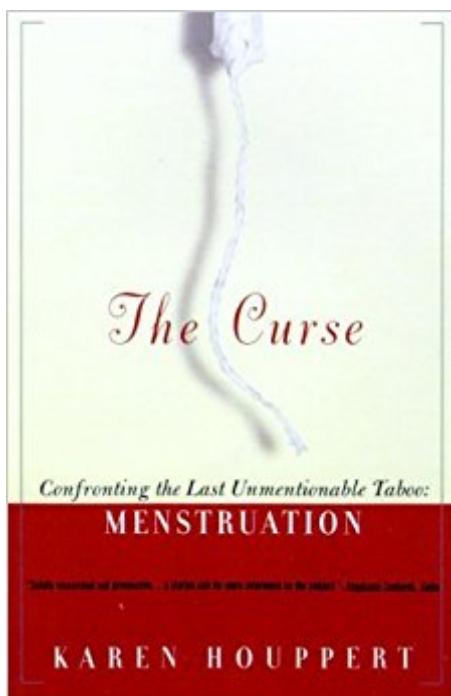


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# The Curse: Confronting The Last Unmentionable Taboo: Menstruation



## Synopsis

A provocative look at the way our culture deals with menstruation. The Curse examines the culture of concealment that surrounds menstruation and the devastating impact such secrecy has on women's physical and psychological health. Karen Houppert combines reporting on the potential safety problems of sanitary products--such as dioxin-laced tampons--with an analysis of the way ads, movies, young-adult novels, and women's magazines foster a "menstrual etiquette" that leaves women more likely to tell their male colleagues about an affair than brazenly carry an unopened tampon down the hall to the bathroom. From the very beginning, industry-generated instructional films sketch out the parameters of acceptable behavior and teach young girls that bleeding is naughty, irrepressible evidence of sexuality. In the process, confident girls learn to be self-conscious teens. And the secrecy has even broader implications. Houppert argues that industry ad campaigns have effectively stymied consumer debate, research, and safety monitoring of the sanitary-protection industry. By telling girls and women how to think and talk about menstruation, the mostly male-dominated media have set a tone that shapes women's experiences for them, defining what they are allowed to feel about their periods, their bodies, and their sexuality.

## Book Information

Paperback: 256 pages

Publisher: Farrar, Straus and Giroux; 1 edition (May 24, 2000)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0374526923

ISBN-13: 978-0374526924

Product Dimensions: 5 x 0.6 x 8 inches

Shipping Weight: 13 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 3.5 out of 5 stars 9 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #770,847 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #5 in Books > Health, Fitness & Dieting > Women's Health > Menstruation #143 in Books > Health, Fitness & Dieting > Sexual Health > Women's Sexual Health #1866 in Books > Health, Fitness & Dieting > Women's Health > General

## Customer Reviews

Village Voice reporter Karen Houppert intrepidly attacks the laissez-faire attitude of many "personal products" companies with *The Curse*, and her investigations should rouse women to action. Most notable is her pointed discussion of dioxin, a class A (most toxic of the toxins) carcinogen, and

how studies have shown traces of it in tampons from every major U.S. manufacturer. Dioxin is a chemical that's been given "zero tolerance" status by the Environmental Protection Agency because of its strongly suspected link "to lower sperm counts in men, a higher probability of endometriosis in women, and a depressed immune system in both." However, Houppert quotes tampon spokespeople who deny any problem, even though a Food and Drug Administration memo mentions that "the risk of dioxin in tampons 'can be quite high.'" This is exceptionally creepy when you consider that the average American woman spends 36 years menstruating, and if she uses tampons, she'll eventually use more than 11,000 of them. Houppert's amusement with the approaches used by Tambrands and other makers of "female protection" is entertaining at times, but overall, it is purposefully acerbic, especially when it comes to marketing and the damage she claims it has wreaked on women's self-image. Houppert says these corporations have created a pervasive "culture of concealment" surrounding menstruation, perpetuated by advertising and single-sex "puberty education" classes in schools (which, she points out, are usually sponsored by such companies as Procter & Gamble, maker of the infamous Rely tampon that was implicated in 38 toxic shock syndrome-related deaths in 1980). While it seems comical now to see Tampax ads from the 1920s claiming to "permit daintiness at all times" and the campaign of the 1990s that asserts "No one will ever know you've got your period," Houppert successfully argues that the advertisements add a cruel sense of mystery and shame to menstruation. According to a survey from the 1980s that Houppert found during her research, more than 30 percent of adults questioned "thought women should cut down on their physical activities while menstruating" and an even higher percentage of teenage girls didn't know what was happening to them during their first period. And we wonder why teen pregnancy rates are so high. "Because ideas about menstruation tie into prevailing notions that women's bodies are dangerously permeable," Houppert writes, "they become a part of the controlling myths our culture has spun to manipulate our perceptions of ourselves and our sexuality. Menstrual etiquette is an element of a woman's experience that contributes to this disorienting effect." She points out that a woman is more likely to tell a coworker about an affair than walk down the hall to the restroom with a tampon in hand. Her book is a revelation, a brilliant analysis of corporate influence and personal shame and how both are detrimental to the health--physical and mental--of women. --Erica Jorgensen --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

