

Weekend

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When fiction tells the truth

A life-long fight for thinness once left Becky Siame on a surgeon's table, close to death. Now the Richmond woman has written a book about being fat that readers are snapping up around the world. Art is imitating life - and, as Naomi Arnold discovers, that's just the way Siame likes it.



At her largest, Becky Siame would knock meals into diners' laps as she tried to squeeze between tables in a restaurant.

She got stuck in chairs, roller coasters, waterslides and airplane aisles. She had to install a seatbelt extension in her car, and when she sat in the bath, her body would create a dam as the tub filled, trapping the water in front of her and leaving it dry behind her.

None of this was amusing at the time, but Siame can laugh about it now. She's taken those humiliating experiences and turned them into a self-published novel, *The Lighter Side of Large*, starring herself as main character, Bella White.

Ask most authors how much of their work is autobiographical, and they turn vague and dissembling. Ask Siame about Bella, and you're rewarded with her thunderclap of a laugh.

"Bella is me," she says. "Even though it's fiction, it's me. I've written my own feelings about my own weight and self-esteem and the issues I've had with partners. I've put all of me into this character."

That character has been remarkably successful in a very

Bella is me: Becky Siame's "reality fiction" is finding an audience all around the world.

short stretch of time. When Siame released her novel on Amazon as an ebook in February, she enjoyed a modest response - until last week, when she decided to offer a three-day free download. From Wednesday to Friday, more than 33,000 readers snapped up copies.

In the New Zealand publishing world, hawking off 20,000 copies attains gold bestseller status for fiction, according to Booksellers New Zealand.

"I didn't realise anything was going on until I started getting these friend requests on Facebook from people I don't know," Siame says.

"One of the ladies wrote a message to me and said, 'I've just finished reading your book in three hours - you're in the top 100 [on Amazon].'"

Stunned, she clicked on the website and watched as her novel rocketed up Amazon's best-seller lists over the next few hours. She stayed up until 2am,

when she hit the top five spot - right next to blockbuster "mummy porn" novel *50 Shades of Grey*.

The downloading frenzy lasted 24 hours before finally easing. *The Lighter Side of Large* currently sits at number 63 in Amazon's humour books category, selling for its regular US\$4.99 (NZ\$6.20). It's rated 4½ stars out of five and has attracted glowing comments from Amazon's international readers.

"I felt like this woman was a friend, and telling a story for all overweight women in this country, as well as others," KR Ryan said. D Lee, from Texas, said there were "so many important messages in this book". Kjak Payne described it as "chick lit with a deeper edge".

Those reader ratings and comments mean so much to Siame. It's not just the huge audience she's gathered that's thrilling her; it's the number of people contacting her to say thank you.

"They say, 'I'm a single mum, I'm overweight, I've had a really rough time, and this book really helped,'" Siame says. "Those messages from people saying, 'Your book has changed my life'."

"And that is why I wrote it in the first place. It's sobering, because I look at my life and go, 'I'm not quite where I want to be'. But I'm a bit further on maybe than others."

"That's why I wrote it in the first place - to give a really sympathetic view. I've done it; I've been there; I know what it feels like to be fat, day in, day out."

Born in Christchurch, Siame's father was Zimbabwean, her mother a Pakeha. She was adopted into a "white" New Zealand

family, the youngest of four, but grew up in Australia. She returned to New Zealand in 2005 after separating from her husband, and now works freelance from home as a web developer and marketer.

The book grew from a series of cartoons, which she originally intended turning into a coffee-table

book. She sent the proposal to a literary agent, who advised her to write it as a story instead.

Disheartened, she put the idea away for a while - then last year, she decided to give it a go. She planned the whole story and then wrote a chapter every week, finishing it in 28 weeks.

"Because I planned it out, I

never got writer's block. My dad died right in the middle of it, but that only set me back two weeks." There's that laugh again.

