

LISA FIPPS



STAR  
FISH



Nancy Paulsen Books

## NANCY PAULSEN BOOKS

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To every kid who's ever been told, "You'd be so pretty or handsome, *if* . . ." You ARE beautiful. Now. Just as you are. You deserve to be seen, to be heard, to take up room, to be noticed. So when the world tries to make you feel small, starfish!



# FOR JUST A WHILE

I step down into the pool.  
The water is bathwater warm  
but feels cool  
compared to the blisteringly hot air.  
Kick. Gliiiiiide.  
Stroke. Gliiiiiide.  
Side to side  
and back again.  
Dive under the surface.  
Soar to the top.  
Arch my back.  
*Flip. Flop.*

As soon as I slip into the pool,  
I am weightless.  
Limitless.  
For just a while.

# NAME-CALLING

Eliana Elizabeth Montgomery-Hofstein.  
That's my name.

My bestie, Viv,  
and my parents call me  
Ellie or El.

But most people call me Splash  
or some synonym for *whale*.

Cannonball into a pool,  
drenching everyone,  
and wear a whale swimsuit  
to your Under the Sea birthday party  
when you're a chubby kid  
who grows up to be a fat tween  
and no one will ever let you live it down.  
Ever.

# SPLASH IS BORN

Now, whenever I swim,  
I use the steps to ease into the water,  
careful not to make waves,  
because the memory  
of my pool party plays  
in my head like a video on a loop.

It was my fifth birthday.  
I wanted to be the first one in, so  
I ran to the edge and  
leapt into the air and  
tucked my knees into my chest.

Water sprayed up  
as I sank down.  
I bobbed to the surface,  
expecting cheers for  
the splashiest cannonball ever.

*That* didn't happen.

"Splash spawned a tsunami!"  
my sister, Anaïs, shouted.  
"She almost emptied the pool,"  
my brother, Liam, chimed in.  
I dove under,  
drowning my tears.

I wish I could tell everyone  
how they made me feel that day—  
humiliated,  
angry,  
deeply sad.

But every time I try to stand up for myself,  
the words get stuck in my throat  
like a giant glob of peanut butter.

Besides, if they even listened,  
they'd just snap back,  
"If you don't like being teased,  
lose weight."



# FAT GIRL RULES

Some girls my age fill  
diaries with dreams and  
private thoughts.

Mine has a list of  
Fat Girl Rules.

You find out  
what these unspoken rules are  
when you break them—  
and suffer  
the consequences.

Fat Girl Rules

I learned  
at five:

*No cannonballs.*

*No splashing.*

*No making waves.*

*You don't deserve  
to be seen or heard,  
to take up room,  
to be noticed.*

*Make yourself small.*

# WHAT, WHY, WHO, HOW, WHEN

The first Fat Girl Rule

you learn hurts the most,  
a startling, scorpion-stinging soul slap.

Something's changed, but you don't know  
what.

You replay the moment in your mind from  
every possible angle, trying to understand  
why.

Why the rules exist and  
who.

Who came up with them and  
how.

How does anyone have the right to tell you  
how to live just because of your weight?

Mostly, you remember the smack of  
the change.

One minute you were like  
everybody else, playing around, enjoying life,  
and then,  
with the flip of an unseen cosmic switch,  
you're the fat girl,  
stumbling,  
trying to regain your balance.

Acting as if you know what you're doing,  
like when you used to play dress-up  
and tried to walk  
in high-heeled shoes.

## THE GIFT

Every time I see a pudgy preschooler,  
I want to hand her my list,  
like the answer sheet for a test,  
to spare her the pain of learning  
the rules firsthand.

But instead,  
I give each girl the gift  
of more days,  
weeks,  
and months  
of a normal life.

Whatever that is.

## BELLIES DANCING

Viv's mom caught her dad with  
another woman and said Texas  
wasn't big enough for the three of them.  
So now my best friend has to move  
to Indiana.

In my backyard, we livestream  
the Latin Music Festival  
on an outdoor screen  
as part of her going-away party.

Viv starts belly dancing  
like she learned in a class at  
the Dallas Public Library,  
where her mom's a librarian.  
I follow her lead and  
our arms morph into snakes  
as our hips figure-eight.

