

Lisa Fipps is a graduate of Ball State University, award-winning former journalist, current director of marketing for a public library (where she won the Sara Laughlin marketing award), and an author of middle-grade books. *Starfish* is her debut novel. She's working on her next novel and several others, and currently lives in Indiana. Get to know her, and more about her inspiration for *Starfish*, below.



Q. You are an accomplished award-winning journalist as well as a novelist. What influenced your decision to write a middle grade novel?

I wrote *Starfish* because it was the book I needed when I was a kid. I was fat and struggled with so many emotions from all the bullying. I come from a dysfunctional family and didn't feel safe or comfortable enough to tell anyone what was going on inside of me. Since I was an avid reader, I turned to books, hoping to read a story like mine, hoping to feel less alone. But library visit after library visit, I didn't find any, and I ended up feeling even more alone. I've always dreamed of writing for children, so it only made sense for my debut novel to be the book I always needed as a kid.

Q. Talk therapy plays an important role in eventually helping Ellie to cope and gain self-confidence in dealing with her peers and her family. What recommendations would you give parents, teachers and librarians trying to help kids who are experiencing difficult situations?

Admit when you don't have the answers and don't know what to do and then find an expert to help you. I had Ellie's dad, who's a psychiatrist, turn to another therapist to help his daughter because I wanted to show kids that parents don't have all the answers. No grownup does. The Mental Health Association of America has a variety of online resources and affiliates across the country. It's a great place to start.

Q. A strong friendship develops between Ellie and her new neighbor, Catalina. They come from very different backgrounds with very different families and are completely opposite in appearance. Please discuss their friendship and its importance to the story.

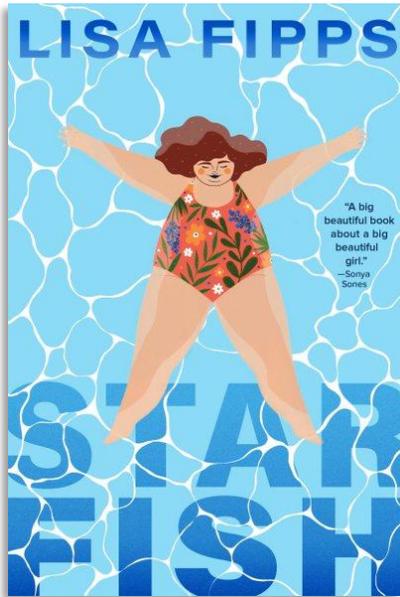
Ellie and Catalina immediately bond over music but for different reasons. Ellie likes the lyrics because she's a poet. Catalina likes the instrumentals because she's a musician. To me, that sets the tempo for their relationship: opposites in harmony. People in society, at school, and even at home tell Ellie she's not okay, just as she is. Catalina does. Ellie's self-image is shattered, in shards. Catalina helps Ellie see herself for who she is: beautiful.

Q. Ellie is constantly reminded of being over-weight by her mother and her peers. This is an intense, moving story that illustrates our society's bias towards thinness and shaming



those who are not. Please explain The Fat Girl Rules that Ellie keeps as well as what prompted you to focus on issues regarding weight.

Anyone who's ever been fat knows the Fat Girl Rules. Don't wear bright clothes; you'll draw attention to yourself. Don't laugh too hard, your belly jiggles.



Don't buy or eat too much of or the "wrong" things in public; people are watching every bite you buy and eat. Don't wear short-sleeve shirts and show your flabby arms or wear shorts and show your clumpy, bumpy legs; hide your skin and fat. Don't this. Don't that. All of it is the world's way of telling fat people, We don't want to see you. According to the CDC, 73.6 percent of U.S. adults 20 and over are fat or obese, and 21.2 percent of adolescents 12 to 19, 20.3 percent of children six to 11, and 13.4 percent of kids 2 to 5 are obese. Look around. Is that reflected in the media? No. Why? Because fat people are told – time and time again – we don't have a right to be seen or heard, and to make ourselves small. Fat people are so tired of the world either hating them or acting as if they don't exist. That's why I included the Fat Girl Rules. It's time to be real about what's going on.

Q. Music plays a role in this story. Please tell us some of the songs and why are they included on Ellie's playlist in this novel?