She got half a dozen friends to edit it, had artwork done and sent it to various New Zealand publishers. They said they loved the book but didn't have room for it in their current publishing schedules.

"I thought, 'Bugger this, I'll do it myself.'" And off she went.

Set loosely in Nelson, the book follows Bella's journey from size 24 to a size 12 as she deals with the problems posed by those restaurant tables, bus seats and seatbelts, as well as friends, her ex-husband, a scheming half-sister, boyfriends, and her extended Samoan family. She becomes fitter and healthier, and develops a dose of self-respect along the way.

"They say, 'Write what you know'. I like to call it a self-help book disguised as a novel."

"My idea for it was that people

who are struggling with their weight and self-esteem can read it and understand and feel like, 'Oh it's not just me that's having these feelings of being inadequate'."

Although you wouldn't think it when talking with her now, Siame has wrestled with low self-esteem throughout her 33 years, and says her ballooning size was a symptom of that. "It's a vicious circle."

She started worrying about it at nine years old, and says she lived as "the 'fat girl' - the vivacious personality that everyone wants to be mates with but no-one wants to date". At her largest, she was 152kg.

"I've been through some really crap experiences," she says. She's suffered through domestic violence and rape, and discovered her husband was having a long-term affair two weeks after their daughter was born.

■ Continued Page 12

I've written my own feelings about my own weight and self-esteem and the issues I've had with partners.

BECKY SIAME



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The home you deserve

'Reality fiction' spurs downloading frenzy

Continued from page 11

"I have lived a really rough life. I've had to experience a lot of things. But my view on it is a lot of that stuff I've lived, even though it seemed hard at the time, helped shape the person who I am today. As a result, I have a huge heart, with so much compassion for people who are struggling and have low self-esteem, and I think that's worthwhile."

"A lot of people go through life and they don't really have any empathy towards anybody else, and you can't create really good relationships if you don't have that heart for people."

In 2005, Siame had lap band surgery, in which surgeons place an inflatable silicone band around the top part of the stomach, reducing the amount of food that can be eaten. With diet and exercise, she saw her drop 52kg over two years to reach 100kg.

But, as sometimes happens, the band became ineffectual. Two years ago, when she was due to have gallstone surgery, the surgeon took the opportunity to fix it. But while under the knife, she stopped breathing and almost died.

"It was touch and go," she says. "My mother was there by the side of the bed and the surgeon was telling her, 'We're losing her'. All day I was going, and then I remember waking up and thinking, 'God, save me for my children'."

She eventually pulled through, but a blood drainage line failed and blood pooled in her stomach, leaving her with two massive



Art imitates life: The *Lighter Side of Large* grew out of a series of cartoons depicting real events in Becky Siame's life.

haematomas. Surgeons didn't want to touch her after what she'd just been through, so they left the pools of blood to sit in her body until they were eventually reabsorbed. The process took three months and left her on strong painkillers, which made her thinking fuzzy and forced her to resign from her job.

All to be thinner. Still, it didn't turn out too bad. She spent the next six months doing a contemporary music course at the Nelson Marlborough Institute of Technology, and the near-death experience led her to finally put pen to paper and create *Bella*.

"Everyone's got a dream to be an author, [and] then when this happened it totally changed my

life. I thought, 'All this stuff I want to do, if I don't start doing it, I'm going to run out of time!'"

The nightmare surgery also appears in the novel. In fact, it's hard to tell where Becky ends and Bella begins in *The Lighter Side of Large*. They both have children named Abe and Fi; Siame is a solo mum to Abraham, 8, and Phoebe, 6. Both have that big laugh. Both deal with their size with humour, though they suffer a constant self-hating dialogue inside.

Both are bi-racial, and feel like they don't quite fit anywhere. Both their fathers had cancer. Did her ex-husband really have an affair with her half-sister? "No. Thank goodness, no! That was total fiction," she says. "I

have lovely sisters." Actually, it was one of her friends.

