



Dishing with the Girls... Oops, the Women

*Our Bodies, Ourselves:
Menopause*

The Boston Women's Health Book Collective

New York: Touchstone/Simon & Schuster, 2006, 352 pp., \$15.00, paperback

*I Feel Bad About My Neck, and
Other Thoughts about Being a Woman*

By Nora Ephron

New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006, 160 pp., \$19.95, hardcover

Reviewed by Emily Toth

Some writings about women of a certain age are horribly morbid: you're gonna wither a lot, and then you croak. More often, though, they're insanelly merry. You, too, can be endlessly moist and climb Mount Everest at age 85. Ugh.

Sure, many of us boomers have hopes and petty vanities along with our aches and itches, but we also know ourselves better than we used to. We're more able to say no, and we like learning the names for our new vulnerabilities: a "meona," says *Our Bodies, Ourselves: Menopause*, is "a person who pees a lot." We're comparing notes, chortling and

whining together, and that's the big message of these two lively and informative books. Ever since the consciousness-raising groups and the zeitgeist of the 1970s got women to speak honestly to each other, we've been in this together.

Our Bodies, Ourselves: Menopause tells us what we need to know, how to talk about it—and how to fight the profiteers. Now that our huge generation is going through the Change, drug companies, plastic surgeons, and hordes of other smaller vultures can't wait to get at our bodies and our wallets—but we're all watching and checking with each other. Nora Ephron, 65 years old in *I Feel Bad About My Neck*, pokes fun at her own eccentricities and finds herself writing about "lunch with my girlfriends—I got that far into the sentence and caught myself. I suppose I mean my women

friends. We are no longer girls and have not been girls for forty years."

But both of these are girlfriend books, and in the best way.

Anyone who came of age in the women's movement in the 1970s—and anyone coming of age now, I hope—knows the original *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, put together for self-help and celebration by Boston women who knew that their (mostly male) doctors were doing them wrong. (Many of the original *Our Bodies, Ourselves* creators worked on this new volume, produced by some 60 writers, named in the back of the book.) Before women like them got feisty, a breast lump routinely meant that you woke up from surgery without a breast—and often without lymph nodes,

“We should look for “signs”—changes aren’t always “symptoms”—and we should call all medical results “effects,” not “side effects.” (A friend’s elderly mother was recently prescribed a drug whose known “side effects” include “death.”)”

too. Women were expected to be compliant patients; the Internet didn’t exist; and you rarely questioned doctors’ authority. Until the huge Women’s Health Initiative research project began in 1997, only a few breast cancer studies had been done—mostly on men.

Likewise, when the world didn’t know that the clitoris is women’s sexual trigger, women routinely faked vaginal orgasms—best spoofed in Meg Ryan’s heavy-breathing-in-the-restaurant scene in *When Harry Met Sally*, written by—who else?—Nora Ephron.

Now readers of *Our Bodies, Ourselves: Menopause* will skim it for what they need, starting with explanations (what, exactly, is menopause?). The authors describe medical treatments for everything from pesky bladder infections to deadly cancers. They write about changing relationships, memory, and mood, and how we can organize for better health care. The authors call women “we,” a welcome and inclusive term, and individual women are often quoted with their own stories. It’s as if friends are speaking to us.

I read *Our Bodies, Ourselves: Menopause* straight through, admiring the clear explanations and the straightforward principles that anchor every chapter. We need to fight any suggestion that menopause is a “disease” that needs “medicalization.” We need second opinions in plain language for any medical procedure, and we must question doctors who prescribe expensive medicines or ones that don’t have a strong track record. We need to evaluate “studies,” and the authors tell us how. We should look for “signs”—changes aren’t always “symptoms”—and we should call all medical results “effects,” not “side effects.” (A friend’s elderly mother was recently prescribed a drug whose known “side effects” include “death.”)

We should consider yoga, meditation, herbs, and acupuncture, and the authors ferret out the studies on, for instance, black cohosh for hot flashes. At last there’s a reliable source for finding alternative remedies that work.

Which brings me to the authors’ biggest question: Do we need to do anything specifically for menopause? Or (here comes a loaded question) is it just a natural process that’ll resolve itself without our help?

