

“I FEEL SO MUCH MORE THAN MY GENDER
AND I FEEL SO MUCH MORE THAN
MY RELATIONSHIP TO MY BODY
AND MY RELATIONSHIP TO MEN,
BUT SUDDENLY YOU’RE ASKED TO
BE AN EXPERT.” —LENA DUNHAM

“I DON’T NECESSARILY
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EVEN WHEN I LOVE IT.
I WANT TO KEEP THOSE THINGS INSIDE.”
—JUDY BLUME

THE **BELIEVER**

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JUDY BLUME AND LENA DUNHAM IN CONVERSATION

JUDY BLUME

— AND —

LENA DUNHAM

IN CONVERSATION

*Two cultural icons discuss writing, feminism,
censorship, sex, and a sixth-grade literary hoax.*



**JUDY BLUME AND
LENA DUNHAM
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**JUDY
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IN CONVERSATION

EDITED BY
Sheila Heti & Ross Simonini



BELIEVER BOOKS

a division of McSweeney's

BOOKS DISCUSSED: *Telex from Cuba*, Rachel Kushner; *The Flamethrowers*, Rachel Kushner; *Forever*, Judy Blume; *Lolita*, Vladimir Nabokov; *The Cat Ate My Gymsuit*, Paula Danziger; *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret*, Judy Blume; *Tiger Eyes*, Judy Blume; *Iggie's House*, Judy Blume; *The One in the Middle Is the Green Kangaroo*, Judy Blume; *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf; *Daily Rituals*, Mason Currey; *Deenie*, Judy Blume; *Places I Never Meant to Be: Original Stories by Censored Writers*, edited by Judy Blume; *Fifty Shades of Grey*, E. L. James; *The End of Alice*, A. M. Homes; the Bobbsey Twins series, Laura Lee Hope; the Boxcar Children series, Gertrude Chandler Warner; the Twilight series, Stephenie Meyer; the Hunger Games series, Suzanne Collins; the Betsy-Tacy series, Maud Hart Lovelace; the Nancy Drew series, Carolyn Keene; the Oz series, L. Frank Baum; *Summer Sisters*, Judy Blume; *Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing*, Judy Blume; the Eloise series, Kay Thompson; *The Love Affairs of Nathaniel P.*, Adelle Waldman

My mother gave me all of her childhood books: the *Bobbsey Twins*, *Nancy Drew*, the copy of *Daddy's Little Girl* that, legend has it, was marked with the tears my grandmother shed while reading this somewhat-maudlin tale of love and loss.

My mother had saved these books for me because she knew this essential truth: little girls love to read. They especially love to read books that feel like secrets, adult secrets, or perhaps their own secrets being quietly recited back to them. Hence, nine-year-old me stealing a copy of *Lolita* and finishing the whole thing despite having understood only scattered phrases.

When we, as young women, are given the space to read, the act becomes a happy, private corner we can return to for the rest of our lives. We develop this love of reading by turning to stories that speak to the most special, secret parts of us. And here comes *Judy Blume*.

As a child I went through many reading phases: Holocaust fiction, Victorian sagas, sci-fi (the result of a fascination with the futuristic architecture of the basement bookshop on St. Marks Place where my dad bought his paperback *Dune* novels). But *Judy Blume* was never a phase, because she had books that were just right for each of my selves: the fourth-grader trying to understand why I was so annoying to the people around me (the *Fudge* books);

the seventh-grader begging for breasts (Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret; Deenie); the teenager trying to understand the fervent, feverish love I felt for my friends (Summer Sisters). And there Judy Blume was, on the back page, smiling wide in a riding jacket with her signature cap of curls.

When I visit Blume in her Upper West Side home, that same face answers the door. Stunned by her familiarity, I follow her into a sunny living room filled with perfectly aged books and a husband who isn't aging so badly himself. Her view is something to aspire to. Our ensuing conversation is a reminder of so much: the hilarious misperceptions of the innocent, the transformative power of art, and why it's essential to eat a good breakfast.

—Lena Dunham

I. GET HIM A THUNDER SHIRT

LENA DUNHAM: You went to NYU and you grew up in the vicinity of New York.

JUDY BLUME: I grew up in Elizabeth, New Jersey, which I am writing about right now.

LD: Are you?

JB: Nineteen fifty-two. Elizabeth, New Jersey. If you had asked me, Did you ever want to go back? Would you ever want to relive that time?

LD: You would have said no.

JB: I would have said, Are you crazy? I hated the '50s. Bland, boring, everybody trying to be like everybody else, although inside you knew that you weren't. You knew you didn't really fit in, because you wouldn't have wanted to fit in, but you pretended. My best friend from seventh grade lives right around the corner, and we're still best friends.

LD: Did she have a similar experience to you of growing up? Have you guys delved into it together?

JB: Oh sure. Hers was very different, but it was also hidden, you know. Nobody ever told anybody the truth.

LD: What do you think made you want to write about your childhood now?

