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HANNAH WITTON

THE HORMONE DIARIES

THE BLOODY TRUTH ABOUT OUR PERIODS

wren & rook

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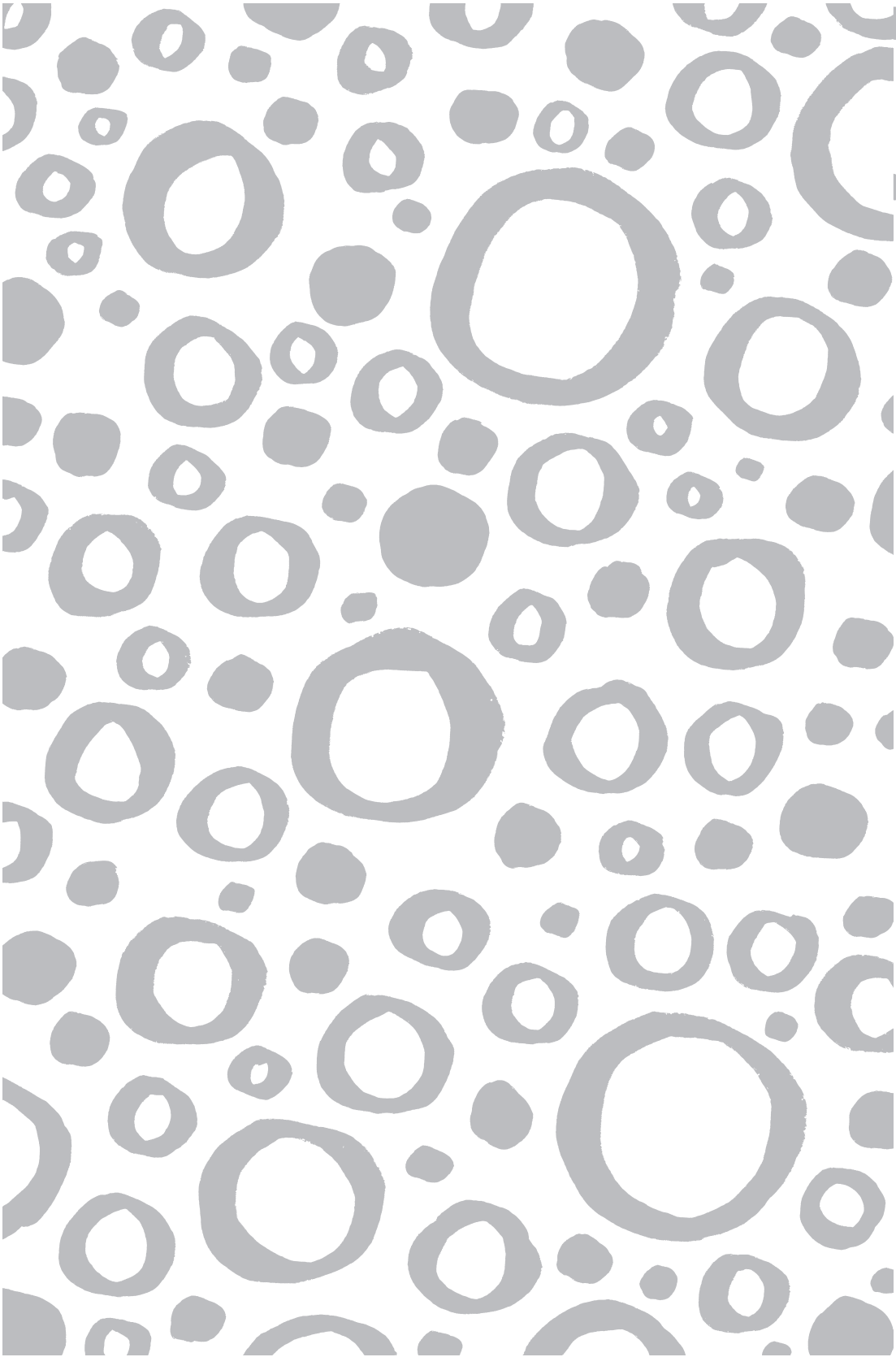
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Introduction

Talking about our bodies, getting to know how we physically function and sharing our experiences is more important than ever. Like it or not, despite the hard work of feminists and movements celebrating body positivity, we are still shrouded by taboos and stigma concerning our bodies.

