



# Flow: The Cultural Story of Menstruation

*Elissa Stein , Susan Kim*

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In this hip, hilarious and truly eye-opening cultural history, menstruation is talked about as never before. *Flow* spans its fascinating, occasionally wacky and sometimes downright scary story: from *mikvahs* (ritual cleansing baths) to menopause, hysteria to hysterectomies—not to mention the Pill, cramps, the history of underwear, and the movie about puberty they showed you in 5th grade.

*Flow* answers such questions as: What's the *point* of getting a period? What did women do before pads and tampons? What about new drugs that promise to end periods—a hot idea or not? Sex during your period: gross or a turn-on? And what's *normal*, anyway? With color reproductions of (campy) historical ads and early (excruciating) femcare devices, it also provides a fascinating (and mind-boggling) gallery of this complex, personal and uniquely female process.

As irreverent as it is informative, *Flow* gives an everyday occurrence its true props – and eradicates the stigma placed on it for centuries.

## Flow: The Cultural Story of Menstruation Details

Date : Published November 10th 2009 by St. Martin's Griffin (first published November 5th 2009)

ISBN : 9780312379964

Author : Elissa Stein , Susan Kim

Format : Hardcover 254 pages

Genre : Nonfiction, Feminism, History, Science, Womens, Health

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# From Reader Review Flow: The Cultural Story of Menstruation for online ebook

## Kerrie says

The absolute best part of this book are the vintage ads. Truly, they will make any sentient female ragey and glad-oh-so-glad that we don't live in the 1950s anymore. They were not the Good Old Days despite certain parties who would very much like to return society backward to that period of time.

The tone of the book, however...

\*big breath\* OK, I don't know what planet these authors live on, but their constant references to a period being only "a few days" of bleeding really chapped my ass. A few *days*??? How about *1-2 weeks*??? Periods are NOT fun. They're a complete pain in the ass, full stop, end of story. So the breezy attitude they had toward this monthly (or every 2-3 weeks!) trial just annoyed me to no end.

## Divacups and Mooncups will save the world

The only thing that assuaged my misery was the amazing invention of the menstrual cup, which is hardly covered here. There's no excuse for it. Truly, if current feminism is focused on women knowing their own bodies, you can't get any more intimate than using the cup - you quickly find out how exactly you're formed "up there." If their main theme was how the femcare industry is killing the environment and your wallet, the cup should have gotten a big ol' boost and promotion. My cup was still going strong after 6 years until I had my hysterectomy - not bad for a single purchase of \$30. How many tampons or pads would I have used in that time, and how much money would I have shelled out?

Question:

If periods are so great, how come I've been so much happier since my hysterectomy? Answer *that*, authors.

*This is a retrospective review - you know, one of those books popped up in your feeds and you remember, "Hey, I read that!" Details of the book may be hazy, but boy, this one sure stuck with me.*

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## Rossy says

Kind of fun, kind of interesting.

Something was missing, I can't really figure out what!

The vintage ads were, without a doubt, the best part of the book, and the facts about menstruation in other cultures and countries were interesting. I was scared to learn how it was treated in other centuries, poor women!

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## Nina says

Easy, entertaining and informative.

It's the light kind of non-fiction - the one that feels more like a casual chat with someone who knows what they're talking about than a textbook - and just the right book for a certain someone to get started on her New

Year's resolution to read more non-fiction. Get reacquainted with real life, you know.

There's some horrifying stuff in here, mostly with regards to how women have handled and viewed their period through the centuries, and at times it can feel a bit scattered as far as cohesiveness and a clear thread are concerned, but overall it's very, very interesting and often amusing. The topics it handles go well beyond the period, touching anything from the social construct that is hysteria to feminism and female sexuality, and it's done in a way that feels complete and relevant, not just there for the sake of it.

Bonus: there are reproductions of vintage advertisements all throughout the book.

In case you were wondering, the authors' final recommendation, and message of the entire work, is to just... go with the flow. Not my pun.

