

# Bodies to Die for: Negotiating the Ideal Female Body in Cozy Mystery Novels

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**I**N THE PAST FEW DECADES, COZY MYSTERIES, A GENRE DOMINATED BY WOMEN AUTHORS AND marketed to a female audience, have taken a big bite out of the market for crime novels.<sup>1</sup> Cozy mysteries developed out of the classic English detective story and, unlike the hard-boiled crime novel, avoid gruesome depictions of violence, gore, and sex. Instead they focus on the puzzle the crime presents and how it can be solved, based on the belief that the world is ruled by causality and can be deciphered through reasoning (Malmgren 13–31). The light-hearted texts commonly feature a female amateur sleuth who lives, works, and loves in a tightly knit, small-town community in which everything is in order save the occasional murder upon which the protagonist happens to stumble.<sup>2</sup> The female sleuth is often depicted as nosy, more interested in good relationships and romance than in her career, and more concerned about her family and friends than about herself. All in all, cozy mysteries would be an unlikely place to find cultural resistance or the renegotiation of gender norms, were it not for the representation of bodies—not the dead ones, but the living ones.

Cozies feature sleuths who come in a range of body shapes, sometimes outside dominant beauty norms. Diane Mott Davidson describes her sleuth as “pudgy” (*Catering to Nobody* 4), Kathryn Lilley calls her character “plus-sized” (back cover), Selma Eichler speaks of hers as “queen-size” (“Books”), Virginia Rich’s Mrs. Potter describes herself as “fat” (53), and G.A. McKevert’s Savannah Reid is “a big, sexy southern sleuth” (*Bitter Sweets* back cover)—to give only a few examples for this under-researched phenomenon of overweight, voluptuous, and regular-sized pop culture heroines targeting a mass market. Cozy mysteries also discuss beauty and dieting practices in innovative and often critical ways, thus encouraging women to disobey or at least to become aware of the pressure hegemonic beauty ideals place on them. Many of the protagonists despise diets and enjoy good food in hearty quantities, while avoiding workouts and other forms of exercise, generally enjoying their bodies as they are. In this way, cozy mysteries create a utopian space in which fictional women who do not fulfill hegemonic beauty standards can overcome weight-bias, live successful lives, outwit thin and conventionally pretty female villains, and fight back against the cultural dictum of self-surveillance and self-improvement. The cozy mystery therefore serves as an example of how popular culture can provide space for the successful negotiation of beauty norms.

Although in the last three decades feminist thought has tentatively embraced popular culture as a site in which users can observe and try out alternative gender performances

and experience and experiment safely with new and unexpected models of femininity, this has hardly affected the analysis of body images. Because of our culture's "obsessive preoccupation with the body" (149), as Rosalind Gill phrases it, academic interest in the topic has dramatically increased. But when it comes to discussing representations of women's bodies, the notion that popular culture is monolithic, misogynist, and oppressive remains largely unchallenged. Scholars analyzing women's complex relationships with their bodies within the context of popular culture almost exclusively focus on representations of female bodies in visual culture and the harm dominant images of slender female bodies cause.<sup>3</sup>

Including representations of female bodies that do not follow hegemonic beauty norms allows for a more complex feminist understanding of how popular culture functions. While there are fewer of these alternative representations, they are not necessarily marginalized, as the example of the cozy mysteries shows. This may also allow for a revision of the understanding of popular culture as driven by a neoliberal market in which users are admonished to achieve a nearly impossible standard with the help of exercise DVDs, diet plans, and other slimming products (Hesse-Biber 63). Popular culture's main function in these readings is turning female users into consumers as, among others, John Germov and Lauren Williams argue. Structural interests and industries produce and standardize "a thin ideal of beauty that the majority of women can never attain, but make it look so appealing that they actually seek it out. The pursuit of thinness and the subsequent failure of most women in this pursuit construct an infinite market of consumers" (121). This understanding of popular culture, dominated by market interests and inherently manipulative of its users—a feminist version of the Frankfurt School's unease with mass culture—may go too far in representing women as powerless, violated, and taken advantage of.

