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Episode 82: The Care and Keeping of You
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VALORIE LEE I was thinking the other day about how when I was growing up, we had sanitary napkins. We didn't have pads
SCHAEFER: that you pulled the adhesive off of and stuck in your panties. We had these crazy elastic belts that you'd pull the napkin tails through fore and aft. And they were the strangest thing.

PHOEBE JUDGE: Valorie Lee Schaefer was born in South Korea. When she was two years old, she was adopted by an American family. She grew up in rural Wisconsin in the 1960s and '70s. She says it was up to her to entertain herself. She describes her childhood as semi-feral.

One day when she was around five years old, she was playing in the hall closet. Inside, she found a package of sanitary napkins.

VALORIE LEE And I remember asking my mom, are these something that we should be putting on the dinner table with our
SCHAEFER: silverware? Because they were called napkins. And I think she was shocked by the question and just was like, no. She didn't tell me what they were. Instead there was a lot of-- I don't know, almost like it was taboo. We didn't talk about it.

PHOEBE JUDGE: Do you remember when you got your period?

VALORIE LEE I do. I was probably about 11. We had a day in school where the girls got pulled into a separate classroom to
SCHAEFER: watch a special film strip. And I know that my mom had to sign a permission slip for me to attend this special learning session. And I think it might have been even sponsored by Kotex or somebody like that. Because at the end of the film strip, we got this cool little take home package with all kinds of product samples in it.

So I had a little kit. I had my little elastic stretchy belt. I had my sanitary napkins. I think there were probably a couple of tampons in there. And this was an era of tampons that came with a cylinder cardboard applicator. I remember it being like the width of a paper towel core. I'm sure it wasn't that large, but it seemed like it. And it was certainly that dry.

And that's what I had as my starting kit. I paid attention to the film strip. I read all the literature in my little goodie bag. And that is how I navigated my first period.

PHOEBE JUDGE: So even when you got your period, you didn't talk to your mother about it.

VALORIE LEE I don't remember talking to my mother about it. This was 1971-ish. You just didn't talk to your mom about that.
SCHAEFER:

PHOEBE JUDGE: I'm Phoebe Judge, and *This is Love*.

Growing up, Valorie Schaefer checked out so many books from the library. She got special permission to get books from the adult section. Her favorite ones were about the occult and fashion. She got a subscription to *Vogue*. She imagined she was one of the only people in Fort Atkinson, Wisconsin, that had one.

In college, Valorie studied sociology. After she graduated, she thought about going to law school. For a while, she worked as a secretary for a lawyer. But then, in 1989, she saw an ad in the classified section of the newspaper.

VALORIE LEE And the ad was so glamorous and exotic sounding. It was like, Do you have experience working with offshore buyers? Do you have experience developing product? And I'm thinking to myself, no, not really. No, not really. But that sounds like a really cool job. And I applied for it.

And I went in for my interview. I can remember what I was wearing, which is so odd, because I can't remember what I ate for lunch last week. But I remember what I was wearing to the interview. I was wearing a bright red silk jacket, and I had my hair done up in a little bun with chopsticks. And I had a meeting with the human resources department, which at that point was one person, I think.

And then she said, well, I'd like to have you meet Pleasant. And she walked me down the hall, and I met Pleasant.

PHOEBE JUDGE: Pleasant was Pleasant Rowland, the creator of the American Girl dolls. The dolls were launched in 1986. Initially, there were three dolls-- Samantha, Molly, and Kirsten. The company was called Pleasant Company.

VALORIE LEE I walked out of the office thinking, wow, I probably am not going to get that job. I'm not really qualified for it. But
SCHAEFER: that was a really interesting meeting, and I loved meeting her.

PHOEBE JUDGE: But Valorie did get the job. Her first assignment was to buy accessories for the dolls.

VALORIE LEE So my first job there was to help source and secure vendors for all the little things that all of the dolls had.
SCHAEFER: Hankies, lunch kits, baskets, little pets.

PHOEBE JUDGE: You could buy beds for your doll from the catalog. You could also get a tiny radio that played music, and a hand-cranked ice cream machine that could make real ice cream.

