A Bleeding Shame: Normalising the Female Body During Adolescence by Repositioning the Menstrual Narrative

By Bec Kavanagh

The way that girls learn to experience their bodies during adolescence is shaped by the way that they are positioned culturally and socially. If the narratives of men and boys are set as superior in both literature and in society, and their stories seen to represent the universal experience (as is suggested by the weight given to the traditional literary canon), then the menstrual narrative is subjugated – the dominant narrative is male, and menstruation is not seen as a male concern.

In this article I argue that we do a disservice to young readers by adhering to these standards, which set boys up to become the "half-knowing male" (Fingerson, p. 101), and teach girls to observe the "etiquette of concealment" (Lee and Sasser-Coen, p. 76-77). I use a detailed analysis of *The Virgin Suicides* by Jeffrey Eugenides and *Carrie* by Stephen King to demonstrate these positions, before suggesting ways in which contemporary young adult texts can reposition the menstrual narrative – by making it more visible, by resisting the idea that menstruation is solely a female concern, and by shifting menstruation away from being the primary focus of an 'issues' book, where the body is a problem that needs to be solved.

The Half-Knowing Boys and Men of *Carrie* and *The Virgin Suicides*

> *It is not their real conditions of existence, their real world, that 'men' represent to 'themselves' in ideology, but above all it is their relation to those conditions of existence which is represented to them there*. (Althusser, 1499)

In a 2005 article by Laura Fingerson, a series of interviews with boys and girls shows that prior to adolescents being formally told about menstruation, there is a period of 'half-knowing'. This results from:

> *. . . overhearing conversations, seeing unexplained menstrual products and having vague notions of pubertal change (Prendergast, 2000). This develops differently as teens reach high school, with girls building their knowledge based on their own experiences and through the sharing of experiences with the female family members and peers. Boys, however 'although interested in learning about menstruation' (Fingerson, 2001), were generally still dependent on not-so-reliable sources and on a sort of half-knowing*.
> (Fingerson, p. 101)

This half-knowing is not something boys are encouraged to grow out of beyond puberty, but instead is reinforced through the representations of menstruation that they encounter in various cultural commodities, including literary fiction, and in the example set for them by older male role models such as parents and teachers as we see in books like *Carrie* and *The Virgin Suicides*. Examining these widely praised and easily recognisable texts reveals instances of both the ways in which society reinforces half-knowing through examples set by older male role models and also the way that literature itself reinforces these roles.

In her 1999 book *The Curse*, Karen Houppert references a survey from 1981 of a series of 15-minute phone interviews conducted with more than a thousand men and women across America, which showed that "men and women had similar beliefs about menstruation, sharing an overall attitude that the researchers characterised as 'negative' and an understanding of menstruation that was 'confused'".

Much of this comes from the fact that boys are positioned as the "guardians of decorum" (Houppert, p. 73). From the moment of half-knowing experienced by boys and girls, the two genders are encouraged to separate themselves in regard to menstruation – boys to remain in this fog of half facts and mystery, tinged with sexual allure and a sort of disgust, and girls to avoid any potential embarrassment, and to maintain secrecy to ensure the on-going comfort of their male peers.

> *And to set the stage for that anxiety, Tambrands reminds educators of the importance of sex-segregated classes: "If the program is to be taught to a mixed group, we strongly recommend that additional time be*

> *allowed for teaching about menstruation in more detail with the girls alone". In suggesting that girls may be more comfortable discussing this in sex-segregated groups (and that boys aren't ready for full disclosure around menstruation), the company reinforces the notion that such a setting is the only appropriate venue* (Houppert, p. 73).

The dominant narrative is established here beyond the text and reinforced internally by many texts lauded as 'universal' and read widely by boys and girls.

In *The Virgin Suicides*, a single voice narrates in third person plural, representing the 'we' of the neighbourhood boys who are intrigued and somewhat obsessed with the mysterious Lisbon girls. This narrative choice immediately signals to the male reader that they should share the position of the narrator, belonging to the 'we' of the dominant narrative. The adolescent male gaze over the female body is prevalent throughout, positioned perfectly within the moment of half-knowing. It is a gaze suffused with excitement at the potential of encountering such a body in the flesh, with awe at the mystery of the workings of a body so other, and with the onset of sexual awakening, where female flesh in all forms can act as the vessel for desire.