The role of popular culture in the formation of imagery of the female body is not that simple. Next to conventional views of ideal bodies, popular culture allows and propagates alternative visions, thus offering space for contradiction and resistance against its own dominant imagery. This is not to say that popular culture is not regulated by market concerns, but that markets are heterogeneous. While mystery novels are produced and sold for profit and cozy mysteries are especially lucrative, the market is not advertisement-driven and therefore generates very different power effects. This niche market lives from copies sold and has recognized that female readers demand a greater diversity in representations of female bodies—a demand to which the industry willingly caters.

### Cozy Mysteries and the Body

In the cozy mystery, the community of the sleuth is usually harmonious. Society in general is ordered and positive and worthy of being restored to its former (precrime) state. Locales and characters are strictly limited, many reappearing in the different books in a series, thus allowing readers to build attachments. Into this seemingly stable and timeless world "comes a figure of violence," writes Richard Schwartz, "with the result that society itself. . .comes under attack" (6). Traditionally, the texts allow the sleuth to succeed in the end and restore the former status quo. Cozies present a world that can be understood and explained. Readers are invited to think along with the sleuth and to help

restore order, thus experiencing the satisfaction of a world that is unambiguous and in which chaos (as represented by the crime) can be overcome.

Ever since Agatha Christie created Miss Maple, cozy mysteries have traditionally (but not exclusively) been the domain of white, female authors.<sup>4</sup> The novels come in all shades of the political spectrum, but with few exceptions they address a straight, middle-class audience, and are more often than not affirmative of hegemonic norms, especially those concerning gender and sexuality (Hermes 72–77). The murders and crimes represented in these texts often implicitly invoke greater social threats to the privileges of the white middle class or specifically to the safety of its women. Cozy mysteries usually do not have an explicit feminist agenda, although they commonly feature capable, strong, and smart women at their center. The women sleuths in cozy mysteries may be amateurs when it comes to murder but they are usually professionals, sometimes working mothers or single parents, who are well-respected and engaged in their communities. Recently, as the hard-boiled genre has moved toward the police procedural, a few cozies have started to feature female private investigators, a move that allows the author to ascribe to her sleuth professional skills and to avoid the awkwardness of explaining why a civilian living in a small town would run into murder not once but repeatedly. But unlike hard-boiled P.I.s, their soft-boiled sisters rarely engage in violence. In contrast to Sara Paretsky's V.I. Warshawski and Sue Grafton's Kinsey Millhone, the cozy P.I.'s operate in nonmetropolitan settings, and most important, feature a less dark and critical outlook on society, at times allowing for slapstick or comic relief. Problems get fixed, and unlike many hard-boiled novels, these cozies end with full closure.

In many regards, cozy mysteries appear gender-conservative. They commonly propagate notions such as that women are naturally curious (often the motivation for sleuthing), and more often than not they depict them as nurturers, as family- and community-oriented rather than ambitious and career-focused. With few exceptions, they solve crimes with skills that are stereotyped as feminine, such as relating to other people, listening, gossiping, community-building, and networking. Feminine-connoted knowledge on fashion, cleaning, crafts, and cooking gives the women sleuths an edge over the male police detectives who sometimes serve as their love interests, and who are depicted as rational and evidence—rather than intuition-driven—thus, directly juxtaposing normative masculine and feminine behavior.<sup>5</sup>

Cozies often treat matters that are not commonly discussed in popular culture, such as paying the bills, facing poverty after a divorce, balancing work and family, surviving breast cancer and other diseases, and struggling with hegemonic beauty ideals.<sup>7</sup> It is in striving to present a credible normality that this subgenre is often surprisingly ambivalent or even openly renegade when it comes to beauty ideals. Authors often depict dieting, exercise fads, and beauty ideals as coming from outside the sleuth's community and endangering the peace of those who live in its idyll. But the texts can be contradictory in their critiques, and occasionally hegemonic beauty ideals are shunned and embraced at the same time. This not only creates interestingly complicated effects in the representation of imagined realities, it also illustrates how intrinsically interwoven are resistance and endorsement.<sup>8</sup> A few motifs appear repeatedly in cozy mysteries that best illustrate this ambivalence, such as the overweight but healthy, successful, and happy detective vs. the slender but mad murderess, and the critical discussion of dieting, beauty ideals, and the diet industry.

