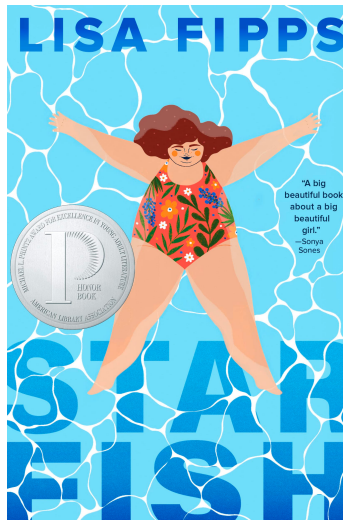


## First Opinion: *Starfish*

Lisa Fipps. *Starfish*. New York, NY: Nancy Paulson Books, 2021. Print.

Jillian Harpster



Ellie, the main character and narrator in the novel *Starfish*, is a middle schooler who is overweight. And while that is a catalyst for a lot of Ellie’s experiences, like Walt Whitman said, we are multitudes. Ellie is also a swimmer, and a writer, and a sister, and a daughter, and a friend, and a pug owner, and both Jewish and Christian. But Ellie’s context is modern-day Texas, and as a girl in society—as any person in society—appearance matters. Lisa Fipps, the author, highlights, through Ellie’s experiences, the emphasis Americans put on weight as opposed to health. Even as Ellie happily passes mornings and evenings swimming and dancing, this active pre-teen is flagged by her family members, her peers, and strangers as lazy, gluttonous, and unworthy.

Written in verse, *Starfish* is both easily accessible and incredibly multifaceted. As with many coming-of-age protagonists, Ellie experiences growing pains. But for Ellie, every time she dares grow, there is someone at home or at school ready to ostracize her for it. So she develops the “Fat Girl Rules.” One of the first rules she commits to memory: “*Make yourself small*”

(Fipps 5, emphasis in original). Ellie’s awareness of her body, and the descriptions used to help the reader understand how it feels for her to be so overly aware of her body in different spaces, are sometimes hard to read. Even so, as a woman in the world who has never struggled with my weight, I still know this rule. I do not want to take away from the importance of Ellie’s experiences as they are informed by her body, but there is also a universality to so much of what Ellie shares. When Ellie talks to a friend about feeling stared at, the friend—who is a Mexican American living in a border town—viscerally understands. When Ellie is partnered with one of her fiercest bullies, he confides that—even though he is her bully—he is often bullied himself because of his socio-economic status. In this way, the novel opens moments in which we can see that, even as Ellie’s experiences are unique to her, others’ experiences mirror hers more often than she likely would have guessed.

What I feel when Ellie writes, “*Make yourself small*” is acknowledgment. When we are different, or when our bodies attract unwanted attention, we learn to make ourselves small. We learn to be quiet, to dress a certain way, to escape into the background. We also learn where we are safe to be “a starfish, taking up all the room [we] want” (Fipps 41). Ellie finds this with her dad, her friends, her therapist. And even if I hope I—or my students or my daughters—will be safe with everyone out in the world, I know that fundamentally is not yet true in the world we live in. Finding where and with whom we can starfish is an important part of being whole and fully human in the world, and we all deserve that.

Yes, we are all multitudes. I am a teacher, and a friend, and a wife, and a mother, and a Christian, and a reader, and a writer, and a music enthusiast. And I hope I can be as brave out in the world as Ellie is in *Starfish*. I want to take up space and not apologize. I want that for my students, for my daughters, and for all readers of this novel. Be like Ellie! Take up space! Starfish!

### **About the Author**

**Jillian Harpster** is an avid reader and a former high school English teacher. She is currently a lecturer in the Teaching, Learning, and Teacher Education Department at the University of Nebraska, Lincoln, where she works with pre-service Secondary English/Language Arts teachers.