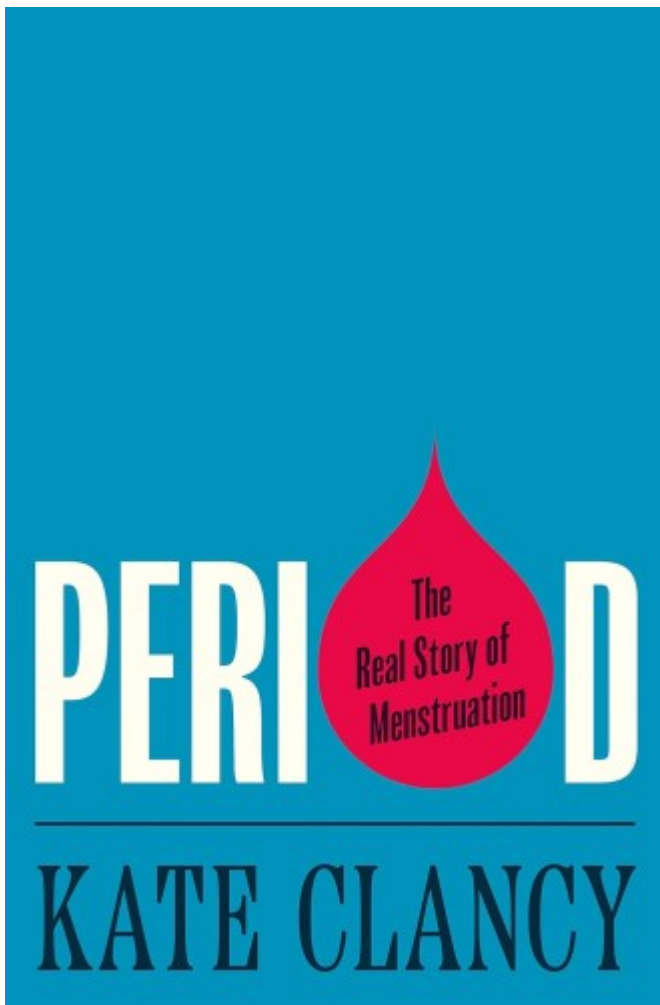


Power in the blood

Kate Clancy wants to redefine the discourse around menstruation.

by [David Black](#) in the [December 2023](#) issue

In Review



Period

The Real Story of Menstruation

By Kate Clancy

Princeton University Press

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Growing up as the youngest child in a family full of sisters, I thought I knew everything there was to know about menstruation. My first encounter with the phenomenon happened when I was three years old and found the bathtub smeared with blood. After that, I learned to expect blood in odd places around the house. As an exceedingly obsequious younger brother, I went out of my way to learn and obey the rules of periods. I kept on hand a supply of dark chocolate and Ferrero Rocher—my cache of monthly offerings to the goddesses. I even tracked my sisters' cycles by asking, with all the diplomacy I could muster, "Are you having trouble with your punctuation?" I prided myself on being in on a great secret.

I have not thought as much about periods in the quarter century since. And aside from a perfunctory unit on menstruation in middle school sex education, I had not learned much more about it until I picked up Kate Clancy's book *Period: The Real Story of Menstruation*. In the intervening time I had gone to seminary and become a mainline Protestant pastor. Despite the fact that at least 55 percent of Protestants experience periods at some point in their lives, and despite the fact that we are forever preaching and singing about the power of the life-giving blood of Jesus, somehow the topic of menstruation never came up in theology or pastoral care courses.

Fortunately, *Period* is a wonderful way to begin learning about the science of menstruation, as well as the social, political, and even philosophical issues that swarm around it. Clancy is an anthropology professor who writes for popular audiences about gender studies, ecology, and science culture. She has a delightfully colloquial style that makes her expositions of complicated biological science feel like listening to a friend telling you about something fascinating over a glass of wine at dinner. I would read much more scientific literature if Clancy were writing it.

Those hoping for a passionless take on menstruation will have to keep looking. *Period* reads more like a manifesto than a textbook, though its chapters are packed with rigorous scientific review and analysis. By Clancy's own admission, this book is a political work. In a tweet promoting its publication, she explains that it was written "with a mix of wild curiosity and feminist rage." That anger rises out of the pages as a rallying cry for people with uteruses—and those who love them—to rise up against the stigma, silence, and disgust that regularly define discourse around menstruation. She isn't just out to teach you, she wants you to believe!