## Chubby Gumshoes and “Cereal Killers”: Reevaluating Body Ideals in Cozy Mysteries

Cozy mysteries depict women’s bodies in unusual ways. Despite examples such as *Glee* or *Huge*—TV series that promote a more liberal standard of body norms in popular culture—average-sized and overweight bodies do not often appear in mass entertainments, save as objects of ridicule. They are placed in the stocks in the form of before/after images in diet advertisements, where bodies not very slender and well toned are “imperfect” and need to be overcome through constant work.<sup>9</sup> Samantha Murray argues that we have developed a “literacy” when it comes to reading bodies that constitutes “some bodies as normal and others as deviant” (13). Overweight is an ascribed status, but the constructedness and arbitrariness of this differentiation has become invisible, since the standards have “become so familiar to us, they operate without question” (13, see also Germov and Williams 118–21). Within this logic, Murray writes, the “‘fat’ woman (is presumed to be) lazy, she is out of control, she is a moral failure, she is unhealthy, she is an affront to normative feminine bodily aesthetics, she is a food addict, she cannot manage her desires, her level of intelligence is below average” (13–14). And the list could go on: she is also imagined as unhappy, guilt-ridden, a burden to society, a danger to her children, uneducated and poor, and sexually and romantically undesirable, therefore not in a position to choose her romantic interests (Seid 223). These meanings are not stable—the meaning of overweight bodies as well as the concept of “overweight” can and frequently has changed in US history.<sup>10</sup> Similarly arbitrary, “being thin provides evidence that we are attractive, in control, and morally upright” (McKinley 97). Positive representations of not-so-slender characters, who are central to a narrative, challenge the idea that only thin bodies are good bodies and people. Therefore, the representations in mystery novels of average and overweight bodies as exemplary and as an invitation for identification are politically relevant and warrant scholarly attention since they complicate hegemonic ideas of deviant bodies in interesting ways.

This becomes evident in Selma Eichler’s description of her soft-boiled P.I., Desiree Shapiro. “She has dimples in her knees, elbows, and some unmentionable places. Desiree is a chubby gumshoe who has a mind as sharp as a Cuisinart and a queen-size talent for sleuthing” (*Social Life* back cover). Her round, soft body breaks with traditional ideas of the genre according to which a violent world can only be faced with raised fists. Shapiro’s body becomes a continuous pretext to discuss women’s eating and body weight. The series starts with *Murder Can Ruin Your Social Life* in 1994, a year after Susan Bordo published *Unbearable Weight*, in which she describes how food advertisements, even those addressing women, did not depict women eating or eating heartily if the proffered food was not fat free, calorie-reduced, or similarly marked as “safe.”<sup>11</sup> Shapiro, a brainchild of the same cultural moment, breaks all the rules, and in reading these two texts together it is difficult not to think of her as a figure of resistance. She lets her readers know:

I once lost over twenty pounds and hardly anyone noticed. I didn’t get discouraged, though. I went and lost fifteen pounds more. This time, *everyone* noticed. My friends thought I looked “fabulous,” “sensational,” and all those other nice things. But it didn’t get me Robert Redford. Or even a reasonable facsimile. And *that* discouraged me. So I put back the thirty-five pounds. And then some. (*Social Life* 7–8)

Shapiro acknowledges the hegemonic cultural narrative that promises only slender women romantic success and simultaneously dismisses the notion. She also counteracts the idea that overweight women are victims of their bodies and not in control of them, as she presents her body weight as a conscious decision she has made. "I stuffed myself silly with positively no shame," says Shapiro after an extra-large meal (54). Her phrasing shows that she is aware of cultural expectations that connect women's unrestricted eating with guilt, but waves them off. While dismissing cultural disciplining mechanisms so light-heartedly may be difficult for her readers, Shapiro shows it is imaginable.

Just as Shapiro eats without guilt, she despises physical fitness. Eichler carefully stages a situation in which Shapiro has to climb some stairs as comic relief but without drawing on a well-worn register of fat jokes (17–18). Instead Eichler invites the reader to identify with Shapiro as she finally arrives at the top of the steps out of breath, with painful lungs, and unable to stand up straight. Her inability to climb these stairs easily does not lead in the narrative to any punishment for being out of shape. On the contrary, this scene will be crucial to helping her solve the murder. Instead of a handicap, her lack of athleticism leads to success.

