

B O O K S

Wendy Shanker Lives Loud and Proud

An Interview With the Author of *The Fat Girl's Guide To Life*

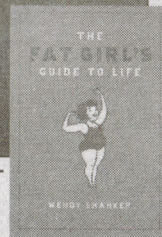
By Iris Wiener

“Figure: if we can’t take it off, then we might as well just take it on.” Thus begins Wendy Shanker’s guide for women that have spent their lives ashamed and angry over the inferiority with which society graces them. A call for women everywhere to accept themselves and who they are, Shanker’s *The Fat Girl’s Guide To Life* invites people of all shapes and sizes to respect themselves and not to feel guilty for enjoying the simple pleasures in life.

Never the fat kid, Shanker didn’t experience the societal backlash of extra poundage until she started college at the University of Michigan. “I started freaking out, I was like, ‘I’m so ugly, I’m so fat,’ and I was doing Optifast and eating all this crap and starving, and that’s when it sort of started going really haywire. I wish I had never started, and I feel like I had seriously messed up my body by doing that,” Shanker says regretfully, as she smiles at the turnaround her life has taken.

“Since I wrote the book, I’ve had a lot more respect for the idea that it’s just a crazy shame that nobody seems to be very happy with their bodies. I just had too many skinny women come up to me and say that they can totally relate, and feel that they can’t ever be skinny or pretty enough. They don’t know what to do or what to tell their kids,” she sighs. “Now I know, maybe there’s one of them out there who is just as happy as a lark, but I haven’t found her, and everybody is just feeling a lot of pressure.”

Shanker is all too familiar with the pressures that women face daily, especially those that come from the media. A comedian and writer, she was the humor columnist for *Grace Woman*, and her byline has appeared in *Cosmopolitan*, *Marie-Claire*, *Seventeen* and *Teen People*, as well as underground women’s magazines like *Bust*



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She’s seen a lot since then, ranging from a crazed experience at Duke Diet & Fitness Center, to the horrible irony of being held up at gunpoint at a Weight Watchers meeting. “I know I’m grateful to be in my own skin, and I can’t imagine it in any dramatically different way than it is right now. There’s that fantasy that I’ll wake up tomorrow and be really skinny, but I have leather jeans, so what difference does it make what size they are?” Shanker affirms loud and proud. “I have love in my life, I have a roof over my head, so I keep not understanding why I’m supposed to be changing my body if I’m healthy and I have the things that I need and make me happy.”

But Shanker knows and despises the fact that plus-size women have a difficult time in all walks of life – especially when entering the workforce in the Big Apple. “Everyone seems to be 22 years old, and they’re all wearing the littlest clothes you’ve ever seen. First of all, it’s important to dress cool if you want to work in a cool industry. But that’s a challenge, because they don’t make what we want in our sizes!” Shanker says angrily.

“You still have to make sure you wear something you like and feel confident in. I hate seeing anybody tugging, it’s a dead giveaway that you don’t feel good in what you’re wearing. If you walk into a room apologetic about who you are, about how much space you’re taking up, whether you’re going to fit into a chair, whether or not someone is going to like you – people read that instantly. I see so many fat girls walking around afraid to take up space. I just want to tap them and say, ‘You’re taking up space, you already are, I can see how big you are, and you’re fine, you’re gorgeous!’” she says affirmatively. “So you might as well throw those shoulders back and swing that tush a little bit more, because you can’t hide in the corner, we see you! If you can’t make yourself invisible, then why not make yourself in-

and *bitch*. She's also brought her inspiring insight to Oxygen's *She-Commerce*, a show about shopping and style, and worked as an entertainment correspondent and movie reviewer for *Pure Oxygen* and *Girls On*, respectively.

But these days her humor can be found in the pages of *Us Weekly*, where she dons a badge as a member of the Fashion Police. "The meaner you are, the more jokes you get in the magazine," she laughs. "And especially when the book came out, I felt so guilty about being mean. I don't make any weight cracks, I don't make any cracks about people's personal lives. If the clothes look crazy, I will talk a little bit about the clothes, but I won't say 'J. Lo's a slut.'"

Shanker has come a long way from her upbringing in Detroit and considers herself a full-fledged New Yorker. "If I had grown up in New York, I might have been more like the heavy teenage goth girl who always has her skinny gay boyfriend. There's at least one pair of those in every high school, I love them. I would've been that girl." But her memories from Detroit inspired a lot of what went into *The Fat Girl's Guide To Life*. "My mom was always overweight, and I think she was worried that I was going to be overweight. We never had anything in our house that was fun to eat, so when we got dessert we thought it was very exciting," she groans. "She went for the repression technique which I think backfired a little bit, so to this day to eat an Oreo is like partaking in the forbidden fruit!"

But she says that food was never as important to her until her mother passed away when Shanker was 10 years old. "I think that was sort of an emotional place where suddenly food became very important, in the way people sort of show, 'We love your family, here's a chicken ... you seem sad, eat this brownie.'"

credibly visible?"

According to Shanker, these inner strengths will help one's confidence in the dating game as well. "The one thing I can never understand is why everyone else needs me to lose weight," she says right off the cusp of an Atkins tangent ("The word 'carb' makes me sick!"). "I think that one of the big reasons is that the majority of men are going to look at me and think I'm not the most attractive woman. Most of the time, I've sort of started understanding that my body isn't going to change very much from what it is right now. I don't need every man to think I'm the most beautiful woman. I need *one* man to think I'm the most beautiful woman ... though a few would be nice ...," she laughs.

In her down time, Shanker can be found in Woodmere with a number of old friends, playing Jenga and getting "a taste of what real life is like." But with her *Guide To Life* being made into a television show and a new book on the way, she's pressed for time – but never loses sight of her ultimate goal. "I want to get women to respect themselves and to have others respect us. I think it's really hard to give a message to the world saying that we're worthy of respect, our needs have to be met and our desires are important, when we look at ourselves and say, 'Ooh, yucky.' Until we can rectify the 'Ooh, yucky,' it's going to be really hard for others to see us and say, 'Yay!'" Shanker's eyes beam as she imagines the possibilities. "The closer we can get to that and the moves that we can make towards that are just really worthwhile, so I'm really happy to be a part of that." ❖

To purchase a copy of *The Fat Girl's Guide To Life*, visit www.wendyshanker.com.