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**Going with the Flow: A Review of Elissa Stein and Susan Kim's
Flow: The Cultural History of Menstruation**

Because historically – and contemporarily – so much “ickiness,” embarrassment, shame and mystery have surrounded women’s monthly periods, [Elissa Stein](#) and Susan Kim have set out to demystify the one common experience that all women have but few celebrate. The high production values of *Flow: The Cultural History of Menstruation* clearly reflect Stein and Kim’s ethos; packed with pin-up girls and examples of feminine product advertising, it’s kitschy, colorful, cute – coffee table material, something to display rather than hide. All of which is their point; women shouldn’t feel like we have to hide during our periods, nor should reliable information about them be hidden from us.

Stein and Kim’s first chapter, “Language,” highlights the way that gendered norms regarding feminine passivity versus male activity are embedded in the language we use to describe even the most basic of biological processes, with “depressing, loser-ish” verbs that imply deterioration used to describe menstruation while “sexy, empowered, action-hero verbs” are used to describe ejaculation. This type of language leaves us, they note, “with the impression that the sad-sack uterus... has once again not been asked to the pregnancy prom, so it just stays home and lets it all go – that menstruation is, essentially, a lame combination of inertia and failure,” even though that’s an inaccurate portrayal of the complex and dynamic menstrual process.¹ Stein and Kim urge us to question the language of disgust, embarrassment, weakness, sickness, etc. that is taken for granted as the way one describes the menstruation, because not doing so grants those words the power to shape not only our perceptions of that monthly process but our experiences of it.

¹ Elissa Stein and Susan Kim, *Flow: The Cultural History of Menstruation* (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 2009), p. 8. Stein and Kim cite Karen Houppert in this particular section; Emily Martin’s 1991 article ‘The Egg and the Sperm: How Science Has Constructed a Romance Based on Stereotypical Gender Roles,’ is an earlier source of similar material. Emily Martin, ‘The Egg and the Sperm: How Science Has Constructed a Romance Based on Stereotypical Male- Female Roles’ *Signs*, Vol. 16, No. 3 (Spring, 1991), (The University of Chicago Press), pp. 485-501.

As narrators, Stein and Kim take on the authorial personas of chatty big sisters or cooler, wiser friends. While this is clearly by design, the gossipy, ingratiating tone does begin to feel forced after a while. Eventually, one wishes they would just present the facts without all the editorializing, exclamation points and introductory adverbs. At the heart of my concern with this rhetorical approach, and more importantly, is an issue that goes beyond simple irritation at its contrived intimacy.

One of the authors' oft-repeated phrases in *Flow* is some variation of "Take it from us..." or "Trust us..." which is inevitably followed by some assertion, e.g.: "While fibroids aren't caused by the menstrual cycle, their growth is stimulated by estrogen... and take it from us, boy, can they grow!"² This attempt at confidence-building contravenes the authors' message by coming across as facetious and as another form of the very behavior by the vested interests they criticize. Stein and Kim's salient point is that for years women have been encouraged to trust unreliable, dangerous, misinformed, ignorant and/or biased sources of information regarding their biological processes. The best way to encourage critical thinking about this information is not then to continually proclaim one's own trustworthiness, which implies that we can't interpret the evidence for ourselves. It's unfortunate that with every "trust us," one hears the chatty cheerleader narrators morph into Joe Isuzu, the slick and decidedly untrustworthy used-car salesman of 1980s advertisements. I found myself wishing that Stein and Kim's editor would have been a bit more heavy-handed with the red pen when it came to the avowals of integrity. It seems a classic case of "show versus tell." Rather than telling the reader how trustworthy they are, the authors would better serve readers by simply demonstrating that integrity -

² Stein and Kim, p. 208.

which Stein and Kim do; they simply needn't trumpet it, as that's a rhetorical strategy which undermines their credibility rather than strengthens it.

