

Big Boned

Jo Watson

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In Jo Watson's endearing novel *Big Boned*, a talented artist's ideas about her self-worth bloom after she moves to Cape Town.

After her parents divorce, Lori transfers to Bay Water High. Her mother, in her distracted grief, rebrands herself as a luxury realtor, and Lori takes over caring for her brother, Zac, who has autism. Family strains, Lori's hopes about art school, and the imagined opinions of Lori's classmates prompt her to strengthen her critical inner voice. But then Jake, a water polo star, befriends her through his volunteer work at Zac's school, and Lori discovers a lovable version of herself.

Despite the elite, white South African community that surrounds Lori, and despite her own privileges, Lori is a down-to-earth heroine because of her self-conscious fragility. Her therapist's succulent gardening inspires analogies about brokenness and recovery, helping Lori to become kinder to herself; she addresses issues like body image and mental health with refreshing candor.

The book's wider story is about figuring out how to align reality with one's changing beliefs. Even so, when Lori's art takes an activist turn, depicting victims of gender-based violence, it feels like an abrupt development, though it's implied that focusing on others helps her to dwell less on her anxiety. Lori's awareness about her role as an ally is also underdeveloped.

The story's modern and appealing narration includes text messages, positive affirmations, and lists. Through meetings with Jake and conversations with Zac, Lori learns to look past people's surfaces and appreciate their differences, culminating in a rewarding, dream-come-true scenario.

Big Boned is an optimistic novel whose warm cast subverts convention, and whose heroine learns to take risks.

KAREN RIGBY (September / October 2021)

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