

THE FAT OF THE LAND

THROUGHOUT HISTORY, A MAN'S BODY SIZE HAS ALWAYS BEEN AN INDICATION OF HIS WEALTH AND POWER. NOW IT HAS BECOME A SOCIAL CONDEMNATION OF HIS LIFESTYLE, EMOTIONAL HEALTH AND INTELLIGENCE. BUT ARE THE ACCUSATIONS FAIR... OR EVEN TRUE?

Words Antonella Gambotto-Burke

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William Leith, the 46-year-old British author of *The Hungry Years: Confessions of a Food Addict* (Bloomsbury), wants to know if men are the new women. This, he feels, is the million-dollar question. The evidence? Department stores glutted with beauty treatments for men. An increasing emphasis on male fashion. Macho slimming programmes (the Gladiator Diet, Calorie Restriction, the Paleo Diet). Ad campaigns featuring slender young males for Armani, Hugo Boss, Gucci, Calvin Klein. And, as with women, the cultural imperative to be slim is powerful, and yet men have never been more obese.

"I remember hunger expressed as an urge," Leith says, "something that quickly gets out of control, and the binge that used to follow was both a displacement activity and a form of self-punishment for having been out of control in the first place. That, I realised, is how you can make the connection between bingeing and anorexia – they are both displacements and self-punitive, albeit in different ways. It was a feeling of anxiety, rather than depression. Anxiety that built quickly, and then became a feeling of emptiness, a sense that something bad was going to happen, that I was lost, powerless, subject to huge forces beyond my control. Simultaneously, things around me, things that normally looked solid and reassuring, suddenly looked precarious. And by this time, usually, I would have blocked the feelings with a binge of some sort."

"Obesity," intoned US Surgeon General Richard Carmona with the straightest of faces, "is a greater threat than terrorism." Concern or hyperbole? The corporate kickback behind his words is explained by Thomas Moore in *Lifespan: Who Lives Longer – And Why* (Simon & Schuster): "Most leading obesity researchers are either consultants to diet or pharmaceutical companies, conduct research for these companies, presenting their results at conferences sponsored by these companies, or sometimes all three." He notes that research that sets out to disprove the diet industry's position is never funded.

THE SKINNY CONSPIRACY

Few know that the American Obesity Foundation (campaigners to have obesity classed as a disease) and the International Obesity Task Force (responsible for numerous World Health Organization obesity studies) are bankrolled by pharmaceutical companies and diet enterprises. Government agencies, food companies, drug houses, medical and health professionals, residential weight loss centres, magazines, advertising agencies and weight loss companies all have an interest in the creation of an "obesity epidemic". Billions of dollars in consultations, say, or weight loss programmes, bariatric and cosmetic surgery (tummy tucks, liposuction), diet foods, diet drugs and stock prices.

Professor William L. Weis of Seattle University's Albers School of Business and Economics revealed in a US study that the obesity industries skimmed \$315 billion from the public purse last year. In layman's terms, that's almost three per cent of the US economy.

The means for classifying what the French refer to as *avoir du pois* is simple. Divide your weight in kilograms by the square of your height in meters and the result is your Body Mass Index (BMI), the international

standard for determining obesity since the 1980s. A BMI of 25 or more is considered overweight for those over 18, and 30 or more is obese. The US National Institutes of Health dropped the threshold from BMI 27.8 to 25 in 1998, and overnight, 30 million Americans became bona fide lard asses.

That which BMI doesn't reveal is, of course, how fat is distributed or the percentage of body fat. It has been pointed out that according to BMI calculations, most of the US National Basketball Association is overweight or obese, as are all weightlifters.

Let Me Eat Cake: A Life Lived Sweetly (Sceptre) is the irresistible memoir of Paul Arnott's lust for dessert, and also reveals a man unperturbed by the dimensions of his hull. "Is fat really the enemy, though?" Arnott asks. "Obviously fat in hardened arteries is nobody's friend, but fat stored around women's bodies can be very beautiful. The Body Mass Index is the Witchfinder General of our times, inaccurate and alarmist in equal measure. You'd have to be mad not to have a sense of balance about fat, of course – if you can't get up the stairs, then maybe it's time to skip the treacle tart – but I'm a great mistruster of anti-fat statistics. Whatever happened to genial Friar Tuck, fat and happy? For men like me, Homer Simpson is the hero de nos jours. *Mmmmm donuts...*"

Arnott's serenity is rare. "Look," he says, "if my penis disappeared under folds of stomach blubber it would be something to think about, but for now I'm fat-neutral on how I feel as a man. More generally, I'd say the guy who needed a window taken out before they could take him away on a crane to hospital – and they found sweet wrappers in his layers of fat – may benefit from an hour or two with a life coach. I wish I had a bit more money so I could buy some decent clothes, but then I chose to have four kids instead. Tough."

