

# Questioning the Obesity Myth

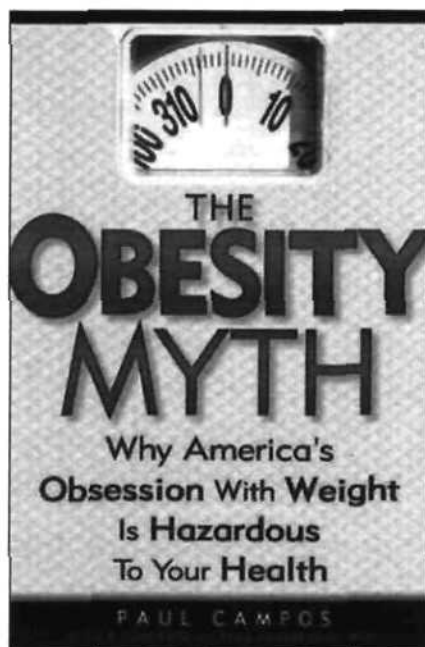
BENJAMIN RADFORD

*The Obesity Myth: Why America's Obsession with Weight Is Hazardous to Your Health.* By Paul Campos.  
Gotham Books, New York, 2004. ISBN 1-592-40066-3. 290 pp. Hardcover, \$25.

At a June 2, 2005, press conference, Dr. Julie Gerberding, the director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, apologized for the mixed messages the public has been getting about the dangers of obesity. Acknowledging that flawed data in several CDC studies had overstated the risks of obesity, Gerberding was responding in part to critics such as Paul Campos. Campos rightly sounds the alarm over bad science, and his book *The Obesity Myth* (reissued in May 2005 as *The Diet Myth*) was prominently featured in a recent *Scientific American* cover article.

The book and controversy provide an object lesson in skepticism. Campos is not a medical professional but a lawyer; he makes a point of mentioning this, implying that his status as an outsider to the obesity issue aids his judgment. It is important to remember, however, that lawyers do not seek the truth; instead, they advocate for one side. In this case, Campos is advocating on behalf of those who believe that the efforts to portray fat as unhealthy and unacceptable are driven by junk science, hatred of fat people, and a profit-hungry dieting industry. He also believes that

*Benjamin Radford wrote about exaggerated media claims in the March/April 2005 issue of SKEPTICAL INQUIRER, based on his book Media Mythmakers: How Journalists, Activists, and Advertisers Mislead Us.*



the time-honored weight loss recipe of watching what you eat and exercising doesn't work. Campos charges that "almost everything the government and the media [are] saying about weight and weight control [is] either grossly distorted or flatly untrue." The whole field is rife with "junk science," Campos writes, and former Surgeon General David Satcher was "unhinged" in his efforts to curb America's obesity.

It is certainly true, as Dr. Gerberding admitted (and Patrick Johnson explains in this issue), that various estimates of obesity's death toll were consistently overstated. While Campos and other critics can gloat in vindication, the fact is that obesity is only the latest in a long list of public health threats that have been

overstated by a sensationalist news media (and, to a lesser degree, by the medical community). The dire warnings, publicity, and hype surrounding West Nile virus, ebola, flu, anthrax, Mad Cow disease, and even AIDS, to name just a few, all far outstripped any reasonable public health threat. And confusing and contradictory medical information is hardly novel, as William Baarschers describes in his article in this issue.

Campos devotes two valuable chapters to the junk science behind the obesity scare. The remaining sixteen chapters, however, are devoid of skepticism. Throughout Campos's book, he adopts a crusading tone and blames the news media and medical journals for getting their facts wrong and presenting a biased viewpoint. So how does *The Obesity Myth* stack up?

Let's start with Campos's subtitle. Does America have an obsession with weight? Campos certainly seems to think so; he calls America "a nation of dieters." Campos seems unaware that—despite health advice from doctors—most Americans are in fact *not* trying hard to lose weight. Studies and surveys find that while some Americans are dieting, a majority are not, and a surprising percentage—one-third to one-half—rarely or never diet. According to a 2002 survey published in *USA Today*, only one out of every five women said losing weight was a top priority. In 2000, a *People* magazine survey found only one-quarter had dieted

at any point in the previous year. Studies published in medical journals have found similar results. For a book that repeatedly criticizes others for exaggerating numbers, Campos starts out on poor footing.