My dog, Gigi, a pug,  
runs circles around us as  
we sing at the top of our lungs  
along with the bands and  
dance with complete abandon,  
like you do when you're alone in your room  
trying out some new moves  
or making up some of your own.

Except it turns out  
we're not  
alone.

## THE NEW NEIGHBOR

Mid-twirl, I open my eyes to see  
a girl's head pop up over the fence,  
then disappear and reappear.

This trampoline girl  
saw me shake parts of me  
I didn't even know I had.

"What do you think you're doing?"  
I stop dancing so fast  
I about give myself whiplash.

I see her head again.  
"I-heard-Días-Divertidos."  
She says it so quickly it's like one word.  
She disappears and reappears.  
"Couldn't-help-myself."  
In a flash,  
she climbs over the fence  
and lands in front of me.  
"I'm Catalina Rodriguez."

## A POET AND A MUSICIAN

Catalina points to the concert on the screen.

“Wow! So you like Días Divertidos, too?

I have all of their songs on my playlist.”

“Me too,” I say.

“Who else do you listen to?”

“Don’t get Ellie started.”

Viv rolls her eyes.

If eye-rolling were an Olympic sport,  
she’d be a gold medalist.

“I’m a poet, so

I love music because

lyrics are sung poems,” I say.

“Rap and country are my faves.”

“I’m a guitarist,” Catalina says.

“I like all music but love Latin.”

She chooses her words carefully, like me.

But she’s not like me.

Catalina’s skinny

like a pancake.

I’m more like a three-tiered cake.

My fatdar should be sounding the alarm.

Why isn’t it?

# THE THING ABOUT FATDAR

Fatdar is a lot like  
Spider-Man's Spidey sense,  
a sixth sense.

Somehow we just know when  
someone's about to say  
something hurtful or  
do something mean.

Even in a crowd,  
I can spot a fatphobe,  
someone who's grossed out  
by overweight people.  
Fatphobes give off this vibe.  
Part discomfort.  
Part shock.  
Part fear.  
Part anger.  
And all hatred.

# SHADOWS

“‘Baila Conmigo’!”

Catalina shouts as the next song starts  
and she dances with us.

“Teach me that one move, Ellie,” she says.

“Which one?”

“The one where you were  
kinda kicking your leg  
while you spun.”

When I dance  
knowing Catalina’s watching,  
I feel every pound of my legs,  
see my fat shake,  
and notice how round  
my shadow on the grass is  
next to her angles,  
so I stop.

Fat Girl Rule:

*Move slowly so  
your fat doesn’t jiggle,  
drawing attention to your body.*

But that uncomfortable-in-my-own-skin feeling  
fades as the music blares  
and Catalina squeal-screams,  
going all bananas with us,  
during the tribute to Selena.

If dance partners were food,  
Catalina and I would be  
peanut butter and jelly.



Cookies and milk.  
Chips and salsa.  
We're different, but  
make a perfect combo,  
heads, hips, and hands  
moving in sync.

Right on cue as the sun sets,  
the katydids start their singing,  
fast and furious since  
their tempo's based on heat  
or maybe Selena's *bidi-bidi-bom-bom* beat.

"Catalina, dale las buenas noches  
y ven a casa," a woman's voice calls out.  
"Gotta go," Catalina tells us.  
"Thanks for letting me crash your party."

She climbs back over the fence,  
then trampolines.  
"Can't-wait-to-come-over-again."

## LIKE PICASSO

Some people have mood rings.  
Viv has mood hair.  
You can always tell how she's feeling  
based on her hair color.  
Since she has to move,  
she's like Picasso  
—in a blue period.

Her bottom lip juts out  
as she pouts,  
and when she huffs,  
her stick-straight blonde bangs  
with blueberry tips  
stand straight up for a second.

“What’s wrong?”  
I ask when we float in the pool,  
cooling off after the concert.

“Today was our last day together  
until who knows when  
and not only did I have to share you,  
but I also had to watch while  
you made a new friend.”

New friend?  
Catalina?  
Is she?

## SAYING GOODBYE

The stars at night  
might be big and bright  
deep in the heart of Texas,  
but not where we live,  
thanks to light pollution.

“Sirius.”

I point to the brightest star, the only visible one.

“Leave it to you to know the dog star.”

“Notice there are no cat stars.”