The "obesity epidemic", has, of course, killed many people, if not exactly in the manner predicted. Weight-loss pharmaceuticals are not only improbably lucrative, but notorious in terms of side-effects. Fen-Phen or Phen-Fen, a treatment marketed as capable of triumphing over human will, was, in 1996, ingested by six million Americans (18 million prescriptions were written). On July 8, 1997, in conjunction with the release of a Mayo Clinic study, the US Food and Drug Administration issued a warning: there was evidence of heart valve problems, primary pulmonary hypertension, neurotoxicity of the brain, and other grave complications associated with the use of these drugs. In September, 1997, the drugs were withdrawn. A major class-action suit is in progress.

Until the late 1970s, the overweight and obese – children included – were being prescribed amphetamines (two billion pills were consumed in 1970 alone), which may or may not explain behavioural disturbances in affected families and health problems suffered in later life. Other treatments were just as toxic. In 1989, over 47,000 complaints of side-effects were made about Phenylpropanolamine (marketed as Dexatrim, Accutrim, Dex-a-Diet, Diadex, Prolamine, Propagest, and Unitrol).

For those who prefer bleeding to Bazedrine and Lean Cuisine, there is weight loss surgery (WLS): intestinal bypass, gastric bypass, horizontal or vertical gastroplasty (stomach stapling), biliopancreatic diversion, jejunocolic bypass, stomach wrap, and truncal vagotomy. Possible fatal complications include cancer of the stomach, oesophagus, pancreas and bowel; kidney disease; liver disease; peritonitis due to leaks in the digestive tract; pulmonary embolism; and vascular thrombosis. In 2004, over 140,000 procedures were performed in the US. The price tag? Almost a billion US dollars.

BIG IS BEAUTIFUL?

Arnott is bewildered both by the association of self-loathing with body fat and the grotesque industry founded on the association. "Some men seem



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William Leith

to think their biggest life problem is their liking for toast and the 115 kilos this gets them on the scales," he marvels. "I believe that if these men wore T-shirts saying 'I like Toast!' or 'Big and Why Not?' and lost the covert element of scoffing, their eating life would be all happiness."

The fact that dieting has been shown to achieve the opposite of its stated aim – that is, to ultimately increase the dieter's weight – is somehow lost in the flurry of promises. A 1991 report published in the *New England Journal of Medicine* stated that those with fluctuating body weight are 70 per cent more likely to die of coronary disease than those with stable body weight, however heavy, cholesterol-loaded, or suffering from hypertension those stable body-weight types may be. Other side effects of dieting include anemia, anxiety, constipation, decreased attention span, depression, eating disorders, electrolyte imbalances, gall stones, gout, hair loss, high blood pressure, impaired sex drive, infertility, lethargy, osteoporosis, self-esteem issues, ulcers, weakness and death.

The trend of big men being ashamed of their intake is, Arnott believes, very new. "It used to be a familiar spectacle," he says, "the man mountain dabbing his forehead with his handkerchief as he sweated his way through a mound of curry and rice, Pavarotti-style. If they feel shame now I suspect it is almost entirely induced by the criticism of others, who in my opinion should keep their big traps closed. If you meet any rugby players in a carvery restaurant swigging beer, even the plumpest of them feel no shame whatsoever. In India, the Philippines and Samoa, a big man is a big man and all the prouder for getting there by sustaining an intake enough to feed a small village."

There are numerous clubs devoted to women who like their men broad. An FFA is a "Female Fat Admirer"; a BHM is a "Big Handsome Man." Meaty gay men even have their own emblem: the International Bear Brotherhood Flag. A masculinist gay subcultural evolution of the "girth and mirth" communities, Bears and Musclebears are mostly heavysset, mature and hirsute men. The popularity of Bears is thought to be a reaction to AIDS-related physical degradation and the unformed and generic quality of Abercrombie & Fitch youths. Bears who weigh 113kgs and over are classed as Chubbies; those who weigh over 181kgs are classed as Superchubs; their fans as Chubby Chasers. The three groups socialise at specific bars and events such as the national US annual Convergence. Sexual pageant titles such as "Mr Chubby International" and his counterpart, "Mr Chaser International" are also awarded every year.

