

## The girls in the gang

They take fat activism from the dance floor to the academic conference – and they make it fun

### CHARLOTTE COOPER

Bill was one of the main organisers for Ladyfest 2002. I went round to her house for a meeting and broke a chair in a quite classic fat-girl kind of way. Bill just raised an eyebrow slightly and she and her girlfriend tidied up the wreckage and got me another one to sit on.

After Ladyfest we started going to a club called the Unskinny Bop together. She does such beautiful art-work for the club every month and produces the Unskinny Bop 'zine, and the amazing Pamzine. I got to know her through reading her stuff and dancing with her, basically.

Now she's Dr Savage and I'm just starting a PhD. She's a lot younger than me but she's become one of my mentors. I started

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off feeling a bit lost in academia and it really helps to know someone who's been through it and survived, someone who I really respect and whose work I love.

Last year I managed to snag a scholarship from the Irish Social Sciences Platform to do study at the University of Limerick. I'm looking at fat people and healthcare and discrimination, but there's also an activist element in it.

Bill was one of the founding Chubsters. We're a queer, fat, girl-gang, but you don't have to be queer, or fat, or a girl to join. We have real members, and gang names and we jump people in. My alter-ego, the Beefer, is deranged and belligerent and aggressive. Fat people are often considered helpless, pitiful, worthless and ugly, and being the Beefer is about remembering that I'm not those things, that I have agency and I can fight back if I want to.

There's an activist side to the Chubsters that addresses fat-hatred, but it's also about creating fat culture and thinking about the value of fat people, while the rhetoric of fat panic is about eradicating that and not acknowledging or recognising it exists to begin with.

Bill's very different to me and the Beefer. Bill's just sweet and giggly all the time. And super cool. I'm the sort of person who would fall on my arse in public. Bill would never do that.

### BILL SAVAGE

It was one of the landlord's chairs. We hid the pieces before we moved out...

Out of all the difficult aspects of my identity, like my gender or sexuality, being fat has been the hardest to come to terms with. It's really only been in the last five years that I've become comfortable with it as part of my identity and Charlotte's been really important in that process.

In a lot of clubs, straight and gay, there's a hierarchy of styles that privilege the thin body. The Unskinny Bop is our space but it's not just about size politics. The thing about the Bop is that everyone looks like they're having the most fun they've ever had. There's none of

that aloof, stand-offish atmosphere.

Last year York University held the UK's first Fat Studies conference and Charlotte and I both read there. In July Raw Nerve Press are bringing out a book based on conference papers and including pages from the Unskinny Bop 'zines, which I produced and Charlotte contributed to.

The Chubsters is about creating new ways of being fat that are not self-hating. It's an antidote to the actual discrimination fat people experience; it's more about creating your own community and doing something positive that will make your life more liveable.

I got my name ages ago. I was in a fake band that all had names ending in Savage, like the Donnas or the Ramones, and it just stuck. It's partly a queer thing. I don't feel like a Rachel.

The thing I love about Charlotte, what we have in common maybe, is that she's someone who likes to make her own fun. She and her girlfriend Kay and boyfriend Simon always have some game they're playing, they always find the fun in any situation. That's why I love them so much, really. Charlotte seems to be able to articulate things very well and precisely, whereas I um and ah for ages. I often find myself thinking, 'Now – what would Charlotte Cooper do?'

INTERVIEW BY GISELE CARLIN. PHOTO: DENZI+ROSE

**Join the gang**  
The Chubsters  
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Charlotte Cooper  
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Fat Studies in the UK  
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and Anni Kaloski Naylor, is  
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Books in July  
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