



Defining, Managing, and Dictating Children's Bodies: Discourses of "Good" Food and the Politics of "Growing"

—Lauren Bosc

Hodge, Deborah. *Up We Grow! A Year in the Life of a Small, Local Farm*. Photog. Brian Harris. Toronto: Kids, 2010. 32 pp. \$16.95 hc. ISBN 1-55453-561-3. Print.

Hodge, Deborah. *Watch Me Grow! A Down-to-Earth Look at Growing Food in the City*. Photog. Brian Harris. Toronto: Kids, 2011. 32 pp. \$16.95 hc. ISBN 1-55453-618-4. Print.

In the discourse regarding fat bodies and the construction of "obesity" and "overweight" signifiers, Deborah Lupton suggests that the increased focus on children's bodies in relation to their size functions as an attempt to "regulate and manage" (42) children generally. In particular, the rhetoric of such governmental interventions as mandatory educational curricula and school lunch programs implemented in elementary and junior high schools has shifted from a focus on fitness and "healthy" food options to a focus on weight control (42). This shift is also apparent in national media outlets such as the *Globe and Mail*, which published in 2012 an extensive, three-part series on "children's fitness and education," beginning with a discussion of "the war on child obesity" as the

cornerstone of the series (Hammer and Baluja). Serving as an example of how pervasive the conflation between health and body size is in general public discourse, the article functions to normalize and concretize this conflation as though it is based on empirical evidence. While claims such as "Canadian children are suffering an epidemic of inactivity that contributes to rising obesity rates and weaker academic performance" (Hammer and Baluja) generally are unsubstantiated and contradicted by academic research (Lupton 43), the ideology that grounds them is sustained by the fear associated with the threat of the fat or "obese" child.

A number of children's picture books focusing on "healthy" food choices recently published in Canada can be read usefully within the context of this public

anxiety. These books, among them *The Good Garden: How One Family Went from Hunger to Having Enough* by Katie Smith Milway, *Potatoes on Rooftops: Farming in the City* by Hadley Dyer, *Down to Earth: How Kids Help Feed the World* by Nikki Tate, and *Why Are You Doing That?* by Elisa Amado and Manuel Monroy, aim to educate children on what is “healthy” to consume, with the ultimate goal of affecting children’s eating habits. My detailed analysis, from a fat studies perspective, of two such books—*Up We Grow! A Year in the Life of a Small, Local Farm* and *Watch Me Grow! A Down-to-Earth Look at Growing Food in the City*, both by Deborah Hodge—raises questions as to who is responsible for addressing, defining, or substantiating the notion of “childhood obesity” (Lupton 41) and how they implicate both the children who are to read these books and the adults who purchase them. These texts, published a year apart from each other, can be compared easily in terms of how they communicate the value of food in the context of health while featuring very different contexts, that of eating in the city and in rural communities. While the two books reviewed here do not discuss issues of fatness directly or purport to function as weight-controlling programs for children, they nevertheless are teaching tools for children to learn about food and food production, and both distinguish between food items that are to be valued and considered “healthy” and those that are not. This ascription of value judgments to particular food consumption and production practices

works to dictate to children the appropriate way to grow—that is, to grow up and not out.

Organized around each season, Hodge’s *Up We Grow!* provides readers with lots of information regarding the cycle of food production and consumption at a small, community-based farm in Abbotsford, British Columbia. The book, which features full-page, high-quality photographs of the farm and its inhabitants, attempts to bridge an assumed gap in knowledge of readers regarding how food is made and why it is important to foster an “appreciation of the importance of small, local farms” and the food these farms produce. Hodge opens her narrative with the note that “[o]n a small farm not too far from the city, farmers are growing healthy, delicious food for you and me to eat” (3). In doing so, she situates herself in relation to her narrative and intended message: that food produced locally and communally is inherently “healthy” and “good” for children to eat. In addition to this distinction, Hodge returns to the notion of “growth” in order to describe maturing food explicitly and to describe and subsequently prescribe the norms for growing children implicitly. It is this rhetoric that Hodge continues to use as the framework for her companion title, *Watch Me Grow! A Down-to-Earth Look at Growing Food in the City*.

