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Pop Culture Gets Its Period: Is This A Good Thing?

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BOOK REVIEW

Pop Culture Gets Its Period: Is This A Good Thing?

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Rosewarne L. (2011). *Periods in Pop Culture: Menstruation in Film and Television*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books. \$70.00 (hardback) ISBN: 987-0-7391-7000-7

Lauren Rosewarne's *Periods in Pop Culture: Menstruation in Film and Television* is a book I couldn't wait to read. As a menstrual cycle scholar, I was interested in learning about her take on current cultural views of menstruation as reflected through film and television portrayals.

The nonacademic side of me was also interested in the pop culture focus of this book because I knew it would let me revisit familiar movies and TV shows. The combination of a scholarly work, written about a topic that is familiar to most (at least those who have ready access to Western media), is a true strength of this volume. Rosewarne is an academic who uses her training as a lens through which to view, understand, and critique the role and representation of menstruation—and women—in pop culture, but her book is so readable and approachable that students and nonacademics, as well as academics, can enjoy and learn from *Periods in Pop Culture*.

Another strength of this volume is the interdisciplinary nature of the work. The book can clearly be classified under the headings of media studies and cultural studies, but it is also appropriate for scholars in Women's and Gender Studies, Sociology, and Anthropology. It is easy to imagine that someone teaching a class on representations of women in film and/or television would choose to use this book as a text. Similarly, a professor of sociology, anthropology, or cultural studies might want to include this book as a text for a class on the cultural history of menstruation. Although a number of books about culture and menstruation exist (e.g., Delaney, Lupton, & Toth, 1988; Shail & Howie, 2005; Stein & Kim, 2009), they collectively do little to cover pop culture, so this volume would serve as a good companion piece. Given this, instructors of both undergraduate and graduate students may want to explore the possibility of adding this book to reading lists for new or existing courses.

Periods in Pop Culture deals with a complex topic and could, therefore, stimulate much discussion and critical thinking about menstruation and the cultural representations thereof. The work was inspired by the author's inability to easily locate on-screen examples of menstruation. In doing the research for this book, she found many instances in which menstruation was discussed/portrayed, but she also found that those instances were fraught with drama. Menstruation was rarely portrayed as a normal, uneventful part of life. Rather, it was a plot device or the focus of a joke. Because of this, Rosewarne classifies portrayals of menstruation as overwhelmingly negative. Although she acknowledges that this is cause for concern to feminists, she also tries to find the positives in menstrual portrayals. In the end, the reader will have to decide if she or he believes that the way menstruation is portrayed on screen is a good or bad thing. Similarly, the reader will have to decide on the reasons for the infrequent inclusions of menstruation in media, although Rosewarne ends the book with an interesting chapter that highlights many possible reasons for the lack of menstrual portrayals. As a teacher, I am excited about the possibility of reflective discussion and debate that could be engendered by reading this book with my students. That said, however, there are weaknesses to this text that also need to be considered.

First, it can be difficult to know where to find specific coverage for topics of interest within the book. For example, the first chapter mainly concerns secrecy, but it does not really address shame or taboos about not concealing menstruation, at least not in a significant way. Secrecy and menstrual taboos are, however, revisited in Chapter 3. Similarly, Chapter 3, "The Curse of Eve," is subtitled "Cramped Stomachs and Cramped Lifestyles," yet it does not actually contain much discussion of portrayals of menstrual pain. Also, PMS coverage occurs throughout the book and generally receives little focused attention, despite the inclusion of a number of PMS portrayals.

A second weakness is the extent to which examples of menstruation from television and film, and representative quotes, get reused throughout the book. Rosewarne referenced many examples, but only a small handful are quoted or covered in detail; on reaching end of the book, I was honestly tired of some of them and had the quotes memorized because I had read them so often. If one were reading *Periods in Pop Culture* slowly over an extended period of time, revisiting of the familiar might be welcome, but in the context of reading it as a text for a class, where the pace to move through the chapters is likely faster, it could well become boring.

Arguably, the most significant issue with *Periods in Pop Culture* is Chapter 6 – "Bleeding out Proud: Menstruation and Empowerment." I applaud Rosewarne's desire to find and highlight positive portrayals of menstruation. Too often, menstruation is characterized as wholly negative, and anything positive about menstruation, including its acceptance, is ignored. To that extent, it was interesting to see examples of positive menstrual portrayals from the mainstream media. Unfortunately, most of this chapter is filled with topics that I would consider negative: PMS, moodiness, absenteeism, "pigging out," and so on. She even frames students' use of menstruation as an excuse to get out of gym class as a positive. The goal of this chapter is a good one, but the execution is poor to the point of being objectionable.

Despite those weaknesses, there are many positives to *Periods in Pop Culture*. One is the fact that Rosewarne consistently made connections to and cited research about the menstrual cycle as undertaken by other menstrual cycle scholars across disciplines (e.g., communications, psychology, sociology). Although I occasionally thought that she draws conclusions beyond the data she cites (e.g., linking the higher rate of depression in girls, relative to boys, after menarche to the anticlimactic experience of beginning to menstruate), readers are pointed to a great deal of core research on the menstrual cycle. She also devotes a significant portion of the book to discussing

the idea that, for many women/girls, menstruation may be a nonevent; it is just part of life and not particularly worth reflecting on in great detail. This is one of myriad reasons Rosewarne offers in her final chapter as a possibility for the dearth of representations of menstruation in popular culture. Finally, she includes a discussion of menstrual porn, which provides very different representations of menstruating women than those portrayed by the mainstream media.

In sum, *Periods in Pop Culture: Menstruation in Film and Television* is a highly readable book that provides some interesting insights into the way women are portrayed in the media that can be informative for people in many disciplines and with different levels of academic training. That said, coverage of some topics is weak, and some of the arguments made are a stretch. These flaws would, however, likely spark many good discussions in classrooms or book groups, and the book presents possibilities rather than a single interpretation of how things are and why, which would add to the quality of such discussions.

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