

Teachin' Books Episode 1.11 – Jes Baker's *Landwhale*

[Music: "Homer Said" by [Dyalla Swain](#)]

Jessica McDonald 0:10

Hey! This is Teachin' Books, a podcast all about the ways people teach, learn, and work with literature. I'm Jessica McDonald, and today I'm talking about how I have taught Jes Baker's memoir, called *Landwhale: On Turning Insults into Nicknames. Why Body Image is Hard, and How Diets Can Kick [I meant Kiss] My Ass.*

0:37

If you follow me on Instagram, or maybe Twitter -- I can't remember if I posted anything about this on Twitter -- you might know that I was planning this episode. Mostly because it's January of a new year, as of January tends to fall at the beginning of the year, and to me, January, for the last several years, as I've increasingly become, I don't know, a sort of killjoy in my own life, that's my that's my role, January is for me a whole bunch of bullshit really. Diet culture, "health and wellness," #Instatherapy, the pressures and the problems of self improvement, and January's focus on self improving, which by the way I spent many years of my life caught up in, and it's really still a struggle for me to detach from that whole discourse of January's promise and potential. I think Hannah McGregor said it best on a recent episode of *Witch, Please* -- episode... Book Two Episode Three. She said, "Truly I loathe the usual January energy of self-improvement discourse." And she also said, "it's the most fatphobic month of the year." And that really gets into something that we're going to talk about today through this memoir, through me talking about the teaching of this memoir.

2:10

So first up, before we get started, I'll just give you a content warning that I'm going to be talking quite generally, almost in no real detail but generally, about weight loss, diets, diet culture, and weight loss surgery as well. So, like I say, I'm not going to be really getting into much detail ,except to broadly describe what Jes Baker says about these things in her memoir. But if it's not a good time for you to be hearing about those topics, then feel free to turn off the episode now and join me next week. If you're in for the ride here then, keep listening.

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[Music: "Homer Said"]

3:00

Okay. So as I said, I'm going to talk about Jes Baker's memoir today: Landwhale. Baker is an author and an activist with a background working in mental health. She writes and speaks a lot about bodies and about body politics, about fatness, about so-called "health and wellness," every time I say that basically today, I'm gonna have sort of scare quotes around it so just imagine that I'm using those words with the hesitance that I think they need.

3:32

Landwhale is like I said a memoir -- memoir. It details experiences from Baker's life growing up and into adulthood, including her navigating the world as a fat person. And I'm just going to read a little snippet from the back cover. It says, "For anyone who grew up as a fat kid (or didn't, for that matter), who has traveled while fat, or who has simply lived in a fat body, Landwhale is a truthful and powerful account of the unforgiving ways our culture treats fatness, and how to live happily, and freely anyway."

4:11

I teach excerpts from this book, like chapters from it, I've never taught the whole book on its own, and the excerpts or the chapters that I choose are a little bit different depending on the class or the section or the context. But in general, I'll just sort of describe the, the gist of the chapters and excerpts that I tend to teach.

4:32

Baker describes her struggles with diet culture versus another framework another health framework that she has experience with and has been enthusiastic about but also struggles with, which is HAES or Health at Every Size. And she has a little bullet list, sort of describing HAES in a few different ways, which I'll read out a few of: "Health at Every Size celebrates body diversity, honors differences in size, age, race, ethnicity, gender, disability, sexual orientation, religion, class, and other human attributes. It challenges scientific and cultural assumptions. It values body knowledge and people's lived experiences. It encourages finding the joy and moving one's body, being physically active. And she continues to describe it. Oops -- Okay, dropped my book. Ummm what was I gonna say? So, Health at Every Size is not a perfect fit for Baker, and she describes how both she feels enthusiastic about aspects of it but of course struggles to actually put it into practice in her life, and that's part of the memoir really is the struggle between different forms of diet culture and then other health frameworks and Health at Every Size being one of them.

5:54

Other excerpts from the book that I choose for students are... There's one chapter where Baker relays her experiences going to Universal Studios. She's not able to fit the rides, and she ties that story, that

personal story, into into larger questions about fatness and accessibility and how spaces are designed for very particular kinds of bodies. She has another chapter, it could be the same chapter actually, on weight loss surgery and shaming versus not shaming people for body alterations in general, this idea of sort of being a traitor if you are a fat positive, body positive, or body neutral person who then decides to do a large body modification, like something like weight loss surgery.