Within the utopian space of the cozy mystery, Shapiro faces punishment neither for her body weight nor her lack of fitness. Extraordinarily perceptive and with a good eye for detail, she outsmarts most of her male colleagues and every criminal. In an era in which weight, exercise, and longevity are habitually depicted as interdependent, the absence of any disclaimer in the text is quite refreshing. It suggests a different conceptualization of what is deemed healthy, by focusing on inner values, functioning relationships with family and friends, and the wisdom of choosing romantic interests carefully, thus not buying into our culture's "obsessive preoccupation with the body."

Another example of a positively depicted voluptuous female detective is G.A. McKevert's Savannah Reid, a sassy, quick-witted, and big-hearted modern Southern belle transplanted into the fictional Southern Californian small town of San Carmelita. At the beginning of the series, she loses her job as a police officer because she is heavier than police standards allow. Since "she isn't a huge fan of diets and she'd rather walk through fire than go to the gym," she starts working as a private investigator (*Body to Die For* jacket). Her weight in no way diminishes her professional effectiveness. She continues to work cases as a volunteer aide to her former partner, Sergeant Dick Coulter. Her success in solving crimes demonstrates that the police department's (and society's) assumption that weight diminishes competence is wrong, and that weight-bias led to the loss of an extraordinarily capable police officer. This and Reid's positively depicted commitment to her big and dysfunctional family and to her community, favoring tolerance and acceptance as crucial social concerns rather than body weight.

Like Eichler's series, this series, too, counteracts common stereotypes. Reid's body weight only enhances her self-confidence and erotic allure: "Savannah would be the first to admit she was a few pounds over what the charts suggested even a tall woman should weigh. But she would also be the first to point out that at least ten pounds of that excess was in her bra, and therefore, not altogether something to be scoffed at" (*Body to Die For*, 15). Reid never seems to feel that she needs to hide or be ashamed of her body or to alter or "improve" it. She has a healthy sense of self-worth and a great appetite for romantic conquest. She indulges in long baths and sexy lingerie (154) and cooks and eats with gusto ("life was too short to deny yourself the basic pleasures of life. Like

food”[202]). While Reid’s weight is a topic in all episodes of the series, there are never numbers attached to it: no clothing sizes, no scale readings. How much Reid weighs (or Shapiro or many other detectives discussed here) is left to the reader’s imagination. This seems to be a small detail, but is an important feature of these series as it avoids creating a new standard that would qualify the detective’s body and bodies like hers as acceptable, but exclude other, heavier ones.<sup>12</sup>

In these cozy mysteries, women who do not fit hegemonic beauty norms live in meaningful and erotic relationships, are financially independent, and are supported by friends, colleagues, and family. Thin women and conventionally beautiful women often do not have as much luck. In McKeveitt’s series, many thin women have to undergo radical measures to maintain their slender bodies, which leave them bitter, depressed, and dangerous. Clarissa Jardin, the owner of a gym empire, is Reid’s antagonist in *A Body to Die For* (2008). The constant pressure Jardin, who claims that she used to be overweight herself, puts herself under to groom her body makes her hard-hearted and mean. She verbally abuses Reid and overweight people in general, which ties in with her disrespectful behavior toward people working for her. Weight-bias here stands as a sign for an underdeveloped, loveless character, and Jardin’s message to the world that only slender people are worthy people appears as a danger to society. As it turns out, the before and after pictures she published of herself to prove the success of her method were fake. The text ultimately challenges the trustworthiness of the before/after claim in commercial diet narratives as well as the idea that massive changes in body weight are possible.

At the same time, McKeveitt avoids creating a new binary in which all slender people are intolerant and dangerous and overweight people insightful and respectful by introducing Savannah’s slender, vegetarian, and regularly exercising assistant Tammy Hart, who summarizes: “I hope you don’t think that just because I’m thin, because I like to work out and eat a certain way...that I approve of what Clarissa Jardin does. I think she’s amassed a fortune by being cruel and sensational and controversial. She claims to be a health guru, but I think what she’s doing is wrong and unhealthy for our entire society” (151). Here, McKeveitt challenges the idea of what is healthy and unhealthy and warns that the obsession with weight can be hurtful to the common good. In these texts, no assumption can be made about a person solely based on her body weight. Thin women are not envied in this series. In *Fat Free and Fatal*, Savannah is hired to protect the actress Dona Papalardo, who has a comeback after undergoing weight loss surgery. While Dona seems to be able to return to her successful career, she is unable to return to normal life. The surgery has left her scarred, depressed, and in constant pain. The price of gaining an ideal body, the text seems to argue, is too high. Dona, who turns out to be the villain, will be held responsible for her deeds, but the text shows that she has also become a victim of society’s beauty standards.