Mostly it’ll resolve itself, and the only unquestionably documented characteristics of menopause are these: no more periods for a year, vaginal dryness, hot flashes, night sweats, and insomnia. We don’t lose our marbles or our bodies, and some of us can still climb every mountain. What we particularly don’t need is hormone replacement, and that’s the section of this book every woman must read. It may save your life to know that extra estrogen—the kind marketed to make you “feminine forever”—can raise your risk of breast cancer and dementia. It may also save your life to know that scores of doctors and medical studies are funded by drug companies to find salable products, and find them fast.

Even osteoporosis—which I naïvely thought was a enormous risk for older women—isn’t such a

monster. It’s much more of a media creation. To promote the drug Fosamax, for instance, its makers invented the field of “osteoporosis education,” funded alarmist magazine ads, and lobbied for bone-density scanners throughout the land—creating a wave of worries for women and a financial bonanza for themselves.

After this gets you riled up, and you write angry letters and accost doctors and contribute to women’s health organizations, then you can turn to the sections on stress reduction. This book really does have all we need—including how to meditate, but not in a New Age-y way that’s always offended my rational soul. The authors tell us how to do deep breathing, and that you don’t have to squeeze yourself into a spandex leotard to do so. Nor do you need fancy equipment to exercise: soda bottles filled with sand will do fine as weights. Unlike the “be happy—you’re at the prime of your life, and of course you’re rich, healthy, and white” crowd, this book talks about poor women, lesbians, and even transgendered people.

It’s a book for all of us—which isn’t true of *I Feel Bad About My Neck*.

Ephron, who is a great wit, has made a career out of women’s body anxieties. The magazine piece that made her famous in the 1970s, “A Few Words about Breasts,” is a long *kvetch* about her flat chest, followed by her mother-in-law’s sage advice: if you’re always on top in bed, he’ll never notice.

Now, though, Ephron *kvetches* about her wrinkled neck, the one part of a woman’s aging body that can’t be resurfaced. She and the ladies who lunch with her all wear scarves or turtlenecks to hide their “shame.” Many readers—including Margaret Morgenroth Gullette, a contributor to *Our Bodies, Ourselves: Menopause* and the author of the award-winning *Aged by Culture* (2004)—have complained, as I do, that bonding through self-hatred isn’t good for women. So what if we have wrinkled necks? What are the consequences? By this stage in life, can’t we just be ourselves and not care what others think? And on and on. You, gentle reader, can probably fill in the rest of my rant.

But I soon made up with Ephron, who’s unfailingly clever and who often pokes fun at our preoccupations while sharing them. “I Hate My Purse,” she writes, and don’t we all? It’s always filled with useless stuff, and you can never find anything. Ephron finally opts for an old plastic bag—a solution for us all.

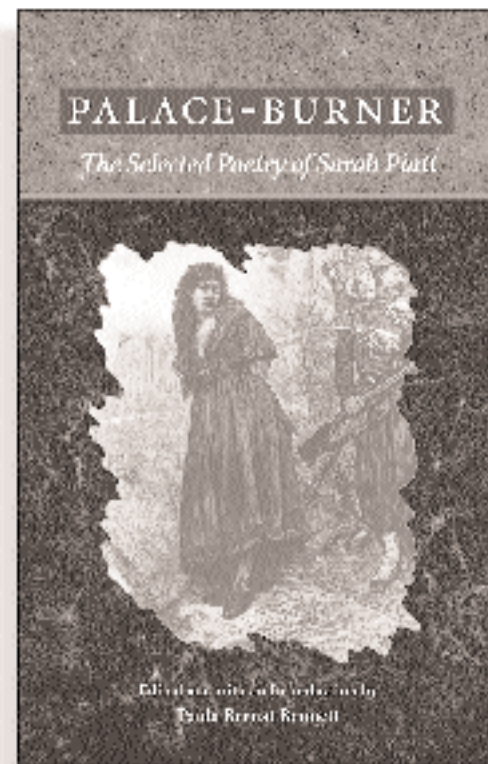
I Feel Bad About My Neck has everything I want in an entertaining read: a breezy pace, wry musings, copious doses of gossip, humor, and new information. I’m in on the secret when she doesn’t mention her second husband’s name (Carl Bernstein, of Watergate fame), and I enjoy her encounters with famous cooks who don’t produce fabulous meals at home. Ephron produces perfect vignettes rather than a chronological narrative, and I don’t think she even mentions menopause.

