BOOK CLUB NOTES

BLOOD MOON

LUCY CUTHEW

"The book young people need."
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Sarah Crossan meets *Sex Education* in this feminist YA verse novel about periods, sex and online shaming.

Blood Moon is an extraordinary YA novel in verse about the online shaming of a teenage girl. During astronomy-lover Frankie's first sexual experience with the quiet and lovely Benjamin, she gets her period. It's only blood, they agree. But soon a graphic meme goes viral, turning an innocent, intimate afternoon into something disgusting, mortifying and damaging. As the online shaming takes on a horrifying life of its own, Frankie begins to wonder: is her real life over? *Blood Moon* is a punchy, vivid and funny story of first-time love, hormone-fuelled sexuality and intense female friendships — whilst addressing, head-on, the ongoing exploitation of young girls online and the horror of going viral. Both shocking and uplifting, it cuts to the heart of what it is to be a teenager today and shows the power of friendship to find joy in even the darkest skies.

"*Blood Moon* is one of the best YA debuts I've read in years. Moving, compelling and bold, it filled me with such hope. It's a very special book."
— Louise O'Neill

"With every verse of her debut, Cuthew shouts down the shame, chips away at the period taboo, and firmly establishes herself as a bold and vital new voice in feminist literature."
— Samantha Shannon

"Written with humour and understanding, this is the book young people need."
— Sara Pascoe

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#BLOODMOON

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Discussion questions

1. Author Lucy Cuthew says *Type "Periods are" into your search engine and "disgusting" and "gross" are both in the top 5 results.* Did you find yourself uncomfortable reading *Blood Moon*? Why or why not? Why do you think period taboos still exist so prevalently in our society?

2. When she's bullied online, Frankie remembers advice from a teacher: "*CRI. Confront. Record. Inform.*" Frankie's response is: "*Who am I meant to* Confront? *I don't know the people piling in on me. Why would I* Record *it? It's already everywhere. And* Inform *who? Mrs Lovelie?*" (p232). Do you agree with the teacher's recommendation? Is there a right or wrong strategy to deal with this kind of abuse?

3. Frankie's torrent of abuse online only gets worse when she tries to defend herself. Did reading *Blood Moon* make you think any differently about online trolls and the language they use? Why do you think digital anonymity makes people say things online they probably wouldn't say to someone's face?

4. Discuss how friendship dynamics are explored in *Blood Moon*. For example, Frankie and her friendship with Harriet and how it changes throughout the novel or the dynamics of their friendship group and how it affects Frankie.

5. Discuss your experience reading a verse novel. Did elements like the chapter titles and text positioning affect your reading? Why do you think Lucy Cuthew chose to write the novel in verse? How might the book be different if it was prose, and how might your reading experience have changed?

6. Frankie usually has a pretty close and mostly honest relationship with her parents. How does that compare to what we see in a lot of teen-focused pop culture?

7. What roles do social media and technology play in the novel? Are they portrayed in a positive or negative light, and how?

8. "*Still, I can't stop imagining all the boys this morning, laughing as Benjamin made our intimacy* something funny. *The thing is, it was funny. But it was funny between us.*" (p 186). How and why does Frankie's sexual experience with Benjamin change for her once it stops being private?

9. How did your opinion of Benjamin change throughout the novel? Were you glad Frankie and Benjamin got back together?

10. "For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction. *This is ours.*" (p 384). How did you feel about the ending of the novel? Did you find it satisfying? Why or why not?

Q&A with Lucy Cuthew

What led you to write *Blood Moon* in verse, and did you have any unexpected challenges or advantages to writing in that format?

I've always written poetry, and I wrote my teenage diaries as poems, so once I started writing *Blood Moon* in this style it came very easily. I'd read novels in verse before, including *One* by Sarah Crossan, which I loved. I was thinking about the music of language after a lecture from David Almond on my MA, and I could hear Frankie's voice with this particular rhythm in my head. Once I started to write it in this form, it felt right. I like how flexible a verse novel is – you can restructure it by moving poems around to change the shape. During edits, I did cut some words which transpired to be supporting a lot of other unexpected words for either rhyme or word play. That presented an interesting challenge! But English is so versatile that there is always another way of expressing what you're trying to say.