Campos compounds this factual error with a logical one by suggesting that "advising people to eat less and exercise more appears to have ended up making Americans a good deal fatter" (p. 33). He is mistaking correlation for causation, but the misunderstanding goes far deeper than that: Campos is assuming—incorrectly—that Americans have been following the advice to eat less and exercise more. In fact, studies have found that most Americans eat poorly and don't exercise regularly.

Wrongly convinced that most Americans are dieting, Campos blames the "fat police" medical establishment and the media for causing low self-esteem in women. "Few Americans—and especially very few American women—are satisfied with the appearance of their bodies," Campos writes on page 174. The zealous skepticism with which he attacked the CDC's inflated numbers is absent when it comes to examining his own assumptions. In 1998 *USA Weekend* conducted one of the largest surveys ever taken of American youth, surveying over a quarter of a million students in grades 6 to 12. Among the results: 93 percent of teens feel good about themselves. A recent Gallup poll of more than five thousand adults found that 90 percent of Americans are confident in their looks. In 2000, the British Medical Association issued a report that concluded "The majority of young women (88 percent) say they are of average or above average self-confidence." And a 2004 survey, "The Real Truth About Beauty: A Global Report" (coauthored by feminist Susie Orbach who, ironically, provided a cover blurb for *The Obesity Myth*) found that only ten percent of women were "somewhat or very dissatisfied" with their beauty. The facts show exactly the opposite of what Campos claims.

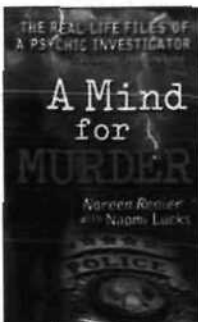
In much of the book, Campos denounces popular culture's obsession with thinness. While thin bodies are undeni-

ably present in entertainment media, large bodies are just as present, from Oprah Winfrey to Roseanne Barr and Kirstie Alley, *American Idol* Ruben Studdard to Starr Jones and Queen Latifah. Bizarrely, Campos cites very thin models and actresses like Kate Moss and Calista Flockhart as being the "cultural ideal." He offers no support for this claim (ideal according to whom?) and seems unaware that both Moss and Flockhart were continually and harshly criticized—not lauded—for their thin bodies.

Then there's the howler on page 121 that "obesity researchers rarely seem to be given pause by the fact that life expectancy and obesity rates in America have been rising in tandem for at least a century now." It seems likely that improved sanitation and decreasing infant and child mortality rates since 1900 are responsible for increased life expectancy.

Furthermore, the incidence of obesity has steeply increased in the last twenty years, and the diseases associated with obesity may take years to actually kill.

In what is the final irony, on page 241, Campos reveals that, in the course of writing the book, he managed to lose 30 percent of his body mass. How did he do it? Why, diet and exercise—the method that the medical establishment and the "unhinged" Surgeon General had touted, the exact recipe Campos had repeatedly assured his readers (pp. 8, 29, 119) *never works*. *The Obesity Myth* does indeed puncture several myths about dieting and obesity; unfortunately it creates and perpetuates more myths than it debunks. The book is a good lesson in the importance of being skeptical not only of others' assumptions and beliefs, but also our own.



## These Files May Be 'Real-Life'—But Is She Really 'Psychic'?

GARY P. POSNER

*A Mind for Murder: The Real-Life Files of a Psychic Investigator*. By Noreen Renier with Naomi Lucks. Berkley Books, New York, 2005. ISBN 0-425-20289-5. 310 pp. Paperback, \$7.99.

The foreword to *A Mind for Murder*, Noreen Renier's memoir of her career as a "psychic investigator," begins, "I have had my throat slit. I have been shot. . . . I don't like to get killed more than two or three times a week—it's just too exhausting." I found the entire book an entertaining adventure—it's a page-turner, and the

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writing isn't half-bad. But are the author's "psychic" claims even half-true?

Boasting endorsements from retired FBI criminologist/author Robert Ressler (among others in law enforcement and parapsychology research), Renier is the only psychic to have lectured at the FBI Academy. She says she has worked on "more than four hundred unsolved homicides, missing persons, and rape cases."

Renier's 1986 libel trial against skeptic John Merrell and their ensuing legal battles, thoroughly addressed in my contributed chapter about Renier in the book *Psychic Sleuths*, occupy two chapters. But she leaves out the most delicious tidbit: She enticed (some might