In this history of "the culture of concealment" surrounding menstruation and the effect of that secrecy on American women, Houppert presents medical, historical, literary, religious and anecdotal

material documenting attitudes toward menstruation dating back to the Bible. Writing with a bravura that occasionally crosses the line into crudeness, she also convincingly investigates the role of advertisers and manufacturers of "feminine" products in perpetuating "superstition, shame, and sexual self-consciousness." In 1995, Tampax "reduced the number of plugs in a box from forty to thirty-two and raised the price," which incensed Houppert and sparked her research. She found that when tampons were introduced in the 1930s, clergy of all stripes opposed them as a threat to pubescent virginity, but few stepped forward to protest in 1980 when 38 women died of "tampon-related toxic shock syndrome." The FDA did not implement regulations until a decade later, after 60,000 women had been affected. Houppert shows how feminine-products manufacturers are maneuvering to stave off the coming industry economic crisis when baby boomers enter menopause by "hawking to pubescents" in middle schools with "traveling menstrual shows" that effectively keep the culture of concealment intact. She shows how PMS "has slipped into the cultural lexicon to discount women's legitimate concerns," noting how it has been blamed for everything from indigestion to murder. The silver lining for Houppert is a Museum of Menstruation (called "MUM" for mum's the word) and Web site ([www.mum.org](http://www.mum.org)). Illustrated examples of each era's advertising introduce each chapter. Copyright 1999 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

I hate this book because it is very negative and it talks about how women were taught to feel ashamed, embarrassed, and disgusted with their body, and unclean once every month we are all adults and we need to embrace and love our bodies.

I can't stress enough how much this book has changed my perspective on not only my period, but the role of women in capitalist society in general. Simultaneously edifying, empowering, and exhausting, this account of the social notion of a woman's menstrual cycle is one that should be on every bookshelf. Simply amazing.

Fascinating analysis and great read!

I happened to pick this book out of the stack of books I have been planning to read the other day - with my eyes closed. How amazingly coincidental that I picked "The Curse" when I just started my period for this month. Anyway, it's a good read - I especially like the euphemisms on the endpapers, most of which I never heard of in my life. I grew up in a house with 5 other females, so there were

no cute little names for "that time of the month". As a matter of fact, when I got my first period, I was sick as a dog and my dad said "Now you are a woman" and I told him "If this is what being a woman is all about, you can keep it." M's Houppert explores the whole feminine hygiene industry, bringing up such bad memories as the "Rely" tampon (remember toxic shock syndrome?) and how dioxin is used in creating the various napkins / tampons most women use at sometime or another. I found this an extremely interesting book. From the extensive quotes from parts of Anne Frank's diaries to the MUM (Museum of Menstruation, located in New Carrollton, Maryland and run by Harry Finley, M's Houppert's extensive research makes this book worth a spot on your bookshelf. I recommend it highly.

I'm also upset at the biased review written by the author of the other 'Curse.' Ms. Houppert's issues with both dioxin and capitalism fit perfectly into the book. The childbirth story was not only not long, but it related to The Curse's themes. And even as a life-long Judy Blume fan, I can honestly say her writing is pretty flat. It's clear your books are completely different, aside from the title, and I would never read your book based on that petty review. Not everyone is looking for a "gossipy history" of menstruation, some people are interested in facts. Anyway, not only was this 'Curse' engaging and interesting, it really made me angry about the way menstruation is treated in our society. Another reader mentioned that she felt no anger because they were providing products that women need, to say the least I DID feel angry, and much more informed, after reading about the way companies have, as the quote on the back says: "taken the natural workings of women's bodies...are medicalized, sanitized, taken from us and sold back to us at a profit." This is really a must for all women.

I found Houpperts book on a dusty old shelf in a local Surplus store. I m not sure how it had gotten there, but upon reading a little into it I was sure it was worth the dollar it was selling for. I am one Chapter in and already she has changed my life. She provides astonishing information regarding tampons: what exactly is in them, what the industry hides, and what affects the secrets have had on womens lives. I promptly threw out all my tampons after finishing her first chapter! This book is not only for women, but those concerned with the environment, capitalism and how they all interconnect to make a horrifically clear picture of our socially accepted profit over people patterns. I found it for a dollar...you may not be so lucky...but there are somethings worth knowing that you can't put a price on.

Revealing work about the feminine protection industry but I couldn't really understand Houppert's indignation with the industry (except for the dioxin problem...) They are selling a product that we need! I'm so happy we no longer need to use those disgusting belts. I'm pretty happy with stick on pads. I've tried reusables but I think the industry is here to stay. I don't have a problem with that. I was expecting much more though, about how women are "The Other", which Houppert does talk about but not to the extent that I would have liked. I found the book easy to read and stay involved in, but it just as easily could have been an article in the Village Voice (which it was originally).

Another reader (the author of the other Curse book) complained about Houppert's long story about her birth. I didn't think the story was that long, and was appropriately included. Houppert admits that she herself is very much influenced by our male dominated society and it shows in her writing.

It seems a little unfair that would allow a writer of a previous book called the Curse--who obviously has an axe to grind against Houppert's witty, thorough and intelligent writing and sees it as competition against the sales of her own volume--to write such a mean-spirited diatribe in the "customer reviews" section. Even more bizarre that actually allows Ms. Tobin to actually REVIEW HER OWN BOOK on that book's page (giving it five stars, naturally). As someone who has in the past taken the customer reviews seriously, it makes me really wonder whether anyone is minding the store. Regarding Houppert's book: It's good. Buy it. Ignore Tobin. She's got a major chip on her shoulder. Listen to Alix Kates Shulman and Peggy Orenstein--they're better (and fairer) judges.

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