Still, hers is a book about change, and that’s where *I Feel Bad About My Neck* is much more than

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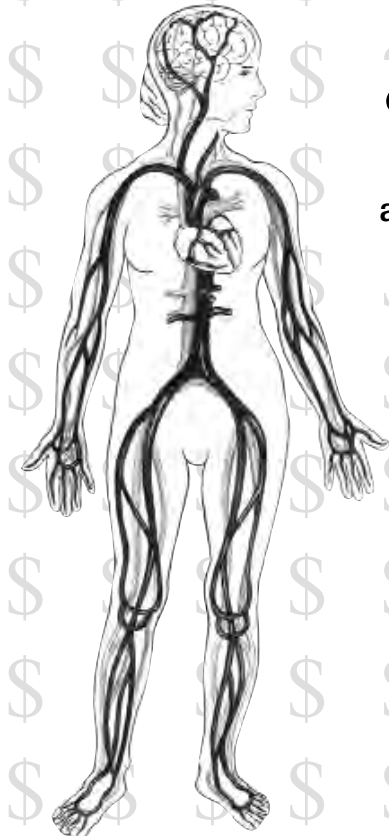
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“Now that our huge generation is going through the Change, drug companies, plastic surgeons, and hordes of other smaller vultures can’t wait to get at our bodies and our wallets.”

do people write books that say it’s better to be older than to be younger? It’s not better.” We get tired and cranky; we sometimes forget names; we don’t want to learn to use fancy digital gadgets. But mostly there’s what lies ahead, what we boomers still like to think we can somehow avoid.

“My friend Judy died last year,” Ephron writes. “She was the person I told everything to.” Judy discovered a lump on her tongue, and before she and Nora got to have the conversation about how to talk about death—she was gone.

By now that’s happening to a lot of people around me—but Janis Joplin, just a year older than I am, has been dead longer than she was ever alive. She would be old enough to be the grandmother of my students, many of whom worship her, and interpret the fundamentalists’ “WWJD” (“What Would Jesus Do?”) to mean “What Would Janis Do?” Of course, I don’t know what Tina Turner did about menopause, if anything—but it’s truly difficult to think of her as *old*.

We mostly don’t know what natural, post-menopausal women even look like, unless we have extremely I-am-what-I-am friends. TV women over fifty are face-lifted, carefully lit, gauzed over. Ephron herself admits to a little botoxing, a lot of cosmetic dental work, and a lifetime of dieting. For many, the dieting never stops. I was shocked to learn, in *Our Bodies, Ourselves: Menopause*, that the largest group of women who die from anorexia are over 45. Their median age is 69.

Ephron argues that one beauty product, hair dye, has changed women’s lives for the better. I agree. In the past, for instance, displaced homemakers who looked gray and “old” couldn’t get jobs—but now, with just a little coloring, they can. (And yes, of course, in the long run, we should eradicate ageism. And no, my hair wasn’t always this shade of brown.)

I finished both books, felt the “rapture” that Ephron says you feel on completing a great book, and went swimming at my local club—where, as usual, I was the only middle-aged white woman. The others, thanks to a lifetime of bullying by the beauty industry, don’t want to be seen in bathing suits. I wish I had companions my own age.

But books have always been faithful pals, and these two are among the best. You may disagree with Ephron, and find her too unaware of women who don’t know about French cooking or types of lettuce. You may find the women of *Our Bodies, Ourselves: Menopause* too mistrustful of the drug industry, and you may think—despite the lack of scientific evidence—that perimenopause did give you lapses of memory (I think it did for me—but the memory’s all back, now). Still, get your friends of a certain age together, rent *Silkwood* (which I think is Ephron’s best and most political film), read these books together, and argue and laugh and cry.

That’s my prescription. 📖

Emily Toth’s first book, *The Curse: A Cultural History of Menstruation* (with Janice Delaney and Mary Jane Lupton) has been in print for thirty years. Her other nine books cover Grace Metalious, Kate Chopin, and mentoring, and her “Ms. Mentor” academic advice column appears monthly on the *Chronicle of Higher Education’s* Career Network site. She teaches at Louisiana State University.

its first, title essay implies. There’s an essay on losing the beloved apartment in which she raised her children: thanks to a gouging landlord, she has to move across town, leaving behind the Manhattan neighborhood that’s home. She’s evidently contented in her third marriage, and her screenwriting career continues, but the last, poignant essay—the best in the book—goes in a different direction entirely.

In “Considering the Alternative,” she criticizes books for older women that are “uniformly upbeat and full of bromides and homilies” about being free to be oneself at last, not taking care of others, not being chained by their expectations. But still, “Why