But one of the biggest body taboos – still – is something we don't tend to see in our visual culture: menstruation, a.k.a. your period, Aunt Flo, shark week, that time of the month. Whatever you call them, periods are a natural part of life. We often think of them as annoying inconveniences – they're painful, messy and make us sad or angry – and in some cultures they're even seen as an illness. But the fact is, periods are a sign of a healthy functioning body and they're not going away any time soon. So we may as well do ourselves a favour and get period positive.

In 2016, having been on the pill for seven years, I decided to come off it. There wasn't anything wrong with the pill I was on, it worked fine. I just missed my periods. That's right, I MISSED MY PERIODS. Nothing to worry about, the pill I was on had a very common and normal side effect of lightening, reducing or completely stopping periods. But still, I was 24 years old and I hadn't had a period since I was 17. Seven years! I started

to wonder if my period would ever come back, along with the rollercoaster of emotions, the mood swings and urges that I'd once known always accompanied it. Being on the pill usually keeps PMS (**p**re**m**enstrual **s**yndrome) at bay – it stabilises these emotions. On a practical level, that was great – but I was starting to forget who pre-pill Hannah was. Was I experiencing the world as I 'should' be? Was it easier – but also flatter and duller?

You hear all sorts about how the pill can affect hormonal balance. That it can impact your mental health, how you feel about yourself and how you feel about others. It's hard to know what's true – there might be cases where all of these things have happened as a result of the pill. Or they might just be spooky tales we tell each other. Either way, a lot can change in seven years, and 24-year-old me was a very different person to 17-year-old me. So I wanted to find out the truth. Was I the same person off contraception as I was on it?

This is when my YouTube series *The Hormone Diaries* was born. There I documented any changes to my mind, body and soul from coming off the pill, sharing my experiences as I researched other options. Amongst other delights, I've made videos about my screwed-up 'monthly' cycle, trying a menstrual cup for the first time, and the highs and lows of having sex on your period. Going on hormonal contraception often isn't about sex – loads of people get it to help with periods and puberty symptoms before they're sexually active. This book is for readers aged 15+ – so while you may be under the age of consent in the country where you live, that doesn't mean that conversations about hormonal contraception aren't important for you. Especially because when you're a teenager, you tend to just go on the first

pill your doctor recommends, no questions asked – and if the side effects aren't nightmarish, you stick with that one without exploring other options. But as you get older, you start learning that there are other types of viable contraception out there. Maybe your pill has stopped serving you in the same way it used to, or maybe you've read scary news articles about some potential side effects.

It felt like my friends and I all had this realisation around the same time. How much did we really know about the contraception we were using – and was there another type out there that would be better for us? How do these hormone regulators we've been taking work in our bodies? Why should we settle for an unsettling list of side effects just to not get pregnant when condoms exist? We want our quality of life to be as good as it can be, don't we? And most of all, we don't want to have to worry and think about it all so much.

Just think, what could we be doing if we weren't so preoccupied with having a uterus? Reflect on the amount of time you've spent dealing with PMS, researching ways to make it better, cleaning yourself up after starting your period unexpectedly, the amount of money spent of period products, the amount of time thinking about your contraception, talking about it (with friends and with health professionals), researching your different options, going to appointments, going to the chemist, reading a book about it, writing a whole bloody book about it. What else could we achieve in that time?

But this book is not just about periods and birth control. We will talk about them, lots, but *The Hormone Diaries* is so much more

than that. It has come to be about all things contraception, periods and bodies. In the YouTube series I have made videos about HRT (hormone replacement therapy and disorders like PCOS. We're going to cover all that and then some in this book.