JB: It's not my childhood. It's a series of events that happened in my hometown and it came to me all at once, in a burst, while I was listening to Rachel Kushner onstage, talking about her first novel, called *Telex from Cuba*.

LD: And her second novel...

JB: Yes, I read the second novel, too.

LD: So did I—*The Flamethrowers*. She's amazing.

JB: I loved the first novel. I really related to it. And she was in Key West at the annual Literary Seminar, the one we have every January. This was in 2009, and when she started to talk about her mother's experiences it was like a lightning strike. I'm phobic about lightning and thunder, so—

LD: So is my dog.

JB: Get him a Thunder Shirt.

LD: I did! And he loves it! Sometimes I put it on him when it's not even thundering, just because it seems to relax him in all situations.

JB: George [Cooper, Blume's husband] tried to get me one at the pet shop around the corner...

LD: To see if it would help you?

JB: Yes, but even though I'm a small woman, there are no Thunder Shirts big enough. I said, "Look!" and I got down on all fours and walked like a dog. I said, "I'm no bigger than a big dog."

LD: You're not bigger than a big dog.

JB: Like a hundred-pound-dog Thunder Shirt would fit me. The thing is, dogs don't understand that they're phobic.

LD: I think that the human equivalent of a Thunder Shirt is Klonopin.

JB: Oh, but I don't like to do that. I like to be in a closet.

LD: Really? If it's thundering, you'll get into a closet?

JB: I will. I have a thunder closet everywhere I live.

LD: That's so crazy.

JB: I know. I've tried really hard to not have this phobia anymore.

LD: But it doesn't go away?

JB: No. And they say if you lose one, you'll replace it with another.

LD: So it's like you're comfortable with the phobia you have and you don't need to switch it up?

JB: Well, at least it's seasonal.

LD: It's not constant. You can explain it to yourself.

JB: But you know what they're predicting for today?

LD: I knew that they were predicting rain, although I never, ever check the weather forecast in my entire life.

JB: I check hourly.

LD: Really?

JB: Not really. But for today it's severe thunderstorms possible until five o'clock with, a chance of a tornado. And I'm thinking, OK, I'm going to be sitting with Lena, so what we'll do is, we'll just go into the closet together—

LD: And keep talking! I can just bring my iPhone into the closet.

JB: Exactly! You know, I believe my phobia goes back to being really small, maybe two (although if I figure out why I have a phobia, then I shouldn't have it anymore), and my father would

sit me lovingly on top of the car for the big fireworks, Fourth of July.

LD: Which must have been terrifying as a kid.

JB: Yeah.

LD: I can't imagine. The thing that's so hard about being a kid, which forays nicely into my first question to you, is that you have no way to explain things to yourself. You don't have enough knowledge to explain things to yourself and so it makes it uniquely terrifying to be young. I didn't actually like being a child particularly, at all, although I had nice parents and a comfortable life, just because I was too confused and generating too many answers for myself, which just scared me more.

JB: But that's the thing—you're a creative person, an imaginative person, so we invent stuff that's usually worse than things really are.

LD: Than reality.

JB: But we were talking about Rachel Kushner, right? And so she was reading and this whole thing went off, like that [*snaps*], like, I've got this story, why haven't I ever told it? Maybe it was buried so deep because it's really scary, what happened. But the whole

thing came to me with characters, with plot, and that's something that's never happened.

LD: And is it a combination of your imagination, your experiences, and your research?

JB: Yes. Well, it's a novel, so the characters aren't real, the characters are invented, and what happens to the characters I make up, that's the fun part, but the reality of the events, that's something else. I can't imagine writing another novel without doing research. It's like your blankie, you know? It's there.

LD: Yeah, you have it to rely on. I met a friend before this who's writing a screenplay that's based on someone's life, and he was looking at a big biography of that person, highlighting things, and I thought, Oh my god, how incredible must that be. When you hit a wall you can return to that text, which is not an experience I've ever had before.

JB: Nor have I. But all my friends who write nonfiction, they all say the research is the fun part, and then you still have to sit down and write a book.

LD: Were you a good student?

JB: I was. I liked school.

LD: Cool. I was not, so it's hard for me to imagine... I'm intimidated by the prospect of research because of the fact that it feeds into all of my bad-student psychology.

JB: But you know what? I went to school and came out basically uneducated. Really, what were we learning? I don't even know. Most of what I do know I've learned since I graduated from college.

II. CRAZY, PASSIONATE, DISASTROUS SITUATIONS

LD: I just have to reiterate for the recording how thrilling it is to get to meet you and talk to you and how it's kind of impossible to overstate how much what you do has made it possible for me and so many women I admire to make their work. It's informed our perspective, and I wanted to tell you a brief anecdote, which is that I, like a lot of children, had a babysitter who was reading *Forever*. She was staying with us for the summer and reading it in her room. And I had read a lot of your other books, the ones that my parents deemed age-appropriate, and my parents are pretty liberal but they were just trying to look out for my innocence or whatever. But my babysitter had *Forever* and I said, "Well, I've read Judy Blume books, can I borrow that?" And she said, "No, this one's not appropriate for you," which obviously got me really worked up, so I took it from her.

