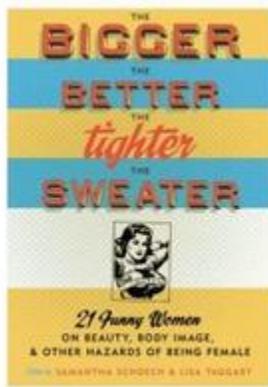


## [Speak Softly – Mama’s Reading: "The Bigger The Better The Tighter The Sweater"](#)



*Please enjoy our new book feature, appearing in this spot every Thursday!*

**Editors:** Samantha Schoech & Lisa Taggart

**Publisher/Price:** [Seal Press](#) [\$15]

**Perfect For:** Every woman who has issues with her self-image; i.e., every woman.

I have issues. There, I said it. I’m a woman. I’m a mother. And, as such, I have some major body-image issues. Whether they be serious, self-flagellating issues that make me lose sleep, have low self esteem, and stay in bed on a Friday night, or simply a voice in my head that says, “Ugh,” when I catch a glance at myself at a bad angle in a full-length mirror, they are with me always. I daresay you have some too.

When [Samantha Schoech](#) and Lisa Taggart set out to put together a book that dealt with this very topic, they recognized that many of us have issues with some aspect of our appearance; in our culture, with our media, it would be hard not to. “Most women we know can love themselves and loathe themselves simultaneously. We might feel beautiful one day, ugly the next. But mostly women get this and have a sense of humor about it,” Samantha, editor and contributor, told me.

The result of their labor was [The Bigger The Better The Tighter The Sweater: 21 Funny Women on Beauty, Body Image, & Other Hazards of Being Female](#). From ta-tas to big butts, pear-shapes to sweating, these 21 essays are organized into clever categories like “The Pencil Test and Other Boob Failures” and “Stretch Marks: Pregnancy & Other Bum Deals.” In the latter you can find Samantha’s essay, “Bump Doesn’t Begin To Describe It,” which portrays her hilarious observations of how the public responds to a woman who is pregnant with twins, and how pregnancy causes us to “lose all familiarity” with our own bodies. Um, yeah, I can relate to that!

I read [The Bigger The Better](#) cover to cover, and if I wasn’t busy laughing out loud, I was appreciating the fact that this was not an attempt to tell me to love my love handles, nor was it saying I should hate them. It didn’t try to dictate my feelings but rather encouraged me by reminding me that I was not abnormal in my fluctuating and often negative opinion of my own

body. “We wanted a book that didn't have a ‘message’ you were supposed to get other than, ‘It's ok to be conflicted and you are not the only one,’” Samantha says. “Our main goals were to be funny and avoid easy, politically correct answers.” The book succeeds in doing both. And tell me, when was the last time you had a serious laugh over the current state of your stretch mark-ridden, floppy ta-tas?

But this book goes far beyond the issues we may have with our outward appearance by tackling the ways in which our bodies seem to sometimes bail on us. The section entitled “The Breakdown: Aging and Illness” includes essays on such serious topics as breast cancer and lupus, while maintaining a great sense of humor and truth. In “Now You're Just Like Flannery O'Conner: A Few Things Not To Tell The Newly Sick,” Mary O'Connell describes with wit and hilarity her diagnosis of lupus and some of the common responses she received from others. Her essay has, I believe, the most triumphant concluding paragraph I have ever read, as she reveals how her “newly sick” body took on the task of pregnancy and mothering.

Several pieces focus on the extent to which our bodies can frustrate our ideals of child-bearing and child-rearing. In “My Life As A Mammal,” [Laura McNeal](#) explores her own expectations when she has an unexpectedly difficult time breastfeeding, and her breasts don't seem to be “fulfilling their destiny.” In this hysterical yet poignant account of her first few months as a new mom, she details her feelings of failure and eventual realization. To our readers who know and understand the anxiety that comes from a trying breastfeeding relationship, she told me her advice is to, “Do whatever will get you and your baby through the early months, not what your husband, your mother, your neighbors, and your friends think will get you through it. In my case, that meant both breast feeding and formula. It was a balance between the ideal and the actual, like most things in life.”

Similarly, in [Jennifer D. Munro's](#) beautiful essay, “Navel Attire,” she describes her process of coming to terms with multiple miscarriages and recovery from an emergency surgery due to ectopic pregnancy. In her account she writes, “My scarred navel, symbol of my inability thus far to bear children. My belly a double shame, double failure. Swells when it should lie flat. Lies flat when it should swell.” Jennifer describes how the simple and spontaneous act of having her bellybutton pierced transformed her view of self. When I asked her how she stumbled upon such an important stepping stone, she said that it was “Synchronicity . . . The fates held up a subtitle card that day (booming God voice): YOU ARE GETTING YOUR NAVEL PIERCED TODAY! DO NOT RESIST! I try to be open to unexpected opportunities that come my way (provided they aren't too painful).” Now in the process of adopting a foster child, Jennifer tells me that, “It's been a long journey to get to this point. I am excited and terrified. I haven't gone about motherhood in the usual way (not that I didn't want to).” In each essay these women describe their situations with wit, humor, and ultimately an encouraging understanding of how to take that which their body has thrown at them and press on.

No matter what you look like and how you've come to terms with your body, there's something in this book for every woman, some passage or quote that ultimately will ring true for you, causing you to nod your head *yes* while laughing hysterically, or perhaps crying sympathetically. And even if you don't necessarily see yourself in all of the writers' stories, the collection truly is

fascinating, down-to-earth, and touching. So when you sit down with this one, bring your issues with you, no matter how large or how small. In fact, the bigger the better.

-Beth

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