

JUDY BLUME: Shining a Light for Young Readers

"It's an embarrassment of riches," Blume says about receiving both the 2013 NCTE/SLATE National Intellectual Freedom Award and the 2013 ALAN (Assembly on Literature for Adolescents of NCTE) Award.

"What I tell kids is 'If they take your books away, don't just sit there, do something!' And they do! They go before the school board and they make their points so much better than adults because they can tell why the book is so important to them."

—Judy Blume

Judy Blume has spent her career shining a light for young readers struggling with growing up, trying to figure out who they are, and wondering whether they are normal.

Her fans are legion; their devotion is epic.

But she has paid a price for her candor and for her straight talk. Blume's books, from *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret* to *Forever* are among the most frequently challenged in the United States.

Blume is an accidental traveler in the world of censorship. When her first book was challenged, she was stunned.

"In the beginning I was like, WHAT??!!" says Blume, who had long dreamed of getting published. "This is America, we don't ban books! We have freedom, freedom to read. I grew up in the public library. Books are good, not something to worry about."

But Blume, who has written 28 books over her 50-year career, took up the cause with gusto. "Sometimes you get involved with something you never dreamed about because it touches you personally," she says.

When Blume's book, *Are You There, God? It's Me, Margaret*, was first challenged she "felt so alone and a little bit scared," she said.

There was little organized resistance to book banning/censorship at that time, so she was basically on her own. But then Blume found the National Coalition Against Censorship (NCAC) and its founder, the late Leanne Katz.

"I met up with the NCAC and I realized I was not alone after all," said Blume. "It's like an abused kid who thinks they're the only one and so they don't tell anyone and they feel so alone. And finding out you're not alone and there is someone to guide you is such a relief."

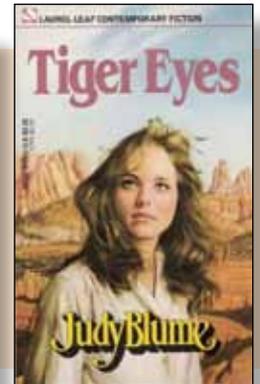
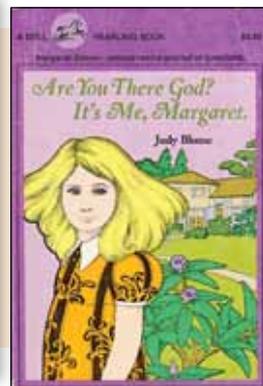
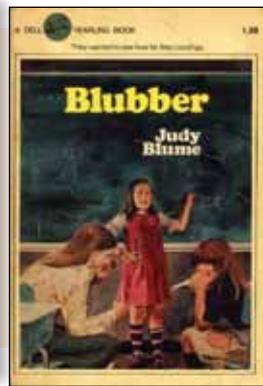
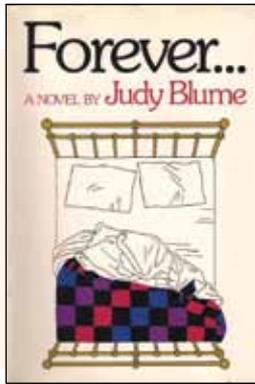
So instead of hiding in shame, Blume got mad.

"It makes me angry when people try to keep kids from reading books," she said. "I'm better when I'm mad than when I'm depressed."

As her books continued to be wildly popular, Blume was frequently interviewed. Over the years she appeared on numerous radio programs and talk shows, including Phil Donahue. Once she was in a makeup room getting ready to be interviewed by Mike Wallace. Over



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Five of Judy Blume's books are on the American Library Association's list of The 100 Most Frequently Challenged Books of 1990 to 1999: *Forever* (7), *Blubber* (30), *Deenie* (42), *Are You There, God? It's Me, Margaret* (60), and *Tiger Eyes* (89).

the intercom she heard Wallace say, "Okay guys, I have to talk to that little lady about the dirty books now."

"I didn't need to wear blush after that," says Blume, laughing.

Blume gave three copies of *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret* to her children's school library, but the principal banned them. Except for that instance, Blume had published numerous books before any of them was challenged. Even *Forever*, a novel about teen sexuality, was greeted without a peep. In the 1970s, some schools even used *Forever* to spark discussions about sexual responsibility, says Blume.

"How are young people supposed to make thoughtful decisions if they don't have information and no one is willing to talk with them?" Blume asks in a *Guardian* interview. (<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2005/jun/08/bookforchildrenandteenagers.sarahcrown>).

"Girls and boys have to learn to say 'no' or 'not without a condom' without fear. I hear from too many young people who give in because they're afraid if they don't, their partner will find someone else."

The '70s were a much more open and progressive time than the succeeding decades, she says. After Ronald Reagan won the 1980 presidential election, book challenges increased four-fold. Publishers were caught by surprise, so there was no help at first from that direction.

"It comes from fear," she says of the efforts to ban books. "And fear is contagious. You tell your neighbor, 'can you believe kids are reading this?' Next thing you know someone is marching the school halls, waving a book and calling it obscene."

Don't be afraid to stand your ground, says Blume, "because the students are the losers if teachers are afraid of causing controversy."

But Blume also recognizes these fights are bigger than a single book or a single classroom.

"You can't fight these battles on your own," says Blume. "It's always way, way better to have a group behind you."