Close female friendships, and how they can both help and harm, are one of the cores of *Blood Moon*. Why was this a topic you wanted to cover?

In my life, female friendships have been, and still are, as important as any of the relationships I have. Female friends support, inspire, comfort, guide, counsel and champion one another. But of course female friendships are often complex and during adolescence can be intense. They are part of a time of life when we are finding out who we are, and who we want to be. During those years we are learning empathy, what we can forgive, how to communicate and how to be vulnerable and ask for help, and often those are skills girls practise with their closest friends.

Blood Moon faces all the period taboos head on. Why do you think these taboos are still so widespread and prevalent today? How might that be able to change?

To some degree period taboo is part of a much bigger picture of female objectification. When a woman's value comes from how sexually desirable she is (as it so often does), periods become undesirable and

thus a secretive thing to shield men from knowing about. Netflix's "Crazy Ex-Girlfriend" has a particularly clever song parodying a seduction called "Period Sex". Its genius is how it completely deconstructs the assumption that periods are incompatible with being sexy. Period taboo is also a vicious circle – something is taboo so you don't talk about it, increasing ignorance around it, increasing shame and thus compounding the taboo. We can help break the taboo by simply talking about periods. Education has a key role to play, but we can all do a little something – by talking about our own periods if we can, or not hiding period products, for example. Small things can make a big difference. There are of course huge cultural differences on this subject. Some religions hold periods to be dirty and require women to separate from their families during menses, not attend religious ceremonies and sometimes not cook or touch anything. But all around the world there are local movements to de-stigmatise periods. It's very heartening.

How did you come up with the character of Frankie? What do you think makes her similar or different to other YA protagonists?

I had the line: "I walk to school, the wind in my hair, I feel #NoFilter fit, I'm textbook, I've totally got it." And from there I found the basis of Frankie's character. She's confident and feels good about herself – a bold move for a teenage girl in our society – and one of her key frames of reference is a textbook – she's a nerd, and passionate about space. I always loved the arts when I was in school, like a lot of writers, but I wanted to show a girl who is into a STEM subject, and I was interested in how gender plays into that.

Why did you decide to write for young people, and how did you work to get Frankie's voice and dialogue to feel so genuine?

Adolescence is such an intense and emotionally formative time of life, full of discovery and heart-break, laughter and hope. It is incredibly rich and inspiring to write about. When I was imagining Frankie and Harriet's voices, I talked to teenagers and listened to them talk a lot. Friends let me chat to their kids, so I could hear what life is like in school at the moment,

and I listened on buses, trains, cafes. I wanted to understand what their social groups look like, how technology plays into their lives. And of course I drew on my own teenage years.

What do you hope readers take away from *Blood Moon*?

I'd love for girls to not feel ashamed of their periods – to know that they are normal and healthy. And for boys to understand that too. And maybe I hope to spread some of that activistic spirit which is so alive in young people – to challenge the status quo. I hate how so many schools still have sexist school uniform policies, for example. I also hoped to shed a light on how deeply it matters that we behave online as we would in life; what we say online is real, what we share has an impact, what we believe, laugh at, ignore – all of it matters as much as it does offline, if not more when we spend so much time in digital communities.

What are your top five favourite reads of all time?

We Were Liars by E. Lockhart
Never Let Me Go by Kazuo Ishiguro
Holes by Louis Sachar
Room by Emma Donoghue
Wide Sargasso Sea by Jean Rhys

What's up next for you?

I'm currently writing about early sexual relationships and how online porn, hook-up culture and gender roles play into the dating landscape for young adults. It's another verse novel and I'm having a lot of fun with it.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Blood Moon is Lucy Cuthew's debut novel. She has published over thirty children's books, including picture books, educational titles and non-fiction, and she regularly speaks on the subject of children's books for the BBC. She was a children's editor for over ten years, both in-house and freelance, and graduated from the MA in Writing for Young People at Bath Spa in 2019, with an exceptionally high distinction grade. Lucy likes TV written by funny women, science podcasts, mountains and croissants. She lives in Cardiff with her husband and young twins, and is currently working on a new YA verse novel about the impact of online pornography on young people.

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