

Clancy, Kate. *Period: The Real Story of Menstruation*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023. x + 249 pages. Hardcover, \$27.95. Paperback, \$18.95.

In this ambitious monograph, anthropologist Kate Clancy brings scientific research into dialogue with feminist critiques of gynecology, science, and contemporary society to challenge our understanding and treatment of menstruation. Clancy argues that the science of menstruation can only be understood by interrogating the power structures that have produced this knowledge. Drawing upon exciting new research, Clancy challenges the normative model of a rigid 28-day menstrual cycle and reconceptualizes it as a dynamic, widely variable, and responsive process that plays a critical evolutionary role in human reproduction.

Clancy opens by demonstrating how gender bias and menstrual stigma shape our scientific (mis)understanding of menstruation (preface through Chapter 1). Clancy argues that negative attitudes towards menstruation are rooted in long standing Western cultural beliefs about female pollution, limit and distort scientific research. This can be seen in early twentieth century fears of menotoxin—an imagined dangerous substance emitted from the bodies and menses of menstruating women—as well as subtler forms of bias such as the assumption that menstruation serves no evolutionary function. Negative bias is further compounded by disciplinary assumptions about which research topics and questions are significant, and thus worthy of funding and publishing. Clancy challenges these assumptions, asserting that menstruation has potential evolutionary advantages, both by limiting the body's energy expenditure when ovulation does not result in fertilization, and by “priming the pump” as the endometrium gains experience building and repairing the optimal uterine environment for future pregnancies.

In Chapter 2, Clancy homes in on two concepts that distort contemporary understandings of menstruation—the eugenic model of a standard, “normal” body, and the innately passive female reproductive body. Clancy asserts that because modern disciplines of anthropology and

gynecology originated in eugenics and race science, racial and gender bias are embedded in our accumulated scientific knowledge and reinforced through disciplinary narratives and methodology. Clancy argues that the dominant model of a uniform 28-day menstrual cycle is rooted in nineteenth-century gendered ideals of the passive feminine body and the eugenic promotion of an idealized “normal” body based on (deliberately curated) statistical averages. Drawing upon her own laboratory research, Clancy argues that the menstrual cycle is highly variable and responsive to environmental conditions, and that the uterus and ovaries exert agency throughout the reproductive process, both by selecting which egg ripens during ovulation and by suppressing ovulation or implantation altogether if conditions are unfavorable.

Chapters 3 through 5 continue to challenge the paradigm of the passive, standard female reproductive body by examining the complex ways in which the menstrual cycle responds to environmental conditions. Chapter 3 explores energetics—the body’s allocation of resources when energy is limited by caloric restriction and/or heavy expenditure, Chapter 4 explains the relationships between inflammation, immune response, and menstruation, and Chapter 5 examines the reproductive body’s responses to psychosocial stress, from childhood trauma to sustained social or workplace stress. Clancy argues that the tremendous energy investment required to support a nine-month gestation and a prolonged subsequent period of lactation and child-rearing creates an evolutionary advantage for the body to delay ovulation during times of sickness or caloric restriction and wait for more favorable conditions. Clancy also raises issues of gender bias and medical paternalism in women’s health care, such as doctors focusing on maintaining patient fertility rather than alleviating pelvic pain (even when patients do not plan to have children), or conversely, by treating infertility in obese patients through dieting (to conform to the thinness ideal of white femininity) even though caloric restriction suppresses ovulation.

Chapter 6 turns to the issue of menstrual stigma in contemporary Western societies, and how masculine-cultured spaces of education and employment place an extra burden on menstruating people to conceal their periods to conform to workplace norms. The epilogue broadens the discussion to tackle the social problems created by Western cultural ideas of mind-body duality that privilege the “masculine” sphere of the mind, and place extra burdens on people who menstruate or who otherwise do not conform to the ideal of white able-bodied masculinity.

Bringing gender analysis to bear on reproductive science and human evolution, Clancy makes a significant contribution to our understanding of evolution that recalls how anthropologist Sarah Blaffer Hrdy challenged gendered assumptions about maternalism in *Mother Nature* (1999). Perhaps as a consequence of engaging such a wide range of scholarly fields and contemporary social issues, *Period* is less focused than more narrowly conceived monographs, but in doing so Clancy also demonstrates the broad significance of her research. Clancy’s apt use of gender analysis to criticize depictions of the female reproductive body as passive might also raise broader questions about the scientific convention of not assigning agency to natural phenomena if brought into conversation with historian Jessica Riskin’s research on the history of mechanistic science in *The Restless Clock* (2016). And while Clancy’s book does an excellent job of critiquing paternalism in modern Western medicine, it could also benefit from being read alongside historian Charlotte Furth’s *A Flourishing Yin* (1999) and historian Yi-Li Wu’s *Reproducing Women* (2010), both of which analyze premodern Chinese gynecological medicine in a very different but equally patriarchal society.

Kate Clancy’s *Period* is an excellent example of public-facing scholarship that is accessible to the educated public while giving scholars in the fields of medical history, sociology, anthropology, health sciences, and gender studies much to think about. Clancy has a rare gift for

being able to write about science in a manner that is engaging, lively, and accessible for the non-specialist, allowing scholars from a wide range of social science fields to draw upon this knowledge. This book raises many compelling questions about gender, reproduction, and embodiment, and will be important reading for scholars of gender and medicine in many related fields.

Nicole Richardson, PhD, Associate Professor of History
University of South Carolina Upstate -Spartanburg, South Carolina