While this is a book clearly not written for the academic or the feminist who is already well-versed in women's studies, at times Stein and Kim curiously omit certain items from their narrative that seem basic to a study of feminine cultural history. For instance, I was surprised that the section on the lore of destructive female deities omits any mention of the Hebrew demon Lilith, Adam's rebellious and sexually empowered first wife. Because Lilith was made out of clay along with Adam she felt equal to him and left him when rather than submit to his forceful attempts to subordinate her (as opposed to the later Eve, made of Adam's rib and thus his lesser). One Hebrew myth finds Lilith living by the Red Sea, constantly giving birth to demon children, subsequent to her desertion of Adam. Because of her insubordination, Lilith was cursed by God. Among the many aspects of Lilith's curse - her immortality, her condemnation to endless childbearing and violence - most relevant is menstruation³, Lilith's fate the root of euphemistic references to women's "monthly curse." Stein and Kim tell us that Adam's name means "bloody clay," (the connotations of which now survive contemporarily as "red earth") - suggesting the importance of menstrual blood in Adam's creation. Though Lilith's role is an essential part of the context of this information, it remains unmentioned.

Flow's fourth chapter, "Hysteria," leads us to an interesting conclusion: that the "discovery" of PMS, first so-called in 1953, closely following the American Psychiatric Association's removal of hysteria from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual in 1952, suggests that hysteria has simply been renamed and rebranded as "pre-menstrual syndrome," a condition as difficult to diagnose and define as hysteria once was. Certainly, Stein and Kim present compelling evidence to support such an idea, and it is worth considering. In this chapter my quibbles are not with the conclusion, but again with some of the information left out in the lead up to that conclusion. Just before presenting the

³ Robert Graves and Raphael Patai, *The Hebrew Myths* (New York: Doubleday, 1964), pp 65-69.

conclusion I have noted, Stein and Kim tell us that “The 1950s may not have been a feminist mecca, but women had more rights than ever before in history.”⁴ As Susan Faludi discusses at length in *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against Women*⁵, what’s also true about the 1950s is that it saw a backlash against the gains in women’s freedoms engendered by the peculiar needs of wartime. Now that the men had come home from war, they needed to go back to work, and the prevailing thought was that the women who had gone to work in their stead now needed to be gotten out of the way to make room for the returning men. Thus women were actively encouraged to get back into the home and guilted into becoming the perfect housewives, stereotypical gender roles (re)enforced with a vengeance. Surely, making the connection between this particular social circumstance and the addition of PMS to the lexicon would be useful in strengthening Stein and Kim’s argument.

Near the end of Chapter 4, Stein and Kim ask,

...[C]an we get both political and conspiracy-theorish for a moment?

Could what was historically called hysteria – widespread instances of clinical depression, unhappiness, anxiety, anger – have been a simple product not so much of sexual or maternal frustration, but of actual systematized oppression? After all, throughout history, women had no rights or autonomy, and were routinely barred from higher education, property ownership, the right to vote, careers. Could it be that when anyone is faced with such fundamental obstacles to happiness and self-actualization, even a whiz-bang orgasm isn’t enough to make things all better again?⁶

4 Stein and Kim, p. 63.

5 Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against Women* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2006).

6 Stein and Kim, p. 62.

Conspiracy theories are associated with paranoia, delusion and a lack of objectivity. Yet the notion of hysteria as bodily protest against the conscripted feminine gender roles conferred on upper middle-class women of the nineteenth century is well-established. This argument has already been cogently made by a number of feminist scholars over the years, notably by Susan Bordo in her 1993 book *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture and the Body*⁷, but whom aren't cited here. To cast the idea of the sociological origins of hysteria as “conspiracy-theorish,” as the authors do, is to confer hysterical properties upon that idea, thus Stein and Kim unfortunately contradict themselves via the dint of their own rhetoric.

Despite all of that, Stein and Kim have written a book with an admirable purpose; their work addresses a subject far too often left in the dark and does so in a way that's to be welcomed for its positivity. Academic criticisms aside, this cheeky book in all its quintessential Third Wave sex-positive girlie-ness is the sort of thing one could give to a pre-teen or teenaged daughter when she hit puberty. It provides an attractive and nonthreatening source of information for girls. Points of disagreement with the text could become useful entry points for discussion and teachable moments in critical thinking and encouragement for further research.

⁷ Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture and the Body* (London: University of California Press, 1993), pp. 157-159.

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