Anyone paying attention to the news will have to admit that Clancy's passion is proportional to current events. Female bodies, and in particular their fertility, are perennial political flash points. In the middle of reading *Period*, I saw a report that Florida is considering a ban on young girls discussing their periods in school. At the same time, several states are considering bans on gender-affirming care, which can include the suppression of menstruation for transgender and nonbinary people.

Reading *Period*, I was reminded of the Baader-Meinhof phenomenon, which refers to the impression that something happens more frequently after a person is taught to notice it. This is commonly experienced when a person learns a new word and suddenly begins seeing the word everywhere. It was always there; only the awareness is new. Readers of *Period* are likely to have this experience. The politicization of menstruation was always there, perhaps too ubiquitous for everyone to see it.

Readers may also have this experience when learning the ways that eugenics has shaped obstetrics and gynecology. Clancy argues that the established understanding of female bodies and their functions is "eugenics all the way down." This is to say, it is rooted in the notion that there is a "normal" way for female bodies to function. *Normal* has historically been defined as the average experience among dominant races, classes, and gender expressions. In our world, this means that standards of menstrual health have been built around data from cisgender White women.

Even if we leave aside the racism and trans-exclusionary bias latent in this approach, Clancy shows that it is just a bad way to do science. To take one example, medical orthodoxy holds that the onset of menstruation occurs every 28 days. But this number is calculated by averaging an enormous range of experiences from people who menstruate. Any dataset can be reduced to a statistical average, but very few people who menstruate will actually have that experience. Similarly, the lightness or heaviness of menstrual discharge, severity of cramping, and timings of menarche (the first period) and menopause all have "normal" presentations as defined by the medical establishment, yet virtually all menstruating people deviate from those averages. By its nature, menstruation is impossible to predict based on models. There is no such thing as a normal period. Every menstruating person's experience is unique.

This is where, for me, Clancy's book became something much larger than itself. As she describes it, menstruation is a wedge in the very idea of normal. The motivation to define human experience along those lines always ends up erasing or pathologizing the experiences of the vast majority of human beings. As Clancy quotes Peter Cryle and Elizabeth Stephens from their book, *Normality: A Critical Genealogy*, the word suggests an imperative to conform to a standard or type, thus implying what is "correct" or "good," even though the standard created this way is so rarified that it basically describes nobody. Whether the idea of normalcy is a product of scientific convenience or eugenic malice, the fact seems to be that, at least in the case of menstruation, it does not describe anything real.

For Clancy, the antidote to eugenics is feminism, which dogmatically affirms bodily autonomy and the sanctity of individual experience. Clancy is not specific about what feminist care for menstruating people looks like. She offers only that the solution "requires communities of care and structural change, rather than an individualist approach in which each menstruating person tries to handle their symptoms or fertility struggles on their own." The final chapter, "The Future of Periods," is staged as the author's imaginative vision of menstrual liberation. Here and throughout the book, Clancy excels in diagnosing the massive social, political, and ideological issues plaguing medical care for menstruating people, but she has little to offer in the way of treatment.

Interestingly enough, Clancy's final thought in this book turns from biological anthropology to theology. Quoting Octavia Butler, Clancy suggests that the seed of a future of menstrual care is that "God is Change," meaning that difference is the very essence of being. Just menstrual care begins with relating to one another as inexhaustibly complex and surprising beings. By necessity, such care is "messy: incommensurable at times, changing, flexible." If doctors recoil at that notion of care, this is the milieu where chaplains and pastors can thrive.

Perhaps a comprehensive spiritual approach to menstruation is needed as much as reformation of the mainstream scientific, sociological, and anthropological approaches. Religion is uniquely capable of taking painful, isolating experiences and using them as catalysts for forming community. Yet, so far, resources on the theology of menstruation are scant. As far as I know, there is no handbook for the pastoral care of people experiencing menstruation. And although Clancy demonstrates that menstrual blood is the source of life, I have yet to hear a sermon relating the life-giving blood of Christ to periods. Perhaps *Period* is the invitation

pastors and theologians need to reimagine what it means to sing our old hymns about the “wonder-working power in the blood.”