This book is for everyone who wants to learn about periods, whether they have them or not. After all, not all women menstruate (trans women don't, and cis women may not either, because of the contraception they're on, or other health reasons) and not all people who have periods are women (AFAB non-binary and trans folks).
No book is perfect, but I want to be as inclusive of trans and non-binary people as possible. However, I may use the word 'women' sometimes because it's this area of so-called 'women's health' – often inadequate, underfunded and straight-up ignored – that has got us into this hot mess of being confused about our bodies.

AFAB means 'assigned female at birth', and in this book I'll be talking about AFAB people most of the time, whether cisgender, non-binary or trans. You might have guessed, but AMAB means 'assigned male at birth'.

Since I started *The Hormone Diaries*, more and more friends of mine have been sacking off the pill. But this isn't a book trying to persuade you to try a non-hormonal contraceptive life. Absolutely not. Everyone is different – whilst coming off hormonal contraception may work for some, I want to stress how bloody amazing it is in the first place, and how lucky we are to have it (even with all the side effects). And in fact, I spend a lot of this book trying *not* to persuade you in either direction – for two reasons. First, I am not a doctor! I'm fascinated by this stuff and I've done lots of research but I am not medically qualified at

all. Secondly, what feels right for one person is totally different to what feels right for another – it's all about choice, not my personal recommendations. We're figuring this out together.

My favourite thing about doing *The Hormone Diaries* on YouTube has been the comment section. It's not something you hear a lot of internet creators say, but the comments on those videos are always so thoughtful and interesting. People from all different countries, ages and genders share their experiences with these topics and I soon realised that I wanted to document that somehow. So I asked my amazing audience to share their own hormone diaries in the style of letters, and you're going to see some of them in this book. I had hundreds and hundreds of responses (thank you so much!) and I couldn't include them all, but I hope you find some comfort that you're not alone from the ones I've featured. You might even be inspired to write some diary entries of your own – you'd be amazed at how cathartic it is.

I hope this book answers some questions you might have, fuels your curiosity, makes you feel a bit more normal and gives you the confidence and knowledge to question whether your period products and birth control are right for you. And if they're not, to arm you with courage to explore other options and, most importantly, to speak to a doctor if anything doesn't feel right.

The information contained in this book is not intended to replace the services of trained medical professionals or to be a substitute for medical advice. You are advised to consult a doctor on any matters relating to your health, and in particular on any matters that may require diagnosis or medical attention.

WAIT – WHAT ARE HORMONES?!

Hormones are chemicals that travel around our bodies causing cells or tissue to act in a certain way. They control most of our bodily functions. When we say, 'I'm feeling so hormonal' in relation to PMS, we're only referring to one or two of many different hormones that are created in glands all over our bodies. These control things such as sleep, stress, hunger, blood sugar levels, calorie-burning, heart rate, growth and sexual urges. You may have heard of cortisol, a.k.a. the stress hormone, or melatonin, a.k.a the sleep hormone. Hormones rule over our body via the endocrine system and a doctor who has specialised in hormones is called an endocrinologist.

But don't worry, this is not an endocrinology book – we're only concerned with a few hormones: oestrogen, progesterone and testosterone, the sex hormones! Ovaries produce all three while the testes only produce testosterone. They impact our lives in various ways. Oestrogen is one cause of puberty (bringing you greatest hits including periods, hips and boobs) and prepares the body for pregnancy and regulates the menstrual cycle. Progesterone also helps out with the menstrual cycle and pregnancy. And testosterone is another cause of puberty (taking a bow for facial hair, increased bone density, muscle mass and strength). As this book is the bloody truth about our periods, we're going to be mostly talking about our dear friends oestrogen and progesterone.

WHERE IT ALL STARTS: PUBERTY

Puberty is the process in which, through physical changes caused by hormones, a child's body becomes an 'adult' body that is capable of reproduction. I say 'adult', but in fact you could be done and dusted with puberty at 13 years old. Puberty is when our hormone journey – something we may spend our whole lives trying to understand – really begins. It can be a wild ride: the anticipation, the shock, the am-I-normal? questions – all swirling around the fact that our bodies are technically now preparing for reproduction.

