

BOOK REVIEW

A BLESSING NOT A CURSE: A MOTHER-DAUGHTER GUIDE TO THE TRANSITION FROM CHILD TO WOMAN

Jane Bennett

Sally Milner Publishing, Bowral, NSW, 2006

Ms Bennett's book, *A Blessing Not a Curse*, is an informative, easy to read and well-illustrated guide for mothers (as well as fathers and carers) to assist in preparing daughters for their first menstrual period.

This book undertakes a holistic exploration of menstruation from socio-cultural, bio-medical, complementary therapeutic, as well as practical and reflective perspectives. Ms Bennett's central point, highlighted in the title of the book, is that menstruation has been viewed across cultures as a curse, a Jungian shadow, connected to witchcraft, as well as impure, dirty and polluting. This highly negative construction has left a legacy of shame and taboo around menstruation.

By way of contrast, this book encourages parents to view menstruation as a natural, healthy phenomenon. The book provides useful information about the biology of menstrual cycles, puberty and menstrual problems such as endometriosis, PMS and heavy and painful periods. A discussion about 'the gear' provides practical advice about pads and tampons together with a brief cultural history of their use. Ms Bennett also outlines, in some detail, how to manage problem periods and establish and maintain menstrual wellness. Many of her suggestions involve complementary therapeutic, self-help interventions such as aromatherapy, shiatsu, meditation and yoga.

The key message of this book is to provide a celebratory and liberating reframing of menstruation. It does not deny the negative experiences many mothers may have of their own menstrual journey and how this might influence their present day relationship with their daughters' journey. To this end, the readers are encouraged to use personal reflection about thoughts, feelings, early memories, experience and education. Fathers are also encouraged to reflect on their personal knowledge of menstruation.

Nonetheless, the book does have some limitations. There is some limited discussion (pp. 83-84) as to the effects of stress on the mind-body connection. Whilst the effects of stress on well-being are well established, the direction of the cause-effect relationship is not straightforward. It is somewhat surprising, then, that Ms Bennett claims that every thought has a biochemical equivalent and that positive attitudes can assist in healing. I found this aspect of the book somewhat

unconvincing (and unsubstantiated) given that many girls and women experience painful periods and hormonal imbalances beyond the control of mere thinking.

Additionally, the book has an emphasis on complementary therapeutic self-help interventions. This may, in fact, be empowering for some people wishing to exercise personal choice in treating menstrual problems. However, oils, herbs, belly-dancing and massage might be of limited interest or affordability for many families utilising social work services. Self-help is also just that — *self-help* and thereby self-responsibility — and does not necessarily contribute to re-inventing the collective cultural discourse about the 'curse' of menstruation.

Furthermore, caution needs to be exercised when using some of this material in complex human service and social work contexts. Firstly, there are implications for multi-cultural practice. The book draws upon a range of complementary therapy from a variety of cultures. However, these cultures are somewhat de-contextualised. For example, it might be inappropriate to recommend yogic asanas (Hindu in derivation) to clients from particular religious or cultural backgrounds. In this way, the book uncritically assumes a Western secular readership.

Secondly, there are implications for working with young women who are disadvantaged, traumatised, homeless or in out-of-home care situations. Aside from lack of affordability of herbs and oils, young women in these contexts may not have an adult in whom they can confide and share the menstrual transition. Again, this book assumes a family context. Consequently, I suggest the likely audience for this book would be mothers/parents who already have some interest in complementary therapy and 'alternatives' to Western cultural approaches to menstruation.

For social work, health and welfare practitioners working with families, children and young people, this book provides a useful starting point for dispelling unhelpful myths and assumptions about menstruation. This sensitive and enlightened stance is a strength of the book. It could be used in practice to encourage parents to have an open dialogue, even celebrate, the pending womanhood heralded by their daughters' first period. The conversational tone, clear illustrations and well-presented information make this book a useful resource.

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