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FILM AND BOOK REVIEW

Film *Dumplin'* and Book *Puddin'*

Fletcher, Anne, director. *Dumplin'*. Echo Films, 2018.

Murphy, Julie. *Puddin'*. New York, NY: Balzer + Bray, 2018.

Part of a recent foray into adapting YA literature (e.g., *13 Reasons Why*, *To All the Boys I've Loved Before*, etc.) into Netflix Originals, 2018's *Dumplin'* brings Julie Murphy's 2015 novel of the same name to the small screen. Starring Danielle Macdonald (also of *Patti Cake\$*) as Willowdean "Dumplin'" Dixon and Jennifer Aniston as her mother, Rosie Dixon, the film explores the life of a fat teen in a small Texas town that's obsessed with its local beauty pageant, Miss Teen Bluebonnet. When Willowdean finds an old pageant entry form her recently deceased and beloved Aunt Lucy filled out as a teen but didn't turn in, she decides to enter the pageant herself as both a protest against the thin-and-beauty-centric town obsession and as a tribute to her also fat aunt who, in helping raise her, instilled in Will the confidence to love herself and body as is. Her best friend Ellen and two other "outsiders" – the also fat Millie Michalchuck and the down-with-the-patriarchy Hannah – join the revolution and enter the pageant as well, even after Will, in a line straight from the book, protests: "I'm not the Joan of Arc of fat girls. OK? This is a bad idea. Go home."

But none of the girls go home and, despite obstacles and ups and downs in their confidence along the way, they shake up Miss Teen Bluebonnet by daring to take up space on a stage that had, until them, no room for fat bodies. For teen viewers, this representation is doubled as, on the small screen that frames that pageant stage, a variety of fat actresses in a variety of roles (from the teens to the aunt to a drag queen and more) prove that fat comes in diverse bodies and personalities that go beyond the old tropes of sidekick, joke, or villain. And that dare to do what fat people, as most media tends to show us, "shouldn't" do – like float confidently in a swimsuit in the community pool (in an opening scene) and walk that pageant stage in a swimsuit that, when standing next to your best friend reads, "Every body is a swimsuit body" (to a standing ovation from the crowd). This representation coupled with the utter lack of a weightloss narrative makes *Dumplin'*, overall and like its source material, a body-positive film that works to subvert the thin-centric norms and ideologies that storylines and castings in the majority of teen films perpetuate.

In fact, Will – in the body she's in and without having to lose weight or even try – gets to enjoy a full range of dramas usually reserved for thin teens (the default protagonists) in such high school flicks: falling for the seemingly-unattainable-yet-somehow-into-you boy/girl, falling out with your best friend only to make up by the end, rebelling against parents, dealing with enemies and bullies, losing loved ones, etc. While some of these generic dramas or plotlines are problematic (i.e., the romance subplot where finally "getting the guy" in the last scene becomes a marker of the female protagonist's success/worth), the very fact that a fat actress/character is given these plotlines is subversive for a teen movie. Such casting offers a critical

argument – you don’t have to lose weight *first* in order to live – for fat (and thin) teens to witness.

But while weightloss isn’t the narrative, weight, body image, and body positivity are critical elements of the film just as they were in the book. Will’s intense dislike of the pageant stems from her strained relationship with her thin mom, a long-time director of the pageant who, unlike her sister Lucy, “conquered” her own struggles with weight as a teen right before entering high school and winning Miss Teen Bluebonnet herself. We learn about both Rosie’s weightloss “victory” and Lucy’s death (vaguely attributed to her weight) in an important scene after Will is suspended from school for kneeing the school bully (who’d been making fun of Millie) in the groin. Here, the plus-size Macdonald-as-Will faces off over the hood of the car with the thin Aniston-as-Rosie and we learn that Will’s mother has pressured her to lose weight Will’s whole life, citing her own weightloss and pageant win as positives and now using Lucy’s death as a cautionary tale for what might happen to Will if she doesn’t at least try to lose weight. This scene reframes Will’s decision to compete in the pageant as just the most recent manifestation of an impressive determination to love herself as-is in the face of a parent’s insistent pressure to change and conform to thin-centric norms. Her determination isn’t perfect. It falters, particularly as she continues to grieve her aunt and deal with a romantic relationship. But it also, over time, impresses Will’s mother who also rethinks her understanding of Lucy’s life and ends the film visibly and entirely proud of Willowdean – just as she is.

While the lack of a weightloss narrative and the change in a parent’s viewpoint remain positive aspects of the film adaptation, much of the complexity of the book – Will’s inner thoughts and struggle with losing and regaining her body confidence/positivity, Aunt Lucy’s role in Will’s life, a love triangle, etc. – is lost as whole plotlines are boiled down to such moments as the car scene. Or as whole characters are cut: a disabled teen who joins the revolution, a “husky” football player who offers a male character whose size is seen as an athletic plus. Or as castings and characterizations are simplified or implied: Hannah goes from half Dominican and openly lesbian to vaguely Latinx and hardcore feminist. In my original review (Shelton 2017) of the novel *Dumplin’*, I critiqued Murphy for not pushing the threads of intersectionality in her novel even more. Unfortunately, while the movie plays up the body positivity aspects of the novel, it wasted the opportunity to highlight (and push) those issues of race, gender, and sexuality that Murphy does indeed include in her work but that were flattened out in the film.