Claudia Bishop displays less empathy with toned bodies and groomed women in her Hemlock Falls series. Sarah Quilliam (“Quill”) is the guardian of public order in this imaginary New England town, while running an inn at the same time. Quilliam is an effortless size 6 and there are hints that she is pretty but not vain, and not overly interested in keeping her body in shape or paying attention to her looks. In this regard, she lives in a state of innocence, protected by a community that doesn’t judge her by her

appearance. Still, Quilliam's life is constantly on the verge of meltdown: Her inn produces debts, she is torn between two men, her small-town neighbors snoop on her, and her temperamental sister generates a constant stream of problems. Solving mysteries seems an easy task for Quilliam compared to keeping her life in order. The pressure increases further when well-groomed, organized, and successful women who seem to be in control of their bodies and lives repeatedly appear as villains. In *Marinade for Murder* (2000), beautiful Sherri Kerri opens a gym in Hemlock Falls:

An athletic blonde of about Quill's own age came out of the back room. . . Sherri had biceps and quads that rivaled Linda Hamilton's in *Terminator 2*. She positively vibrated with good health. . . She had turquoise-blue eyes and the kind of thick, springy blonde hair that. . . Quill associated with surfers. She also had one of those perfect caramel tans like unmarred silk. (44–45)

Not only does Kerri have impeccable looks, she also seems successful and happy, which makes Quilliam aware of her own imperfections. When she meets Kerri the first time, Quilliam “dabbed futilely at her hair, which was sticking up from the heat, and pulled in her stomach” (44). Kerri seems to be all that she could potentially be if she could only get her unruly body and life in order. Although Kerri assures her, “You don't need to lose a single pound, Quill” (46), Quilliam leaves the gym with a one-year membership and a couple of hundred dollars' worth of nutritional supplements. There is the implicit promise that if she would only work on her body, bringing it under her command, her life would follow suit. But as the mystery unfolds, she rejects the promise the gym makes as false and futile and takes control over her life by making difficult decisions instead of by toning her body. In the end, the gym and the gym owner, with their outside ideas of beauty and femininity, do not bring the improvement they promised to the people of Hemlock Falls; on the contrary, they profoundly endanger their peace. Kerri first tries to take the inn from Quilliam; then she tries to take her life. Only in bringing perfect Kerri down (and having the gym closed) can Quilliam avert the danger to herself, her family, and her community. As if the criticism implied were not obvious enough, it turns out that the lethal weapons involved in the deaths of two people were gym equipment and health supplements.

The showdown between Kerri and Quilliam reveals the former to be mentally disturbed. This link between madness and slenderness is a theme that Bishop also explores in *A Puree of Poison* (2003), in which, as it eventually turns out, the villain is Donna Olafson, “one of the most perfectly groomed women Quill had ever met” (24). She, too, immediately makes Quilliam aware of her imperfections. But like Kerri, the striking Olafson turns from beauty into beast during the final confrontation: “She smiled in a scary way. It didn't reach her eyes, which were mad. All the smile did was expose her shiny white teeth” (252). Beyond the beautiful façades that Quilliam admires hide desperate, lonely, and deeply troubled personalities. This suggests that by subjecting themselves to the disciplinary practices beauty ideals prescribe, especially dieting, women endanger and can lose themselves. Taking all of this together—the unwillingness of protagonists to lose weight or to work out, the positive depiction of calorie-rich meals, the depiction of women who diet as deranged and severely impaired—these cozy mysteries are a not-so-subtle criticism of dominant discourses that connect slenderness with happiness and success.

