women and men are now considered to be essentially similar, women are expected to resemble men in ways bodily as well: hard muscles, able movement, none-too-exaggerated curves."

I love a book that makes me think, gives me new perspectives on things, make me go "Wow, that's so cool I hadn't thought about that!" Lots of those moments in this collection.

Lindsey Stieber says

I read this book a few years back and really enjoyed it!! I have a degree in Cultural Anthropology, so this book was right up my alley. It was very engaging, to the point that it many of the essays read like novels. The book was very informative about how other cultures look at Fat.

Melissa says

This is a collection of essays about fat. Some were more interesting than others, but I think the book did a good job of presenting the subject in a well-rounded and fair manner. From the delicacies of Italian olive oil to fat porn and back to the female quest for holiness through the loss of fat, the book looks at fat through different cultural eyes and shows that fat has many different meanings.

Hazel says

really wonderfully good - it's so nice to read people talking about fat in a way that is not immediately related to bodies and hate, and the one essay that is in there about body image and fat is very positive. besides that, a couple essays on food and culture, which I love.

Jackie says

This would make a great reader for a medical anthropology or anthropology of nutrition class. The essays make fat studies easy to read and digestible (ha!), and I can see students getting a lot out of discussing the essays.

In particular, I found the last few essays to be of interest, from participant-observation of why people at Starbucks request low-fat milk but agree to add whipped cream to their order. The discussion of the social phenomenon of Spam in Hawaiian culture made for interesting reading and resonated with my experiences as a past and hopefully future tourist.

I've also had personal experience with Alli, the fat blocking drug, so the essay on Flow-cal in Brazil made me laugh while putting into a larger cultural context why women use the drug.

One thing I knew nothing about but was especially enlightened on was fat porn, which garners two separate essays.

This diverse collection of anthropological essays makes for fun reading no matter if the reader is a student or simply interested in fat.

Dana says

Read through this quickly and intend to use it for my Fall multiculturalism course

Allison says

Really great read for the most part. I didn't read all the chapters, but skimmed them and read thoroughly through the ones I want to use in a class for Cultural Anthropology. The best chapters were the ones on Fat Culture in Niger and the Fat Culture in Sweden. Talk about polar opposites. I can't wait to compare those with our American culture among a bunch of 18 year olds. ha!

Jodi says

This book promises to make you think about fat in lots of new ways and that is exactly what it does. Although this is a book on 'anthropology' it is very easy to read and also a very enjoyable read. It is very intelligently written and is sure to make you aware of issues surrounding fat that you weren't aware of previously.

This book, like Fat Is a Feminist Issue which I also read (finally!) recently, leaves you with lots of food for thought.

The standout essays for me were the first and last ones featured in the book.

Rebecca Popenoe essay on villages in Niger where women try to be as fat as possible was as fascinating as it was disturbing. I think being force fed millet porridge to become as fat as possible in your youth is just as bad if not worse than a society being obsessed with thinness.

The final essay on the activist group Pretty Porky and Pissed Off was funny, and intelligent and fiery ...and made me want to march on the streets and join the group members in throwing peanut butter sandwiches at people. (I agree with the need for advocacy and the sandwich throwing bit just sounded really fun.)

The essay on olive oil was very good as well and made me want to put good quality extra virgin oil on something and eat it, immediately.

The essays are each quite short and the book is short so I don't want to write too much and give too much away to those that are yet to read this book.

I did have one quibble with this book though, and that is in the quality of the nutritional information it gave about fat. I know that this topic is really beyond the scope of this book. I understand that. This book would be absolutely hideous if it had a weight loss diet plan at the back of it!

I'd not have said anything if the dietary fat information had been neutral, but it wasn't neutral. Unfortunately this book was very dietary fat phobic, and reinforced some of the worst myths about dietary fat being bad for our health and something to fear and avoid at all costs.

Not being unreasonably scared of dietary fat is important and is very much tied in with accepting fatness and fat people and our own fat, I feel, and so I'd like to set some of those myths straight, briefly.

Embracing fats is also very good for your physical health!