This second text, albeit also about growth, shifts its teaching space from the rural farm to the urban city and focuses more on the importance of discovering

locally sourced food than on the production of that food. In this title, the four sections no longer revolve around the growing seasons but instead emphasize tasks of growing, sharing, eating, and caring for food and others while living in urban spaces. As opposed to relying on nature and the seasons to determine one's consumption cycle, readers are encouraged to seek out city spaces where food is grown and to start their own garden spaces in or around "backyards, rooftops, boulevards, vacant lots, fire escapes, balconies, patios, windowsills and kitchen counters" (7) in order to source their own "healthy" food choices. Featuring full-page, colour photographs similar to those of the earlier book, this time of the greater Vancouver area, *Watch Me Grow!* depicts as normative possibilities afforded to those who have the time, space, and privilege to grow, share, and eat their own food, acts that Hodge connects explicitly to "caring" about one's community, friends, and physical body. While the implied reader is assumed to have access to these privileges, the actual reader may not be able to occupy this position. While each text describes food production and consumption from different perspectives and in varying spaces, the narrative style, audience, and tools with which value judgments are made about particular consumption practices are shared by both titles.

As texts of children's literature, Hodges's titles are part of what Mavis Reimer and Perry Nodelman describe as "a body of texts defined by [their] intended

audience" (79): children. Each text, written in a way that speaks directly to the child who is reading it, describes and contextualizes the images included alongside the text and follows up this description with a direct question to the reader. For example, *Up We Grow!* includes such questions on almost every page—"Would you like to visit the farm?" (3); "What kind of seed would you like to plant?" (4)—imposing a layer of "surface ideology" that creates a relationship between narrator and child (Hollindale 28). Each text describes itself as written for children aged four to seven, but the structure of the narrative actually implies a relationship between an adult teacher and a child student. The teaching function of the text directs the attention and interaction expected of the child audience. This transfer functions on multiple levels of ideology as well, as each text carries what Peter Hollindale describes as "quiescent and unconscious ideology" (30) that interpellates its readers as conforming to their part of the pedagogical relationship. It is important, then, to enact a "reading against the [children's] text" (Reimer and Nodelman 156) in order to uncover how Hodge uses both of her narratives and their assumed audiences to subscribe to larger systems of fat phobia.

In *Childhood*, Chris Jenks posits that it is difficult to constitute childhood without making reference to adulthood. In particular, he observes, "the status of childhood has its boundaries maintained through the crystallization of conventions and discourses into



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lasting institutional forms” (3) such as the family and educational institutions. Jenks goes on to discuss the child as savage, natural, and social, explaining that the language used to describe the child and children—for example “having a child” and “being a child”—is constructed in such a way as to render the category as normal and natural (6). For Jenks, it is the metaphor of “growth” that functions to concretize this construction and to tie the “natural child” to the “social child”: a child who “grows” developmentally and socially is normal (7), so that the metaphor presupposes what a child will become (9). Additionally, Jenks makes clear that the notion of childhood is always contextually constructed and imagined in relation to its growth.

The children in *Up We Grow!* and *Watch Me Grow!* are imagined as those who understand their relationship to the food they consume. In *Up We Grow!*, children are implicated directly in the production of their own food. They are responsible for helping with the planting, maintenance, and harvest of the food items their families produce on their small, local farm. In this depiction of childhood, “healthy” children are photographed next to similarly “healthy” adults, a decision that demonstrates the implied outcome of the growth expected of the children featured in the narrative. Readers are assured that “owning the land together lets the farmers share the work, the worries and the satisfaction of growing fresh, healthy food” (6) and that “[o]lder farmers teach younger ones, and everyone, including the children, takes part in the important work of growing food” (18). In this narrative, sharing the idea of what it means to be healthy from generation to generation allows the plants and the children to grow in a normatively “healthy” way. This rhetoric is also reflected in Milway’s *The Good Garden*, in which