JB: How old were you?

LD: I was eight. But I was a very precocious reader; I read a lot of things I didn't understand. Like I read *Lolita* when I was nine.

JB: But it didn't matter, because it went right over your head. That's why I tell parents not to worry.

LD: Exactly. I had no clue what anybody was talking about. I don't think any of the depictions of sex were more to me than just, like, an image of two people's arms rubbing together; I just had no clue. But I took *Forever* to the bathroom to read and then I heard my mom coming—we were at our country house—and so I stuck it under the toilet and went running out. I went back later to check for it and it was gone. I was freaked out. My babysitter came up to me and she said, "Did you take my copy of *Forever*? I saw it in the bathroom, under the toilet." And I told her that my cat had put it there, which at the time seemed like a really great excuse.

JB: *The Cat Ate My Gymsuit* by Paula Danziger. Did you read that?

LD: Totally! It's funny, I've generated and written down all these questions for you, but I'm so curious about everything you have to say that the conversation could take up anywhere.

JB: Anywhere. That's OK.

LD: So you've written for a range of ages, you've written for adults, it sounds like the novel you're writing now is an adult novel.

JB: Maybe.

LD: You've written for children and you've written for that crazy in-between place and I think your work for teenagers is the stuff that's resonated the most with me, even though I'm very attached to the younger characters you've created. I just want to know—

JB: When you say “teenagers,” what books do you mean? Because I think the books you're talking about are read by preteens.

LD: I think of *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret*.

JB: Right. Preteen, or what's called “tween” now.

LD: Because I guess it's about the preteen experience.

JB: It is, and they're all read by kids so young now.

LD: Do you consider any of your novels specifically for teens... Maybe *Tiger Eyes*?

JB: Certainly *Forever* would be published today as YA. There was no YA category then. They didn't know what to do with the book. And maybe *Tiger Eyes* would be a very young YA, but the others, the ones that I think meant something to you, they're what we call "middle-grade" books now.

LD: I think I read them probably when I was in fifth and sixth grade, and I considered myself to be above—whether this was true or not—I considered myself to be well in advance of my classmates, so I was reading elicited teenage property.

JB: Good.

LD: Which maybe was just satisfying for me. And I know, like, *Iggie's House*, for example, I read when I was in third grade, which was earlier on. And *Iggie's House* was your first book, right?

JB: My first for middle-graders, she said, rolling her eyes.

LD: Is it hard for you to read your old work? Do you ever do it?

JB: I do, not all of it, but the ones I like. Every now and then if I'm cleaning things out, I'll pull a book off a shelf, open it up, and say, "How did I know that? I don't know that anymore." Because when you're writing, you know, you're in that other place, you don't even know what you know.

LD: So I wanted to ask you what made you want to start writing for younger readers. What was the thing that first inspired you to speak to that audience?

JB: It's what I knew. It's what I remembered. I was in my twenties, but my experiences as an adult were limited. I identified more with kids than with the adults in my life. And I was desperate for a creative outlet. I wasn't happy following my mother's prescription for me. The '50s-mother prescription for the daughter is: you go to college to meet a husband, because if you don't find him in college, you're never going to find him.

LD: And then you have a better chance of being struck by lightning than of getting married. All of that.

JB: And so I married really young, although not as young as some. I was twenty-one.

LD: Which to me sounds like a baby.

JB: Yes, it's very young. What did I know? I knew nothing. I had finished my junior year at NYU and there I was, married. And then the next step is you have a baby, and you have another baby, and I liked babies, but I was missing something, that creative something.

LD: Had you always written? Had you always been a storyteller?

JB: A secret storyteller. I never shared; I never wrote them down; they were always rolling around inside my head. I remember being nine and having stories, great stories, very melodramatic stories.

LD: Did they take the form of characters for you? When you had these stories, were they people you created with sagas and characters whom you'd birthed?

JB: I think they were fed by what I was seeing at the movies, because in those days I went to the movies every week with my parents. Movies weren't rated then, so I went to see everything. There was nothing they had to worry about me seeing. They were character-driven stories, and I would come home and act out every part. So when I played and when my stories ran around in my head, they were melodramas and they did not feature kids.

LD: They featured adults in crazy, passionate, disastrous situations?

JB: Oh, yeah. I was a surgeon amputating the legs and arms of my paper dolls, and I had a little board with little tacks and I would tack them down to do this.

LD: So they would be restrained while you cut their legs off?

JB: Yes, and then they were very grateful because I would reattach their limbs.

LD: You'd save their lives, basically.

JB: I would, yes.

LD: I was always really encouraged to write stories, which was a kind of part of the education that I had.

JB: You were lucky.