Menstruation supports this narrative, as it sets the female body as something outside the norm for these male onlookers, and is inherently connected to the world of sex – after all, when a girl starts menstruating, it means (we are constantly told) that she has become a woman, and is primed for sexual encounters. Given this, it is unsurprising that we first encounter menstruation in the early pages of the novel, in a scene where Peter Sissen, attending a dinner at the Lisbon house, has the opportunity to explore the cabinets in the Lisbon girls' bathroom, and retells his experience of finding menstrual products to his eager audience.

> *. . . Sissen told us of a discovery that went beyond our wildest imaginings. In the trash can was one Tampax, spotted, still fresh from the insides of one of the Lisbon girls. Sissen said that he wanted to bring it to us, that it wasn't gross but a beautiful thing, you had to see it, like a modern painting or something, and then he told us he had counted twelve boxes of Tampax in the cupboard*. (Eugenides, p. 10)

This excerpt reinforces the position of half-knowing for adolescent male readers. Eugenides interpellates these readers with a knowing wink that recognises the excitement of early adolescents and first encounters with the female body. These readers, through the educational or social interactions outlined above by Houppert and Fingerson, recognise the reflection of their own world, which positions them in relation to the text. The language sets a tone for the workings of the female body that is mysterious, slightly erotic and somewhat disturbing. The narrator describes the discovery a "beyond our wildest imaginings", giving a context that both alienates this aspect of the female body as something outside of even wild imaginings, but also one that is positioned very much within the patriarchy, as the object, justified, of these imaginings.

Even the description of the used tampon "still fresh from the insides of one of the Lisbon girls" is amplified in the eager voice of the prepubescent narrators "that it wasn't gross but a beautiful thing, you had to see it, like a modern painting or something". This description takes menstruation far from the norm, with a very visual description that one might imagine as both glorious and disturbing. In addition, the wanting to "bring it to us" and idea that "you had to see it" give symbolic weight to the physical evidence of menstruation – there is the suggestion that it needs to be seen to be believed, so strange is it to imagine. The text is so heavy with the male gaze, the intrigue in menstruation is perhaps twofold – it is a part of the female body that lies beyond the male gaze (at the same time as being shaped by it), and it is frequently linked to the onset of sexuality, and so symbolises a sort of potential.

In Stephen King's *Carrie*, the titular character, an unpopular uncharismatic teenager, is the focus of the menstrual narrative. Blood is a recurring motif in the book used to shame, humiliate and ultimately destroy Carrie. Again, the scene for this is set early on, with the infamous shower scene opening the narrative. Here, Carrie is in many ways worse than the half-knowing male – her mother is a religious fanatic, and is so afraid of the sin of menstruation that she has neglected to tell her daughter anything at all about its reality.

Blood is a recurring motif in the book used to shame, humiliate and ultimately destroy Carrie.

When Carrie gets her first period in the locker room at school, she is painfully and completely oblivious to the fact of it, and it is this, as much as anything else that incites the furious, horrifying bullying from the girls

around her. To them, she must represent everything they fear – unaware, uncontrolled, uncontained. In a way the mob attack on Carrie – in which even Sue Snell, described as the 'nice' girl, and the teacher Miss Desjardin, although she knows she should be above judgement, participate – could be seen as a frenzied response to the embarrassing event that girls are taught to fear – that they are seen to bleed.

This opening scene certainly sets the tone of the book, and in fact the novel focuses far more on women than men, with Carrie, her mother, Sue Snell and Chris Hargensen at the fore, but there is a subtle yet continued male presence, and their reactions (or the fear of their reactions/need for their approval) shape the actions of those women, reminding readers that the dominant cultural narrative here is still male, and that Carrie is very much acting outside that norm rather than within it.

An example of this subtle interpellation – far less obvious than in the Eugenides scene – can be found when Miss Desjardin leads Carrie to the assistant principal's office, past two boys waiting to be seen.

