

ADOLESCENCE, LITERATURE AND CENSORSHIP: UNPACKING THE CONTROVERSY SURROUNDING JUDY BLUME

By Mallory Szymanski

For many, the mention of Judy Blume's name conjures up a specific adolescent memory or resonates with an experience in young adulthood. Ellen Barry of *The Boston Phoenix* calls Judy Blume the “woman who *invented* American adolescence.”¹ Blume is the author of more than twenty-three books, most of which are geared toward a youthful range of audiences from toddlers to teens. Since the publication of *Are You There, God? It's Me, Margaret.* in 1970, Blume has stood as both an observer and a voice for adolescent girls and boys. Despite vast praise and popularity, Blume has received harsh criticism for addressing subject matters such as sex, masturbation, menstruation, death, puberty and religion in her youth novels. The American Library Association named Blume's novel *Forever*, published in 1975, the second “most challenged” book of 2005 due to its “sexual content and offensive language.”² A clear distinction emerges between those who love and admire Blume's work and those who are disgusted and offended by it.

On the surface, novels such as *Forever*, *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret.*, and *Deenie* seem harmless coming of age tales. They involve realistic characters, straightforward plotlines and lots of candid dialogue. What is it about these books—especially the ones involving and geared toward adolescents—that is so threatening to many people? What makes them so appealing to young readers, despite the negative controversy surrounding them? An analysis of two of the five Blume novels that appear on the “100 Most Frequently Challenged Books of 1990-2000:” *Deenie* and *Are You There God? It's Me Margaret.*³ aims to provide answers to these questions. These novels target primarily female adolescent and teen audiences and discuss topics such as masturbation, puberty and sex. While the selections in these books that make them controversial may be easy to locate, the reasons they appeal so much to young readers is more difficult to discern. The themes in these novels, like many other of Blume's less controversial books, speak to perhaps an even greater issue for adolescents and teens than sex and puberty: fitting in. Blume's characters grapple with questions like: Am I normal? Is anyone else going through what I am? What do I make of all this? These questions pertain not only to sex and puberty, but simply to getting through each day and making sense of growing up. I will argue that it is Blume's frank approach to these questions that have made her novels successful and appealing to young readers for over thirty years. However, this approach is also the cause of fierce opposition to Blume's work. What is so controversial about normalcy and growing up?

A website geared for parents provides five guidelines for evaluating whether or not a book in their

¹ Ellen Barry, “Judy Blume for President,” *The Boston Phoenix*, (1998). www.bostonphoenix.com/archive/features/98/05/21/JUDY_BLUME.html. Emphasis added.

² Lara Clark, “American Library Association announces author Judy Blume ranks as second most censored author of past 15 years,” American Library Association (Chicago, 2004), <http://www.ala.org/ala/pr2004/september2004/Judyblume.htm>. accessed 29 July 2007. The first most challenged book according to this list was *It's Perfectly Normal: Changing Bodies, Growing Up, Sex and Sexual Health* by Robie H. Harris due to its discussions of abortion, homosexuality, nudity and sex education. It was published in 1994.

³ “The 100 Most Frequently Challenged Books of 1990-2000,” American Library Association (2005). <http://www.ala.org/Template.cfm?Section=bbwlinks&Template=/ContentManagement/ContentDisplay.cfm&ContentID=85714>, accessed 29 July 2007.

child's school warrants challenging:

1. Age appropriateness
2. Good taste
3. What are the educational goals/objectives and does the book achieve them?
4. Is the book relevant to curriculum, standards of learning and programs of instruction?
5. Is this book necessary?⁴

These criteria are provided by Parents Against Bad Books In Schools, an organization that argues: "Yes, they [bad books] are corrupting your child. The schools and elected officials like the School Board should not have the power to violate your God-given, natural and constitutional rights as parents....More books with graphic sex and violence and other objectionable material are in the schools everyday."⁵

This group encourages parents to take an active role in rooting out the 'bad books' their children can access in schools. According to the American Library Association, parents challenge books more than any other group.⁶ By definition, a challenge differs from a ban in that it is an attempt to remove materials from a library or curriculum; a ban is the successful removal of the material.⁷ Blume's work has been victim of both. She stated: "I believe that censorship grows out of fear, and because fear is contagious, some parents are easily swayed. Book banning satisfies their need to feel in control of their children's lives."⁸ Five of Blume's novels are listed on the "100 Most Frequently Challenged Books of 1990-2000."⁹ In 2004, the American Library Association labeled Blume the second most censored author in the past 15 years.¹⁰ Critics refer to Blume as "amoral" and "subversive."¹¹

Both *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret.* and *Deenie* exemplify some of the themes (some controversial, others not) that Judy Blume addresses in her novels. They demonstrate the struggles of adolescent teen girls' lives and are written based on many of Blume's own experiences growing up.

Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret. begins with Margaret's silent conversation with God. From the onset, Blume invites the reader to enter into Margaret's innermost thoughts. Margaret, about to enter the sixth grade, moves with her family to a new town where she must enter a different school and establish new friends. She meets three other girls her age and quickly befriends them. The plotline includes anecdotes about making friends, crushing on boys and going to school, but the focus of the novel occurs in two parallel themes: religion and puberty. While some have challenged Blume's representation of religion to be inappropriate, the subject of Margaret's (and her friends') puberty caused the majority of the con-

⁴ *Parents Against Bad Books In Schools*, "Controversial and challenged books," <http://www.pabbis.com>, accessed 29 July, 2007

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ "Challenged and Banned Books," *American Library Association* (Chicago, 2006). <http://www.ala.org/ala/oif/banned-booksweek/challengedbanned/challengedbanned.htm#wcb>, accessed 29 July 2007.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Judy Blume, "Judy Blume Talks About Censorship," *Judy Blume's Home Base* (2001). <http://www.judyblume.com/censors.html>, accessed 29 July 2007.

⁹ Blume's *Forever* appears at number eight, while Madonna's *Sex* book comes in at 18. The other four Blume novels rank at various points in the list.

¹⁰ Alvin Schwartz, author of the *Scary Stories* Series is the first.

¹¹ Cedric Cullingford, *Children's Literature and Its Effects: the formative years* (London: Cassell, 1998), 151.

trovery. Menstruation lies at the center of Margaret's world and her thoughts are monopolized by anxiety about when her period will come, how it will happen, and what it will feel like. Her new friends interrogate her on the first day of school: "Did you get [your period] yet?"¹² For Margaret's peers, menstruation marks a rite of passage from little girl to grown-up woman. Breast development (and a lack thereof) also occupies much of the girls' attention. Margaret prays to God regularly, asking Him to help her breasts grow and to quickly deliver a period. She begs: "let me be like everybody else."¹³ In one frantic prayer, Margaret tells God: "Gretchen, my friend, got her period. I'm so jealous, God....Nancy's sure she's going to get it soon, too. And if I'm last, I don't know what I'll do. Oh, please God. I just want to be normal."¹⁴

Margaret and her friends have unanswered questions and confusion about the physical changes they are experiencing. Yet Blume's frank discussion of these issues has received countless challenges and bans. Puberty is a common human experience, one that is not often publicly addressed but that happens to everyone. Literature that involves such a mundane subject matter is certainly not threatening and inappropriate. Few other stages in life are as universal as puberty. Of course, each experience is unique, but as Margaret and her friends exemplify, puberty is shrouded in secrecy, making it mysterious and ominous for them. The pressure on them to somehow 'will' their body into puberty consumes much of Margaret's thoughts and conversations with her friends. Blume places these issues at the forefront of *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret*. and invites young readers to relate to the characters she creates. Margaret obsesses about experiencing puberty normally and readers are able to engage in that struggle alongside her. The novel functions as a safe, honest form of communication to adolescents, letting them know that puberty is confusing and it is different for everyone, but that they are not alone.

In *Deenie*, the main character experiments with a different kind of bodily struggle. An otherwise average 13-year-old suburban girl, Deenie is diagnosed with scoliosis. When she fails to make the cheerleading squad, her gym teacher alerts Deenie's parents that her posture might need some correction. Deenie sees several doctors until the final diagnosis is made: her spine is curved in an S-shape and she will have to wear a brace from her neck to her waist for the next four years. She feels "like a freak"¹⁵ and does not want anyone to know she is wearing it. This news devastates Deenie and her mom. Deenie fears that her crush, Buddy Brader, won't like her anymore; her mother's dream of Deenie becoming a model must be put on hold. The plotline of the story centers around Deenie's coming to terms with her 'illness' and at the same time growing more accepting of her peers. She befriends a girl in class with a "disgusting rash all over her..."¹⁶ whom Deenie eventually recognizes as a human being, not a disease. While Blume makes a poignant (and stinging) point about disability and the fears children have of them, what makes *Deenie* controversial is the few scenes in which Deenie discusses masturbation. She says: "As soon as I got into bed I started touching myself. I have this special place and when I rub it I get a very nice feeling. I don't know what it's called or if anyone else has it, but when I have trouble falling asleep, touching my special place helps a lot."¹⁷

¹² Blume, *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret*. (New York: Bradbury Press, 1971), 31.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 101.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 100.