LD: I was really lucky. But looking back on the kinds of things I chose to write about, it was all families who gave up their daughter for adoption, then she became a pauper, then she came back to kill them all. It was all so heavy, so deeply heavy, and I called them all novels no matter how short they were. Always.

JB: That was great for you that you were encouraged. I mean, it wasn't that we were discouraged, but there was no creative writing in school at all. I don't remember any of that.

LD: So then when you felt it was finally time to write something down, what was the impetus for you making the leap from secret storyteller to public storyteller?

JB: I wanted to do something, but I didn't know what. I was reading my little children rhyming picture books at bedtime, so at night, when I was washing the after-dinner dishes, I'd make up rhyming stories. Imitation Dr. Seuss stories. They were really bad. I have some in a box right down there.

LD: Really?

JB: Yes, and it says on the box—it's a note to my kids—it says, "When I die, if you ever publish these I will come back and haunt you." They cannot be seen.

LD: It's really hard to rhyme. It's very special and particular; some of the most talented people in the world can't do it.

JB: Can you do it?

LD: No. I can't rhyme at all. My mom is an incredibly good rhymers.

JB: My father was a great rhymers.

LD: Really? It's a real skill and it's a different kind of skill than the one I think you've been developing in your career.

JB: I have not been developing rhyming skills.

LD: So then after, you wrote *Iggie's House* and it had this—

JB: Well, *Iggie's House* was my third published book, I think. Wasn't it? Maybe it was my second. The first one, you're going to make me say this, is *The One in the Middle Is the Green Kangaroo*. It was a picture storybook.

LD: Which I'm not familiar with.

JB: Just as well. That was the first one that was published and then maybe, yes, then I guess it was *Iggie's House* and then it was *Margaret*.

LD: Did it suddenly just feel like your life had changed and you were a writer and that was what you would do from now on? Was it hard to make the transition from mother to working woman?

JB: I didn't know I was really a writer until I read a review of *Margaret* in the *New York Times*, then I thought, Oh my god, maybe I can really do this. Charles Strauss, who wrote the music for *Annie* and *Bye Bye Birdie*, said almost the same thing. "I never know if anything is good until I read that somebody says it is, and then I think, Oh, maybe this is good."

LD: And you related to that?

JB: I did, because I didn't know what I was doing. It can be good, when you don't know what you're doing and it's spontaneous and you're not afraid. You don't know enough to be afraid. You can be fearless.

LD: Well, it's an exhilarating feeling.

JB: Like you—I hope you'll be fearless forever. I was a fearful child and can sometimes be a fearful adult, but I'm still fearless in my writing, so I know there's that other person inside me.

LD: My boyfriend's a musician, and I think when he's onstage it's the only time when he's not worrying, so that's the reason he keeps doing it—because it gives him that sort of experience of weightlessness that I only get out of being deep into writing something or really lost in a moment on set. It's available to me in these select moments through my work.

JB: And isn't that great?

LD: It's the most wonderful thing that can happen.

JB: To me, too. When you ask, Did writing change my life? It totally changed my life. It gave me my life.

LD: Everything opened up.

JB: Although I was still a suburban woman living in New Jersey with a husband who had '50s expectations for me, and two little children. But I had this secret life where I was writing.

LD: It often takes a moment for the bravery you express in your work and your personal life to catch up with each other. Often one thing supersedes the other. I know that was my experience for sure. For a few years, at least, I didn't feel like my life matched the pleasure that I got from my work.

JB: But it's great that you've found that now, because you're young. And to find that now is just fabulous.

LD: It's amazing, and I'm sure there will be moments when I feel like I didn't, because it all comes in and out of focus.

III. A BLANK PAGE IS THE CRUELEST THING KNOWN TO HUMANITY

LD: This novel that's inspired by, I guess you'd call it a news story, was it a public event that happened?

JB: Yes, a series of events. I remember it. I was thirteen at the time.

LD: Are you allowed to tell us about it at all, or is it a secret right now?

JB: I don't think it's a great idea to talk about it yet.

LD: That makes so much sense, because you have to protect your experience of writing about it and keep your energy close to you.

JB: I've talked more about this book than any book I've ever written, the opposite of what I'd advise any writer to do. When George was writing his books, he liked talking about them with friends, and I would say, "Don't do that," because if you talk about it then you won't need to write it down.

LD: That's such an interesting perspective.

JB: I think it's true. I've talked too much about this novel.

LD: Maybe trying to work through your thoughts about it or understand why you need to write about it?

JB: No, it's because I'm excited. And frustrated, too. Because I want to focus on the book. I want to finish it. And life keeps getting in the way. I can't wait to get to Key West and into a routine.

LD: Do you have your office set up there?

JB: Yes, it's so beautiful.

LD: That's wonderful.

JB: I've always loved my own little office spaces, no matter what they were like, no matter how tiny they were.

LD: It's the Virginia Woolf *Room of One's Own* concept. It's really important.

JB: It is.

LD: Do you have a writing routine every day? Do you have a way that you structure your routine?