> *She tried twice to explain the commonplace reality of menstruation, but Carrie clapped her hands over her ears and continued to cry.*
> *Mr Morton, the assistant principal, was out of his office in a flash when they entered. Billy deLois and Henry Trennant, two boys waiting for the lecture due them for cutting French I, goggled around from their chairs.*
> *'Come in,' Mr Morton said briskly. 'Come right in.' He glared over Desjardin's shoulder at the boys, who were staring at the bloody handprint on her shorts.*
> *'What are you looking at?'*
> *'Blood,' Henry said, and smiled with a kind of vacuous surprise.*
> *'Two detention periods,' Morton snapped. He glanced down at the bloody handprint and blinked*. (King, p. 14-15)

Carrie is coming directly from the shower scene here, and so Billy deLois and Henry Trennant are unaware of the precise nature of the blood on Desjardin's shorts. Their reaction however, is significant still, because it is a response to the sight of blood on a woman, specifically on the lower part of her body, and readers could easily assume that the boys, if they don't understand the specifics of what has happened, have at least jumped to a conclusion as to the nature of the blood. Their reactions to this bloody handprint, which presumably would be of horror if they felt the blood came from a tragedy, or intrigue perhaps, if they suspected a fight, imply the same half-knowing seen above in *The Virgin Suicides*, that similar sense of awe, and intrigue. The boys are not horrified, instead they "goggled around from their chairs", and when Henry responds to Morton's question, it is "with a kind of vacuous surprise", that paints him with a kind of naïve awe, arguably the same naïve awe readers would be familiar with as a response to the idea that once a month, women bleed.

If we analyse these scenes of boyish naivety (or half-knowing) against scenes where much older men encounter menstruation, we can see more broadly the cultural interpellation that contextualises the half-knowing of boys as a sort of stepping stone to the determined and uncomfortable avoidance of adult men. The reactions of adult men to menstruation, in both *Carrie* and *The Virgin Suicides*, are important, because the behaviour of adults is the ultimate representation of the dominant cultural narrative that shapes the way male adolescents learn to behave (and reminds female readers that their actions, and even their bodies, are responsive to male standards of acceptable). The textual representation of adult men interpellates the adolescent male reader by reinforcing a standard of behaviour (the half-knowing) that is considered the norm, and by giving them (both within and external to the text) a structure of responding to menstruation that others the experience of women, and reinforces the system of half-knowing as outlined by Fingerson.

Eugenides (p. 23) demonstrates the relationship of men to menstruation in a scene exploring Mr Lisbon's position as the only male in a full house of women. The narrators refer to the annoying "odor of all those cooped-up girls", talking of the many females that "roamed the house", so many, that "they forgot he was a male and discussed their menstruation openly in front of him". This language reminds readers that male comfort should be a priority, and makes a nuisance of anything that potentially upsets this. The 'forgetting' that Mr Lisbon is a male, reinforces the idea that menstruation is a topic that should only be discussed openly amongst women, and that anything beyond that disturbs the dominant male narrative, and emasculates any men unlucky enough to be made more aware.

> *Those five days of each month were the worst for Mr. Lisbon, who had to dispense aspirin as though feeding the ducks and comfort crying jags that arose because a dog was killed on TV* (Eugenides, p. 23).

In *Carrie* we see a similar discomfort when Miss Desjardin recalls the events of the infamous shower scene to the Assistant Principal, Mr Morton. In the early part of the scene, when Desjardin tells Morton what has happened, King (p. 17) writes that he "cleared his throat again and his cheeks went pink. The sheet of paper he was sweeping with moved even faster." His obvious physical discomfort, which echoes that earlier embarrassment of Henry Trennant, is represented by the standard sort of shuffling behaviour that readers would recognise as embarrassed distraction.

In the continuation of the scene, Morton's embarrassment increases. Desjardin's description of the girls throwing sanitary napkins "like peanuts" makes him turn scarlet, and the closing line "he did not understand women and had no urge at all to discuss menstruation" is introduced with Morton repeating the word "um", wisely implying that it would be unwise for a man to engage to deeply in a conversation about women's issues.