6:41

In that section, she has kind of a list of questions really a huge paragraph long of questions that speak to these issues that I want to read a little bit out from. She asks, "How much are we allowed to change our bodies while still being body positive? Does that amount of change decrease, if we call ourselves part of the fat acceptance movement? Does the community get to vote you out if you go over a line? Where is the line?" So all along Baker is sort of struggling with this question of body alterations, and how we react to other people's choices to modify or alter their bodies. There's a chapter where she talks about how her body is read and surveilled differently as a fat traveler. And in that chapter, she also talks about the accessibility of planes for fat people or for people with bodies that don't really accord with the strict kind of parameters drawn by air travel. And she also, in that same section or chapter, relates the experience of getting sort of automatically coded as American because of the way her body looks because of this idea that her body must be American because it's unruly and undisciplined and it's a fat body.

8:06

Finally, there's a chapter I usually assign called "The Bulletproof Fatty." This chapter draws on Leslie Kinzel's work defining "the bulletproof fatty," which is a figure. This is a figure or a stereotype who is fearless who is invincible, defiant, fashion rule-breaking, has an online presence, Instagram-savvy, but who isn't actually real because behind the scenes, quote from Baker's book, "she still struggles to resist diet culture. She cries after dealing with the bigotry that surrounds her daily, and the expectation of her invincibility only isolates her." So the bulletproof fatty is a figure that pops up in body positive circles, for example on Instagram, and Baker sees a lot of problems with this kind of stereotypical figure, because it's a figure that really perpetuates unrealistic expectations. It's also a figure that seems to rely on a false front, putting up this sort of front of confidence and resilience when there's struggles going on beneath that. And it's a figure that doesn't make space for vulnerability or complexity in representations, like representations of fat people.

9:23

So in sum that's sort of the gist of the selections that I will go between or combine to teach this text. Now the teaching context for this text is in my first year English class called Reading Culture. And reading culture just means, I'm not sure if I've talked about it on the podcast before, but it means that we are asked to provide like a variety of texts, including, for my own sections in this for this course, I include cultural texts like music videos, novels, plays, comics, poems, film. Yeah, just a variety of cultural work so

memoir memoir memoir memoir memoir [has trouble saying this word] -- okay, memoir is one type of cultural texts that I introduce in this class.

10:19

And the theme of my class is Nature versus Culture and, I think I've mentioned that on the podcast before for sure, when I, when I teach English 114, at least in the last couple of years. And that theme already is complicated from the very start of the course -- that's the kind of purpose of the course is to complicate the idea that these two things are, that nature and culture are pitted against each other and are even separable. And this text takes place or is slotted into a unit on bodies. And in that unit on bodies we deal with a bunch of different things. We deal with questions of disability and access, of fatness, of appearance, of gender and its complex relationship to the body and to appearance and so yeah this memoir, or excerpts from it, becomes one part of a larger discussion about bodies.

11:17

So I'm going to start a little bit general and then get into a specific assignment that I use to teach, or to provoke discussion around this text. So general: I always introduce this as a memoir, as I said, and I define memoir and I talk about what memoir usually does -- that's not actually my focus here today so I'm just kind of skipping over that part for now, but the the reason why I do that is to really get into the question, or the matter of rhetoric and to talk about how rhetoric is used in memoir and other biographical writing. In particular for this text, I always introduce the three rhetorical appeals: logos, ethos, and pathos. And when I say rhetorical appeals I just mean, these are three strategies or three ways of making an argument in a text or in a work of any kind.

12:20

So I'll use Baker's text to talk about logos, which is like an appeal to logic or to reason when you're making an argument and you appeal to logic, or you use reasoning to make the argument stronger. I talked about how Jes Baker structures her argument in a way that appeals to this process of reasoning of logic. So for example, in one section she acknowledges and talks about and discusses with honesty, the sort of other side that she's working against, and by other side I mean kind of the diet culture side of the discourse that she's working against, before she goes on to build her own case against it. So there's kind of an appeal to logic, even in the very structure of some of Baker's sections. I talk about ethos, which is an appeal to authority or credibility -- you know when writers or culture makers try to increase the strength of their argument by making it sound authoritative or valid or scientifically credible. And Baker does this throughout by for example referring to reputable research, providing sources, references, even something like the HAES model, Health at Every Size model, she provides you know research and sort of backs it up with information. And I also talk about pathos, an appeal to emotion, appealing to emotions to make your argument stronger. And there's of course a lot of this as well in Baker's text. For example, when she describes her own really emotional, sometimes painful experiences in relation to fatness and diet culture, like her memories of not being able to go on rides at Universal Studios.

