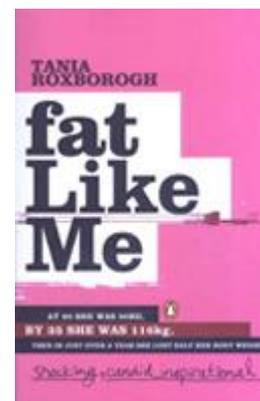


Fat Like Me

Reviewed by Emma Wylie (English in Aotearoa) October 2005



It's been a long time since I've read a book in one sitting but Tania Roxborough's new book gripped me from the start with its graphic honesty. *Fat Like Me* is a personal account of Tania's struggle as a successful teacher, writer, wife and mother, who was also a severely overweight woman. I add that detail last because, when I met Tania at the NZATE conference in 2003, I thought she was funny, approachable, and her accomplishments were not only intimidating, but also made me think about how I'd always said I wanted to write. It did not occur to me during that brief meeting to add her size into the equation. The influential women in my life have (for the most part) been overweight, so I suppose my perspective is somewhat different from the 'norm'. However, many of the incidents Tania describes in this book show a world where being fat means being judged, dismissed, or ignored altogether. Through reading her story, I was able to appreciate firsthand the trials and tribulations that accompany a serious weight problem.

Tania Roxborough underwent gastric bypass surgery in 2004, after nearly a decade of being obese. The bulk of the book covers her life up to that point; it examines what could have been some of the underlying factors behind her dysfunctional relationship with food. It makes no excuses, instead giving some background about the author's childhood and the circumstances in which food was either in short or abundant supply. It also takes into consideration the vacillating nature of body image.

While Tania discusses her feelings of shame or embarrassment at different times in her life, she never blames anyone for her situation. She simply speculated about what may or may not have influenced her path. This is a woman who tells it like it is. Tania has used her old journals to illustrate her changing perspective over the years, which makes following her journey much more authentic than a simple re-telling. Where she has explained the circumstances of particular episodes in her life, the words and thoughts she had at the time are there to substantiate the details.

Fat Like Me was an easy read for me because I could relate to much of Tania said about her evolving self-image and the need to prove herself as a successful professional. She spent ten years of her career striving for excellence in every endeavour, and at the same time fighting the toll that obesity had taken on her body. Sometimes this meant handling horrid, insensitive shop assistants with a brave face, and sometimes it meant brushing off callous comments made by people who should have known better. What struck me the most, though, was how clearly Tania wrote about the physical demands and limitations that her size imposed during those years. The worst moments are covered without hesitation, from everyday feelings of despair to a life-changing trip to Rarotonga. Tania has candidly recounted her experiences of life as a 'Fat Mamma' (as she calls herself in many of the chapter titles), but she has not omitted her successes from the story.

I would recommend *Fat Like Me* for Level Two Wide Reading, or even Theme Study for Year 13. Its subject matter is confrontational and requires a mature reader who can understand the intention behind the book and cope with the extremely personal nature of some of the chapters.

This book is at times shockingly truthful, but we shouldn't dismiss the value of its message: that 'you never really understand a person until you climb inside his skin; until you walked around in it'. It is hard not to admire the courage it must have taken to get it all on paper. This is a story that almost any woman should connect with, even if they have never struggled with their weight or been on a diet. Most importantly, *Fat Like Me* should be required reading for anyone who is eager to judge a book by its cover.