“Maybe not in the Milky Way,” Viv says,  
“but I’m sure there’s a galaxy  
—more evolved than ours—  
where cats rule.

They’ll invade our planet  
and make all pugs prisoners.

Admit you’ll miss Oreo.”

She splashes me with each syllable.

“Only if you admit you’ll miss Gigi.”

I splash back.

When Viv’s mom picks her up,  
we promise to text, video-chat—  
whatever it takes to stay connected.

Viv suggests we make a blood oath.

I remind her she faints when she sees one drop.

We settle for a tame, lame pinky swear.

Viv starts to open the car door,  
but then throws her arms around me.

We cry our goodbyes.

## SUPER SLEUTH

Every kid needs one place  
they can escape to when  
life gets to be too much.

The pool is my place.

Today I've been in the water so long,  
my fingers look like raisins,  
but I plan to swim and float for hours more,  
mourning my first day without Viv  
and the last day of summer vacation.

"I-love-to-swim.  
Can-I-join-you?"  
Catalina's back on the trampoline.

I barely know her,  
so can I trust her  
with the pool?  
I haven't swum  
with anyone  
but Viv since  
the Under the Sea party.

I still don't know why  
Catalina wants to hang around me.  
Could she be friends with  
Marissa and Kortnee and  
helping them set me up for a prank?

I climb out of the pool and  
wrap my towel around my  
shoulders like a superhero cape.

Time to activate my sleuth powers.

"I wish I could keep swimming,  
but I have to get my stuff ready  
for school tomorrow."

I don't lie.

Catalina climbs over the fence.

"I've been putting it off, too.  
I dread being the new girl."

Like Wonder Woman with her lasso,  
I seek truth.

I ask Catalina,

"You going to go to Kiser Academy?"

"Is that where you go, Ellie?"

I nod.

"I wish. Then we'd be together.

But I'm going to Bishop Joseph Catholic School."

Wonder Woman wouldn't give up  
until she had all the answers.

Neither can I.

"Wanna get our stuff ready together?"

"I thought you'd never ask."

## A FRESH START

The best part of  
going back to school  
is the back-to-school supplies.

We dump everything on the floor.  
Catalina zooms in on one of my prized finds:  
flamingo pens with feathers.  
“Watch what happens when you write.”  
The flamingo dances  
as I scribble on a piece of paper.

She trades me a unicorn pen for one.  
It lights up when she taps it.  
“Great for writing in bed.  
The best ideas for songs come at night.”

“Same with poems!  
Viv and I used to do this,  
swap and share supplies.”

“Me and my friends, too,  
but they’re all back in Houston.”

So she’s not from here.  
She doesn’t know Marissa and Kortnee.  
She doesn’t know I’m Splash.  
Being friends with her will be like  
opening a brand-new notebook,  
a clean, fresh start.

# LUCKY DOG

Every morning,  
my pug stands on her hind legs,  
snatching kibble out of the scoop  
before I even have a chance  
to dump the food into her bowl.

Gigi doesn't hide her hunger.  
She feels pure joy  
when eating.

She devours every bite  
and licks the bowl.

Her tummy full,  
she circles three times before  
lying down and  
resting her chin on my feet  
under the breakfast table.  
Curled up and cozy,  
she soon starts snoring.

She's happy with her round body.  
Content.  
Comfortable.

And no one bullies her because of it.  
Lucky dog.

# FAMILY FOR BREAKFAST

We have a family tradition  
of eating  
breakfast and dinner all together  
on the first day of school.

No exceptions.

“Grub’s ready.”

Dad slides omelets and toast onto plates.

“But scrambled egg whites or oatmeal  
was what we’d agreed.”

Mom talks like a ventriloquist,  
through her teeth with her lips fake smiling.

I surrender my food to Liam,  
who’ll be a junior in high school this year,  
and make a bull’s-eye for the fridge  
for some fat-free yogurt  
that’s yet to make me fat-free.

A new article dangles from a refrigerator magnet:

“Dairy Products Might Aid Weight Loss.”

It slightly covers the other articles,  
including my fave:

“Tips to Be a Real Loser.”

Mom just loves hanging these articles  
on the fridge for me.

She’s a writer and magazine editor,  
but spins her words for a different reason than I.



I plan to become a storyteller,  
and a poet,  
to help people feel what it's like  
to live in  
someone else's skin.