the protagonist, María Luz, turns to her father to learn how to find the lost “goodness” of the land (3) and the healthy food it produced. In *Up We Grow!*, readers are asked, “What job would you like best?” (7), and they in turn are invited to become a part of the production of healthy, growing food and bodies. The investment expected to be made by the readers of each text in producing their own food for personal consumption in order to grow in a particular way is made explicit in the section in this book on summer. After planting and planning for the food to grow, Hodge explains to readers that, when summertime comes, “everything is growing!” (12), the exclamation encouraging enthusiasm toward this growth. Hodge’s use of words such as “juicy,” “plump,” and “sweet” (12) to describe the fruits and vegetables growing on the farm functions to attach positive value to this food and its “healthy” qualities. So much so that when she states, “You’re growing, too!” and asks, “How big are you?” (12), it is implied that she is searching for an answer that speaks to children’s height or social maturity, garnered from the participation in their own food production, and not to the possibility that they are larger than they should be.

Similarly, in *Watch Me Grow!*, the children depicted within the text are responsible for ensuring their own healthy growth along with the growth of their own food in their urban context. They are depicted planting, watering, and picking their backyard garden food in many photos, all smiling and looking delighted to be

taking part in such rituals. In the cycle of production and consumption, which in this text follows the four acts of “growing, sharing, eating, and caring” (3), children in the narrative and those interacting with it become “gardeners” (4) and are given the responsibility of undertaking each act in order to remain healthy, helpful subjects. In this text, the action of “eating” plays a particularly important role, in that growing and sharing result in eating, which in turn results in caring, as the narrative describes the cycle. As Hodge points out, “All across the city, children and grown-ups are eating food they have planted and harvested themselves” (20), implying that the decision to do so is an act of caring for their labours and one another. At the end of the “Eating” section—where Hodge exclaims, “Are you hungry? Let’s eat!” (27)—the rhetoric shifts to the importance of caring and its role in the alternative production of food.

While the title of Hodge’s first text invites readers to join in the journey of growth, exclaiming “Up We Grow!” together, the title of her second text demands that readers watch the growth occurring—hailing readers literally to “Watch Me Grow!”—and take note of how such “healthy” growth looks and sounds. Children and adults are designed to reflect the ideology of growth that structures each text: healthy growth, it is clear, looks like slim children and adults smiling as they take responsibility for the food they consume. At no point in either text is there a picture of an adult or a child

who might be considered fat; the narrative makes clear that those who take the job of eating seriously enough to grow their own food will also permit their bodies to grow up—properly and normatively—and not out. The presence of fat bodies in either of these texts would undermine the purported goal of promoting healthy bodies through the consumption of healthy food, and as such, they are excluded. This observation also holds true for the texts by Amado and Monroy, Dyer, Milway, and Tate, none of which, in making connections between children and their role in food production and consumption, features illustrations or photographs of fat children or adults.

Functioning as threats to a “healthy” society, fat children are understood as diseased or ill and in need of treatment (Lupton 34). The fat body, as discussed by scholar Kathleen LeBesco, is understood as “repulsive, funny, unclean, obscene, and above all, as something to lose” (16). People who are perceived as having fat bodies face stigma and discrimination for their fatness, as fat bodies are commonly presumed to be attributable to gluttony, to the need to fill “a deeply disturbed psychological need,” to irresponsibility, or to an inability “to control primitive urges” (Farrell 6). While such perceptions of fat bodies are ascribed generally to adults, fat children are also viewed as threats to normative expectations of body size and growth. Amy Erdman Farrell notes that, in a number of European studies of fat children, children’s fatness is blamed on