14:18

So that's where I start. This is a really good text to start discussing rhetoric and these rhetorical appeals, logos, ethos, and pathos, in the context of memoir, but also in general, because this is a text that can let you get at questions of how does self-writing build the self, and arguments about, and also around, the self, using rhetorical moves?

14:45

From there, this is a text that really I dive into the topics of "health," "wellness" and fatness. And again, using kind of scare quotes around health and wellness because part of the project to me of this text and of my teaching of this text is to unpack those terms a little bit. So I usually start with terminology on this front, after we've done and dealt with kind of rhetorical moves and the rhetorical appeals and memoir, and just kind of beginning to sink our teeth into the text, I start with health and wellness and fatness terminology. And in particular, I highlight how terminology in this realm of health and wellness but also elsewhere, really informs and also encapsulates ideology. So, in this case, using "fat" as a neutral term in this text, as well as in our study of it, helps advance a particular take on health and wellness and bodies. When I'm introducing this terminology, I talk about how fat as a neutral term becomes just a descriptor rather than a word that carries any sort of inherent judgment, and in adopting fat as a neutral term, we can help alleviate stigma around fat bodies, help combat negative associations with fatness, you know laziness, unhealthy, etc that sort of thing. And can move towards a politics of bodies that recognizes the neutrality in all bodies and doesn't just see sort of thin, white, cis-ness as the clearly you know ideal or neutral starting point for bodies.

16:36

From that terminology, we start opening up to larger discussions about this being a text that really stirs up questions about "health," "wellness," "fitness," bodies, and fatness. We talk about you know, what assumptions do each of us make about people's health, based on people's bodies? And how do we define "healthy" quote unquote or "well" quote unquote or "fit"? And why do we define these terms, why do we feel the need to have like a definition of these terms? Why is that? We talk about what ideas and what attitudes inform our definition, each of our definitions, of health or wellness: where did we get those attitudes from? Where did they come from, and how have we carried them?

17:26

And this is where I want to get into the specifics. So in particular one specific, which is an assignment, a very short kind of low-stakes reading analysis assignment, I call them, that students hand in when we basically are first studying the text. So the assumption is that they've already read the text, they just do this low-stakes reading assignment as a kind of content quiz almost to show that they are engaging with the text on their own terms, sort of before getting into the classroom, and having me and other students

inform their thinking, which is also a valuable process, but it's a way for them to voice their reactions and responses ahead of time before getting into the classroom space.

18:10

I should mention that I assign this text, or excerpts from this text, alongside a podcast episode. That includes an interview between Jes Baker and Hannah McGregor, who I already mentioned earlier, on Secret Feminist Agenda podcast. The episode is called "Landwhales and Fat Liberation with Jes Baker," and I will link to it in the show notes so you can listen to it.

18:34

So students are asked to read both the excerpts from the memoir, as well as listen to the podcast episode, and to just write a short, low-stakes reflection about their own reactions and responses to the episode or the excerpts in relation to their own existing attitudes about health and wellness. So I ask them, you know, after you've listened to the podcast episode and read the excerpts, write a reflection that considers roughly these questions: What concepts or aspects from the episode challenged you or surprised you, angered you, confused you, empowered you, provoked you to think differently? I'm basically just asking them to study their own reactions, maybe articulate them, and then reflect on them. I ask them to think about, are there any ideas introduced in the episode or the memoir, that you feel resistant to? And if you do, why is that? Then I ask them whether the episode reframes or affects their reading of the text, or if their reading of the text informs or reframes their experience of the episode? Just sort of putting those two texts in conversation with one another.