VALORIE LEE And at the time I was purchasing that product, all of that product was being made by actual small artisan outfits
SCHAEFER: in the US. So Kirsten's pottery was being made by ceramicists in Cambridge, Wisconsin, and Samantha's hankies were being embroidered by ladies all over the US. And as the company grew and the demand for products grew, it really outstripped the ability of some of these smaller artisanal companies to keep up with the demands for quantity.

PHOEBE JUDGE: Since 1986, more than a dozen historical dolls have been added, including dolls from the 1990s.

PHOEBE JUDGE: Did you have a favorite American Girl?

VALORIE LEE What? I can't say that. I love them all equally. No, I think I probably-- when I started at Pleasant Company, we
SCHAEFER: had just the three original historic characters-- Kirsten, Molly, and Samantha. And I loved Molly, of course. She was--

PHOEBE JUDGE: Is she the one with the glasses?

VALORIE LEE She's the one with the glasses, totally. And then we introduced Felicity during the time that I was working.
SCHAEFER:

PHOEBE JUDGE: And she's the red-haired one.

VALORIE LEE She's the red-haired one from Williamsburg.
SCHAEFER:

PHOEBE JUDGE: When the company was about to release Felicity, Valorie spent months organizing the launch in Williamsburg, Virginia. She was eventually put in charge of the American Girl catalog.

VALORIE LEE And as part of my job, I was also the company's first copywriter since Pleasant. Pleasant wrote every word in that
SCHAEFER: catalog for many years, and I was the first person to take over that job from her.

PHOEBE JUDGE: Tell me a little bit about Pleasant.

VALORIE LEE At the time that I was hired at American Girl-- then Pleasant Company-- it was a time when a person like me with
SCHAEFER: a lousy BA in Sociology could get hired in to do a job that was probably frankly well beyond my skill set. And she was an incredible champion of, I think, especially young women who were ambitious and had some moxie. Who maybe had never done a job before, but she believed that we could. So she is somebody who to this day I think of as having been one of the most important mentors in my life.

PHOEBE JUDGE: In 1992, Pleasant Company also started publishing the *American Girl* Magazine. The first issue featured a new short story about Molly, the World War II era doll, and a paper doll you could cut out and dress up. It had articles about what it was like to have your parents run for a political office. And interviews with fourth and fifth graders about how they convinced their parents to let them pierce their ears.

Soon, the magazine started running an advice column.

VALORIE LEE And *American Girl* Magazine got bagfuls of letters from girls all over the country about all kinds of topics. One of
SCHAEFER: the most frequent things that girls wrote in about was with questions about their changing bodies. And they were always written in this private confessional tone. "I'm scared, I'm confused. Is there something wrong with me? I'm getting pimples. It's so embarrassing." I mean, I think "it's so embarrassing" was a really frequent comment that girls made.

And it became really clear I think to the editors of *American Girl* that there was a need for something that spoke to the kinds of questions girls of this age had and spoke to them in a way that was informative, certainly. But reassuring most of all..

PHOEBE JUDGE: As Pleasant Rowland and the editors saw how many girls were writing in with questions about things they felt like they couldn't talk to their parents about, Pleasant got an idea. A book. And she wanted Valorie to write it.

VALORIE LEE And it was really confusing to me. I had never written a book. I had never written anything longer than a catalog.
SCHAEFER: And so I had a meeting with Pleasant about it. And I think I may have even asked her the question, why me? It seemed an odd choice. And I'm sure the editorial team thought, why her?

But I just remember Pleasant saying to me in this no-nonsense way, she said, you are the only person who can write this book.

PHOEBE JUDGE: We'll be right back.

To write the book, Valorie Schaefer and the editors at American Girl worked with a pediatrician. And they interviewed kids with and without their parents.

VALORIE LEE What became clear to us is that every girl thinks that they're a freak of nature. That they are the only person who
SCHAEFER: is experiencing these kinds of changes, that they're the only person who has these fears. They feel alone. And they feel there's something wrong with them. Either their breasts are growing too quickly or they're growing too slowly. They've got pimples or they're wondering when they're going to get pimples. And what does it mean? What do you do to make them go away?