JB: I do. Do you?

LD: No. I wish I did.

JB: Oh, you don't?

LD: I write at all different times, I write in my bed, I write at the table; I need to get it together. Or maybe I don't?

JB: But it's working for you. Why change it if it's working?

LD: Because I feel admiration. I just read this book called *Daily Rituals*; it's super amazing. It outlines the rituals of artists and scientists and various productive people, and I am very turned on by people who eat lunch at the same time every day and get to look forward to those things. I feel like my body doesn't have a rhythm and therefore I am somehow not strong enough to do everything I need to do.

JB: I would not mess around with what you do right now.

LD: Really?

JB: No, because look at how productive you are.

LD: That's so nice to hear.

JB: So you're writing how many episodes of *Girls* at a time?

LD: Lots, twelve, and then working on a book. I just jam it in whenever it makes sense.

JB: I can't do that. First of all, I can only focus on one creative project at a time. I wish I could focus on two, because I really only write a couple of hours a day. Here's my schedule.

LD: OK, I'm so excited.

JB: [*Laughs*]

LD: I really am. This is the juice that we all want...

JB: I'm sorry it's not more exciting. I get up, I go for a power walk, two miles, wherever I am.

LD: Amazing.

JB: It's not really.

LD: It's a really healthy thing to do.

JB: It opens you up. It's a very good time for thinking.

LD: For thinking and focusing.

JB: And then I have my breakfast, which is my favorite meal of the day.

LD: What do you eat? Do you eat the same thing every day?

JB: Yes. Well, almost.

LD: Are we allowed to know what it is? I'm fascinated by people's breakfasts.

JB: Yes. I eat my cereal, which is currently Barbara's Original high fiber, with a sliced banana and blueberries—carefully washed blueberries—and skim milk and then maybe a piece of toast or a half a piece of toast and a cup of tea. That's a lot of breakfast.

LD: That sounds wonderful.

JB: And then I do my morning toilet. Now, here's the thing. That takes longer and longer, although I don't wear any makeup and I don't know why it takes longer. I have a theory. It's because I have a radio in the bathroom and I love to listen to NPR in the morning. In Key West, Diane Rehm comes on at 10 a.m. I have to fight the urge to listen to the whole show. Then I go to my office.

LD: Which is in your home?

JB: Yes, but in Key West it's in another little building.

LD: Oh, beautiful.

JB: Not very far away, just steps.

LD: But enough that there is some kind of separation between your home and your work space.

JB: Yes. I open the glass doors in front of my desk and it's like working in a garden.

LD: It sounds so nice.

JB: It is pretty great. It's my favorite place to work that I've ever had. I stay there until lunch. And on a first draft, lunch is earlier and earlier.

LD: I really understand.

JB: I hate first drafts.

LD: So much more fun when you have anything on the page.

JB: Anything.

LD: It's the greatest. Even, like, when I'm writing a script, just having the slug lines for the scenes makes me feel like it's possible, but a blank page is the cruelest thing known to humanity.

JB: And scary.

LD: Yeah.

JB: So I scribble in a notebook before I start, and I do a lot of scribbling during the whole process. My best ideas still come from scribbling.

LD: Do you scribble whole sentences and whole paragraphs?

JB: Sometimes.

LD: I hate my handwriting too much to feel good about any of the ideas that come out in that particular way.

JB: See, because you grew up at a time when computers ran the world. I started to write on my college typewriter, a little portable electric, so you didn't want to do twenty drafts because it meant typing and retyping. In those days it was five drafts, tops.

LD: Typing it over and over. I learned to type so early that I think I didn't cultivate my handwriting properly. It's a little schizophrenic; it's neither here nor there.

JB: I can't always read my handwriting.

LD: But looking at it doesn't make you want to vomit.

JB: No, that doesn't occur to me. Besides, that's my other phobia.

LD: Vomiting? OK, we don't even have to say it. We don't even have to talk about it.

JB: You can say it, and now that we have a vomit scene in every movie—I mean, what is it with vomit? I write vomit moments into most of my books, hoping that will kill the phobia.

LD: You just don't want to do it.

JB: I don't want to do it and I don't want to see it on the street. How did I have children, I don't know, but I did and they're fine. They're not afraid of lightning and thunder and they're not afraid of vomit. And now you know all my phobias.

LD: They're really good ones to have if you're going to have them, because they're not that existential. They're not that torturous and you can actually avoid them.

JB: It's not an everyday thing.

LD: That's the best.

JB: I got Norovirus a few years ago. That was—

LD: Horrible.

JB: Yes. I spent three days on the floor of my bathroom on a little rug with a pillow and a blankie. You don't want to get Norovirus.

LD: It must have been the worst. And also really spoke to your fears on deep levels.

JB: Ugh! Enough of that subject. Where were we before that?

LD: We were talking about your daily routine. So then you have lunch...

JB: Oh, my daily routine, right. Then I have lunch, yes. Do you want to know what lunch is?