## “Dying to be Thin”: Dieting in Cozy Mysteries

Cozy mysteries not only challenge the binary of lean and fat as good and evil, the texts also explicitly comment on dieting practices. One of the earliest texts is Virginia Rich's *The Nantucket Diet Murders* (1985). Mrs. Potter, a senior sleuth who evokes Miss Maple, returns to Nantucket Island, her summer home of younger years. Her friends living on the island—all, like Eugenie Potter herself, recently widowed—have fallen under the spell of a new diet doctor. “You’re all so gorgeously thin!” Potter exclaims at their reunion. But silently, she wonders: “What had happened to about twenty pounds of Leah Carpenter? And how had a rather nondescript gray tabby . . . become this small purring kitten?” (10) She remembers one of her friends “Helen’s undefined and unremarkable square shape, her somewhat heavy jaw and features, her stiffly set dark hair. Presiding at a committee meeting, Helen always made Mrs. Potter think of a Roman emperor. No, better yet, of Mussolini, one hand upraised to command instant silence and attention. Helen today was a tiny, rigid doll” (12). While in these descriptions losing weight is equated with losing power, it is also related to gaining femininity and returning to a sexual economy that the protagonist feels excludes women of her age. For widows, dieting brings back the promise of romantic bliss, embodied in the form of the diet doctor and con artist, Tony Ferencz, a figure straight out of romance literature: dark, courteous, and secretive. Ferencz on first glance is selling diets, but in fact he is in the business of promising romance to his clients who suffer from loneliness even more than from their extra pounds. He charms women with his attention and seduces them with expert hand and foot massages, suggesting the possibility of falling in love with each one of them. The text thus presents, in the character of the doctor, the culture’s dictum of the slender body’s sexual desirability by creating a character who sells the promise and delivers himself as the prize. Potter feels the illicitness of his touch, and her fear of him is mixed with good sense, prudishness, and an air of drama that better befits pre-puberty than post-menopause.

Not only will Ferencz be discredited (and with him the idea that diets lead to love), the text also questions authority over the female body in general. “You know who are the best diet authorities in the country? . . . *Us! We are!*” the women state in their final meeting, “*We’re* the ones who have lived through the whole history of modern dieting” (272). While the text does not dismiss dieting in general (Potter loses weight in the course of the novel and enjoys it), it seriously questions expert authority claim over the female body in prescribed diet regimens. It is not only Ferencz’s miracle diet that turns out to be a placebo, but much of the other diet advice the women have received over the years they dismiss laughingly as useless: “the airline pilots’ diet,” “the Drinking Man’s Diet,” “Doctor’s Quick Weight Loss Diet” and many others (272–73). It is ironic that the women then claim authority over their bodies by exchanging their foolproof diet advice, which from the vantage point of the second decade of the twenty-first century sounds just as arbitrary as the official diets they ridiculed before: “don’t eat anything out of a package, and don’t eat standing up,” “don’t eat candy unless it’s *white*,” and “cut a sandwich in thirds” (274–75). The belief in effortless weight loss may seem humorous, but the women’s determination to claim expertise over their bodies and thereby to reclaim autonomy is not.

For her mystery series, Diane Mott Davidson created the caterer and amateur sleuth Goldy Bear (who will become a happily married Goldy Schultz in the course of the ser-



ies), another self-taught detective who does not conform to hegemonic beauty ideals. Unlike in Virginia Rich's texts, there is no indication that she should. Bear describes herself as blonde and curly haired, freckled, brown-eyed, and slightly "pudgy" (*Catering to Nobody* 4). That this is not only her opinion becomes clear when a stranger refers to her as "Ms. Plump" (*Killer Pancake* 40). Despite the pressure, Bear shows no interest in dieting. Like protagonist Savannah Reid, her "pudgy" body is not unattractive. (She is happily married to her romantic love interest, who was not the only interested candidate.)

In *Killer Pancake* (1996), Davidson discusses the topic of fat-free food from a number of perspectives. Mostly the text condemns it, as here in a quote by Bear's friend, the journalist Frances Markasian: "Diet food makes me gag. I have to eat too much of it, and that makes me feel like a bear foraging for winter" (*Killer Pancake* 59). Food in the series often has healing and calming properties. Diet food, in contrast, is soulless. While Bear is preparing a diet lunch for a cosmetic company, she sharply contrasts diet food with good food:

I was in caterer's hell . . . the crisp cauliflowerrets, delicate buds of broccoli, slender asparagus spears, and bias-cut squash, celery, and carrots looked appealing enough. . . . But there wasn't a drop of rich, homemade mayonnaise, not a puff of whipped cream, not a slice of tangy cheese in sight. And forget dimpled pats of sweet, unsalted butter or luscious dollops of sour cream. (3)