So I think what we really heard was how anxious girls were, how alone they felt. And we heard very much their need to be reassured that what is happening to them or what would be happening to them was absolutely normal.

PHOEBE JUDGE: I mean, do you remember hearing what these girls were saying and looking at the questions that were coming in to the magazine and thinking, it's so funny, because it's now decades later, decades later, and it's the same exact thing as I was worried about?

VALORIE LEE Yeah. And I think that tells you first of all that it's not always a question of whether the parents are well equipped
SCHAEFER: or on hand. It has as much as anything I think to do with the natural developmental age of that-- the developmental age of the child is to believe that you're unprepared, that you're not normal, that you are the only person having these kinds of thoughts and feelings. And that seems to transcend whatever style of parenting you had at home or where you lived, or even what time you grew up. And I mean, I think some of this is just natural human development.

PHOEBE JUDGE: What was the tone that you were trying to strike? I mean, did you want it to be the voice of your cool older friend or the voice of your mother? What--

VALORIE LEE We always said that the voice of the book should be your favorite aunt. And we were imagining that she was
SCHAEFER: maybe your mother's younger sister. Maybe not a lot younger. But because she wasn't your mother, you thought she was maybe just a little bit cooler. And you felt like you could talk to her privately, and that she would keep your confidence.

And I think that so that is the voice that we worked really hard to deliver to girls. And to be authoritative, but not like your pediatrician is or your teacher is. But somebody who you trust. A trusted adult. Your favorite aunt.

PHOEBE JUDGE: What was the hardest part of the book to write? What section?

VALORIE LEE The section that I think we spent the most time talking about was certainly the section about periods and about
SCHAEFER: what kind of information was age appropriate. And not only what was age appropriate from the standpoint of parents, but from what girls really wanted to know. I mean, I think it's really easy for adults to decide to dump a lot of information on kids.

Because we want to be an open book. We want to give them everything. We want to give them all the information we think we remember that we wanted. And the boundaries that we put in place for ourselves were that we're going to talk about reproductive organs, we're going to talk about reproduction. To the point that we can answer the questions girls have about their periods.

Why am I getting a period? When am I getting a period? Where am I going to be when I get my period? How will I manage my period? So to answer, those kinds of questions required a certain amount of discussion of reproductive organs. But it did not require a far-ranging discussion about sex or sexuality. In fact, I feel like the girls we talked to and heard from were a little bit like, la, la, la, la, la, la. Not ready for that. Don't want to go there yet.

PHOEBE JUDGE: But I would like to know what a tampon is.

VALORIE LEE I want to know what a tampon is. Where do I put that thing? Is it going to fall out? Is it going to hurt? Is everybody going to know I have my period? How am I going to know when to change? Basic care and keeping maintenance kinds of things. So that's the information that we really wanted to give them, especially in a book designed for girls seven and up at that time.

PHOEBE JUDGE: You know what I like? Is that there's these sections about getting your period and things. But it also seems so much to me to be of the appropriate age, because there's also a whole entire page devoted to what happens if you get gum stuck in your hair. It seems to capture this very special age, which is, you're not a real teenager yet. And you're not a little kid anymore, but you're both of these things.

VALORIE LEE That's right. And I think that straddling that line was a really important part of nailing the tone of the book and determining which content was really right for the book. And I think girls really wanted to know about growing pains in their legs. They wanted to know about, what if I chew my fingernails? How do I deal with braces? Braces are so embarrassing.

Those things were just as important to girls as, what size bra should I get? When am I going to get breasts, and what about my period? So I think the head to toe approach of the book gave equal weight to each of those sectors of the body. Girls wanted to know about underarm hair. They wanted to know about shaving their legs. They wanted to know about lice. I mean, all of these kinds of things.

And to be able to talk about all of those things in the same matter-of-fact, straightforward, informational way was very much a part of what we set out to do.

PHOEBE JUDGE: At the same time she was working on the book, Valorie found out she was pregnant.