Arnott deeply understands the appeal of size. "There is a Conservative politician in Britain called Nicholas Soames – Winston Churchill's grandson – and a woman once said of a night of passion with him that 'it was like having a wardrobe fall on top of you with the key sticking out of the front.' And the Sumo wrestler proves that attraction is more often to do with

power, wealth, or just plain self-belief. Let's face it, once the washboard stomach or the six-pack has loosened over your trousers we're all fat men together, yet the human race seems to procreate with unabated efficiency."

He points out that he and his wife didn't get to four children by accident. "Actually," he remembers, "we did. Apparently my element is water, and in the bath by candlelight I look not like Moby Dick but actually all right and worth a tumble, especially on my birthday, which I am glad to say is only two weeks away. I don't think she minds being seen out with the larger man, but she really hates it if I dress like a tramp."

American author, gourmand, and proud fat guy Steven A Shaw shares Arnott's effortless élan, arguing that above all, fat guys are better in bed. "The thin and the fit like to demonstrate their manliness by getting on top and banging away," he reasoned, "but no fat guy in his right mind would do the equivalent of 100 push-ups when he has the opportunity to lie on his back. Plus, do you know what the odds are of a girl getting off in the missionary position? If I have to tell you, you're obviously not a fat guy."

Instead of gleefully indulging in Big Guy Sports such as rugby, stone puts, or hammer throw, Leith decided to write a book about being fat, how it felt to be fat, and why he was fat mostly because these, he believes, were things that he was hiding from. "I think every fat person," he once said, "to a certain extent, hides from the truth." Being fat made him feel heavy and sort of creaky and sweaty and ungainly and unattractive; he wrote about how it affected his sex life; he wrote about what it felt like at the heart of a binge, and about his out-of-control drinking and drug-taking, and how he vomited and passed out at the same time, which, he correctly concluded, was "pretty disgusting."



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A WEIGHTY PROBLEM

Ultimately, Leith even feels oppressed by the *memory* of fat.

"I think fat people feel rotten about themselves partly because being fat is horrible," he muses, "and partly because, if you're fat, it's almost certainly because you have an eating problem, which in turn is almost certainly because you've got an emotional problem. So being fat is both the cause and effect of feeling rotten. Fat – or, at any rate, the state of being fat, lowers self-esteem. You see yourself negatively, and other people see you negatively, and you can tell, and that feels awful – although some people sort of escape into this area of negativity, this place where they are not quite taken seriously, which gives them a sort of free pass to come along to the party, because they don't have to compete in the same way as they might if they weren't fat. I never quite got like this, but I talked to people who were, and I think that, on one level, they were really lost and depressed."

According to a 2005 study published in the August issue of the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, the workplace is a significant contributing factor to obesity. Television viewing time and internet usage, it was discovered, are also strongly linked to obesity (measures to limit television

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Paul Arnott

viewing in children were shown by a recent international trial as effective in controlling obesity). The lifestyle of the modern male in particular is grossly sedentary, and decreasing parental supervision due to work schedules means the average child no longer exercises for enjoyment.

That said, the single greatest predictor of obesity in men is lower educational attainment. Middle-income men are, on average, more often more obese than their wealthier brothers. Interestingly, the higher the income and level of education, the more likely a man is to diet. Other studies show that weight loss efforts are linked to race: African-American men are the most confident; Hispanic men, the most likely to diet.

American journalist Laura Miller believes that our cultural spin on the fat as lobworms and warhogs is rooted in an obsession with class. She has written of the mania for slenderness and how it began around 1910, when peasant immigrants settled in America wanting to better themselves, and how generations of hard rural life created bodies equipped for physical labour and cycles of want and plenty: stocky and fat-storing. "The naturally svelte frames of old money elites have become the most elusive status symbol," she surmised, "a way of sorting out the riff-raff, and there remains a high correlation between poverty and obesity. Fat is the last front in our covert class war."

Leith is unforgiving. "Fat is a sign that, as a race, we can't handle prosperity."