LD: Yes, desperately.

JB: Lunch is the same every single day unless I go out to lunch, which I almost never do.

LD: Because it breaks up your whole day?

JB: It does.

LD: So what is lunch every day?

JB: A peeled mac apple.

LD: Yum.

JB: [*Laughs*] With cottage cheese and toast.

LD: That sounds wonderful.

JB: I used to be a cookie/cupcake-a-holic, but I don't do it anymore. I went cold turkey.

LD: Really? Do you feel better since you stopped?

JB: No.

LD: [*Laughs*]

JB: No, I did it for breast cancer, and the oncologist said to me, "Why?" And I said, "I don't know, I thought sugar is just not good." He said, "Go to Key West and have a cupcake." So if I pass Magnolia and I find myself [*lip-smacking sounds*] longing for a cupcake—

LD: You'll allow yourself to do it?

JB: Definitely.

LD: So then you go back to writing?

JB: Well, that depends on whether or not it's a first draft. In either case I'll read over what I wrote that morning and make notes for the next day. If it's late in the writing process I'm more likely to continue in the afternoon. Otherwise, after lunch is when I do everything else. I have two helpers who will gently nudge me to attend to mail, to hit the to-do list. You must get a ton of fan mail.

LD: You know, I get some and I've not figured out an answering philosophy yet. Do you answer everything?

JB: Everything gets an answer but it's not—

LD: Always from you.

JB: I do feel every child who writes needs to get a reply.

LD: Mine's a lot of weird guys in prison, so I don't need to answer them.

JB: Oh, no, you don't.

LD: Yeah, it's a different situation.

IV. TO MAKE BEING ALIVE EASIER

LD: So the thing that got us into talking about this was...

JB: Routine.

LD: Routine. The thing that got us into talking about routine had actually nothing to do with routine. I was wondering, because your books have got this—this is a sort of selfish question, too. I'm always trying to figure this out: your books have covered so many big issues, so many big cultural issues, whether you intended them to or not, and I wondered if you ever conceive something as, I would like to write about this subject: racism, puberty, bullying, or whether you conceive a character, you conceive a world, and then it happens to speak to that particularly sensual need for people to discuss that topic.

JB: I think you hit on it when you said, "You conceive a world." Because I don't really know exactly how it happens, but I don't like the idea that I would ever have thought, I'm going to write about racism or puberty or bullying. I know where some of the ideas came from. *Blubber* came from stories that my daughter told me when she came home from fifth grade. There was a kid in the class who was being bullied. We didn't even call it bullying then. It was like victimization in the classroom. The word *bully* was so out, was so not in use for all those years, and now it's back, big-time.

LD: It's a hugely discussed topic right now.

JB: It's huge. I don't know that you can ever really get rid of it—the way kids behave toward one another—but it's good to bring it out in the open.

LD: It is, and I think that as our country becomes more tolerant as a whole of certain things—hopefully becomes more tolerant—certain kinds of bullying will be passé and unacceptable and it will be taught in homes that it's not OK to make fun of a kid because he's gay or it's not OK to make fun of a girl because she's fat, but that we're living in a culture where so many people's parents supported those beliefs that there wasn't any infrastructure for children to understand right and wrong in those situations, if that makes sense.

JB: I hope you're right.

LD: That's my utopian dream.

JB: That's a good dream.

LD: So you never approach a book thinking, I need to bring this subject into the light? You approach a book from a character place and it happens to speak to the issue?

JB: I think so. It's different with each book. I don't really understand where ideas come from. I don't want to know. I mean, with *Margaret* I remembered so clearly. I had an incredible memory of my own childhood, and I thought, I'm going to write a book and I'm going to tell the truth, but it was just my truth, it was just what I knew to be true about sixth grade.

LD: And it happened to become this sort of bible for girls going through that experience, which must have been incredibly satisfying and also somewhat overwhelming, to be suddenly the voice assigned to young women developing breasts in the world.

JB: I guess I was writing about a universal experience without knowing it. I wasn't overwhelmed until later, after many books, when kids started writing expecting me to have all the answers for them.

LD: Feminism and issues surrounding being female always, but particularly right now at this complicated cultural moment—I guess every moment is a complicated cultural moment, but this is the one where I'm alive—it's a huge part of what's important to me, but it's not all that's important to me, and you must feel the same way. I feel so much more than my gender and I feel so much more than my relationship to my body and my relationship to men, but suddenly you're asked to be an expert.

JB: Oh my goodness, yes, you're the expert, right? Of a whole generation.

LD: And then there's this whole backlash of people who feel like you're not representing them accurately, and you want to say as elegantly you can, "I wasn't trying to represent you, I was just doing what I could do to make being alive easier for me."

JB: Yes.

LD: And if it helped anyone and it made them feel comforted in the process, then it's the greatest thing you can ask for.

