This study covers more than menarche across time and space, exploring also menstrual lore, menstrual education and advertising, and the rise of tampon use in Australia. Its primary thesis is that ‘although menarche is a shared physiological experience in the lives of pubescent girls, the meanings associated with it have been constructed from antiquity through the continuing influences of medicine and religion’ (p. 183).

Chapter one presents medical views of menstrual blood and menstruation in classical Greece and Rome, ancient China and India, the medieval Christian world, and the modern Anglo world. Dammery aims to show that the meanings male medical practitioners have given to menstrual blood have, throughout history, been integral to control of the menarcheal body (p. 23). In chapter two, the author begins to present interviews conducted with women who experienced menarche from 1938 to 1967 in multiple countries. Dammery finds that a girl’s experience is influenced by her cultural, socio-political, and historical contexts, but there are notable patterns across cultures, including the connection of menarcheal bleeding to sickness. In chapter three Dammery explores the theme of menstruation and uncleanness in Jewish, Islamic, Eastern Orthodox Christian, Hindu, and Buddhist religious law. She concludes, with many before her, that such law excludes women from the sacred. The influence of social reform or educated parents however can prevent ‘internalisation of the concept that the menstrual body as [sic] unclean’ (p. 64).

In chapter four Dammery argues that menarche ceremonies are ‘not solely for the benefit of the girl whose experience it is’ (p. 83), and where they still exist, serve male control of the girl’s potential fertility toward alliance formation, marking the time when newly fertile females may be married (p. 66). Dammery claims that western cultural ceremonies have, in contrast, ‘evolved’ and now involve choice of participation by the menarcheal woman, and are absent of a belief in the dangers of menstruation (p. 66). In chapter five Dammery assesses the value of menstrual lore, and laments that it ‘almost seems a pity that the whole phenomenon of menstrual lore is disappearing’ (p. 112). This lore is interpreted as women’s imposition of restrictions on themselves, the cautionary purpose ‘to ensure menstrual health as an indicator of good general health, hence reproductive health’ (p. 106). The focus of chapter six is to show that, even among diverse cultures, there is a shared concern for concealing menstruation (p. 114). Western medicine and marketing created the sanitary hygiene industry ‘based on the concealment of menstruation, while simultaneously revealing its existence through public advertising’ (p. 122).

Chapter seven presents ways in which the traditional oral transmission of information from older to younger women, and suppression of information to pre-menarcheal girls, was challenged in early- to mid-twentieth century Australia by the publication of information booklets reflecting medical and religious influence (p. 160). In the final chapter Dammery considers the future of menarche and menstruation,
noting that the further evolution of menstrual practice and education will come at a cultural cost, breaking down, for example, cultural silence around menstruation and resulting in broader participation of women in community decision-making (p. 163).

This cultural study of menarche and menstruation draws from a wide range of cultures over the course of known history, and expert knowledge of all of those cultures and times is probably impossible. There are, though, many strengths in the study. The information gathered is interesting to read. Also, while there are numerous international studies on menarche, no such cultural study has been completed within Australia. The study of early tampon advertising in Australia is a particularly welcome addition to the body of research. It is worth noting however that the book does not discuss menarche or menstruation in Indigenous Australian cultures. Another strength is Dammery’s preservation of the interviewee’s voices. As older women now, they are recollecting and telling the stories of their girlhoods. This is something Dammery acknowledges, noting that ‘their recollection was overlaid by their interpretation of the events they were retelling’ (p. 82). However, Dammery’s four interview questions – focused on the interviewee’s initial response to seeing the menstrual blood outside their body, who they told, the immediate response of that person, and the broader social response to their menstruation (p. 26) – potentially offer limited opportunity for the women to fully express their interpretation of the menarche ceremony. While it is certainly true that the menarche ceremony is ‘not solely for the benefit of the girl whose experience it is’ (p. 83), it is also true that the girl, and the woman she becomes, might find something of value in it. In my own work among women in the Pacific, I have learned that it is better for the women to determine the value of their practices. The Kiribati menarche ceremony te Katekateka, for instance, and te tabutabu, which restricts a woman’s activities during menstruation, might be valued by an i-Kiribati woman, feeling that she, and her gender, are being honoured through te Katekateka, and allowed to rest during a painful period thanks to te tabutabu. Any such potential value of the menarche and menstrual practices to the women who experienced them is however lost in Dammery’s assessment of the practices.

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