The vegetables are described mostly by their looks and the looks they promise (crisp, delicate, slender), while the "forbidden" food is referred to in terms of mouth-feel and taste (rich, tangy, sweet, and luscious). In this way the text inverts mainstream discourses that depict calorie-rich food as dangerous and evil and fat-free food as healthy and good. Low-calorie food cannot provide the same sensual satisfaction rich food can. In Bear's world, women who diet deprive themselves of an important dimension of the eating experience that can make them healthy on a spiritual and emotional level. Only when her best friend Marla Korman suffers a heart attack does Bear rethink her rigid view of low-fat food and agrees to prepare special fat-reduced dishes for her. Unlike in the series discussed earlier, the notion that health, longevity, and body weight are inter-related is not challenged. But the series dismisses dieting to achieve the dominant beauty standard as unhealthy and dangerous to one's happiness and health.

### "Killer Workouts": Dieting Mysteries

With a growing market for mystery novels, cozy mysteries have differentiated themselves into new and increasingly smaller niches over the last decade. There are now coffeehouse and teashop mysteries as well as interior design and hairdresser mysteries. Another new addition is the diet mystery. Diet mysteries typically address an audience imagined to be specifically interested in dieting and often depict weight loss as positive and rewarding. In Peg Cochran's *Allergic to Death* (2012), Giovanna "Gigi" Fitzgerald opens a gourmet diet food delivery service in the small town of Woodstone after her divorce. Three times a day she delivers calorie-reduced home-cooked meals to her small circle of clients. In this world, most of the women are on diets, diets are presented as lifelong or at least long-term endeavors one must engage in repeatedly, and diets work

—some of the clients will lose substantial weight in the course of the story. Those who do not are accused and found guilty of “cheating” (eating or drinking noncalorie-reduced items). Dieting here is a lifestyle that is not generally questioned. While this all seems straight-forward, even in these texts dieting is accompanied by ambivalence and subversion of hegemonic norms. The protagonist, diet cook cum sleuth Gigi Fitzgerald, claims that she herself “continued to struggle with the unwanted five pounds that she had ushered in her first birthday after the big three-five” (2). But while the story unfolds, we never see Fitzgerald watching what she eats. She easily and without remorse gives in to her tastes for Italian food and especially pizza, confesses to her “weakness” for strawberry Twizzlers, and eats what she leaves off her clients’ dishes to save them calories (2). While she points out the importance of limited calorie-intake for her clients, it is not for her, which sends a more ambivalent message on dieting to her audience.

Another dieting mystery series, Kathryn Lilley’s “Fat City” books, features television producer Kate Gallagher, who wants to move from behind the camera to working in front of it. Although unusually talented, she needs to lose weight to become a reporter (*Dying to Be Thin* 4). This seems to strike Kate as neither nonsensical nor unjust. She decides to drive to Durham, or “Fat City,” a town that offers a choice of diet clinics—(“In the War on Fat, Durham is the nuclear option,” [2])—to become a patient in one of the clinics that will soon turn into a crime scene. The text is in many ways supportive of dieting. Each chapter is introduced with a diet tip from the fictional *Little Book of Fat-Busters* by Kate’s colleague and friend Mimi Morgan, which include (often unusual) recommendations on how to lose weight, such as eating the “exact same thing for breakfast and lunch every day” (70). These recommendations, which have no role in the plot nor correspond to the chapters they precede, are gimmicks to appeal to a readership imagined to be on the quest for weight loss.

Kate’s weight (around 190 pounds) and weight loss play an important role in the text. The weight she seeks to lose is evoked not only in numbers and diet advice but also in chairs that sigh when she sits down, clothing that is uncomfortably tight, and spaces that are too small for her to move through gracefully. Kate thus reflects on a world that does not accommodate her body and pressures her constantly to shrink. She never seems to object or feel the need to resist. But again there are subtle moments of subversion in the series. Diet doctors in the “Fat City” series are arrogant and/or deeply disturbed sadists, sexually deviant, or caricatures of drill sergeants.<sup>13</sup> Kate scrutinizes and ridicules the cost and quality of the dieting programs. It appears that Kate believes the profits that can be made from obesity are unethical. (Still she is prepared to pay the price asked.) The murderer in *Dying to Be Thin* (2007), the first episode of the series, turns out to be again a crazed thin woman, a successful dieter who achieved her goal weight but not the promise of happiness and success (262–70). Kate will eventually land her dream job—not because of weight loss, but because of her competence and professionalism. Thus, the text undermines the assumption that happiness and success can only be achieved via dieting and are tied to a slender body. It is also in the convention of the series that Kate regains her weight between the episodes so that she can go on another quest for a slender body, which will eventually also introduce her to another crime to solve and a new love to conquer. (She goes through three lovers in as many books.) All the diet tips are therefore rendered useless and unnecessary in the end, which undermines the otherwise positive attitude toward dieting in the text.