Mom's a journalist,  
determined to expose  
all that's wrong in the world  
and spotlight everyone's flaws,  
not caring if she  
gets under people's skin.

## DOES SHE REMEMBER?

Dad looks at Anaïs and Liam.  
Both are wearing new clothes.  
I tug on the hem of my  
old button-down shirt,  
trying to make it longer.

“No new clothes for Ellie?” Dad asks Mom.

“She gained more weight this summer.  
I’m afraid if we keep buying her bigger clothes,  
she’ll just let herself *get bigger*.”

If Mom thinks I look horrible now,  
wait until I can’t fit in anything—and  
have to go naked.

Liam inhales his food  
and belches, “I’m outta here.”  
Seconds later, the back door slams,  
and tires squeal as he shows off  
his red Mustang.  
He thinks he’s a stallion since he’s sixteen.

“Enjoy sixth grade, Splash,”  
Anaïs calls over her shoulder as she leaves  
to start her senior year of high school.  
That’s like saying to a shark bite victim,  
“Enjoy the free liposuction.”

I wonder if my sister even remembers  
it’s her fault

everyone calls me Splash,  
how that one word  
on one day  
changed my world.

## LIFE ON A TEETER-TOTTER

Dealing with my parents is like  
riding a teeter-totter nonstop.

Dad promises me a shopping spree.  
Up I go.

“Good luck finding anything she can wear.”  
Down I go.

“We’ll do just fine without you.”  
Up I go.

Mom grabs her briefcase, purse, and keys.  
“Just don’t forget El’s first appointment  
with the therapist.”

Down I go.

Fast.

Hard.

Like when the other person  
jumps off the teeter-totter and  
throws everything off-balance.

“Huh? Wait. What?”

Mom’s shoulders droop as  
one hand freezes on the doorknob.

“You said you’d tell her.”

She shoots eye daggers at Dad.

He shoos her away like an annoying fly.

“Go on. I’ve got this.”

The whale has to go to a shrink?  
It’s a punch line for a bad fat joke.

# JUDASED

Dad rips the weight-loss articles off the fridge  
and tosses them into the trash.

"I'm sorry you found out this way."

He says he never got around  
to talking to me about the therapist  
because he'd been swamped with work—  
but then he goes on and on about  
the importance of talking.

Do parents ever hear themselves?

"You're a psychiatrist, Dad.  
I talk to you all the time."

Dad straddles the chair next to me.

"It's not the same thing.

Your mom and I agree

Dr. Wood could help you."

Translation?

Mom nagged, and Dad caved.

"Judassssssss!"

I hiss the s like

a western diamondback rattlesnake.

Dad's always had my back.

Not the knife in it.

## THE LESSER OF TWO DEVILS

I don't ride the bus.  
Dad takes me.  
When we turn the final corner  
and I can see the school,  
my stomach somersaults;  
it's the only part of me  
that can do gymnastics.

I text Viv.  
I really need her,  
especially after that  
freaking family breakfast.

**Don't know if I can do this alone, Viv.**  
**I'm freaking out.**

**Just chill.**

**I'm tryin'.**  
**It's just—ugh.**  
I add a string of emojis.  
Frowny face.  
Worried face.  
Sad face.

**I know.**  
**I know.**  
She adds a hug emoji.  
**But if I can do it, so can you.**

After all, I've gotta go to  
a whole new school.  
Remember, the devil you do know  
is better than the devil you don't!

Yeah. But they're both devils.

# H-E-DOUBLE-HOCKEY-STICK

*Happy Monday, Dallas!*

the radio deejay yells over the airwaves  
as Dad pulls into the drop-off lane.

*Gonna hit one hundred and ten!*

*Perfect weather to hang out by the pool.*

I wish.

“Okay, Ellie. Have a good day at—”

I slam the door,  
cutting Dad off.

As he pulls away,

I hear someone singing

“Baby Beluga.”

I don’t have to turn around to know  
it’s Marissa.

And so it begins.

Giggles.

Stares.

Rejection.

The devils I do know.

Kortnee holds open the door—until I head in.

It slams, nearly smashing my face.

“Oopsie!”

she yells over her shoulder.

Even without the scorching Texas sun,

I am officially in

h-e-double-hockey-stick.