JB: But there's no book or play or series or anything that speaks to everyone, because then it wouldn't speak to anyone. And that's what I say when people want to ban books from the library. If all you leave in the library are books that you think speak to everyone, what are you going to have? You'll have nothing. And when you spoke about having read *Lolita*, I mean, you got it just right. This is what I've been yapping about: let the kids read the books. If they have a question, they'll come to you. If they don't, they'll just read right over it. Carolyn Mackler, a YA writer, tells this great story about reading *Deenie*, who has a special place—

LD: I love *Deenie*.

JB: Thank you. And so Carolyn made up her own special place and it was right here [*points at her forearm*]. And she rubbed it and rubbed it and waited for the good feeling [*laughs*]. I love that story because it's so sweet. You know? She was, like, nine years old.

LD: That's so sweet. Like, I thought babies were made because a guy and a girl put their arms together and the sperm and egg met through the pores of their skin, and I remember telling that to my mom and she was like, "It doesn't *not* make sense." She was like, "It's scientific, it's not a stork, it has some bearing in reality, but it's not going to work."

JB: How old were you?

LD: Probably five? I learned about sex pretty early. I remember my friend Amanda DeLauro explained it to me when I was six.

JB: She told you how babies were made?

LD: She told me how babies were made. Then I went home and told my parents, "Oh my god, Amanda said this ridiculous thing, can you believe how stupid this is? She's insane." At which point they kind of looked at each other and went, "Well, actually, we've been meaning to tell you." And I couldn't believe it. I went into my room alone and I was just like, How can I even continue on this earth with this terrible, terrible knowledge?

V. A LITERARY HOAX

LD: What emotions did having books banned elicit for you?

JB: It didn't happen in the '70s, so I had a whole decade without an organized effort to ban my books. So when it happened big-time, following the presidential election of 1980, I felt completely alone, and that was scary and depressing until I discovered the National Coalition Against Censorship, and I was like [*gasps*], "I'm not alone! I'm not alone!"

LD: I just saw that you put together a collection of stories by authors that had been banned.

JB: *Places I Never Meant to Be: Original Stories by Censored Writers.*

LD: So it must have made you feel alone and angry, and did it make you feel sort of concerned about our cultural state as a whole?

JB: Yes, I thought it was crazy. Like really and truly.

LD: It's like a sci-fi novel.

JB: Really. My thoughts were: This is America, we don't ban books here! But of course I know a lot better now. And I wasn't the only one. Norma Klein was writing at the same time and her books

were being challenged and sometimes banned. So many of us. But when you say to me, No, you can't do this, I say, Oh yes, I can!

LD: I have the same problem. I have an authority problem.

JB: Is that what it is? It's like, You can't tell me what to do. Do not tell me what to do and do not tell me what I can't do.

LD: It's the worst. It's the worst, and I always get this feeling of, You don't know what you're dealing with.

JB: Because we can do it!

LD: That's the best. And so it didn't make you—of course it didn't make you want to shift the focus of your writing at all.

JB: No.

LD: How could it, because that would only happen if you were like... It's so crazy to me—this has just occurred to me, by the way—that we're living in a world where your books were ever banned and now *Fifty Shades of Grey* is being read in high schools. It's just a wild—

JB: That's being challenged, too, I'm sure. I haven't read it. Have you read it?

LD: No, I haven't read it, and I felt like maybe I should. It's like I don't have an elicited, confused relationship to my sexuality, so I don't need a book like that right now in my life, and I don't need to be—from what I hear, it's not a way I need to be turned on or a hole that needs to be filled in me, and I don't think it would be that exciting to me. I also like to read good books and I don't have enough time to do it, so it's hard for me to imagine willingly submitting myself to a trilogy that I've been told is at the fourth-grade reading level. I wish that author all the success in the world, but it's just not for me.

JB: I have no interest in it, either, which is interesting, because when I was twelve, and I was going through my parents' bookshelves, I found the most wonderful books, by the best writers, and within those wonderful books were scenes that were real turn-ons.

LD: Oh my god, it was all I thought about. I had specific books I had that had pages I knew had sex on them that I would go and read. And a lot of them now that I look at, a lot of them were really perverse books. One of them was *The End of Alice* by A. M. Homes, which is about an adult pedophile, but I didn't get that. I just got the: Oh, people are touching each other, like it wasn't connecting for me in that way. I'd be a lot more upset by reading *The End of Alice* now than I was as an eleven- or twelve-year-old. But YA fiction didn't exist when you began.

JB: It didn't exist when I was growing up, either.

LD: So then what was the media that connected for you when you were the age that you're writing about?

JB: Radio, early TV, movies, music, magazines, newspapers. And books. By twelve, I was in my parents' bookshelves. And this is something I've been saying a lot lately, but I'm going to say it anyway, which is that my parents gave me the gift of letting me know that reading is a good thing. My mother was afraid of everything, but she was never afraid that I was reading, or about what I was reading.

LD: She knew that there was no harm that could befall you from reading.

JB: It was something to celebrate. She was a reader. My father was a reader. They were proud of me for being a reader.