Luckily, that complexity returns (and that intersectionality is pushed even more) in *Puddin’*, Murphy’s companion novel to *Dumplin’* which also came out in 2018. The novel picks up the story of fellow fat misfit contestant and surprise first-runner-up winner Millie Michalchuck who, in the film, steals the pageant spotlight with her vintage swimsuit and sunglasses glam and her powerhouse vocal performance for the talent competition. In the new novel, not long after the pageant is over, Millie is moving on to more of the dreams she’s carefully listed in her journal – mainly to not return to the Daisy Ranch fat camp for the ninth time and, instead, to attend a journalism summer seminar at UT Austin. No longer willing to share in her mother’s obsession with dieting and fear of not being thin, Millie has decided to follow her passion and become a news anchor (with the explicit goal of breaking ground as a fat person in front of the news camera). The book alternates viewpoints, also following Millie’s new and unlikely friendship with Callie Reyes (the mean-girl and pageant contestant who briefly came between Will and her best friend Ellen) from *Dumplin’*.

We find that despite Will's observations in the novel and Millie's appearance in the film, Millie isn't the naïve optimist she appeared to be in *Dumplin'*. She struggles just as much as Will to hold onto her confidence and body positivity, especially in the face of her mother's relentless dieting and belief there's a thin Millie waiting to be released as well as other students' relentless teasing at school. She absolutely hears what others say about her body and her fashion choices:

Amanda gives me a knowing look. The two of us have spent the last few years ignoring all the looks and jokes from our peers. It's not like we don't hear it, but there came a time when we had to make the decision to pretend we didn't hear it, or just let ourselves drown in it (252)

And still, Mille has made a choice to be herself, to accept and love the body she's in and to live her life *now* instead of waiting (as she did in the past) for the summer she "finally" comes home thin from fat camp.

Callie, we find out, isn't just a one-dimensional villain. Instead, she's also a teen struggling with where she fits as a Latinx with a Mexican father and abuela she doesn't live with and a white mother whose remarriage to a white stepfather gives her two white stepsiblings and makes her the only, as she puts it, brown person in the house. Kicked off the dance team she's devoted her life to, she begins to realize her pity for fat Millie is misplaced and that she can learn from her new friend's optimism and approach to life. Millie, likewise, is stunned that Callie is struggling when she seems to have it all: "I thought I had her pegged. Pretty girl, dance team assistant captain, dream boyfriend [...]" but that was only the story of herself she wanted me to see" (317). Murphy's focus on these once secondary characters and the bond they build after the pageant expands on a theme started in *Dumplin'*: people (fat *and* thin) are more complicated than our first impressions of them. Indeed, *Puddin'* is a book about perspective and stories, the ones we think we know and the ones that become clearer when we refocus. As Millie's boyfriend Malik says, "You think you've got it all figured out, but it's like camerawork. You adjust your position, even slightly, and suddenly you're telling a different story. Seeing a new world" (326).


For me, as an adult now well-versed in fat activism and fat acceptance movements, much of the book – as with *Dumplin'* – verges on didactic, particularly as Millie takes on the role of initiating Callie into the fat acceptance discourse and community. But, as I've also said of *Dumplin'*, I'm not the intended audience. It would have been revolutionary for my 16-year-old self to have Millie and Willowdean's stories in my life. To see them engage with a college student like Iris who introduces Millie to the slogan "Riots not diets" and the idea of Fat Girl Pride. To see Millie navigate school desks, restaurant booths, and movie theater seats. To see Millie talk Callie through saying the word fat instead of avoiding it like it's a dirty word. To see Millie take a stand against society and those who told her "no" based on her size alone. To see her *consciously* make the decision to not believe in the "thin girl within" and instead live her life *now* in her body *as is*. All of these moments are entry points for teen readers – fat and thin alike – into a complicated and subversive fat acceptance discourse that they might not have known existed. They are an opportunity to refocus, to come out of a reading experience with new lenses teens can use to view the world and their struggles with the fat phobia and ableism they encounter on a daily basis.

Indeed, though the *Dumplin'* movie, in flattening out much of the complexity of the novel, might not have lived up to *all* my expectations, it, along with both books, is part of

an important and diverse world Murphy is building in the unlikely space of small-town Clover City, Texas. In fact, for many teens more inclined to binge Netflix than to keep up with the latest YA literature, the movie becomes a gateway to that larger world Murphy has created, inviting those same teen viewers to dive deeper into Willowdean and learn more about Millie through the novels. And to see disability, race, and sexuality all widely represented in their larger cast of friends.

Reference

Shelton, Sarah A. 2017. "Dumplin': Go Big or Go Home by Julie Murphy." *Fat Studies* 6 (2):237–40. doi:[10.1080/21604851.2017.1286881](https://doi.org/10.1080/21604851.2017.1286881).

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