There's a deft comic touch that verges on the black - at one particularly low point, Bella lies on the floor with chocolate vodka and sleeping pills, considering whether to end it all - but she refuses to die on an empty stomach.

"It's a nice mix of comic relief and tackling some pretty serious stuff. It's not just chick lit; it's got a real deeper edginess about it as well. There is a reason behind writing it. A message I want to send to the world."

Curing her chronic self-hatred began with the simple. Every day, she'd concentrate on one good thing about herself that she liked. On her website, thelightersideoflarge.com, she has a page called the Just As I Am Challenge, where people post things they like about themselves. So simple - and yet for many people, so difficult to do.

"It's so easy to get stuck in - 'I'm so ugly, look at these rolls, look at how ugly I am'. Whereas I think, 'I've got a beautiful face. I've got nice eyes and a beautiful smile'. The more you concentrate on the negative, the more it will come up in your life. Whereas if you concentrate on the positive, that will start to reinforce itself, and before you know it, 'Wow, look at me and look at where I've come from'."

"I've still got issues; don't get me wrong, I haven't got it all together," she says, laughing again.

But the success of the book has been "really encouraging". She has a pile of hard copies ready

for sale via her website for \$30, and she's in the process of drafting the sequel, *The Larger Side of Life*, which she plans to release in February.

She's also taken the unusual step of taking her characters off the page and into the world wide web. She's created Facebook pages for each of them, and blogs at thelightersideoflarge.com as Bella.

"That's why I think it's worked as an ebook - because Bella's got the online presence. It's something that's not been done yet. I call it 'reality fiction' - we're taking these fictional characters and putting them in these arenas as if they're in real life."

"I love *Pride and Prejudice* - I would love to sit down and talk with the characters and ask the author or character a little bit more about who they are and how they did things. Because this is me, I know I can answer those questions - I might as well be called Bella."

Her weight battle has now turned into one of her biggest assets. She's developed an industry around size. In 2009, she appeared on *Campbell Live* with sizeXchange.co.nz, an enterprise that offers women losing large amounts of weight a way to swap clothes as they downsize.

Becky Siame's life is no longer crap. But she still struggles daily with accepting herself as she is. Her main mission, she says, is to help other women manage that for themselves.

"One of the quotes I love in the book is, 'I may be fat. I am carrying excess baggage. But fat is

Fighting fattism

Bigger people need to be treated better, a group of New Zealand academics say. Massey University academic and activist Cat Pause organised the recent Fat Studies conference in Wellington, a New Zealand first. Dr Pause promotes equal treatment for everyone, regardless of their size, and has called for New Zealand to be the first country to outlaw discrimination against fat people, saying "fattism" is the last socially acceptable form of prejudice.

Fat Studies is an interdisciplinary field that challenges assumptions about fatness. Presentations at the conference included discussion around gender, medical diagnoses, sexual identity, and the weight-loss industry. One speaker, Waikato University professor of geography Robyn Longhurst, says fat is the last taboo.

"There's a lot of discrimination still around size for people who are large, and somehow that seems acceptable for a lot of people." Her research into social and cultural geography included work on pregnancy, which led her to research body size in general.

"When I was a larger woman I realised there were a lot of places I didn't feel welcome," she says. "That had a great

effect on my experience of different environments. Anything with built-in furniture is really challenging; even going into women's clothing shops and feeling unwelcome, no-one greeting you because you know they don't have clothes in your size. In effect you're made to feel shame and humiliation. It's partly about the actual physical environment [that] doesn't fit - changing rooms, restaurants, aeroplane seats - but also the attitudes that go with that in making you feel like you don't belong."

Massey University business lecturer Andrew Dickson, who spoke on weight anxiety and the weight-loss industry, says there are better predictors of health than weight and size, such as waist-to-hip ratio. "I'm interested in how the weight-loss industry positions people of all different sizes to believe they should be losing weight," he says.