Arnott agrees that the more economically elite the man, the likelier he is to live near an organic vegetable shop and have the time and equipment to steam his vegetables lightly and serve with fresh sea bass; the poorer population often lives in areas where this kind of produce is either unavailable or unaffordable. "However," he briskly announces, "I'm not one for excuses. If you sit on your backside night after night eating pizza and watching television you will end up fat and stupid, and poverty is no excuse."

American author Julian Dibble, an unabashed fan of Quarter Pounders with cheese, chocolate triple-thick shakes, Cuba Libres, cheese-laden canapés, two-inch-thick pastrami, corned-beef sandwiches, and Häagen-Dazs ice cream, recently braved manorexia by trying the extreme Calorie Restriction Diet – a diet whose central, radical premise is that the less you eat, the longer you'll live – for nine weeks. Why? Because he wanted "to find out what it looks, feels, and tastes like to commit to the ultimate in dietary trade-offs: a lifetime lived as close to the brink of starvation as your body can stand, in exchange for the promise of a life span longer than any human has ever known." For someone attracted to control, accomplishment, and power, he noted, this was the life. He also found that eventually, Calorie Restriction practitioners started to look weirder and weirder, like emissaries from a future he's not sure could ever feel like home.

GUILTY PLEASURES

"I think it's a mistake to look at weight as though it were a toxic substance," Dr Katherine Flegal, Senior Research Scientist at the US National Center for Health Statistics, remarked. "Weight is a physiological variable, everyone has to have some weight. It's not a toxic substance like lead, or cadmium that poisons you... the most recent survey show[s] almost no relationship between weight and mortality at all."

The US Center for Disease Control had reported that the number of

deaths attributable to overweight and obesity was around 400,000 per annum; Dr Flegal, in her capacity as team leader of the 2005 JAMA *Excess Deaths Associated With Underweight, Overweight, and Obesity* report, amended the final figure to fewer than 30,000. It seems the overweight actually have longer life expectancy than those of normal weight. "The take-home message from this study, it seems to me, is unambiguous," University of Southern California sociology professor Dr Barry Glassner told *The New York Times*. "What is officially deemed overweight these days is actually the optimal weight."

Undoubtedly because of negative kickback, one factor never mentioned in obesity studies is the role of breastfeeding in the creation of obese adults. New research shows that exclusive breastfeeding in the first six months of life almost halves the risk of childhood obesity. Despite this and strong recommendations by WHO to the contrary, only one per cent of children are still being breastfed at the age of two. The 2001 National Health Survey showed that the older the mother and the higher her educational level, the more likely she is to breastfeed, which conforms to the aforementioned findings: the higher the educational level of the male, the less likely he is to be obese.

"I wasn't breastfed," Arnott acknowledges. "And there are three particular sugary pleasures I love which are clearly breast related. The first is a crème caramel, with its soft white creamy cone topped with a dark and delicious caramel coating. The second is what is known in England as a Mr Kipling Fondant Fancy – the pink ones are tits and that is all there is to be said on the subject. The third is a Cadbury's Creme Egg – basically when you gnaw softly into the tip of one of those and suck out the wondrous filling you don't need to be Sigmund Freud to work out what's going on there."

Leith believes that he no longer experiences the engulfing hunger he wrote about in *The Hungry Years* because he spent a lot of time thinking about, and feeling, the emotions that his bingeing was concealing. "When you allow yourself to feel the emotion, it's almost certainly not as bad as you thought it was going to be," he shrugs. "That's because it has its roots in childhood, when you were much more vulnerable. For instance, being on my own, in the evening, would always give me this incredible sense of melancholy, which would often lead to a binge. But when you sit and think about it, you can unravel the whole thing and realise that this melancholy is not an accurate representation of your feelings at all, but some kind of stock response in your brain."

"It's really scary, and you want to run away from it, but when you finally face it, it's really not so scary. The thing that induces the binge, then, is a sort of enforced forgetting; you see shadows, and get scared, and binge. Facing it is much easier than you think."

Arnott remains less anguished about his ardour. "In this tricky life we need to take our pleasure where we can, and if you like a good marmalade sponge you should go for it. I think if we relaxed around food issues a bit more we'd be a lot happier and slimmer because happy people tend to walk, swim, go dancing, be filled with *joie de vivre*. If you're miserable you tend to stay indoors with a diet meal and then shove down a packet of cakes under the duvet on the quiet. Food has become yet another pressure, and where there is pressure, there is always a self-destructive response." ■