# PRETEND-IOUS PRETENTIOUS

While conjugating verbs in French class,  
I imagine Viv  
at her new school and  
figure I stink  
because I don't want to think  
of her making new friends.

To punish myself,  
I conjugate the present tense of *puer*  
from *I stink* (Je pue) to  
*they stink* (Ils/elles puent).

The lunch bell rings.  
Thanks to Chef Brigitte at Kiser Café,  
gourmet food is on the menu every day,  
as in artichoke pizza on wheat flatbread or  
veggie burger with Moroccan cilantro spread.

Chef? Oh, yes. A chef.  
A cafeteria worker simply won't do,  
nor will the word *cafeteria*.  
Mais non!  
Our private school's too classy,  
uses français  
to make everything from *aah* to *zed* sound good.

But let's call it what it is.  
School lunch is for bullies  
to dine on their prey.

Bon appétit.

# HUNGRY GAMES

I stare down the hallway,  
Katnissing in the Hungry Games,  
wanting nothing more than to get out alive.

I spot mutations—  
part piranha with their gnashing teeth,  
part wolverine with their claws,  
and part hyena with their howling laughter  
—posing as students.

I'm hungry for escape.  
They're hungry for laughs.  
And there's no way out but through the arena.

"Get back! Make room! Thar she blows!"  
A guy sucks in his stomach  
and slams back against the hallway walls  
as if my blubber takes up all the room.  
Viv and I call him  
Enemy Number 3,  
ranking behind  
Enemy Number 1, Marissa,  
and Enemy Number 2, Kortnee.

The sea of students parts  
as everyone crashes left or right  
to hug the hallways.  
It happens every day.  
Every day since first grade.

Its puent.

## LIFESAVING LIBRARIANS

The library is my safe harbor since  
I dare not go into the cafeteria alone,  
a whale surrounded by starving sharks.  
It was hard enough when  
Viv and I faced them together.

“How’d your summer reading go, El?”  
Mrs. Pochon asks.

I tell the librarian about my new favorite  
novels in free verse.

“Imagine that, eh?”  
Her Canadian accent is strong.  
“Poetry at the top of your list.”  
She smiles as she scans a book,  
its spine snapping and plastic jacket crackling.

I breathe in the smell,  
hungry to read the words.

“You’ll like this one,” she says.  
“I’ve been looking forward to seeing you  
so you could check it out.”

She’s the first person to smile at me today.  
The first to make me feel wanted.  
Understood.  
I blink back tears.  
It’s unknown how many students’ lives  
librarians have saved  
by welcoming loners at lunch.

## SMOWNING

Wind chimes dangling from the door  
bang and clang,  
announcing my barrival at  
the dollhouse-sized office with  
its living room turned waiting room and  
sunroom turned therapy room  
is so fitting for  
my life turned nightmare.

Dishes rattle in a sink somewhere and  
a voice calls out,  
“Make yourself comfortable  
in my office, Ellie.  
Join you in a minute.”

“That’s Dr. Wood,” Dad says,  
taking off his cowboy hat  
and sitting down in the waiting room.  
You can take the man out of the ranch,  
but you can’t take the ranch out of the man.  
“You’ll like her.”

He winks and  
draws up one side of his mouth and  
makes a double click.  
I call it his cowboy charmer.  
“Trust me.”

“Not anymore I don’t.”

Venom drips from my voice as  
I give him an exaggerated smile  
that quickly morphs into a frown—  
the *smown*, we call it.

I’m famous for them.

## POWER STRUGGLE

I decide to go  
toe to toe  
with Dr. Woodn't-You-Like-to-Know.

When she comes into the office,  
she finds me in her chair,  
throwing her off her game,  
taking away a smidge of her power.

She purses her lips.  
“Hmm.”  
Then she sits on the couch.  
“Ellie, tell me why you’re here.”

My therapist is skin and bones.  
Couldn’t they at least  
have found a fat one  
who might  
understand me?

I fold my arms across my chest,  
the universal sign for *conversation closed*.  
I may have no choice about being here,  
but I can choose if and when I talk.

“You do realize seeing a therapist  
is about having someone to talk to,  
to sort out what’s going on in your life  
and how you feel about it,  
to figure out what you can do  
to change or accept it.

