

First Opinion: Reflections on Size, Body, and Humor: Yehudi Mercado's

Chunky

Yehudi Mercado. *Chunky*. Illustrated by Yehudi Mercado. New York, NY:

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In the opening chapter of Yehudi Mercado's autobiographical graphic novel *Chunky* (2021), readers are introduced to Hudi, a very funny Jewish Mexican-American adolescent boy who has prior health issues that are adversely affecting his weight. His parents and doctors are concerned and Hudi's father, a strong and athletic man with a shelf full of trophies from his youth on display, suggests he take up a sport but Hudi is hesitant because he lacks athletic skills, coordination, and interest, preferring the world of comedy and theater. Nevertheless he agrees to give a sport a try. Along the way, Hudi picks up an imaginary mascot/cheerleader named Chunky who functions as a friend, riff-partner, and developing consciousness. Each chapter centers on a sport that Hudi partakes in, unsuccessfully and with repeated trips to the hospital. It isn't until Hudi takes on football that his large body becomes an asset but it also transforms the

witty kid into a violent warrior that pleases his coaches but troubles his parents. *Chunky* is a comedy but it addresses many sociocultural issues about the body, size, health, food, physical activity, and identity.

Throughout the book there is tension concerning what is healthy and what is not. It's a complicated dialectic that, to the author's credit, does not get neatly resolved in the book. In one of his frequent trips to the hospital, Hudi jokingly boasts to the doctors that "I'm really good at holding still," implying that he is particularly sedentary. It is via sports, ironically, that Hudi regularly hurts himself, the very activities that are supposed to help resolve his weight issues and help his overall health. Simplistic weight loss maxims ("exercise more and eat less") don't account for the complexities of Hudi's life that include losing a lung, being a growing adolescent, a love of food, and a disinterest in sports. Post-game pizza outings are typical for kids but Hudi has to negotiate with his dad for his, "if I get on base can we get pizza afterwards?" It is a motivator. At bat, he hypes himself up whispering "do it for the pizza." Hudi does get on base, by being hit in the face with a pitch, and nowhere is there a happier child. It's a funny moment but also sad once the scene is unpacked.

As a graphic novel, readers can see that everything about Hudi is round: his jaw, hairline, torso, even his glasses. Standing next to his lanky teammates and muscular coaches, the contrast makes him stand out. Only his imaginary friend Chunky, naturally, is round like him. It is often through clothing that Hudi's size becomes the most apparent. After months of sports activities his mother notes that he hasn't lost any weight, as evidenced by his inability to fit into his suit for his sister's Bat Mitzvah. All the provided sports uniforms are too small for Hudi. Of all the players on the team, only his stomach is exposed to the world. When Hudi suggests he just wear a different shirt that fits, the coach retorts "We all have to wear the uniform. You're not special." His words reveal a binary perspective. The coach believes in equality over equity and, if Hudi doesn't like it, he should try to become more uniform, the same as the others. But Hudi doesn't want special treatment, only a playing jersey that fits his body.

While reading *Chunky*, I must admit to feeling a lurking danger: the stereotype of "big kid" as comedian. Hudi is not an athlete, musician, overtly beautiful, not even "cool looking," but he *is* funny and he might have found his ticket to positive social status with the curated identity of "funny guy." There is a "large man" archetype in comedy, such as Chris Farley, John Candy, and Robbie Coltrane, where they leverage their body size as part of their comedic

routine, but “fat” does not equal funny and fat jokes, even if they are self-directed, still have an oppressive dark side to them. Fat jokes seem to be for the benefit of the thin at the expense of those who are large.

For example, when asked by a new friend’s mother if he has any food restrictions, Hudi quips “You don’t get a physique like this with food restrictions.” I found the short exchange provocative. He joked to make her laugh but her question acknowledges that people do have food issues, allergies and restrictions, and individuals themselves get to decide what they eat, whether it is for health, cultural, or even personal preference reasons. But Hudi’s joke, and my own laugh afterwards, made me uncomfortable. It implies that Hudi does indeed devour food without restriction, and while many people eat whatever they like and as much as they like, only a big person can make this particular joke. A slender person cannot, nor could they make it concerning an overweight other. So, why did I laugh? Hudi’s self-deprecating humor is clearly more sophisticated than his peers’ lame attempts, where calling Hudi “fat” is the beginning and end of the joke, but I found myself questioning if *any* jokes about being big or overweight are funny.

Works Cited

Mercado, Yehudi. *Chunky*, Katherine Tegen Books, 2021.

About the Author

Chuck Jurich is an associate professor in the Watson College of Education at the University of North Carolina Wilmington. He teaches a variety of language and literacy related courses but particular enjoys reading and studying books alongside his students while teaching Children’s Literature.