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## **Sarah says**

2.5 stars. This is a great idea for a book, and it looks fantastic--the design and layout are top-notch. And all the vintage advertisements for feminine products were really great to look at. But for me, the writing style really grated. It felt like reading Seventeen magazine--preachy, didactic, and way too cutesy. Adding to the the feeling that I was reading something aimed at youth rather than adults was all the repetitive, careful explanation about drug companies and makers of feminine products. For instance, are you shocked to learn that these businesses are concerned more with selling their products than with protecting your health and well-being and conserving the earth's resources? No, you're not shocked because that is pretty obvious to most any modern adult who lives in the world? Oh, okay. Well, you're way ahead of this book, then.

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## **Jane says**

First, I want to point out that I like the idea of this book. The argument that women have always been period-hating victims of men and the femcare industry's judgement and marketing is cool with me; I hate the femcare industry and like yelling about misogyny as much as the next lady. The many vintage advertisements and illustrations are nice, and realizing that "water cure" meant "water-stimulated orgasm to relieve hysteria" was pretty cool.

However.

Several things about the book rubbed me the wrong way. The greatest of these was the mini-section on alternatives to big femcare products (tampons and disposable pads). Menstrual cups (my personal torch) rated just one, mostly positive, page, although any convincing of reluctant readers is undermined by the writers suggesting that removal will cause you to be covered in "bloody goo." For two women who want us to view our periods more holistically and without the shame industry has assigned them, that seemed like a strange choice of words. Even more strange, though, is the section on cloth pads (which have a pretty long history to back them up). The strange part, though, was a side-quote from one of the authors, who writes that she "delved into the world of reusable pads" (241) in the spirit of conservation and book-research. Well, congratulations to you. Unfortunately, she admits that she was squicked out by seeing blood on her happy little flannel robots and that pads are hot in August. (Personal-torch-rant: TRY A CUP! THAT WOULD ACTUALLY BE RESEARCH AND THEN YOU MIGHT BE FREE FROM THE DISPOSABLES COMPANIES!) I'm a little surprised that authors of a book that is so damning of the femcare industry and all

that they market to us come off as so personally unadventurous toward reusable products. Why else have you been spending five chapters telling us about TSS and deoderized tampons and landfills and et cetera et cetera et cetera?

Anyway.

Other minor gripes include the occasionally off-putting conversational/breezy tone of the writing, the relatively thin coverage of menopause and menarche, and the overall focus on white, middle-class American women throughout history. (Yes, I know the book is about America and that advertising for 200 years has tended to target the middle- and upper-classes, but STILL. Token mentions of the working poor and minorities do not constitute coverage.)

All in all, I enjoyed my trip down bio-feminism lane, or whatever you want to call it. I've been embracing my period (and menstrual cup) for five years now, though, so the choir was feeling a little superior to the preachers' revelations about alternatives to big femcare.

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## Susanne says

I did not \*enjoy\* this book, per se. (See [here](#)) But it was a truly informative read.

Sure, there are some tiny mistakes (for example, doctors endeavoring to produce hysterical paroxysm did not \*always\* have the patient stand - the patient could also be reclining) but that is being nit-picky. And the tone can be a little too full-on "How can anyone not love their period?" (Quite easily, thank you.) But the book makes up for this by providing you with some eye-opening facts about how menstruation has been treated in America.

For example, companies assuring women their douche products were safe with **no testing whatsoever**. (Again, Lysol??? WTF???)

On the research front, this book is great for historical authors who want to know what their female characters would have gone through each month before the ease of current products.

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## Christina says

The authors use a lively, irreverent tone to take readers through the history and American cultural experience involving menstruation, that very taboo subject. I feel that the book is strongest when they assert that a natural biological process associated with fertility has been co-opted by the "femcare" industry into a monthly event that is feared and hated, mostly for the purposes of selling us products -- pads, tampons, hormonal replacement therapy, Midol, what have you. (No surprise: that's my feeling, too.)

I'm not saying periods are so awesome; there are women who have serious medical issues surrounding them, and they're not imagining them, nor should they be ignored. But that doesn't have to be the norm. When you consider how many periods an average American female has, you can see what a money-maker it is to convince women that they are smelly, gross, unappealing to all other humans, and that any attendant issues like cramps, headaches, digestive upsets etc. must be medicated into submission. The authors throw out an

intriguing tidbit: right around the time that "hysteria" started to die out as a legitimate medical diagnosis, "PMS" started up.