VALORIE LEE I was an older mom. I got married when I was 35 and became pregnant with my first child when I was just under 40. So it was something that I very, very, very, very, very much wanted. And I was by myself in my office in downtown Madison when I suspected that I might be pregnant. And I took an at-home pregnancy test by myself in my office.

PHOEBE JUDGE: What did you think?

VALORIE LEE I thought--

SCHAEFER:

I think obviously I was excited and happy. But for me, I think as a person who was adopted, who was a transracial adoptee, a transnational adoptee, I had an extra special feeling that I was going to meet somebody and be connected to somebody who was biologically a part of me. And I think that's a really common feeling for adoptees to have, especially transracial adoptees.

So I might have had a little extra happiness, I think, about learning that I was going to meet a new person, a new family member.

PHOEBE JUDGE: But then, at around 22 weeks, Valorie started to have early contractions. She says her daughter was trying to come early.

VALORIE LEE And, I mean, she was trying to arrive with force. And so I went to the hospital. I was put on strict bed rest. I did
SCHAEFER: my bedrest at Saint Mary's Hospital in Madison flat on my back.

PHOEBE JUDGE: The doctors thought she had what they called an incompetent cervix. She had to stay in the hospital on bedrest for weeks.

VALORIE LEE It became my funny little home, you know. I worked there, I ate there, I slept there. I learned how to use the local
SCHAEFER: cab service to get magazines delivered to me. My husband Richard worked a demanding full-time job, and so I bedrested at Saint Mary's Hospital by day and had friends and family visit at night.

PHOEBE JUDGE: I mean, you were working on the book at the same time that you were pregnant.

VALORIE LEE I know. Isn't that funny? I mean, my changing body. Woo.

SCHAEFER:

[LAUGHS]

PHOEBE JUDGE: Were you thinking about that? I mean, do you think that it changed the way that you were writing the book, knowing that you were about to become a parent? That you may very well be having a daughter. I don't know if at that time you knew you'd be having a daughter.

VALORIE LEE I did. I did know I was going to be having a daughter. And I think ultimately myself and the editorial team at
SCHAEFER: American Girl felt like we were writing for a particular girl. And for each of us, it might have been a little bit different. I think I was certainly writing for my eight-year-old, nine-year-old self. But I think in the back of my mind, I also was thinking about a girl I might have someday.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

PHOEBE JUDGE: We'll be right back.

Valorie Schaefer gave birth in March of 1998. She named her daughter Maris. And then a few months later in September, the book she had been working on was finally published. It was called *The Care and Keeping of You*. The whole book is illustrated with cartoons demonstrating things. The book talks about what kinds of bras there are and how to find one that fits. What to do if you have bad breath and how to use deodorant.

It's divided into chapters. One for the head. Another for arms, belly, puberty, legs, and feelings. At the end of every chapter, there's an advice column, like in a magazine. In the puberty section, one letter reads, "I've had my period for a year now. My mom is here to talk to me about it. But I don't want to. I feel like I don't even want to grow up." The answer reads, "You sound lonely, scared, and uncomfortable. And that's too heavy a load for any girl to bear. It may be hard to imagine now, but talking it out with an adult who has been there, done that, will make you feel much better."

VALORIE LEE And at that time, most of the response was through letters, letters and cards that we got at American Girl. It
SCHAEFER: wasn't the kind of immediate feedback you get from a social media post now. We got lots of mail. And it wasn't universally well received. Certainly we got letters from people who felt we'd gone too far or who felt it wasn't appropriate for girls of that age and let us know that they would not be letting their child have access to the book.

Thank god for libraries. A lot of girls would not have had access to the book were it not for libraries.

PHOEBE JUDGE: Are there any letters you remember particularly?

VALORIE LEE I think some of the most memorable letters came from girls who didn't have mothers in their homes or from girls
SCHAEFER: who had single fathers as their primary caregiver. And those letters were really special to me, because those girls really, really, really, really needed that book. And sometimes we got letters from parents, too.

