comprendre comment les batailles de la Seconde Guerre mondiale ont été disputées.

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The title of Lara Freidenfelds’ book, *The Modern Period*, is not just a deliberately-misleading pun. Whilst her account of the changes in the ways of managing and thinking about menstruation has little to do with sweeping historiographical considerations, she offers an important discussion on the way medicine can re-conceptualise women’s bodies to fit them into modernity.

In this award-winning tome based on her doctoral dissertation, the historian of science examines how the management of menstruation shifted from something embarrassing and secret, to a normal process that was part of the emerging vision of the modern body. To carry out her study, Freidenfelds uses extensive oral interviews of women to show that they welcomed these new technologies—even though the transition took several decades. She also examines the discourse of medical experts who were instrumental in promoting these technologies as valid modern ways of managing menstruation.

Early in the twentieth century, what appeared to be new menstruation technologies such as tampons and pads, attempted to displace traditional techniques like home-made cloth nappies. Of course, these had long been available, but by and large they were expensive and sold behind the pharmacist’s counter. The traditional feelings of embarrassment attached to
menstruation also meant that the purchasing and disposing of these technologies were problematic for women. What is more, menstruation was perceived as fostering weakness that could lead to serious, if not fatal injuries. Only sound rest and the absence of any physical activity could help women when they had their periods.

By the end of the century, however, tampons and pads were widely used and have since become a norm. Freidenfelds argues that these changes were the result of new scientific evidence which suggested that menstruation was in fact a natural and harmless process for both health and sexuality. They also mirrored post-war changes in sex education that sought to break the taboos of menstruation by telling girls about it before their first ever periods. Finally, as Freidenfelds documents with several advertisements, they were the product of new commercialisation that offered women ways of managing menstruation that departed from the traditional techniques and promoted tampons and pads as the “normal” way of managing menstruation.

This process of normalisation is the product of a number of trends of the period: modern science trying to displace traditional management of menstruation, post-war consumerism, and new social attitudes surrounding the modern female body. Through her account, Freidenfellds shows how modernity was summoned in a middle and upper-class discourse to promote ideals of female mobility and efficiency. In the Progressive Era that seemed to be lifting at least some women out the domestic sphere and which emphasized the need for a new self-presentation, middle-class females felt that they ought to be able to make the best of their new visibility throughout the month and thus welcomed new menstruation technologies. Freidenfellds concludes that the gradual acceptance of new technologies by working class and non-white women reflected a desire to rise from their social status and join a middle-class that appeared increasingly accessible. Whether or not they succeeded, these women came to adopt the same menstruation management standards set by the middle class. These new technologies thus came to symbolise modernity, upward mobility and normalcy.
Amongst the important contributions Freidenfelds makes to this particular field is her resentment of a Foucauldian approach to the management of menstruation that laments the use of modern technologies as yet another intrusion of modern science into the human body in an attempt to transform it into finely-tuned mechanism devoid of stains and smells that could be used all month long. She also takes issue with the notion that from this new management came the inevitable marketing of new products that simply drove women into consumerism, when they had coped happily with their periods for centuries using “natural” methods. Instead, she refers to the extensive interviews she has carried out for her research to show that females mostly welcomed those changes as ways of efficiently managing their periods. Cynics might charge that this is a fitting illustration of the covert influence of modern science and consumerism, but Freidenfelds convincingly replies that if female agency is more important than the social structures of power, then tampons and pads were indeed a welcomed asset for women, who thus became emancipated from any form of superstition and cumbersome or expensive devices. The new scientific understanding of menstruation was also a significant departure from the pre-modern notions of menstruation as something shameful and risky, which could only be discussed amongst married women.

Other historians of women’s health have argued that modernity has often led to the medicalization of natural processes that were previously confined to the traditional domestic sphere. For instance, the historian of medicine Denyse Baillargeon has shown how child-bearing became medicalized in Quebec at the turn of the nineteenth century and was transferred from those traditional spheres to the modern hospital—incidentally, Baillargeon also tempers Foucauldian ideas of scientific oppression by revealing that many women actually welcomed these changes.\(^1\) Here, Freidenfelds argues that the reverse is also true: the history of women’s

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management of menstruation in the twentieth century reveals a de-medicalization of periods as a monthly condition to turn it into a vaguely-uncomfortable process, but one that is now perceived as normal and natural.

Ultimately, Freidenfelds’ clear style of writing and persuasive conclusions make for a solid social history of the female body at the centre of class-struggle, consumerism and modernity, with a great emphasis on female agency far removed from ideas of medico-scientific oppression. Her account reveals how ideas of normalcy with regards to the management of menstruation were by no means carved in stone and have shifted throughout the twentieth century in conjunction with broader socio-cultural changes.

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Jeffrey H. Jackson’s account of the 1910 flood is both a rich history of Paris in the waning years of the Belle Époque, and a fascinating parable of human hubris and triumph. In Jackson’s tale, the Seine is a mythical, ancient monster whose slumbering body snakes through the heart of the rapidly modernizing city. It is a city riven not only by class conflict, but also by the (imaginary) divides of culture and nature, progress and atavism, and the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. *Paris Under Water* argues that even though Paris was a deeply-divided city, its residents pulled together during the flood thanks to both an ideology of resourcefulness (known as *Système D*), and to effective government and charitable aid. Although Jackson emphasizes throughout the book that Parisians were entirely unprepared for disaster, a spirit of shared citizenship mostly carried the day.