I appreciate that the authors went right there on a lot of topics: smell, sex during your period, just what is "normal," etc. Their "hey sisters!" tone grated at times, and the phrase "funnily enough" was oddly overused. (I just have a problem with the word "funnily.") But it's worth a read or at least a browse, if only for the reproductions of the many, many hilarious ads from the 1900s to today.

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## **Traci says**

I love the cover of this book, and let's face it, it sounded like it might be interesting. This time the cover art and the description did the book justice; it was interesting, and fun to boot.

The authors are women, and often I found myself thinking this sounded more like a day out with the girls than a primer on the history of menstruation and all things associated with it. The writing has a very nice, easy "you-are-there" style, which helps as sometimes the subject matter is just - well - yeah, it's a bit on the "icky" side.

The history of "femcare" as the authors dub it isn't all that long, surprisingly enough. Way back in the day there was no such thing. What did our intrepid ancestors do, you may ask yourself? Um, bled. Sorry, but that's the truth; our foremothers pretty much bled on whatever it was they were wearing. Yes, some of them tried to use various things to handle the flow (some of them what you'd expect, like wads of cotton) but most just bled onto their clothes. As the authors are quick to point out, why do you think our clothing back then had so many petticoats and such? It wasn't to look feminine after all; it was to hide all that icky stuff going on down there.

Perhaps the authors' biggest complaint is that femcare is almost always presented as a problem, and thus, a solution. But pretty much every woman is going to need it at some point in her lifetime, so it's really not a problem so much as it's simply a matter of biology, and the authors want to know why it can't be presented as such. Think about it: have you ever seen an ad for tampons, pads, douches or the like that didn't talk about making your life better somehow? And keep a close eye out for the "not-so-fresh" type comments, as almost every ad has one of some sort. Women's flow is almost always presented as an obstacle to overcome, and a very yucky one at that.

Then we get to the whole idea of not having a period at all, which is now possible through the miracles of modern medicine. And the authors want to know two things: is this really a good idea and why is it being pushed on us? Well, it's sort of a good idea if you're concerned about ovarian cancer. The Pill gives a woman a leg up (so to speak) on cutting down her chances of ovarian cancer due to the fact that the eggs don't burst out of the ovaries as they normally would every month. No bursting means no repairing the ovary which means less chance of the cells going haywire and becoming malignant. And yes, I had pretty much forgotten everything they taught me in my sex-ed class and was fascinated by this information. It makes sense to me now why some of my friends know when they're ovulating, as they feel the discomfort/pain of that little tiny egg kicking its way through the ovarian wall. And if you're on the Pill, you don't really have a period, either. You have a pseudo sort of thing happen every month, something that mimics a period but doesn't supposedly have all the usual aches/pains/icky stuff that those not drugged up experience.

To that I say, my sweet a\*\*! Sorry but in the name of full disclosure, I've been on the Pill since I was

eighteen. Most months I would say I'm pretty OK, no PMS or anything to really clue anyone in that "Aunt Flo" is visiting. But sometimes, look out - it's love you one minute, hate you the next, and where's the damn ice cream?! I do get some pain (cramps, occasional backache, etc) and I still have some bloating. So if my body isn't having a "real" period, what's all that about? Is it all in my head? Sure doesn't feel like it, and sadly, the authors don't explore this enough for my taste.

Overall though it's an interesting, and yes, fun, book. Even if you have no intention of reading it, pick it up for the pictures alone. There are some fabulous old ads for the various products. My favorite are the ones used for the "Modess...because" campaign: high fashion photography that look more like artwork than femcare ads. In fact, if you saw them elsewhere you'd never know they were hawking tampons/pads!

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## Ana Rînceanu says

This book is mainly about how american women's view of menstruation has been affected by misogynistic rhetoric and an industry build up on their insecurity and myths about menstruation. Interesting read and I wish there were more about how the rest of the world views our monthlies.

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## Deborah Markus says

I can't blame this book for not giving me the information I was hoping for. *Nobody* seems to know for sure how women in Regency England dealt with the flow.