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[Music: "Homer Said"]

19:48

The results of this reading analysis have generally been really successful. This is sometimes students' first encounter with the politics of "health and wellness," with fat activism, with just even the bare process of getting just a tiny bit more critical about the popular or dominating image and discourse of wellness that, you know, dominates health and wellness -- that was so circular, but I'm leaving it in. But yeah for some students this is their very first time, so I will oftentimes get really heartening, dramatic reactions, like in the first sentence like, "I am disgusted by the way that I used to think about health and bodies..." and blah blah blah. You'll also have students who sometimes get vulnerable in their responses, and I try not to pressure or in any way invite that vulnerability, but there are students who will find, of course, these matters very relatable and see themselves in Jes and in Jes's experiences, Baker's experiences. You'll get some students that are resistant to these ideas and that to me is really valuable because even students who in this assignment articulate that resistance... they say why they're resistant or what ideas they have that seem to bump up against what Baker says, sometimes I'll have

students reference BMI and so I can have a conversation in the margins or in class about the bullshit of BMI. And we can just talk about some of that resistance right? So that resistance is useful in itself, it starts a useful conversation because like I say, this assignment, sort of starts to offer a study of the text and so then after I read them I can sort of shape the activities and discussions in the next classes to respond to what I'm seeing in the assignments. I can also respond in the margins and I often do and it can just be a really vulnerable, open, self-reflective, and dialogic -- a dialogic discussion, again with the repetition and circularity. But yeah, it can actually be a discussion. And so I find this assignment helpful for getting real answers out of students who have varying levels of familiarity with the kind of body politics that lie behind Baker's text. So starting with this kind of self-aware self reflection, self-critical self-reflection self self self self self I don't know how many times I can say that in one episode, that has been to me really valuable. And it's actually a fitting way to approach this text, which is written by the way in a very casual, vulnerable, intimate sort of open style, so having students match that style in their assignment feels fitting and useful.

23:03

Okay, let me just say a few more words to end about why this is a good exercise and a good text to teach. Just reiterating what I said before, really, this is a useful opportunity to look at memoir. Memoir has rhetoric behind it and has rhetorical devices and rhetorical appeals that can be used within it. Just like rhetoric can be used in more, maybe overtly argumentative works, I guess. It's also a good text because it really opens up these important discussions, really relevant discussions, not just because it's January, but because of, I guess the state of the world right now and the COVID-19 and the global pandemic and health crises all around the globe, it opens up questions around, what are our attitudes about who is healthy and who is well and which bodies matter, and how we treat bodies that are different from ours or are familiar to us? Those are important questions to ask always and, in particular, not that I've taught this text since the event of COVID-19, but in particular I would say now those are questions we need to be asking with vigor. Is that the right phrase, with vigor and rigor? I'm not sure, whatever. Ugh, January.

24:25

In particular, this is a text that helps us ask: what models of "health and wellness," are we using, each of us are we circulating, are we propping up, are we supporting? And perhaps unthinkingly because sometimes it's easy to just slip into the dominant mode of thinking about something, especially if you have the privilege to be able to do so, the privilege to be able to slip into that dominant mode because you haven't had to navigate the challenges of, let's say, having a body that doesn't fit dominant images of health and wellness. I'm thinking here of how in January, you know Instagram is a nightmare. It's such a nightmare of, you know, wellness and diet culture and #Instatherapy all sort of combining together to come at you with all of these rules, and I guess formulas, for you to follow for your life, for you to read your diet through, formulas to read your relationships through, formulas to read your self-love through I mean it's just so much bullshit and so much pressure, too. And so that's one of the things I've been thinking about when I think about this text and this episode and what models of health and wellness we prop up, we circulate on Instagram.

25:52

I was also thinking of a recent panel that was hosted by ACCUTE, the Association of Canadian College and University Teachers of English, which is an association I'm part of as sort of part of my academic work. I was lucky to attend this panel last week and I was drawn to it because of this episode that I was planning. The panel was called "Pandemic and Institution: Mental health, Invisible Disability." As part of this panel, Andrew McEwen gave a presentation entitled, "Let's Talk, Then: #BellLetsTalk and the Exclusions of Mainstream Mental Health Advocacy." And in this talk, he outlines the quote unquote "wellness" model of mental illness in contrast to the disability model of mental illness. And for me, this talk was really important because that was a difference in models that seemed to be applicable to wellness more broadly, and not just specifically mental illness. To paraphrase McEwan, the wellness model creates implicit divisions between well and unwell, or healthy and unhealthy. And these divisions are always loaded right? Like we're supposed to know just by hearing those that of course you would want to be well, of course you would want to be healthy. This model of thinking, this wellness model, creates a loaded opposition. The wellness model also puts the focus on individual behaviors, like yoga or meditation or rest or what have you -- in short, on self care, instead of the social, structural factors that influence people's bodies and well being, like ableism or accessibility. And as McEwen noted in the talk, this model doesn't really make space for questions about who is afforded the time or the opportunity to undertake these sort of individual improvements or actions.