¹⁵ Blume, *Deenie* (New York: Bradbury Press, 1975), 97.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 34.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 56.

While it is clear Deenie doesn't entirely understand that what she is doing is masturbation, she still feels embarrassed. When the gym teacher offers to answer any anonymous questions students might have, including those about sex, Deenie submits one: "Do normal people touch their bodies before they go to sleep and is it alright to do that?"¹⁸ When the teacher reads the question aloud, one girl responds, saying that if boys touch themselves too much their bodies will grow deformed. This scares Deenie; she fears that her crooked spine may be the result of touching her special place. Luckily, the gym teacher clears up the misconception and assures the class that masturbation is harmless and normal. Near the end of the story, as Deenie masturbates in the bathtub, she admits she doesn't know much about sex and wishes she had some one to talk to.

Daily existence for Deenie is difficult. She must walk around wearing an obvious brace and oversized clothes that are both immediate declarations (in the world of a 13-year-old) that she is not normal. What is more, she wrestles with the ability to understand both her body and her special place. She knows that touching her body feels good, but she doesn't know why and wonders if anyone else has a special place, too. While the gym teacher's open discussion about masturbation relieves Deenie of some of her embarrassment, she still isn't comfortable about the subject and wishes some one would give her more information about it.

While few adolescents suffer from scoliosis, many have questions and curiosity about their body. Deenie is unable to find solid and reliable answers to her inquiries about masturbation from her gym teacher or her parents. As a result, she is inclined to believe the false information supplied by her peers. This situation resembles the lack of dialogue about these sensitive issues occurring between adults and youth, rendering young people uninformed and embarrassed about their bodies. Blume presents the issues of masturbation appropriately and responsibly—something parents and mentors should do as well. Challenging this book and removing it from library shelves only perpetuates their ignorance about their body by silencing what is for some, their only source of information about masturbation.

Despite the wealth of negative responses to Blume's novels, her books have sold 75 million copies worldwide and they have been translated into twenty different languages.¹⁹ She has won numerous awards, including the prestigious National Book Award in 2004.²⁰ Clearly, Blume's work is recognized as valuable and lasting. But it is not only the slew of awards that validates Blume against her harshest critics; rather, her solid, loyal, and vocal fan base defends her with love and admiration. To many, she is not just an author, but a role model, mentor and friend. A 34-year old fan commented, upon meeting Judy Blume: "For so many torturous years, she was the only person who UNDERSTOOD. She was the quintessential anthropologist covering puberty in America. She helped us know what was normal, okay, exciting."²¹ Others echo this type of fondness. Ellen Barry wrote of an interview with young women who, when asked about their feelings about Judy Blume, replied with "We must—we must—we must increase our bust!," a

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 83.

¹⁹ Blume, "The Official Bio," *Judy Blume Home Base* (2001), <http://judyblume.com/jb-bio.html>, accessed 29 July 2007.

²⁰ Young Adult Library Services Association, "1996 Margaret A. Edwards Award Winner," 1996. <http://www.ala.org/ala/yalsa/booklistsawards/margaretaedwards/maeprevious/1996awardwinner.htm>, accessed 29 July 2007.

²¹ Cathy Young, "Here's To You, Judy Blume!" (1998). <http://www.grouchy.com/blumemeeting.html>, accessed 29 July 2007. Capitalization in original.

memorable quote from *Are You There God? It's Me Margaret*.²² While it is often difficult to assess readers' responses to literature, many women have published their thoughts about Judy Blume. Many mention of the integral role that her books played in their own adolescent experiences. From such accounts, "there is a large body of evidence to the effect that Judy Blume is responsible for puberty as we know it."²³

Another valuable representation of Judy Blume's appreciative and adoring fan base is *Letters to Judy: What Your Kids Wish They Could Tell You* (1986). It is a compilation of letters from readers of all ages (although mostly those under age 18), thanking her for addressing topics such as sex, death, menstruation and divorce. Readers have also shared stories about how her books have helped them through adolescence and many ask her to continue writing about topics that address the difficulties of growing up. Some letters are from parents, expressing the ways in which Blume's books have helped open conversation with their children about difficult topics. The following is one example from a fifth grade girl that exemplifies the letters in the book:

Dear Judy,

I am in the fifth grade and developing. It is kind of embarrassing having people say things like, "Lorna stuffs." I don't really "stuff" but once word gets spread around you can't stop it. Many times I have been alerted for my period. I was embarrassed asking my mother if she thought I had it, so I asked my understanding sister what was in my underwear. She looked at it and said that it was just something called "discharge." I really don't know what that is but my sister said it is just part of growing up.