The interpellation of the male reader through these events in *Carrie* and *The Virgin Suicides* sets the dominant reading, which Mills (p. 187) describes as the position of the reader based on an ideological message in each text which they either accept or reject as "given or obvious". She bases this on Althusser's notion of obviousness, which is the "seemingly coherent message" carried by a text that signals to the reader what the text is "obviously" about. In each of these cases, the dominant reading is characterised by "statements at which the reader will nod her head sagely or which she will simply accept as self-evidently 'true' within that culture" (Mills, p. 190). These statements could be reframed as the dominant cultural narratives, which set the 'obviousnesses' that position the adolescent male reader as dominant, albeit half-knowing, in relation to menstruation, and position the female reader as subservient, reminded that the narratives of their bodies and of menstruation are constructed around male comfort and ease.

The obviousnesses found in both texts that interpellate the reader in regards to menstruation could be outlined as follows. Firstly, that periods are embarrassing or shameful, and it is the business of women (and women only) to keep men from knowing them fully. Houppert refers to the many "leakage stories" sent to the advice columns of teen magazines. She notes that:

> *What is curious, though, is the number of "I nearly died" stories that have to do with simply acknowledging that you menstruate. Or that you may menstruate. Or that you may have menstruated in the past. Tampons that fall out of book bags, boys who see you purchasing pads, o.b.s that slip out of pockets – all the accoutrements that make your private shame public are cause for alarm*. (Houppert, p. 88)

We need only to compare the attitudes of men and women in relation to menstruation in the texts to these examples, which are widely reinforced by education and advertising, to see the dominant power structure at play in reality being reflected and reinforced in these narratives.

Secondly, we can see that periods are intertwined with the onset of sexuality, as is seen in the eager enthusiasm by the boys in *The Virgin Suicide*s, and in the connection *Carrie* draws between menstruation and carnal sin. Again, these textual assumptions interpellate the reader by reflecting the world they live in.

> *. . . no matter where girls glean information about periods – the formal curriculum (menstrual-ed tracts), the informal curriculum (teen magazines), or menstrual classics (Judy Blume's Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret, Stephen King's Carrie, Anne Frank's diary) – they learn that menstruation and sex are inextricably linked*. (Houppert, p. 62)

If there is any argument that women are not subjugated in these narratives it could be found in Fingerson's (2005, p. 91) idea that "creative interpretations of menstruation, based within teens' unique peer cultures, provide opportunities for girls to exert agency and thus influence gendered power relationships". Certainly, there does seem to be a kind of power in the "dramatic womanliness" (Eugenides, p. 23) displayed by the Lisbon girls during their monthly time, and in the way they order their father to the shops to buy Tampax, but despite this agency, these narratives remind us that any power is limited. If the power comes from a sense of making men uncomfortable, uneasy, even slightly aroused, we should remember that it is in fact power stemming from the cult of secrecy and shame created to ensure the ongoing comfort of men. While the women in these narratives may seem to exert a sort of power as they learn to wield their sexually charged

bodies, and exploit the power of discomfort, they are ultimately conforming to a narrative which privileges men's comfort over women's and secrecy over normalisation.

Resisting the Etiquette of Concealment

I use *Carrie* and *The Virgin Suicides* to explore the ideas of the half-knowing male and the etiquette of concealment because, as mentioned, they are widely read and praised, and stand out from the traditional canon in that they refer to menstruation at all. Of course, at a young adult level, there are texts that explore menstruation more directly.

Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret by Judy Blume is often hailed as a seminal text for emerging female adolescents. The problem with this, and a number of other texts that involve female puberty, is that menstruation is positioned as the central 'issue' of the book and the book itself, is predominantly marketed to only female readers. Margaret "feels awful" (Blume, p. 33) at the thought that she might be the last of her friends to menstruate. When she does finally "get it", in the last chapter of the book, Margaret celebrates with her mother and the book ultimately finishes on a positive note. While this book made some steps toward normalising menstruation for girls, in that Blume is relatively frank about the variety of experiences (from fear to shame to celebration) that girls can have around their first period, it offers more as a fictional infomercial than it does in starting a genuine and ongoing acknowledgement of the daily reality of periods.