But *Flow* was an engaging enough book to hold me until the end, anyway. The period (in every sense) product ads alone are worth the price of the book, though I'm not sure I wanted to know that until fairly recently, women were encouraged to use bleach-based products to stay "fresh." (Lysol douching, kids. It happened. I'm scared.)

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## Jacqi says

Gah! This should be a monumental piece of work. Instead, it's flawed with a severe lack of authority, questionable references to the internet (moreso than books) and extremely lacking in recent medical discoveries. Interesting cultural tidbits, but overall, nearing the line of more fiction than fact.

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## verbava says

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## Eileen says

I reserved this at the library because I saw a couple snippets of Susan Kim speaking with Sarah Haskins.  
Advertising+feminism+humor=great, right? Pretty much, yes.

Although I knew a good amount of the information in this book before I read it--dioxin in tampons, clitoral  
orgasm as historical cure for hysteria, condescending faux-medical femcare advertising, etc.--I also learned a  
reasonable amount of new info. For those less knowledgeable about the contemporary western cultural  
history of menstruation, the information here would be critical.

A few caveats, however:

The book is styled in a very pink, girly, retro-kitsch way, plastered with midcentury ads and curlicued  
chapter headings. Ordinarily this would piss me off to no end; in this case, however, half the point of the  
book is exploring the historical marketing of femcare, so my reaction is more complex. On one hand, the  
design could be an overtly ironic statement, aware of its relation with the book's content. On the other hand,  
it's unfortunately also plausible that the publishing company wanted that design specifically as a marketing  
device--in short, they may be using the same strategy that a significant chunk of the book dissects. As much  
as I'd like to attribute the design solely to the first motive, I think it's much more likely to be a combination  
of the two. So, ok. At least the advertising strategy is being used to actually inform people, as opposed to, for  
instance, selling Lysol as a douche. The ends are superior, but the means are...more difficult.

The tone, as well, is poised between girlfriendy gossip and scientific data analysis. This does make the  
information presented easily available to all, with little effort required for understanding, but again, what  
does this say about marketing to women? Are women too stupid to comprehend a more seriously toned  
volume, or are they uninterested in anything too complex? The information communicated here is valuable,  
but by putting literature aimed at women in this problematic tone, it seems to some extent that the authors  
and their editors are falling into the same trap that they seek to expose.

All things considered, it's definitely worth getting your hands on a copy of Flow. Substantial amounts of the  
information here is absent from the mainstream presentation of menstruation, and while it's possible to find  
bits and pieces of said info elsewhere, I haven't seen such a comprehensive volume anywhere else. As long  
as you consider the book with a critical eye, it's valuable.

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## Loederkoningin says

*Femicin ad, 1968*



Thank fuck for three waves of feminism.

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## **Mary says**

I've been interested in how women who got out and about throughout history have dealt with menstruation. I was especially intrigued by 2 of my favs: Catherine the Great (my review of Catherine the Great: Portrait of a Woman <https://www.goodreads.com/review/show...>) and her 6-month Crimean journey and Christine Granville (my review of The Spy Who Loved <https://www.goodreads.com/review/show...>) and her trip across the Tatras into Poland during WWII. Like Ginger had to do everything Fred did but backward and in heels, women historically toughed it out with the men while dealing with their own bleeding. Hygiene and privacy were not what they are today in my world. Plus women had many less periods until the 20thC with our good nutrition and access to reliable birth control. I live in San Francisco. We have a large population of homeless. I feel for the women among them without regular access to product and facilities. Then there's Trump attacking Megyn Kelly for possibly menstruating. Mr. Backward.

Instead of properly researching my more historic/academic questions, I got lazy and found "Flow" on someone's Goodreads page. A coffee table (yes) book on menstruation is not for me. Too much opinion, speculation, repetition by non-historians. I learned a bit and the old adverts were an eye-opener. The things we ladies do to ourselves! Lysol was touted as a internal body cleanse for women. Nice. I do agree with the authors that advancements in femcare have coincided with advancements in the women's movement. We wouldn't get too far from home without the modcons and products.

The authors are jaunty and likeable but as much as they want us all to lighten up on the subject, you will not find "Flow" on my coffee table.

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