I'm not going to lie: for me, puberty feels like for ever ago. My boobs came in towards the end of primary school, so out with the vests and in with the crop tops. I no longer just had nipples, I had BOOBS! I specifically remember the tissue around my right nipple swelling up first; I would poke it thinking, *Is this it?* I ran into the bathroom where my mum was having a bath to show her my one boob and asked if I was growing breasts. I'll always be very grateful for the relaxed atmosphere in my house which meant I could barge in on my mum's bath time and feel normal about flashing her my nips.

By stark contrast, a few more years into puberty, I was lying in the bath and this time it's Mum who barges in. She points at my crotch and makes a comment about my baby pubic hair and I screamed at her to get out. I was absolutely mortified. And that's what puberty did for me; I went from not caring about my family seeing me naked, and not caring about seeing them naked, to being so self-conscious of my body. Covering everything up and

making sure no one could see. As puberty advanced, so did my shame. And I wasn't the only one.

Even in secondary school, I don't remember seeing any naked boobs in the girls' changing room. Many girls, including myself, wore sports bras, and we had mastered the art of changing bras under T-shirts without flashing our boobs. Ingenious, right? If only there'd been a GCSE for pretending our boobs and pubes didn't exist. Most of us adapted and learned to get comfortable with our changing bodies in time – for me, having parents who are open and relaxed definitely helped. But periods, they were another level. If I was self-conscious about my burgeoning boobs, I felt completely isolated when my periods started.

I was just about to turn twelve when I got my first period – while watching *Freaky Friday* at the cinema with my friend and both our mums. Nipping to the cinema toilets, there it was: blood staring right up at me from my knickers. What did I do? I stuffed my pants full of toilet roll to soak it up, and when we got home I told my mum, who was extremely prepared. Even though I was just 11 years old and my sister was nine, Mum had a supply of tampons and pads at the ready.

I didn't tell anyone else, though, not for two years. I was convinced that no one I knew had started their periods, and I didn't want to be the freak who started early. I *wanted* to tell my friends – keeping it a secret was hard work, as well as an emotional burden – but I had no idea how to bring it up. How was I supposed to just *slip it into* the conversation? But, just like with the onset of boobs and pubes, I found out I wasn't the only

one going through it. Hanging around at my friend's house after school when we were thirteen, she casually grabbed a tampon out of a drawer, waved it at me and went off to the bathroom. And just like that, the spell had been lifted. It turned out that most of my friends were getting visits from Aunt Flo, too. If only I'd asked! All that time wasted on being embarrassed. See, talking about things is always better than keeping them bottled up inside.

This is where my personal period adventure takes on a quirk all of its own, and where my experience of puberty isn't like most people's. I had something called ulcerative colitis, or UC – a form of inflammatory bowel disease, which would affect me with flare-ups. When this happened, I would take medication and the UC would eventually go in to remission. During secondary school, I had flare-ups aged 12, 14 and 15, and during those times my periods stopped. It's common for your periods to be a bit irregular when you first get them, but usually they settle down. But mine never did. The UC flare-ups would disrupt my cycle too much. This was both a blessing and a curse. My cycles were usually very long, maybe five or six weeks between each period instead of the common four weeks, which was great – less time bleeding! Less PMS! Fewer tampons and pads! But it also meant I never knew when my period was going to start. I don't remember having any clear PMS symptoms in advance that would give me the heads-up, so they always came as a surprise. The stop-starts continued until, before they got a chance to regulate naturally, I went on the pill at 17. Since my very first period during *Freaky Friday* to when I came off the pill at 24, I'd spent more years not having periods than having them.

What was the natural period experience like? I wondered. Not only did I want to find that out, my fascination with periods – what they're for, what they affect, what comes with them, and how to make them work for us better – led me to create *The Hormone Diaries*, and to build the online community that became part of my period exploration. Between us, we got to grips with all the issues around menstruation and shared our stories.