“weak willed fathers” and “overindulgent mothers” whose actions lead to children who are “psychologically stunted in an infantile state” (79). Fat children, who indulge in “continued and excessive gratification at a primitive level” (79), are perceived as unable to control their consumption and are presumed to be dependent upon their caregivers to supply their food needs. In a fat-phobic society, health becomes synonymous with a thin body, regardless of the actual health of said body. It is through this lens that the narratives of Hodge’s texts can be seen to reinforce the troubling binaries between healthy and unhealthy, good and bad, thin and fat, in ways that celebrate or denigrate inherently the bodies of their readers. For the fat child or the parent of a fat child who comes across this text, this narrative can be read as the solution for their fat bodies, producing shame initially and hope eventually for a thinner body and healthier food options. This rhetoric is also used in *Why Are You Doing That?* Each question the young boy asks adults about why they are producing food in the ways they do is answered by a suggestion that doing so will make the boy grow “tall and strong” (Amado and Monroy 3, 4). The hope for a thin eventuality is grounded ultimately in the notion that “caring for the future” (*Up We Grow!* 30) and for “our future” (*Watch Me Grow!* 30) is the best thing we can do for our bodies and health in the long term, an observation that repositions an understanding of the emphasis of growth in the titles of Hodge’s texts.

The final notes in both *Up We Grow!* and *Watch Me Grow!* suggest that participating in a form of alternative food production such as a small farm is a way to “care for the future” (*Up We Grow!* 30). Specifically, Hodge states that, as “the soil becomes richer, the farmers earn a living and we all grow up strong and healthy, eating delicious food from farms in our own area” (*Up We Grow!* 30), adding that, “[w]hen we grow our own food and keep the soil healthy, we are caring for ourselves” (*Watch Me Grow!* 30). The implication is that those who do not share such values do not care about themselves, their children, and presumably their futures. While these texts, by focusing on local food production and consumption, address explicitly social inequalities that are perpetuated by the rising costs of “healthy” organic foods in supermarkets, they are also, ironically, addressed implicitly to privileged children and adults who have access to alternative systems of food production: only those who can afford the time and the money can invest in these practices. The narratives of *Up We Grow!* and *Watch Me Grow!* suggest that participation is simple, a suggestion that aligns itself with the rhetoric disseminated by many activists of the alternative-food movement (Guthman 161). Julie Guthman makes this point in *Weighing In: Obesity, Food Justice, and the Limits of Capitalism*, in which she notes that much of the work performed by alternative-food advocates—placing value on the pleasure that comes from eating “fresh,” local food and seeing it

as the antidote to obesity, for example—is complicit in reinforcing bodily norms and “problematizing fat bodies” (144). In the effort to effect change in how and what Western societies eat, the conflation of “good” and “healthy” food with “local” and “organic” food options actually functions to reinforce the idea that obesity is “evidence of injustice, with lack of access to good food assumed to be the cause” (Guthman 154). Guthman’s critique of the alternative-food movement and its advocates offers a basis for deconstructing the rhetoric and ideology present in Hodge’s children’s books. The question Guthman directs to these advocates can also be asked of Hodge’s texts: “Who gets to define lack of real food as a health disparity or bigness as a disease?” (154). It seems clear that the answer is not “children or their caretakers.”

While on the surface Hodge’s texts act as windows for children to develop an understanding of what they eat and where it comes from—a goal that is not inherently malicious, indeed seems salutary—the underlying and “unconscious ideology” (Hollindale 30) of each narrative remains a platform for reinforcing binaries of healthy and unhealthy or good and bad food and the thin and fat bodies that result from choices made between these binaries. Each text focuses on the imperative of growth in a way that leaves no room for alternative growth within the alternative-food movement; children are taught by these narratives,

directly and indirectly, that eating is an act of caring for themselves and those around them. For readers, the threat of a fat future lies just under the surface ideology

in each text and is ultimately passed to those who ingest these principles along with their local, “healthy” food options.

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