Dietary fat information interlude

In the brilliant book The Diet Delusion: Challenging the Conventional Wisdom on Diet, Weight Loss and Disease and Good Calories, Bad Calories: Fats, Carbs, and the Controversial Science of Diet and Health (Vintage) Gary Taubes explains that:

1. Saturated fat and cholesterol in the diet DO NOT cause heart disease.
2. Your body needs saturated fat and cholesterol to function properly.
3. The 'calories in, calories out' mantra is a myth. Overweight and obese people often eat no more calories, or even less, than their thinner counterparts
4. Dietary fat, including saturated fat, is not a cause of obesity. Refined and easily digestible carbs causing high insulin levels cause obesity.
5. Most people are overweight due to bad medical advice, NOT a lack of willpower, greed, laziness or because they lack 'moral fibre' or eat too much fatty and greasy foods!

For more on cholesterol see The Great Cholesterol Con: The Truth About What Really Causes Heart Disease and How to Avoid It

Other books which celebrate fats and oils and even the much maligned animal fats include Real Food: What to Eat and Why and Know Your Fats : The Complete Primer for Understanding the Nutrition of Fats, Oils and Cholesterol. The Weston A Price Foundation site is also very good and gives lots of information on why we need to eat real traditional foods to be healthy and why heavily processed foods are making us ill and fat, not old fashioned foods with fat in. One of my favourite quotes from the site is how you should always add enough butter to your bread so that when you've taken the first bite, the butter has 'teethmarks' in it!

The book Deep Nutrition: Why Your Genes Need Traditional Food explains why avoiding fats (including saturated fats) and other traditional foods in our diets can have negative consequences for you and also for your offspring but how these can be turned around by eating real food.

Most of the information we are given about fats is wrong. Saturated fat sounds scary and gluggy and is often described as 'artery clogging' and 'not heart healthy' but the truth is very different. Saturated fat isn't saturated by some sort of horrific 'glop' but by hydrogen! The same element that is in water.

Saturated fats such as coconut oil are an important part of a healthy diet. We need to eat them to be healthy. Don't believe all the saturated fat hype!

Trans fats and hydrogenated vegetable oils are to be avoided, but not all fats should be tarred with this same brush.

Non-factual mentions of dietary fat in the book include the following:

- Despite the fact fattening up diets were described as consisting of millet porridge and milk - which does have some fat in but also lots of sugar - the fattening up diet was summarised by the author as causing weight gain because it was high in fat.
- One essayist writes, 'Modern eaters don't need these fat calories in their diets' and comments that while it was necessary for people to eat lots of fatty natural foods in the past, this isn't true today where the only reasons we might eat them are prestige and luxury and taste. Our need for fats in the diet, including saturated fats, are the same now as they were hundreds of years ago! They taste good because we are supposed to be eating them.
- The fact a food contains cholesterol is commented on as if this is synonymous with it being unhealthy, which isn't at all true.
- The book claims that whipped cream hardens your arteries, which is just not true; the saturated fats = heart disease theory has been scientifically dis-proven.
- The idea that someone battling illness would try hard to avoid natural whole foods with cholesterol and saturated fat in, nutrients that are good for you and essential for health, and replace them with lots of pasta, a highly processed junk food which has nothing in it whatsoever that is good for you and is just turned into sugar by the body, is appalling. Sugar depresses the immune system and causes all sorts of problems, as is well known. Etc. etc.

This book is great but may be even more powerful if you can combine reading it with reading about why dietary fat is good for you and not the enemy.

Double fat acceptance has to be a good thing!

Again, I think they each feed into the other, no pun intended.

Annoying nutrition lecture over

This book has a great cover page design as well, I love it.

I highly recommend this book. I don't buy many books but I am glad I bought this one. I look forward to loaning my copy to a few friends and family members and then talking to them about what they thought about it, too.

Jodi Bassett, The Hummingbirds' Foundation for Myalgic Encephalomyelitis

Anette says

I expected lengthy takes on what it means to be fat when I picked up this book. It's 100% not that and thank gods for it.

The explanations of what it means to be fat and the healthy relationships we should have with it as championed by fat activists will be to you, after reading this book, only one side of the issue. The complexity with which this collection of essays approaches the subject of fat parachutes the reader into a brand new perspective of what fat truly is. What it is not is obvious.

There is a love- hate relationship with body fat and edible fat. There is quiet indulgence, there is sustenance, there is reverence and anger. Once you look at fat through the different pairs of glasses you are forced to pick up by the authors, you start seeing how single minded our motives of fatshaming are. I recommend this book to anybody looking to embrace fat.