I remember particularly a letter from a dad saying that he was raising this girl by himself. And he knew these were things that needed to be talked about with her, but he didn't know how to do it. And he was so, so grateful that he had this book that he could leave on her bed and tiptoe out of the room and leave behind. I remember that letter particularly. And we had letters from girls whose parents were forbidding them from having the information in the book, but the girls had managed to get a copy of the book from a friend's home or from a library to peek at it in their school's library and let us know in their letters how much they appreciated having that information available to them. Those kind of letters had a special place in my heart, I think.

PHOEBE JUDGE: You had two daughters. When they got to be eight, nine years old, I mean, had they seen *The Care and Keeping of You*? I mean, were there just copies of it all over your house?

VALORIE LEE Yeah, for sure. I mean, it was on the bookshelves of our house. And like every other mom of my generation, I was
SCHAEFER: going to improve on what my mother had failed to do. And I was ready to have the talk. Let's have the talk anytime. Do you have any questions for me? Are you concerned about anything?

And just like a lot of other seven, eight, nine-year-old girls, they did not want to talk to me about it. No thanks. I think I remember my youngest daughter Raina saying, Mom, I have the book, OK? If I have any questions, I'll let you know.

PHOEBE JUDGE: Does Maris think it's funny that she and the book were both born at the same time?

VALORIE LEE Yeah. I don't know if she thinks it's funny, but I think that she has certainly seen, especially in these last few
SCHAEFER: years, that it's a book that lots of her friends grew up with, and that's a funny thing. Maris often talks about going to a summer camp where they were having the dreaded icebreaker where they go around the circle and ask you to tell everybody in the group something about you that everybody in the group wouldn't expect or know.

And they got to Maris, and she was stunned and didn't know what to say. And she blurted out, my mom wrote the body book for girls. And she said she was very popular in camp that summer.

PHOEBE JUDGE: Are there any piece of advice from the book that you still think about today?

VALORIE LEE SCHAEFER: There's a line in the book that talks about, you don't necessarily need to shave above the knee, because that's a lot of leg to shave. And I don't know, some of those kinds of things stick with me because they were instances of the book where we were able to give a little piece of advice that was funny and wasn't necessarily straight facts, but an opinion. You can shave up there if you want to. But you know what? If you don't want to shave up there, that's OK, too.

And I think that it's funny that some of those kinds of things really stuck with women that I talk to now in their 20s that say, oh yeah, I remember that section about you don't have to shave above the knee. And to this day, I don't shave above the knee. I'm like, hey, all right.

[LAUGHS]

PHOEBE JUDGE: Since it was published in 1998, *The Care and Keeping of You* has sold over five million copies. Parents are still buying it for their kids today. An updated edition has just been released.

PHOEBE JUDGE: If you could have a book for you about growing older in the same way that *Care and Keeping of You* was for girls, what would you want it to cover?

VALORIE LEE SCHAEFER: It's so funny that you ask me that because it's the most frequent request I get from women who grew up with the book. When are you going to write a book about perimenopause? And I think it's really funny, but every age and stage of life you move through, you have questions. The questions are the same. What's going to happen? What's normal? Why do I feel this way?

So I think there are certainly lots of books out there about menopause. I often wish there were a book that is as slim a volume, as straightforward, and as warm and reassuring for women of my age as *The Care and Keeping of You* has been for girls. Answering the same fundamental questions. You're normal. This happens. You're not a freak, and you're not alone.

PHOEBE JUDGE: *This is Love* is created by Lauren Spohrer and me. Nadia Wilson is our senior producer. Katie Bishop is our supervising producer. Our producers are Susannah Roberson, Jackie Sojico, Lilly Clark, Lene Sillesen, and Megan Cunnane. Our show is mixed and engineered by Veronica Simonetti.

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PHOEBE JUDGE: I hear you recently got braces.

VALORIE LEE SCHAEFER: I did. When I went to the orthodontist, I had the option of clear braces, behind the teeth braces. And I was like, hell no. Give me the full metal jacket. I mean, you know, let's rock a tin grin. If we're going to wear braces, let's wear braces. Let's go.