transported into Firdaus’ cell. The rest of the novel consists of Firdaus telling her life story just hours before she is to be hanged.

*Woman at Point Zero* is based on the true story of a woman Nawal met while conducting her study on women and neurosis. Nawal has said that the novel is, in fact, eighty percent non-fiction and twenty percent fiction. Perhaps this firm basis in reality distinguishes this novel so markedly from the others. Certainly, the simple, direct and totally unsentimental voice of Firdaus, as she talks about her deprivation, abuse and ultimate revenge, is not unlike Nawal’s own stile in *Memoirs from the Women’s Prison*.

Undoubtedly, the situations described in *Woman at Point Zero* contain the compelling combination of drama and tragedy, a fact recognised by several producers who lost no time in adapting it for the stage. For women readers, especially, Firdaus’ revenge, however short-lived, on the pimp who threatened her life merits our applause. Equally, we cannot help but admire her refusal to grovel to the authorities for a pardon, although we would not condone the occasional festering sore, decaying bodies and the continuous references to dirty fingernails, especially since these belong to the hundreds of men who cynically exploit Firdaus.

For those who have read the story of Firdaus’ life, it is not difficult to understand why the novel has been so widely acclaimed, both internationally and in Middle East countries where publication was permitted. Along with many of Nawal’s books, *Woman at Point Zero* is banned in her own country, though many Egyptians have managed to obtain illegal copies. At the same time, this book is Nawal’s most consistently misunderstood work. Many critics have mistakenly assumed that the author is advocating violence as a means of combatting sexual oppression. But Nawal has explained that Firdaus and the character Bahaih in *Two Women in One* did not win. The theme in both these books is that it is impossible for an individual women to fight alone. The two characters’ failure is completely consistent with Nawal’s feminists convictions enunciated so clearly in *The Hidden Face of Eve*. The only avenue for women’s liberation is for women to unite together and connect our concerns with the struggles for economic and social justice everywhere.

While so much more can be said about Nawal el Sa’adawi both as a writer and a political activist, my purpose here has merely been to tempt potential Sa’adawi fans to delve more deeply and discover for themselves the many pleasures and insights found in her books. Hopefully, we can also help create some pressure for the remaining seventeen books still not available to us to be translated into English.

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**Guilty feelings**

Reviewed by PA VLA MILLER.

On the back cover of *Eating Your Heart Out*, the publishers tell us that the book is for “everyone who worries about their weight”. They are wrong. The book is also for those, worried or not, who want to understand the making of one of the overwhelming concerns of people today. In her book, Ramona Koval takes on two important tasks. Firstly, she sets out to demolish the seemingly natural character of the “ideal” bodily shape. Secondly, she exposes the trickery and dangerous practices of many sections of the weight control industry.

Only fifty years ago, advertisements in Australian newspapers invited women to “transform ugly hollows into graceful curves”; a few years earlier, an advertisement offered to “put 10, 15, yes, 20 pounds of solid ‘stay there’ flesh on your bones”. Today, teenage models, looking “like pipe cleaners”, entice mature women to “bite chunks out of their weight problem” and to “create a slim, sexy great body in record time”. The ideal changes, but the pressure on people to conform to it remains. Women in particular, Ramona Koval argues, channel many problems and frustrations of their everyday life into an obsession with food. Rather than attempting to deal with the causes of these problems, the “body industry” aggressively and enthusiastically cashes in. Conforming to a changing and elusive ideal body shape is presented as an easy solution to problems ranging from unemployment to poor health or an unsatisfactory sex life. In fact, dieting and other weight-control measures may be a source of greater health problems than those which they are used to solve.

With a degree in Microbiology and Genetics and a delightful sense of humour, Ramona Koval does a convincing job of demolishing the link between health and thin bodies — so much so that many thin people might feel a slight twinge of unease. Certainly, “those thin people who maintain their weight through a combination of rigorous dieting, food obsessions and self-hatred do not fall into the category of healthy”. Fatness,
on the other hand, may be one of the risk factors associated with some diseases, but does not necessarily cause them. Indeed, the book favours the view that fat and skinny people are part of the natural range of human diversity; and that the sickness and misery of fat people depend not only on their weight but on their sensitivity to persecution on account of their weight.

While research on the link between weight and health remains inconclusive, some parts of the weight control industry seem to present a considerable health hazard. In the chapter on the medical wing of the industry, the author presents detailed information on the various drugs and surgical procedures used by the medical profession to control weight. As yet, there seems to be no satisfactory drug which can lead to the permanent loss of large amounts of weight. The available surgical procedures are often dangerous and have limited success. Whatever the case, medical practitioners in Australia do not receive adequate training in diet and nutrition. Indeed, the author argues that fatness in itself is not a disease. While middle class doctors, however, tend to see the body shape acquired by the women of their class as the ideal, and assume not only that other social groups share their ideals, but that poorer women, too, have the time, resources and inclination regularly to attend fitness clubs and purchase health foods.

The food industry and many of its products are subject to even stronger criticisms. Even those who tend to be sceptical of the claims of advertisers will find some surprises. Did you know that Weight Watchers International is owned by Heinz (of the Heinz beans)? That a Weight Watchers brand of breakfast cereal contains more kilojoules per 100 grams than the same kind of breakfast cereal produced by the same company under its own name? That Purina toasted muesli contains 26 percent sugar?

In terms of quick profit, however, perhaps the highest stakes are involved in commercial weight-loss centres, dieting clubs and similar enterprises. Although little systematic information is available about these, Ramona Koval documents some of the rip-offs and dangerous practices involved. In particular, she points out that, for some people, some forms of exercise can lead to a serious deterioration of health. Once the first visit is over, however, health fitness club staff seem to offer little professional guidance to their clients. Several of the "miracle diets" analysed in the book do not fare much better: they might give miraculous profits to their promoters, but are based on misleading medical information, are dangerous to health — and do not work in the long run.

Unlike most books about food and dieting, Eating Your Heart Out leaves the readers guilty about their innermost desire to lose weight and, unintentionally, makes skinny people feel somewhat uneasy. Unintentionally, since the main message of the book is undoubtedly: "Feel good about your body, whatever size and shape it is". Those readers who remain convinced that they, for whatever reason, need to lose weight, will have to read between the lines to work out the best way to do it.

The problem remains that in our society many people do have unhealthy jobs and lifestyles, and often develop serious disorders such as anorexia and bulimia associated with food. In her chapter on strategies for change, the author discusses two ways forward. On an economic level, this is a thorough and stringent regulation of the weight control industry. On an individual level, she discusses the possibilities opened up by feminist psychotherapists working with groups of women who have problems with food. Yet, in the long run, increased self-esteem and feeling good about our bodies is not enough. In the end, we must demand healthy, meaningful livelihoods for all people, adequate incomes and leisure (even for women!), and cheap, widely available healthy foods. In other words, the emphasis should be only partly on feeling good about ourselves, but also on making sure we all have a lot to feel good about.

I highly recommend the book — it is not often that we can chuckle our way through a readable, scholarly demolition job on a major social institution.

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