"Weight anxiety forces people into a very uncomfortable and horrible relationship with their own bodies... they don't know how to eat any more and fear food. It's a sad indictment on the weight-loss industry. "The anxiety is independent of weight to a degree. We do discriminate against people of a certain body size, whether we do express that or not. I'm 100 per cent behind people accepting their bodies."

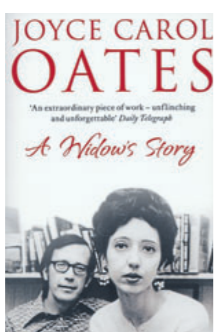
what I am, that's not who I am'. "Once you can keep the two of those separate, you've got more

of a chance of living a fulfilled life, comfortable in your own skin as a bigger woman."

Bereaved writer's raw memoir

A Widow's Story. By Joyce Carol Oates. Fourth Estate, 417 pages. \$26.99.

Reviewed by John Ewan.



"that's enough self indulgence".

Eventually she does come to an epiphany of sorts. She realises Ray was working away happily at his papers right up until the last day. He didn't have any long-term suffering. The suffering was the lot of those left behind.

Professionally they lived somewhat compartmentalised lives. He was the editor and publisher of a literary magazine. But he never read any of her books or reviews. She, a Princeton professor and a novelist of prodigious output, seldom read any of his work. Yet in private life they were a devoted couple who shared nearly 50 years of such everyday activities as walking, gardening, visiting friends, and listening to music on the classic television channel.

However, it was only some weeks after his death that she came to know his in-

ner self. He had made one attempt to write a novel but it had never been finished and it was only after his death that she forced herself to read the manuscript. And it was only then that she recognised the autobiographical aspect and learned much about the man with whom she had shared a lifetime.

She has included a number of emails sent to friends telling of her feelings. She did not publish the replies, citing that it would invade her friends' privacy. Yet she does include quotes from letters she received. One memorable message told her to suffer in her grief because her husband was worth it.

She is less than charitable in her reaction to other words of comfort, often given by well-meaning friends, who were obviously struggling for the right words to say.

This is not a guide to coping with grief. It is, however, a remarkable insight into one woman's experience on the loss of someone precious.

More drama and less gossip

Rivals - Sport's Greatest Battles. By Phil Gifford. HarperCollins, 287 pages. \$39.99.

Reviewed by Lewis Martin

introduction to this collection, setting out his plan for the book and the basis for his selections. All he gives us is two pages comparing sport to Greek drama. Not a word about his choices for the book or his reasons for them.

And what has he chosen for our delectation? Many chapters are obvious: Ali v Frazier; Sugar Ray Leonard v Roberto Duran; All Blacks v Springboks; Celtic v Rangers; Sebastian Coe v Steve Ovett. But beyond the obvious, the choices have the ring of a shopping list about them: I've got enough rugby; I need some women's sport; one on golf; have I got enough cricket?

Some of them are deliberately whimsical, like "Norma Plummer v New Zealand". Excuse me? The rivals here are



the Australian and New Zealand netball teams, not a netball coach and a country.

Some are accounts of personal feuds, not sporting rivalries. Rugby is a side issue in the chapters on Grizz Wylie and John Hart, and Richie McCaw and Quade Cooper. Figure skating is barely mentioned in the chapter on Tonya Harding and Nancy Kerrigan.

The chapters follow each other in random order, the writing is good enough, but no more, and the focus often drifts away from the sporting contest: do we need to know that Sugar Ray Leonard was molested as an adolescent?

