Body Thieves: Help Girls Reclaim Their Natural Bodies and Become Physically Active, by Sandra Susan Friedman. Vancouver, BC, Canada: Salal, 2002, 244 pages, $14.95.

Some people never disappoint us, consistently stepping up to the challenge of making the world a safer place for girls. Sandra Friedman is at the top of that list. She continues to develop innovative and comprehensive programs to promote positive body image, self-esteem, and identity, and to build resilience and resistance to the many factors that endanger girls’ health and contribute to eating disorders. An outstanding resource for parents, professionals, and for girls themselves, Body Thieves is her fourth and most recent work. Once again, Friedman has managed to integrate sophisticated feminist theory with practical, real-life examples, elucidating the many causes of these problems and suggesting new strategies to effect change. Like her previous contributions (Just for Girls, Nurturing Girl Power, When Girls Feel Fat), this is a must-have for anyone involved in the prevention of eating disorders and in health promotion for girls.

Friedman identifies six primary body thieves that hold girls hostage, tie their self-worth to their weight, and sentence them to years of dieting and negative body image. Robbed of their youth, some will succumb to full-blown eating disorders, with as many as 10% dying prematurely as a result. Others will be unable to live to their potential and precious years will be wasted with negative and obsessive attempts to alter their bodies. Just as they try to keep their stomachs empty, their lives also will be empty.

The body thieves are: society’s emphasis on thinness; the silencing of girls’ voices; society’s attitudes and prejudices toward fat; anti-fat crusaders; dieting; and mothers, teachers, and other mentors who diet. She artfully describes how each of these evolved and took hold in western culture.
Beginning with a chapter on the impact of gender on development, Friedman integrates biological, neurological, and social influences on behavior, relationships, and identity. The next chapter examines the gender-based socialization process dictating that girls internalize their distress while boys are allowed to externalize. Forced into silence, girls express their distress through their bodies. Knowing that fat is bad, they begin to translate their negative feelings into the “language of fat.”

In “Celebrating Girls’ Bodies,” the chapter on body image, Friedman illustrates how beauty ideals reflect social movements, reminding us that, not all that long ago, fat was seen as a “stored up force” representing energy, strength, health, and economic well-being. A century later, having a fat woman by his side no longer represents a man’s success: Only very thin women are trophy wives today. This historical approach is a good reminder of how arbitrary and conditional our current beauty standards are and is particularly useful for work with adolescents and young adults who have no other reference point, having been raised in this era of body thievery. The book is full of useful exercises, self-assessments, and resources to help translate the concepts into reality, and this chapter has particularly useful suggestions on activities and consciousness-raising projects that will help girls reclaim their bodies.

Friedman dedicates three chapters to the issue of “fat,” including a well-referenced summary on the fallacies and myths that are used to justify the war on fat. She challenges the antifat crusade, which emphasizes concerns about health that actually have no supporting research, and introduces the radical notion of size acceptance. Her next chapter shows the overlooked consequences of this antifat crusade, discussing the prevalence of disordered eating and eating disorders, ending with helpful tips if you are worried about a girl with these issues. The final chapter in this trilogy focuses on the challenge of being a fat girl today. This includes a thorough examination of the multiple factors affecting weight, including genetics, faulty hunger mechanisms, eating habits, activity, and dieting and provides practical and sensitive ideas to help fat girls deal with their feelings, stressing that fat is a body type and not a character type.

Subsequent chapters focus on various ways to combat the body thieves. Friedman, more poignantly than any other writer on this topic, explains how girls are taught today to translate all of their negative affect into the language of fat. Not only does she describe the problem, she also provides many ways to challenge this language and to help girls deal with their feelings directly. Tests, exercises, rituals, and art projects are some of the techniques she suggests. Her ideas are creative, easily executed, and transformative for girls and for all readers.

Throughout Body Thieves, Friedman challenges readers to be honest about things such as their own antifat prejudice or dieting history. She reminds parents that they themselves may be body thieves if they pressure or
encourage their daughters to diet. Mothers must be especially careful not to teach their daughters to deal with stress by restricting their food intake. Talking the talk is one thing; walking the walk, another. Friedman’s own personal reflections and revelations throughout the book remind us that parents, professionals, and other caregivers must be in a parallel process of development and self-examination.

Friedman introduces some refreshing and new ideas that are typically absent in the prevention and health promotion literature. One is quite simple: the importance of enjoying food! Unfortunately, most educational programs that intend to prevent eating and weight problems actually increase the rules and caveats about food, making young people more and more anxious about it and turning food into a toxic and feared substance. The antidotes to body thieves are actually exploration, adventure, and trust, rarely discussed but critical to changing our relationship with food. Furthermore, her approach stresses the importance of being connected to girls. According to Friedman, a program, no matter how well designed, is not going to stop the body thieves, only relationships based on genuine respect and mutuality will lead girls into safer territory.

Another unique contribution concerns the value of physical activity to health and well-being. Demonstrating how the two sexes differ when it comes to sports, Friedman argues that we need to transform “physical education” to make it more relevant to girls, providing not only a thorough review of the gender differences but also much sage advice for coaches and parents regarding how to introduce a feminist approach to athletic participation and competition. Asserting that “equity is not the same as equality,” she challenges the traditional approach of trying to make girls act like boys. This includes a brief but thorough summary of the different forms of harassment girls experience as well as the physical risk for the female athlete (amenorrhea, disordered eating, and osteoporosis).

*Body Thieves* includes a comprehensive and practical chapter on the impact of the media. The constant exposure to gender-limiting stereotypes showing active boys and passive girls, male superheros, and rigid standards for female beauty cause great pain, confusion, and despair. This chapter is a good resource for media literacy, with practical pointers for letter-writing and activism. She concludes “with courage and determination” and an optimistic view that we can overcome the body thieves, by changing our attitudes but, more importantly, by changing our actions.

*Body Thieves* is a wonderful resource and a great addition to the literature, with thorough references and diverse resources. If pressed to criticize, I could say that the emphasis is on what mothers can do and not on fathers; however, the reality is that women, both as professionals and as parents, need to admit their complicity in the body thieves of contemporary western culture. Furthermore, like it or not, every social movement has rested on the
shoulders of women. This is truly a women’s movement and one that re-
quires immediate attention and action: We have to start treating our bodies
and the bodies of all women with the respect and honor they deserve. We
can do better and Sandra Friedman’s *Body Thieves* shows us how.

Margo Maine, PhD
West Hartford, CT