I have an interest in a boy in my class and he seems to have an interest in me. Hopefully it isn't because I'm growing (like last year). I am already 5'2" and wear a size 9 in women's shoes. I would like to know if you think I am a *normal* fifth grader. Please write back.

*Lorna, age, 10*²⁴

Many complicated issues are evident in letters like this one, such as lack of communication with parents, anxiety over menstruation and adjusting to changing body shape and size. But Lorna concludes with one overriding question: am I *normal*? Other children express similar uncertainty in their letters—the same uncertainty that Deenie and Margaret grapple with in Blume's novels. Children write to Judy Blume, asking for her advice, not because these subjects are taboo, but because these girls and boys are struggling to construct a space for self-identification while attempting to position themselves among their peers. Meanwhile, their bodies are acting strange, feeling different and looking awkward. Adolescence is a challenging time in a young person's life, but teachers and parents make it more difficult by failing to provide information and guidance to make the transition easier. Blume's novels promise insight into the minds of other young teenagers so that readers can almost hear Margaret's thoughts as they read about her stuffing her bra for the first time. Blume's characters may be fictional, but she writes them with a true adolescent voice as the narrator which gives them a fresh honesty that allows for frank discussion of sex, masturbation, periods, etc. Blume comments on Lorna's letter: "Kids want reassurance that they're normal. Every

²² Barry.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Blume, *Letters to Judy: What Your Kids Wish They Could Tell You* (New York: G.P. Putman's Sons, 1986), 153.

week they write asking if I think they're okay. They ask me to explain what their parents haven't ."²⁵

These letters to Judy provide evidence that not only are Blume's novels entertaining, but they function as a mode of education, especially about the things that young people can't find adequate answers to elsewhere. Why, then, do parents strongly oppose them? What is so dangerous about children finding a way to assess their 'normality'? Why are novels published in the 1970s both widely popular and feverishly challenged in the twenty-first century? Perhaps the change in cultural climate over the past 35 years has inspired the reactions, both in favor of and against Judy Blume. Newspapers in the early 1970s, such as the *New York Times* and *The Christian Science Monitor* approached the subject of book banning as something that has been around since the early days of printed books.²⁶ Yet several articles alluded to an attack on free speech looming in the near future. Diana Loercher of *The Christian Science Monitor* stated: "With shelffuls [sic] of new books on such controversial topics as sex education, the drug culture, black power, and feminism, schools are hard-pressed to select up-to-date classroom material that pleases everyone."²⁷ Journalists treated censorship as merely a threat from those who think "small and [carry] a big matchstick,"²⁸ but at the same time, winked at the possibility that change in social behavior and moral values may result in an increase of censorship in the future. By 1979 this premonition became reality. The *New York Times* published an article entitled "Wave of Censors Hits Schools" that listed J.D. Salinger, Anne Frank and Ernest Hemingway as challenged authors.²⁹

The tone in newspaper articles about book banning moved from concerned, in the 1970s to alarmed in the 1980s. In a 1981 *New York Times* article, Colin Campbell argues: "A censorial spirit is at work in the United States, and for the past year or so, it has focused more and more on books."³⁰ The number of challenges made to the American Library Association's Office of Intellectual Freedom jumped dramatically; in the early 1970s, approximately 100 challenges were made each year, in the late 1970s that number increased to 300 per year and in 1981, nearly 1000 challenges were reported.³¹ The "right to read" was under siege.³² Most often, vulgarity or sexuality was cited as the reason for challenging a book, but other controversial issues included unorthodox family structure, speculation about Christianity, unflattering depictions of authority, critiques of corporate business and radical political ideals.³³ Finally, in the early 1980s as the "junior novel" was increasingly considered valuable literature among academics,³⁴ Judy Blume's work began to appear on challenged lists. According to Jerome Smiley of *The English Journal*, Blume's *Blubber* was one of over 70 books banned between May 1983 and May 1984.³⁵ Despite the onslaught of

²⁵ Blume, *Letters*, 153.

²⁶ "Mirror of Opinion: Book Ban," *Christian Science Monitor*, 30 March 1976, 36.

²⁷ Diana Loercher, "Who should decide what children read in school?" *Christian Science Monitor*, 31 December 1975, 10.

