

Can fat guys be sexy? (Hell yeah)

by Gillian - Thursday, June 02, 2016

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Men and body image will be just one of the topics discussed at the second annual Body Love Conference this weekend in Tucson, Arizona. We asked Jesse Arenstein, self-professed "fat guy", about his own journey to body confidence - and what happened when he found himself being a model for a day. By Jesse Arenstein. Photos by Rachel Miller and [Liora K](#).

Jesse Arenstein says fat guys are more culturally acceptable than fat women. But men get body shamed too, he argues. Photo by Rachel Miller

When body positive activist Jes Baker, a.k.a. [The Militant Baker](#), asked me to participate in the second [Lustworthy](#) photo shoot - a shoot that was based on the premise that money/gold digging isn't the only thing that can attract sexy women to fat guys - it stirred up a wealth of self-reflection.

I thought about my own tastes and ability to find beauty in, and sexual desire for, women of all races, sizes, and cultural persuasions. I felt like a part of a movement that emboldened and validated the part of me that loved both fat thighs and thigh gaps, that cherished, maybe even worshipped, the diversity of the female form.

I was flattered as fuck that this young woman - whom I watched grow from a snarky, savvy, sexy "bookworm" into an international cultural powerhouse changing the way the world perceives beauty - thought of me first when she wanted to highlight a sexy fat guy in her latest Internet propaganda party. (Jes and photographer [Liora K](#) launched the Lustworthy photo series - a rip-off of perfume ads, but one that uses unconventional body pairings - in 2013.)

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Jes, also the founder of this week's [Body Love Conference](#), has a charisma and a raw energy which I encourage all of you to encounter in person, and I was determined to honor our friendship by participating in this movement.

I had doubts that this idea I was to be the figurehead for in this particular shoot wasn't anything special. That fat guys get hot girls all the time. That there really is a vicious double standard in the way that heavier women are perceived sexually as opposed to heavier guys. I wrestled with all of the accepted cultural norms like being the "teddy bear" or the "funny fat guy", the generations of comical fat guys in cartoons that wind up with skinny attractive wives - from Fred Flintstone to *Family Guy's* Peter Griffin. All this seemed to be working against me, in that the point we were making with the second Lustworthy was something the communal consciousness of the world already had accepted.

And, tellingly, these doubts seemed to be reflected pretty consistently in the comments left on Jes's blog post after the photo shoot was published. Comments like this:

Photo by [Liora K.](#)

And when I got nervous about all of this and considered not doing the shoot, my wife Rebecca told me to suck it up, that this is important on a large cultural level, that I was sexy, and that participating would make a difference. (She was also kind enough to give me the same pep talk when I whined about writing this article). After the shoot, when one of Rebecca's male co-workers came up to her and expressed that self-esteem issues based on weight were something he had struggled with for years, and that seeing me in *The Huffington Post's* coverage of the shoot made him feel better about himself and his ability to attract women, we both knew she was right. She normally is.

Really though, when considering doing the Lustworthy shoot, I wound up facing my own personal binary relationship with self-esteem. The heights of testosterone-fueled confidence and the lows of bullying-fueled self-hatred. The incomparable effect that the confidence part can have on the outside world's perception of me, and the fact that the source of that confidence also involved not caring about what that perception was.

I thought about the seemingly endless years of being made fun of for being fat throughout school. And I thought about how beautiful that little kid was and how destructive to his ability to perceive his own beauty all of those taunts and insults were. The main premise for this article and why I was asked to write it comes from this same source: conveying the idea to the followers, and those who oppose the body love movement, that guys have body issues too. No matter how subconsciously culturally acceptable the fat guy, and even the fat guy dating a conventionally hot woman is, the reality of it is this: men get body shamed too, and it hurts across gender lines just as bad.

I remember watching *Revenge of the Nerds* at a 6th grade birthday party in Breezy Point, NY and it occurring to me that the war of jocks versus nerds had been raging for a long time. I felt like the casualty of a conflict near its end but still lingering on enough to keep people wounded and damaged. Later that year I wrote my first poem, went to my first middle school dance, played my first *Dungeons and Dragons* game, and my parents and I moved to Tucson.

At maybe the third or fourth middle school dance I had attended, I'd find myself finally fed up. There had been years of bullying, name calling, belittling - constant reminders that I was not good enough, not skinny enough, to deserve the attention of girls, pretty or otherwise. I was standing in the gym of my middle school, experiencing a puberty-fueled internal nuclear event. Something just snapped inside. I can't remember if it was a particular insult, watching someone else get shamed, or if it was just all of the pretty girls and the Sinead O'Connor ballads. But I was no longer capable of giving a fuck about what all these petty assholes thought of me or said to me. I had been beaten up, publicly shamed, endlessly belittled both by classmates and family members about my size, but now the fat shaming was getting in the way of the one thing I could not, would not, be separated from: Girls.

For Jesse, fat shaming was getting in the way of one thing: girls. Photo by Rachel Miller

That moment wound up being pretty critical for me, and not just because I got to dance with a lot of pretty girls that night. It had always occurred to me that the shaming and the insults people had thrown at me were their own problem, not mine, but I never had the ability to keep that from impacting my opinion of myself. Now it occurs to me that the 12-year-old kid that I was in the pre-Internet era had the realization at that moment that the self that I would continue to be depended on me following a rule many bloggers, and especially Jes and Liora, follow rigidly. I honestly was not giving a fuck about "the comments".

* [Jes Baker](#) will be a keynote speaker at The Body Love Conference, which takes place Saturday June 6th in Tucson. [Tickets and more info here.](#)

* Speakers on men and body issues at this year's Body Love Conference include Steven Yanez Romo of [Romo Tonight Live](#) and Noel Trapp, owner of [Noel's Restoratives](#). You can read more about Noel in this [3 Story feature](#).

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