When I write, I listen to music I think the key characters would listen to so I can get more inside their heads. *Brave* by Sara Bareilles is the main one I listened to throughout the writing process, but especially when I wrote the poems where Ellie stands up for herself, when she starfishes. Every time I hear this part of the song (see below), I cry because it's so true, so powerful, so Ellie. And then when I saw the video for the song, I realized the people in it are starfishing! It's just perfection.

*Nothing's gonna hurt you the way that words do
when they settle 'neath your skin.
Kept on the inside and no sunlight
sometimes a shadow wins,
but I wonder what would happen if you
say what you wanna say
and let the words fall out.
Honestly, I wanna see you be brave.*

People might be surprised to see *Bigger Than My Body* by John Mayer on the list. But it's there because Ellie – as all fat people – is so much more than her body. Her life is bigger than that.

*Someday I'll fly.
Someday I'll soar.
Someday I'll be
something much more
'cause I'm bigger than my body
gives me credit for.*

Q. What message(s) do you want readers to take away from *Starfish*?

Starfish is about a bullied fat girl, but anyone who's ever been bullied for any reason can relate. I want kids who read it to know that they're not alone. I want them to know they don't have to put up with bullying; they can defend themselves without attacking others. I want them to know they can reach out for help to deal with all their emotions. I want them to know they do have a right to be seen and heard. I want them to *starfish*: to find their place and take up space in the world. I truly hope parents, teachers, pediatricians, and anyone who works with children reads *Starfish*. I want adults to learn that, even if they have the best intentions, their comments about kids' bodies wound those children. And based on my experiences and reader feedback, those wounds last a lifetime.

Q. What do you like to do when you aren't writing?

That's a trick question, right? Writers are always writing. Lol. I read. You can't be a writer if you're not a reader. You'll find few books for adults on my shelves. Middle grade and some YA and picture books make up 90 percent of my collection. I dabble in watercolor and photography. I listen to all kinds of music.

Q. A mosaic is the backdrop/theme on your website. Please elaborate!

In addition to being bullied for being fat, I'm a survivor of multiple childhood traumas. I was angry with the people who didn't protect me and the people who hurt me. I struggled with depression. I hated feeling broken. Damaged. Scarred. And yet, as a lover of art, I saw such beauty in mosaics. You can't have the beauty of a mosaic without brokenness. I realized when bad things happen that leave your mind, heart, and soul shattered, you learn from and then discard the dreadful pieces, and then you can puzzle the good back together just the way you want them to create the life you've always dreamed of. Broken things and people are beautiful. I am a mosaic.

Q. We learned that in addition to your being a journalist and a writer you are also a library marketing manager! We wanted to let you know that public librarians from all over the world will read this interview. Is there something you'd like to say to them?

The public only sees the tip of the iceberg of all that you do. And for support staff, they might not even see that. Technology continuously revolutionizes libraries, providing us with all kinds of new ways to serve patrons. It also competes with us and makes us reinvent ourselves. Now COVID has done the same thing. You've had to find new ways to do just about everything – all while fearing for your health and the health of your loved ones. But it's also provided us with all kinds of new ways to serve patrons. A lot of us offer curbside pickup now. We do virtual programs that allow patrons to participate when it's best for their schedules. We're always going to face challenges, but we're always going to overcome them because you, like me, see the kids literally running through our doors because they're so excited to pick out books to read. We see the under-resourced families using our computer labs to do homework, and to apply for assistance and jobs. And our programs? They change lives. I'll always remember a program our library did. We had a staff member who was a photographer on the side. We set up a studio, complete with a nice background, and took a photo of anyone who signed up. We emailed them a copyright-free, high-resolution JPEG, so they could make whatever prints they

wanted. The first family who signed up arrived over an hour early. They were downright giddy as they got dressed up and did their hair and makeup in the bathroom. The mom said, with tears in her eyes, “Thank you so much for this. We haven’t been able to have a nice family photo taken in fifteen years. We couldn’t afford it.” You have your programs like that. Our libraries are full of stories – and not just in the books on our shelves. Hold onto those until this pandemic is over. And hold onto those whenever the next big challenge comes our way. Y’all rock! You make a difference. Keep going!

Starfish published on March 9th and can be purchased in [hardcover](#) or [eBook](#) format on TitleSource 360.