27:55

In contrast to that wellness model, the disability model of mental illness in McEwan's words quote "rejects the idea that mental disability is something to be cured." And it prioritizes safety and access, structurally, socially, over individual behaviors or individual self care. This model tries to account for the various environmental factors that contribute to wellbeing, such as socio-political harm, and it doesn't prescribe or assign value to individual behaviors supposed to achieve health.

28:31

So I was just reading my notes there from the talk from last week, but in general McEwan's presentation, like I say, was about mental illness and so-called mental health, in particular, and Baker's memoir is much more general than that because it deals with bodies and health and wellness and just life in general, relationships. But both of the models that McEwen describes -- the wellness model and the disability model -- can be engaged with or usefully intersected with this text, I think, and it would be something I would hope to do in the future of teaching this text.

29:10

For example, with the wellness model that McEwen critiques, we see this apply to the, to the novel I almost said, apply to the text in the way that Baker expresses and struggles with the success of sort of

taking individual actions towards wellness -- like, you know, going to fitness classes or dance classes or getting acupuncture, kind of trying to struggle through doing individual actions in order to achieve some vision of wellness. We also see aspects or dimensions of the disability model come into play or intersect with this text when we read about Baker, her attention to access and accessibility and her attention to how spaces are designed for particular kinds of bodies, her attention to what forms of travel and enjoyment and hobbies are made accessible to people with different bodies.

30:08

So McEwan's presentation, Baker's text, simply being online in the world in January, all of these have really reminded me or brought me back to the importance of disrupting ideas of health and wellness that feel really simple to me, feel a little bit too much like formulas that normalize, and that consolidate power around certain ways of being formulas that are recognizable, relatable, and profitable and shareable, but only maybe to some people, right? These are formulas that don't work for all bodies, and I think that's the gist of I guess Jes Baker's text, which is that health and wellness discourse and discourse around bodies and fatness, that all has served certain people and certain groups and bodies that fall into categories of normal that are problematic. And so, moving away from those models or disrupting them or questioning them is a really important part of practicing a larger politics of the body.

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[Music: "Homer Said"]

31:34

Thank you for listening to this episode on Jes Baker's Landwhale, which was recorded on Treaty Six Territory and the homeland of the Métis. In the lead up to this episode on health and wellness, I've been thinking about health leaders who I admire and who I've learned from as a very non-health expert or non-medicin expert. And I've been thinking about the leaders who I've learned from on this land. In particular, I thought of Dr Jaris Swidrovich, who is a Doctor of Pharmacy and the first Indigenous Pharmacy faculty member in Canada, currently based on Treaty Six in Saskatoon, and a member of Yellow Quill First Nation. Dr Swidrovich's online work on both Twitter and Instagram confronts important topics related to health and well being, such as gender-based and trans rights and activism, vaccines and affordable housing, the implications of language like "vulnerable populations," environmental justice issues, and so much more. That was just a scan of some of the topics that came out from his posts over the last month or so. I'll link to Dr. Swidrovich's accounts in the show notes and I would recommend that you go follow him if you don't already.

32:56

Thank you to Dyalla Swain for the podcast theme song. You can find more of their work at soundcloud.com/dyallas. Thank you to Jade McDougall at musktrat-hands.com for the awesome podcast

graphics. You can follow the podcast on Twitter and Instagram @TeachinBooksPod, or you can also get in touch via email at teachinbookspod@gmail.com. I would love if you would rate and review the podcast, especially if you like it, on Apple podcasts, or any podcatcher that allows you to do so. And I can tell it's the end of the episode because I'm losing my voice, I have still not really found how to solve that problem, even though I have researched it and have many tips that I don't use, but I have water here, and that doesn't seem to help. So it is time to say goodbye, goodbye for now, goodbye to January, by the way, ugh I'm so glad that it's done and I'm very grumpy about it. I look forward to returning next week in February. And bye!

[Music: "Homer Said"]

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