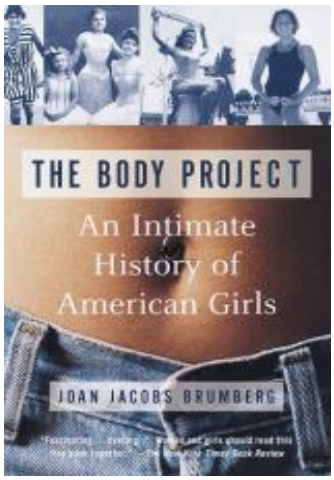
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The Body Project

by Joan Jacobs Brumberg



About the Book

The questions and discussion topics that follow are intended to enhance your reading and discussion of Joan Jacobs Brumberg's **The Body Project**. We hope they will give you a number of interesting angles from which to approach Brumberg's provocative historical analysis of the experience of growing up in a female body during the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries in America.

The Body Project will interest a wide variety of readers. Mothers and daughters of all ages will find it fascinating. Mothers and fathers of adolescent girls can use it to begin a dialogue with their daughters about sensitive issues, including puberty, menstruation, sexuality and sexual ethics, body image, eating disorders, and self-confidence. Groups of women who are the same age can discuss adolescent experiences common to their age group and relate those experiences to their own later lives. Pediatricians, sex and health educators, school psychologists, social workers, and teachers will find it valuable in their work. For adolescent girls it provides a new perspective on an intensely private and personal experience.

Discussion Guide

1. What does Brumberg mean when she says that there is a mismatch between biology and culture in the lives of contemporary American girls? How is the declining age of menarche related to this mismatch? What role does girls' emotional and intellectual development play?

2. For most American girls, menarche is now a hygienic crisis rather than a maturational event. How have medicine and commerce transformed the menstruation experience? How does Brumberg explain this phenomenon? Why were Victorian mothers so silent about menstruation?

3. What does the change from corsets to dieting and aerobics tell us about the changing nature of American girls' "body

projects"? Does the change from external to internal controls mean that girls are more autonomous and less vulnerable today? Given the impact of the post-1960s women's movement, do you find this situation ironic? Do adults as well as girls in the late twentieth century believe that the body is perfectable?

4. Are all American girls equally preoccupied with "the body project"? What evidence does Brumberg provide that there may be social class and ethnic differences in ideals for beauty?

5. How does Brumberg use girls' diaries from the past one hundred years to illustrate the change in girls' focus from "good works" to "good looks"? What aspects of girls' diaries have not changed over the years? What kind of information do diaries provide that is not available in other places? Why are diaries valuable as an historical resource?

6. Before the advent of mass media, girls saw themselves and the world differently. What technological developments in the twentieth century have increased their opportunities for self-scrutiny? Today, many women suffer from "bad body fever," a continuous internal critique of one's own body and body parts. Can you provide examples from your own life and/or the lives of women and girls you know? How does this kind of thinking affect your day-to-day life? How might it change with age? Is there an effective way to counter this kind of thinking?

7. When girls go through puberty they gain body fat, particularly in the breast and hip area, while maturing boys gain muscle. Why are adolescent girls today often so unhappy with their changing bodies? Why do girls view a normal developmental process as a problem, while boys believe that this same process makes them more attractive? What conclusions can we draw about a culture in which adult women seek to restore their body to its prepubescent shape?

8. Brumberg notes that our society is sexually permissive and yet, while sex permeates the culture, we are conflicted about how to approach sex education and discuss sexual ethics. How sexually permissive is American society today? What messages do contemporary adolescents receive about sex from parents, peers, schools, media, and religious institutions? How have attitudes toward virginity in our culture changed in the past hundred years?

9. Brumberg notes that "Girls who do not feel good about themselves need the affirmation of others, and that need, unfortunately, almost always empowers male desire" [p. 212]. In what ways does the preoccupation with appearance empower male desire? She suggests that adults need to help girls develop sexual ethics for the post-virginal age. How would you help adolescent girls to develop their values about sexual behavior? What guidelines would you give girls about when to have sex? Does a double standard still exist for boys and girls? How are the risks different or similar for boys and girls?

10. Put yourself in the place of a mother of a twelve-year-old girl and imagine that you want to share the ideas in this book. What pieces of information do you think would be most helpful for your daughter to know? How could you use your own experiences as an adolescent to begin a dialogue with your daughter? What would you tell her about the differences between growing up today and when you grew up?

11. Brumberg recommends that we put the emphasis on what female bodies can do, rather than what they look like. Where do we draw the line between healthy and unhealthy attention to appearance? How can we confront and counter the messages girls receive about the importance of good looks? Do we need to explicitly discuss our values about appearance and beauty or is it enough to emphasize other aspects of girls' lives, such as athletic, musical, artistic, and intellectual abilities?

12. According to Brumberg, "At the close of the twentieth century, the female body poses an enormous problem for American girls. . . because of the culture in which we live" [p. xvii]. How did forces outside the family become so influential? How can families regain their central role in educating and advising daughters about puberty and sexuality, while acknowledging the influence of modern medicine, consumer products, and the media?

13. Brumberg encourages a new era of advocacy for girls, yet some would argue that focusing on the special needs of girls puts them at risk for discrimination. Girls need equal rights, some people maintain, not protection. Do girls in our culture need more protection and guidance than boys? Why or why not? What are the risks in protecting girls? What is to be gained? What is the difference between protection and girl advocacy as Brumberg describes it? Why is this an important distinction? What forms should advocacy take?

Author Bio

Joan Jacobs Brumberg is the Stephen H. Weiss Presidential Fellow and Professor at Cornell University where she has been teaching history, human development, and women's studies for twenty years. **Fasting Girls**, her l988 book about the history of anorexia nervosa, won the John Hope Franklin Prize, the Berkshire Book Prize, the Eileen Basker Prize, and the Watson Davis Prize. Her sensitive research and writing about American women and girls have been recognized by the Guggenheim Foundation, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Rockefeller Foundation, the Society of American Historians, and The MacDowell Colony. From l985 to 1988, she was Director of Cornell's Women's Studies Program. She lives in Ithaca, New York.

Critical Praise

" An insightful and entertaining history behind the destructive mantra of the '90s--'I hate my body!' "

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