The cozy mysteries discussed here depict varying degrees of resistance against dominant beauty ideals, but all feature either positive representations of overweight women or critical discussions of beauty norms and dieting practices. While this does not succeed in creating new norms, it creates alternative views on what should be or could be considered normal, healthy and beautiful in American society. The craze for slenderness in the female body translates into the slender but mad murderess, thus depicting the extreme bodily norms culture created as dangerous to women and disruptive to society.

Cozy mysteries offer alternative representations of women's bodies, thus creating a space for female readers to distance themselves from the constant pressure to adhere to unreasonable body standards. In these well-ordered worlds, women can come in many shapes without losing their prospects for happy and fulfilled lives, providing a counterweight to dominant narratives of the grim consequences for women who do not discipline their bodies. In this context, cozy mysteries are an unlikely place for resistance, but they offer the opportunity of negotiating hegemonic beauty and gender ideals and present a glimpse into a utopian society in which women are not at war with their bodies.

## Notes

1. See Foster as well as Murphy's interview with Natalee Rosenstein, Vice President of the Berkeley Publishing Group. Rosenstein states that of over 100 mysteries Berkeley Prime Crime publishes per year, "cozies are by far the most popular."
2. Ron McMillen, former chairman of *Malice Domestic*, the organization that gives out the Agatha Award for the best soft-boiled mystery novels every year, claims that cozy mysteries are "the Americanization and modernization of the classic English mystery" (in Stasio, 44).
3. In her pioneering *Femininity and Domination*, Bartky argues that the "ideal body of femininity" is smaller than a man's to stabilize the prevailing gender hierarchy, and it comes into existence through disciplinary practices that women learn from popular culture (71). In *Unbearable Weight*, Bordo shows how images in advertising attempt to control women's appetites, and representations of ideal femininity are commonly embodied in slenderness in popular magazines and TV shows. In a more nuanced reading in *Never Too Thin*, Seid suggests that popular culture can serve strategically to change dominant body images or at least undermine them.
4. There are a number of explanations for why the number of detective novels with African-American protagonists as well as by African-American authors has been growing only recently. Most argue that the detective plot (and the soft-boiled one even more so) is based on the belief that society is inherently orderly and just, and can and should be restored. This trust may not be shared by social groups that have traditionally been disenfranchised of the most basic civil rights. But Pepper warns of "essentialist arguments about cultural/racial authenticity and ownership" (78).
5. See also Hermes, who investigates audiences of mystery novels featuring a female sleuth. She argues that the audience feels strongly about the female heroes, but calls it a "depoliticized, domesticated conservative feminism; a feminism that does not wish to give up on ingrained notions of gender difference" (73).
6. See, for instance, Reddy, Munt, Klein, Irons, and Walton and Jones.
7. See also the chapter "The Personal and the Regional: New Forms of Authenticity in Female Crime Writing" in *Contemporary American Crime Fiction* by Bertens and D'haen (58–76).
8. See in *Never Too Thin* shows how the thin body itself is conceptualized as a form of resistance against patriarchy in the 1970s (220–21).
9. See Kent, 134 and Levy-Navarro's excellent article in which she discusses the "before" and "after" of diet discourses as a Foucauldian confessional practice (342–44).
10. For histories of the changing meaning of body weight in American history, see Schwartz, Stearns, and Vester.

11. See Bordo's chapter "Hunger as Ideology" in *Unbearable Weight*.
12. In discussing romances with overweight female protagonists, Frater shows that dress size and number of pounds can create new normative body ideals. Instead of undermining the assumption that bodies are unacceptable beyond a certain dress size, the margins are expanded to include a few more body sizes, but to exclude others (235).
13. See, for instance, *Dying to Be Thin*, 18–21, 85–87.

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