It's nothing to be ashamed or afraid of."  
Dr. Woodn't-You-Like-to-Know  
raises her eyebrows,  
forming wavy forehead wrinkles.

She's paid to put up with me,  
so I show a little sass.

"I know.

My dad's a psychiatrist, remember?"

Eyes roll.

Mine.

Then hers.

"Not in the mood to talk today, huh?  
That's fine."

She scribbles on a pad  
until time's up.  
With each word,  
she takes back her power.

I wish I could smart off  
to my parents like I did to  
Dr. Woodn't-You-Like-to-Know,  
tell them what I really think,  
especially Mom,  
but I guess I'm too scared  
of how she'll react.  
She makes life hard enough now,  
while I'm keeping my thoughts to myself.

Why aren't kids allowed  
to tell grown-ups when they're wrong?

They don't know  
everything.  
Sometimes it's as if  
they don't know  
anything.



## CHOICES—FINALLY

“While you were with Dr. Wood,  
I texted Aunt Zoey, and she told me  
about a new boutique  
for plus-size kids and teens.”

“Whatever.”

At my size,  
shopping for clothes isn’t fun.  
I just want  
what everyone else my age wears,  
to blend in,  
since I already stand out.  
But it’s hardly ever in my size.

At least shopping with Dad  
is way better than with Mom.  
She always tells me to try on clothes  
that won’t even fit over my head  
and then kvetches  
that I need to stick to my diet.  
Mom always says,  
“You’d be so pretty”  
—and all the big girls in the world  
can finish this sentence in unison—  
“if you lost weight.”

After the boutique owner, Diana,  
introduces herself and  
welcomes us,  
Dad says,  
“I’ll be over there reading.”  
He points to a lounge area.

He always has a book with him.  
“You just have three rules right now, Ellie.  
Enjoy.  
No limits.  
Take your time.”

My eyes lock onto  
an orange peasant top with  
embroidered turquoise flowers,  
my two favorite colors.

At first I think it’s probably not in my size.  
But I discover it is.  
Everything is!  
I’ve never had so many  
cool clothes to choose from.

Or had a store like this to shop in.  
Even the mannequins here  
are my size.

I’m Charlie in the chocolate factory.

## FEELING PRETTY

"I love your store.  
I don't know where to start!"  
I tell Diana.

"Thanks.  
I've dreamed of having  
a shop like this since  
I was your age."  
Diana leans on a display near me  
as I search the racks of shirts and jeans.  
"You're lucky," she says.  
"Finding plus-size clothes is easier now.  
When I was young,  
clothes for zaftigs were just ugh."  
She places one hand on her neck,  
as if the memories strangle her.

*Zaftig* means "pleasantly plump."  
It comes from  
the Yiddish word *zaftik*.

My dad speaks Yiddish  
all the time,  
so I know that word.

But no positive word for *fat*  
would ever be in Mom's vocabulary.

"So my mom learned to sew," Diana continues.  
"She created patterns just for my body."

I feel a twinge of envy  
thinking about having a mom like hers,  
someone who accepts us

and adapts the world to fit ours,  
instead of trying to make us  
fit in the world.

Every time I get a chance,  
I glance at Diana and  
notice things about her.  
Like how she wears  
an off-the-shoulder shirt and short skirt  
to show off her curves  
—instead of hiding  
as much of her body as possible,  
like I do.

How she wears bright yellow  
—instead of a dark color.

How she walks with confidence,  
head held high,  
happy to be seen  
—instead of looking down at the floor,  
like I do.

I want to be more like Diana.  
Free to be me.  
A zaftig.

I wish I were an octopus  
as I shop.  
Two arms can't hold  
all the clothes I want.

For the first time,  
I find things that make me feel  
pretty.

# I'M A STARFISH

When I get back home from  
Diana's boutique,  
I try something new.

The pool's always been my escape.  
The place I feel weightless  
in today's fat-obsessed world.  
I swim each morning and  
try to hold on to that feeling  
throughout the day.  
But by the time school's over,  
I feel every pound, plus  
the added weight of shame  
from all the comments and pranks.  
The pool helps wash it all away.

Now I want the pool to be something more,  
not only a place to escape,  
but also a place to express myself.

As I float,  
I spread out my arms  
and my legs.  
I'm a starfish,  
taking up all the room I want.