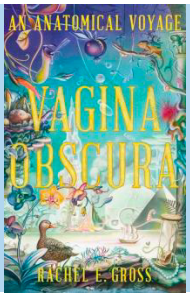
Discussion Guide



Vagina Obscura
Rachel E Gross

W W Norton & Company
2023
352 pages
ISBN: 978-1324050537

Menstruation

Summary

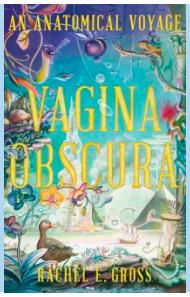
A camera obscura reflects the world back but dimmer and inverted. Similarly, science has long viewed woman through a warped lens, one focused narrowly on her capacity for reproduction. As a result, there exists a vast knowledge gap when it comes to what we know about half of the bodies on the planet. That is finally changing. Today, a new generation of researchers is turning its gaze to the organs traditionally bound up in baby-making—the uterus, ovaries, and vagina—and illuminating them as part of a dynamic, resilient, and ever-changing whole. Welcome to *Vagina Obscura*, an odyssey into a woman's body from a fresh perspective, ushering in a whole new cast of characters.

Questions

1. *Vagina Obscura* drills into the background assumptions and biases that scientists—and all of us—have when it comes to female anatomy. What was one of the assumptions you had when you first opened this book? How did that understanding change by the end?
2. When did you first learn about the female sexual and reproductive system—the vulva, vagina, uterus, and ovaries? Do you remember feeling curiosity, shame, fear, or discomfort?
3. This book shows several ways language can shape our relationship to our bodies. When you think of the word "vagina," what are your first associations? What about "clitoris"?
4. Scientists and doctors who mapped the female body were often in pursuit of an elusive "normal." We see examples of this when it comes to the female orgasm, the vaginal microbiome, and the size of the clitoris. What are the dangers of designating one kind of body as the norm? Who do these standards end up hurting most?
5. Dr. Linda Griffith and Dr. Helen O'Connell are examples of scientists who have been able to imagine new scientific possibilities and challenge existing modes of thinking. How do the paths that led to their realizations differ? Are they models who can be followed to break old patterns of thinking? Why or why not?
6. Do you agree with Dr. Griffith's intention to avoid marking her Center for Gynepathology Research with traditional symbols of femininity? Why, or why not? Does this promote a gender-neutral approach to science, or does it perpetuate sexist notions about the role of women in science?
7. What is something you learned about human anatomy in this book that you found particularly interesting, inspiring, or shocking? Explain your thinking.

This discussion guide has been funded in whole or in part with Federal funds from the National Library of Medicine (NLM), National Institutes of Health (NIH). The content was created by the NNLM Reading Club for educational use and is solely the responsibility of the authors and does not represent the official views of the National Institutes of Health (NIH). April 2025

NNLM Network of the National Library of Medicine



Vagina Obscura
Rachel E Gross

W W Norton & Company
2023
352 pages
ISBN: 978-1324050537

Menstruation

8. Were you ever uncomfortable while reading this book? When? Why?
9. Rachel E. Gross writes, “The beliefs we share as a society about sex and gender harm all bodies. Culture, and medicine, shapes bodies” (pp. 253-54). Do you relate to these statements? Is it possible to see ourselves and our bodies outside the influence of culture, medicine, and societally held ideas?
10. Given our modern understanding of human biology and social structures, how would you describe what Marie Bonaparte experienced as “frigidity”? In your opinion, is there a contemporary idea or prejudice analogous to the nineteenth century’s “frigidity”?
11. Aminata Soumare describes feeling lighter after discovering that she has options in response to the genital cutting she was subjected to as a baby (p. 42). How is this similar to Bo Laurent’s realization that “she could change her narrative” (p. 253)? Can you think of a time when you realized you had more options than you previously thought? What led to this realization?
12. Science, and its claim to objectivity, is a major theme in this book. Is it possible for science to be objective, given all the biases and injustices it has perpetuated? Are there any examples in the book of scientists who challenge the objectivity approach and provide a different path forward?
13. Do the illustrations in the book add to your reading experience? Did one stand out to you? Did any of the artistic choices or symbolism surprise you?
14. Was there any topic you expected to be covered in this book that wasn’t (pregnancy, PCOS, the hymen)? Why do you think these topics weren’t covered?

This discussion guide has been funded in whole or in part with Federal funds from the National Library of Medicine (NLM), National Institutes of Health (NIH). The content was created by the NNLM Reading Club for educational use and is solely the responsibility of the authors and does not represent the official views of the National Institutes of Health (NIH). April 2025