

Reading Group Gold

Flash Count Diary

Menopause and the Vindication of Natural Life

by Darcey Steinke

Menopause hit Darcey Steinke hard. First came hot flashes. Then insomnia. Then depression. As she struggled to understand what was happening to her, she slammed up against a culture of silence and sexism. Some books promoted hormone replacement therapy. Others encouraged accepting the coming crone. Beyond that, there was little that offered a path to understanding menopause in a complex, spiritual, and intellectually engaged way. She felt lost until she encountered a scientific fact that had escaped her through the early stages of dealing with this life change: one of the only other creatures on earth that experience menopause, she discovered, is the female killer whale.

Her fascination with this fact became the starting point for *Flash Count Diary*, a powerful exploration into aspects of menopause that have rarely been written about, including the changing gender landscape brought on by reduced levels of hormones, the actualities of transforming desires, and the realities of prejudice against older women. Steinke learned that in the seventeenth century women who had hot flashes in front of others could be accused of being witches, that the model of Marcel Duchamp's famous *Étant donnés* was a post-reproductive woman, and that seeing whales in the wild can lead to orgasms. *Flash Count Diary* takes readers from Brooklyn to the red light district in Amsterdam, and finally to a watery encounter with a wild killer-whale matriarch in Washington State's Salish Sea. *Flash Count Diary* will change the way you think about menopause. It's a deeply feminist book, honest about the intimations of mortality that menopause signals but also an argument for the ascendancy, beauty, and power of the post-reproductive years in women's lives.

We hope the following guide will enhance your enjoyment and understanding of this brave and unprecedented book.

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QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. As Darcey Steinke researches menopause and its manifestations—hot flashes, sleeplessness, anger, changing libido—she uncovers deeply held and disturbing beliefs about women’s roles and the aging female body. What does she learn about how menopause is viewed—by the medical establishment, in popular culture, and by women themselves? What messages do these attitudes send to women of all ages?
2. Humor is often employed to help people face uncomfortable issues. Jokes can be both concealing and revealing. Why is menopause as much a subject for humor as for serious discussion? What truths might the jokes contain?
3. On the one hand, Steinke likens hot flashes to a spiritual or religious experience. On the other, she compares the hammering heartbeat and rising heat of a flash to the physical changes suffered by the comic book character Bruce Banner turning into the Incredible Hulk—a violent metamorphosis, an explosion. What are other metaphors for describing menopause and its symptoms? What does science have to say about the physiological causes of hot flashes as well as possible benefits?
4. Steinke quotes the feminist Katha Pollitt, who writes, “Storylessness has been women’s biggest problem.” She also references Germaine Greer’s book *The Change* in which Greer states, “The menopausal woman is the prisoner of a stereotype and will not be rescued from it until she has begun to tell her own story. What does Pollitt mean by storylessness? What is Greer’s stereotype? What are the narratives that have shaped women’s lives and the stories that need to replace them?”
5. Dr. Robert Wilson writes in his book *Feminine Forever*, published in 1966, that menopause is a “disease” that “ruins the female body” and “destroys the personality.” What is illogical about his thinking? Have beliefs about menopause evolved over the last fifty years? How do modern remedies for menopausal symptoms compare to those of the past? Why does medicine focus on relieving the symptoms of menopause, thereby attempting to reverse a natural process, rather than helping women enter into productive post-fertile lives?
6. Steinke writes, “menopause is a...physical characteristic that should, according to Darwin’s theory, have been selected against.” The only other creatures to experience menopause are female killer whales, narwhals, and short-finned pilot and beluga whales. Granny, a Southern Resident orca born in 1911, is a leader and caregiver in her pod, essential to the survival of younger members. How might whale behavior offer clues to a Darwinian purpose for menopause in human females?
7. What does Steinke find compelling about the story of Lolita, the Southern Resident orca captured to perform at the Miami Seaquarium? Why is she drawn to Granny? How does menopause put women in touch with their “creatureliness” and animal feelings? What can be gained from this awareness?
8. What is the meaning of the chapter title “Demigirl in Kemmering?” What does Steinke mean by “ungendering?” She writes, “Since I’ve stopped my struggle to be beautiful, I am overtaken by beauty more often.” Why is there an almost immutable connection between femininity and beauty? How might giving up, at any age, the struggle to be beautiful awaken women to the beauty around them? How might women raise daughters immune to unrealistic standards of beauty and femininity?

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9. What are the mental and physical issues about sexuality that menopausal women face? How are these different from men's concerns? Steinke writes that because of the "sexual disgust the greater culture aims at older women," she expects to become "a body not only invisible but also despised." With influential older women in business, politics, entertainment, etc., is it possible this will change? What are the aspects of intimacy that both women and men need to confront to enrich their relationships?
10. The chapter "Nocturnal Hunter" is about the author's mother. How does Steinke see her mother's life? What do our mothers teach us about what to expect as wives, parents, women? How does Steinke's mother embody the conflicts many women feel as they are faced with choices about relationships, family, and careers?
11. The experience of menopause is a link across generations of women. Do women of different ages do a good job of supporting one another through menopause? How might mothers help prepare daughters for the changes that come with aging and loss of fertility? How might menopause be presented as something to look forward to?
12. Steinke travels to Amsterdam to attend the eleventh European Congress on Menopause. What does she learn about what women around the world have in common in terms of treatments for menopause and attitudes toward aging?
13. Steinke's "flash count diary" is an actual diary that she kept to help her cope with menopause. Her book is a quest to position menopause as an inevitable and important transition. What insights does she gain at each stop along her journey—at the Miami Seaquarium, the National Zoo, and at the Lucky Orphans Horse Rescue, alone in the middle of the night with a box full of her mother's things, kayaking in the Salish Sea? How does the connection she feels with the whales Granny and Lolita help her, as a feminist, illuminate and embrace this part of her life?
14. Steinke writes, "I'm not only fifty-six, but also seven, twelve, two, thirty-four, forty-eight." As you look back on the various ages or phases of your life, what wisdom do those girls and women have to give you? How are they different from one another? Is there one word to describe all of them? How do they come together to make you the person you are?
15. The book concludes that menopause is a crossroads of the metaphysical and the biological, a spiritual as much as a physical challenge. Do you remember when you first learned about menopause? How was it presented to you? What was your reaction? If you have been through menopause, what was your experience? Viewed without the filter placed on it by a patriarchal society, what is the true nature of the change that menopause brings to women's lives?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Darcey Steinke is the author of the memoir *Easter Everywhere* and of five novels: *Sister Golden Hair*, *Milk*, *Jesus Saves*, *Suicide Blonde*, and *Up Through the Water*. Her books have been translated into ten languages, and her nonfiction has appeared widely. Her web story "Blindspot" was a part of the 2000 Whitney Biennial. She has received both Henry Hoyns and Wallace Stegner fellowships, and was a Writer-in-Residence at the University of Mississippi. She has taught at the New School, Columbia University's School of the Arts, New York University, Princeton University, and the American University of Paris. She lives with her husband in Brooklyn.