In *Lockie Leonard, Human Torpedo*, an arguably similar narrative about male adolescence, Lockie's experience is not, as Margaret's is, limited to his close same-gendered family and friends, but read as a normal part of a much larger story, that also looks at love, friendship and school. The humour Winton uses around his protagonist also serves to normalise and destigmatise Lockie's experience of having wet dreams, while Margaret is initiated into the etiquette of concealment at every level of the text. Lockie, on the other hand, comes out of his adolescence with a powerful confidence, that enables him to talk frankly (at 13) to his girlfriend about his doubts around sex. Where are girls to find similarly encouraging narratives that give them the confidence to talk naturally about their bodies to the opposite sex? And why should a book that so openly explores wet dreams contain only one reference to menstruation, where the phrase "are you still on your period?" is used to silence another female character? Where are the narratives that capture both?

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What is lacking, in many books, is a normalisation of menstrual narratives that can be found in books marketed to and read by both boys and girls. The examination of *Carrie* and *The Virgin Suicides* shows that the culture of shame and secrecy around menstruation is formed early in the divide between the way men and women experience their own bodies and the way they learn about each others. To have menstrual narratives solely for women, therefore, does nothing to disrupt the dominant narrative around menstruation that teaches young women to internalise shame around the natural processes of their own bodies.

What if we instead provide new positions both within and external to texts for male readers to align themselves to? What if male readers saw cultural examples of awareness, rather than half-knowing, and if books about girls weren't only marketed to girls? What impact could that have on the experience of adolescent girls experiencing menstruation?

In *Alanna, The First Adventure* by Tamora Pierce, the one person Alanna feels that she can turn to is a male – George, king of thieves. Despite the nature of her predicament when she gets her first period while posing as a male knight, she has no hesitation about turning to him, and in the scenes that follow, we see that his reaction to her revelations completely changes the tone of her experience, allowing her to see a future in which she may accept her roles both as a knight and as a woman. When Alanna initially turns to George, and reveals that she is a woman, he doesn't ask any questions, taking her instead to his mother who is a village healer. In a conversation afterwards though, George is insistent on encouraging Alanna to accept her femininity. We can presume this includes her menstruation because, although Alanna is too embarrassed to

mention it outright, it is implied by George's mother that he has been "listening at the keyhole" and more, that he is aware of the female body, and would almost certainly have put two and two together. His curiosity, although it contains echoes of the earlier half-knowing, reflects more the desire of boys genuinely wanting to understand women and menstruation, an idea which is captured in Fingerson's interviews (2005, p. 142).

If this is true, and if we take the moment of half-knowing as a stepping stone for awareness rather than an ideological interpellation into a culture of shame and secrecy, then menstruation should be included as normal in a variety of books that both boys and girls are encouraged to read. Menstruation is becoming gradually more visible, in young adult fiction at least, as women tire of adhering to the etiquette of concealment, and popular authors like Lili Wilkinson, Fiona Wood, Justine Larbalestier and others, commit to normalising menstruation by referencing it in the majority of their work. These texts, and others, start to explore and acknowledge the societal conditionings experienced by the characters (and reflected in the readers' reality) but also offer an alternative, where female characters buck the trend of being ashamed of their bodies and become role models for their readers, and their experiences are supported by the matter-of-fact awareness and acceptance of the male characters close to them.

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Unfortunately, these texts, and my findings around them, are limited by structural gender issues in the wider literary world – texts by women are seen less frequently on school text lists, in the pages of reviews, and on literary prize lists. This gender discrimination means that boys and men are far less likely to read and therefore align themselves with texts that positively represent menstruation, and are far more likely to find their way to a position of half-knowing through engagement with those texts that continue to erase or misrepresent the experience. If we are to see gender equality, then we must see equal representation of women in literature, and this must include a more normalised representation of their bodies.

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Bec Kavanagh *is a Melbourne-based writer and academic. Her work has been published by* Bookseller and Publisher, Australian Book Review, Killings, Westerly *and a number of education publications. She has had fiction published by* Seizure *and the* Review of Australian Fiction*. Bec is currently the Manager of the Stella Schools Program and a PhD candidate at LaTrobe University.*