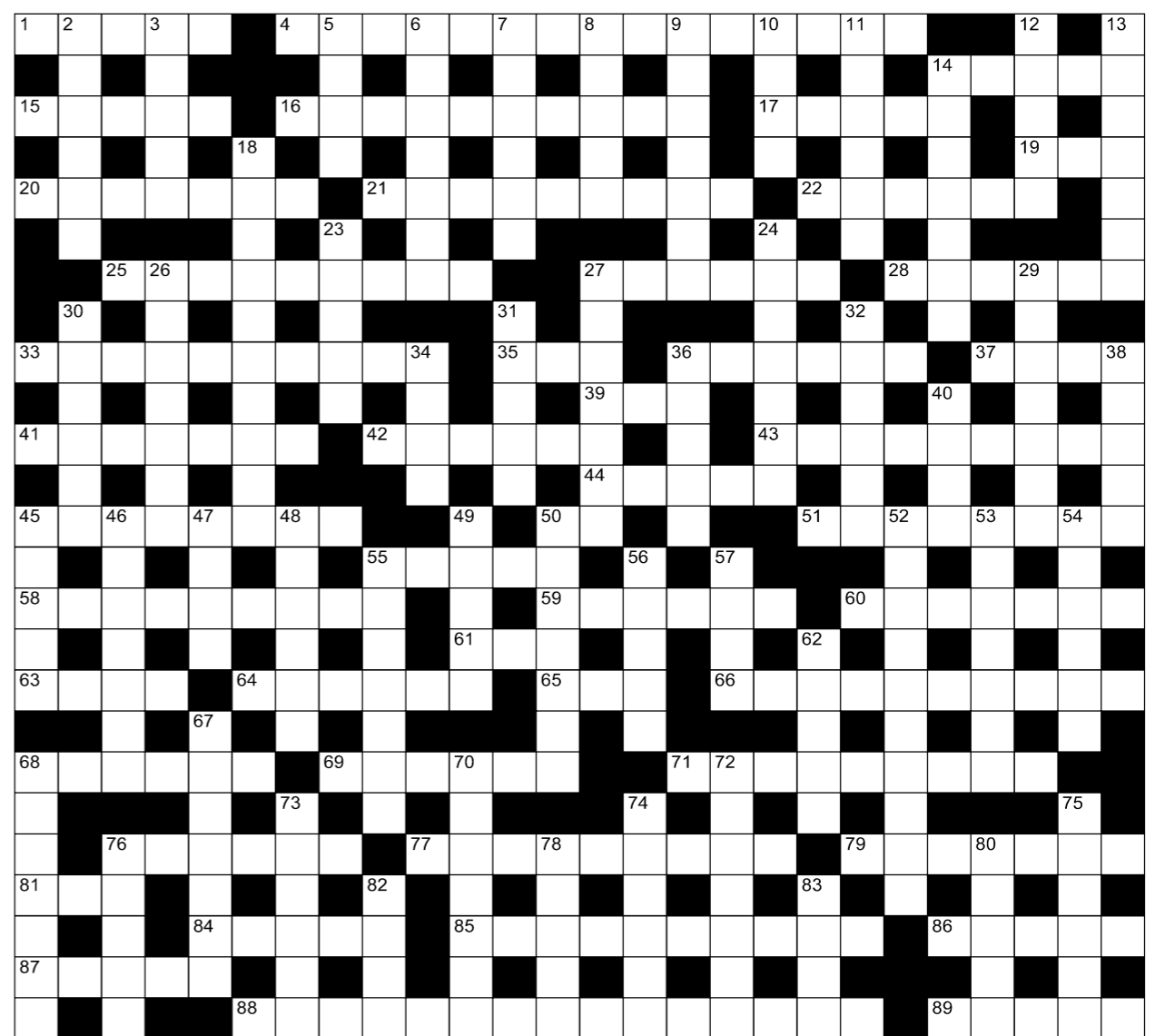
More drama and less gossip is needed to make a good sports story. Some pictures might have helped, too.

Pope completes trilogy

The Vatican says Pope Benedict XVI has completed the third instalment of his planned trilogy on the life of Christ. The publication date will be announced after *Jesus of Nazareth* is translated into various languages from Benedict's original German.

The announcement yesterday says the third volume is dedicated to accounts of Christ's infancy. Part I was published in 2007. AP

WEEKEND CROSSWORD 998



ACROSS

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- 15 Sediment (5)
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