People who challenge books want to do it in secret, says Blume. They don't want to see editorials about their actions. Blume encourages others to keep shining a light on these efforts at censorship, to chase away the shadows.

"Make noise, don't keep quiet," she says.

Blume continues to work with NCAC, and many of her publishers have "lent their heft" to the effort. Today NCAC also runs the Kids' Right to Read Project (KRRP—<http://www.ncac.org/Kids-Right-to-Read>) to help students fight censorship efforts. "Not a week goes by that I don't refer someone to NCAC's Kids' Right to Read Project," says Blume.

NCTE also has an Anti-Censorship Center to help fight book challenges, Blume notes. Since the Anti-Censorship Center became active in the mid-1990s, NCTE has worked with educators to solve from 30 to 100+ challenges a year—these to a wide variety of books, including Judy Blume's. And NCTE often joins KRRP to speak out when books are threatened in the schools.

It helps also that most, if not all, schools and libraries now have policies in place for book challenges. The key, Blume says, is to stay cool. Often it is not a parent or member of the school community who challenges a book. The person objecting to the book first has to fill out a form in writing.

The form allows the complainant to explain what it is they object to. Then a committee, "hopefully a very good committee of teachers, librarians, and principals" will look at it.

Almost without exception, challenges are raised against the most popular books.

"It's not like they are reading every book," says Blume of the would-be censors. "It's more like 'if kids like this book, it must be bad.' Again, it's all about fear and not trusting kids."

Masturbation seems to be the activity that sets off would-be banners the most, notes Blume.

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“On one radio show with a call-in guest, there was a woman who said that my books told kids it was okay to masturbate and she tells her children it’s a sin,” she said. “It’s as if they think they are protecting their children, that if they don’t know about puberty, for example, that it won’t happen to them. But kids are great that way, they’ll figure things out,” whether parents shield them from certain books or not.

“What I tell kids is ‘if they take your books away, don’t just sit there, do something!’” says Blume. “And they do! They go before the school board and they make their points so much better than adults because they can tell why the book is so important to them.”

Blume downplays her own anti-censorship efforts, but she lends a hand whenever she can. She recalls meeting some students last June in Chicago at a promotional stop for the movie of her book, *Tiger Eyes*, that she and her son made.

“They were defending *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* and were making 30-second videos of different people talking about the book and censorship,” Blume remembers.

Would Blume consent to being interviewed? Of course she would!

“This was their idea, they presented it to the school board,” she says. And the book stayed, though with some conditions.

Censorship and book banning may appear to loom large in Blume’s life, but she never writes about a topic worrying about or thinking about censorship.

“I always say you can’t write with a censor or a critic on your shoulder,” says Blume.

She also never starts out writing about a topic. She always starts with a character. “I don’t know what they might or might not do. I’m just trying to tell the best story I can,” she says.

Blume is currently working on a story set in her hometown of Elizabeth, New Jersey, in the 1950s, an era she never thought she’d want to revisit. This book will be fairly autobiographical and perhaps not a children’s book. She is not sure yet.

In addition to not writing for censors or critics, Blume does not really think of her audience when she is writing. She doesn’t necessarily know who will read her books, she just tells a story and hopes some readers will discover and cherish it.

And, she emphasizes, she has never written a YA book.

“YA books feature teenage characters and I haven’t written about teenagers except for *Forever* and *Tiger Eyes*,” she says.

Besides, Blume adds, “I don’t like categories and being categorized. I dislike telling people what they can and can’t read and what ages they should be and what grade level each book falls into.”

That doesn’t mean Blume is against YA books, just that she doesn’t write them.

“I am glad YA books are doing so well,” she says. “I’m glad bookstores and libraries have a section where teens can find the books they want to read. One hopes, whatever their interests, whatever their ages, young people will find books that will turn them into lifelong readers.”

She is extremely honored to be receiving both the NCTE/SLATE National Intellectual Freedom Award and the ALAN (Assembly on Literature for Adolescents of NCTE) Award at the NCTE Annual Convention in November.

“It’s an embarrassment of riches,” she says. “What’s especially exciting to me is that ReLeah Lent is giving me the [Intellectual Freedom] award.”

Lent was an award-winning English teacher who was removed as advisor to the high school newspaper in Panama City, Florida, when administrators decided the paper should promote a “more positive” image of the school. Blume had the honor of presenting Lent with the 1999 First Amendment Award from PEN and Newman’s Own.

Lent, together with Gloria Pipkin, whose award-winning language arts program was eviscerated thanks to a policy banning books that were “vulgar, obscene, or sexually related,” wrote a book titled *At the Schoolhouse Gate* about their experiences.

“These two are the kinds of teachers that we dream of our kids having, so committed and creative,” says Blume. “When their hands are tied and their programs taken away, it’s sadder than [when I], being a writer, have my books challenged and even banned. An adult working for the kids and with the kids, who is stripped of his or her ability to teach—that’s a much sadder tale.”

Deb Aronson is a freelance writer based in Urbana, Illinois.

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—**Judy Blume**

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Read “Defending the Right to Read: A Modern Tale” (*The Council Chronicle*, Sept 2011), featuring Releah Lent and Kim Jasper, at <http://bit.ly/1bHLx4v>.