²⁸ "Mirror of Opinion.", 36.

²⁹ Fred Hechinger, "Wave of Censors Hits Schools," *New York Times*, 8 May 1979, C1.

³⁰ Colin Campbell. "Book Banning In America," *New York Times*, 20 December 1981, A1.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Judith Krug, "Book Banning—Who Says it Can't Happen Here?" *NCJW Journal*, 5, 3 (December, 1975), 10.

³³ Campbell, A1.

³⁴ Robert C. Small Jr., "The Junior Novel and the Art of Literature," *The English Journal* 66, 7 (October, 1977), 56-59.

³⁵ Jerome Smiley, "Eight Graders Look at Book Burning," *The English Journal* 75, 3 (March, 1986), 54-57.

negativity surrounding controversial books, Blume's readership remained strong.³⁶ A 1982 survey of 3399 students revealed that one of the best books 4th through 6th graders read on their own time was *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret*.³⁷

Following a growing sense of alarm and emergency created around censorship and book banning, the mood of 1990s news reports reflected a sense of permanence in the censorship debate. *New York Times* articles entitled "The next front in the book wars"³⁸ and "Groups square off over issue of barring books at schools"³⁹ suggest that the issue of censorship had become a battle, with two sides in firm opposition. The number of books banned per year continued to increase throughout the 1990s,⁴⁰ but instead of addressing the subject with the level of shock evident in the 1980s, journalists seemed to accept it as a fixture of political debate. Issues of censorship had saturated the media so deeply in the 1980s, that by the 1990s censorship had become ordinary, average news. Also, emerging issues involving the internet and filtering software took the forefront, as technology advanced toward the end of the century.⁴¹ For instance, *The New York Times* reported in 1999 that the New York City Board of Education placed a filtering program on public schools' computer systems that prevented students from accessing websites that addressed categories of news or sex education. The program filtered websites based on censored key words; consequently, students who were conducting research on breast cancer, child labor or AIDS received a message stating "Access Denied." The article reported that I-Gear, the filtering program used in New York City was popular and used by many school systems throughout the country.⁴² By the 1990s, the threat of the licentious codex no longer made headlines; rather children's access to internet pornography and chat rooms seemed a greater concern.

However, in the American Library Association's most recent list of Banned and Challenged Books (from 2005), Judy Blume still ranks second on the list and no one seems worried. In the age of the Patriot Act and Homeland Security, when mass censorship has been mandated by the federal government, the banning of Judy Blume and other controversial novels is often overlooked in favor of larger, more pressing First Amendment issues. Nonetheless, Blume's frank discussion of masturbation, puberty and sex remain threatening enough that parents are still filing challenges to her novels. At the same time, young readers continue to devour Blume's work thus demonstrating that these issues and the question of 'normality' remain contemporary problems for adolescents--ones that outlast the recent shift towards cultural conservatism.

Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret. and *Deenie* both provide an arena for an honest discussion about adolescent issues. These novels present characters and problems that readers are able to relate to. Ultimately, these novels serve to assuage readers' fears about growing up. As they get to know Margaret

³⁶ Judith K. Redmond, "Young Adult Literature: Is there Life After Judy Blume?" *The English Journal* 71, 3 (March, 1982), 92-94.

³⁷ Don Gallo, "What Should Teachers Know about YA Lit for 2004?" *The English Journal* 73, 7 (November, 1984), 32.

³⁸ Stephen Bates, "The next front in the book wars." *New York Times*, 6 November 1999, 4A22.

³⁹ Catherine S. Manegold, "Groups square off over issue of barring books at schools," *New York Times*, September 1, 1994, A18.

⁴⁰ "Rights Group Reports Increase in Books Banned," *New York Times*, 31 August 1995, B13.

⁴¹ Amy Argetsinger, "Libraries Urged to Nip Internet in the Buff; Explicit Material Spurs Calls for Curbs; Opponents Cry Censorship," *The Washington Post*, 21 April 1997, B01.

⁴² Anemona Hartocollis, "Board Blocks Student Access to Web Sites," *New York Times*, 10 November 1999, B1.

and Deenie perhaps they can no longer feel alone, and after reading, might realize that their questions about their bodies are indeed normal. Instead of attacking Blume's work, parents and censors must begin to view her work as a positive initiation of a conversation about puberty, growing up and fitting in. Adolescents will continue to struggle with uncertainty about their body and it is only through talking about it and lessening the taboo around these issues that young people will begin not to be concerned about being normal, but about just being themselves.

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