LD: And so you were pretty quickly reading adult novels.

JB: And finding whatever I found in them. It was exciting, it was the world of grown-ups. I was very interested in the world of grown-ups. But I wasn't just looking for hot scenes, I was reading great stories. O'Hara, Bellow, Salinger. Their books inspired me; they've stayed with me all these years.

LD: And as a kid, what was popular? What were the books people read at school? Was it the Bobbsey Twins and Boxcar Children?

JB: I never read the Bobbsey Twins or Boxcar Children, but—

LD: Both boring.

JB: My first favorite books were the ones in the Betsy-Tacy series. But they weren't popular in school. I didn't know anyone else who was reading them. I liked Nancy Drew, used my allowance to buy one every week at the Ritz Bookstore. In sixth grade I made up books to give book reports on.

LD: You invented them?

JB: I did.

LD: You would report on a book that had never existed?

JB: I did.

LD: Were you ever caught?

JB: Nope. I always got an A on those.

LD: That's incredible.

JB: I just wasn't interested in the kinds of books I thought I was meant to be reading. I wasn't that interested in stories about prairie girls or horse stories. I never read a horse book in my life, but I thought that's what my friends were reading and that's what I should be reading—Dobbin does this and Dobbin does that.

LD: That was the name of your series?

JB: It was about a horse named Dobbin, yes. I made up the characters and the theme and I stood up in front of the class and I gave my report.

LD: On the books you made up in your mind?

JB: Yes.

LD: That's a literary hoax, basically.

JB: I had never heard of a literary hoax then. Still, I knew it wasn't right. The thing is, I *was* reading. I was reading from the bookshelves at home, but how could I report on those books? I tell teachers now, when I tell this story, I say, "How about just once during the school year, give your students the chance to invent books? See what they come up with."

LD: Did you ever say in the book report that you didn't like it, that it wasn't good?

JB: I don't think so.

LD: That would be a whole other meta-layer.

JB: If somebody says the word *theme* to me now, I run, I go under the table. Don't ask me about themes!

LD: I have two dreams a week that I have to write a paper that I'm late with, or that I've gone back to high school and I have to do that in addition to my current job.

JB: The writing a paper that you're late with, that's mine, too!

LD: Is it really?

JB: That's my anxiety dream. I go to the library and all the books on my subject are out.

LD: That's exactly it, only my anxiety dream involves not being able to find any results on Google. [*Laughs*]

JB: Yes, that's so funny, different generations with the same anxiety dream. I love that.

LD: So then what has your reaction been to the intense YA trend that has grown and bubbled over the past fifteen years?

JB: I'm really happy for my friends who write YA. Maybe it's allowing them to earn a living and that's great. YA books are very hot. I have zero interest in—

LD: In reading them?

JB: No, in writing them.

LD: Do you have any interest in reading any of the huge blockbuster-y YA trilogies like *Twilight* or *The Hunger Games*?

JB: George and I drove up to Miami and back—that's about four hours each way—and we listened to an audiobook of the first *Hunger Games*. We were so into the story we couldn't wait to get in my car for the trip back. When we pulled into the carport we still hadn't finished, so we sat in the car until the end. That's high praise. I thought the movie was very good, too. I didn't read any of the others. I had no interest in reading *Twilight*, but I did see the first movie.

LD: So did I, but I sort of gave up after the moment that he told her to hang on to his back like a spider monkey.

JB: I don't remember that. I remember him swooshing into her bedroom at night.

LD: I've had, as an "adult," strong connections to certain—I'll say "adult" in quotes because I'm just getting there—but strong reactions to certain YA books I've read, but fantasy is not a particularly rich area for me. I don't know if you're interested in fantasy books.

JB: I'm not, either, although George and I both read all the Oz books as children and we always say that if our mothers had only kept those books we would be rich. But that's interesting: you like reality, I like reality, and I'm not into fantasy and I'm not into dystopian worlds.

LD: I'm into reality, and escapism for me can come in the form of someone else's reality.

JB: Yes, me too. Are you sure we're not related? I think we are.

LD: *[Laughs]* That was the feeling I always had about your books that I read and re-read. *Deenie* was a huge one for me, too, and I remember wishing I had a back brace. You were not trying to glorify scoliosis, but I just had a—

JB: Oh, it was so terrible, that brace. They don't use that brace anymore, the Milwaukee brace, but they use others.

LD: I've seen other people in braces and now I feel it's kind of a trope in comedy, the girl with the brace who's at the dance bobbing up and down but she can't move because of her brace, which must be the most painful thing in the world, but I remember at the time thinking if I had a brace everyone would feel so sorry for me.

JB: Buddy Brader would pin you against the wall and you'd be terrified he'd feel the brace, not you.

LD: Exactly, exactly. So another question that I had was: you've written and are writing novels for adults, you've written novels for children, what can you do in an adult novel that you can't do in a book for younger readers, besides just speak frankly about sex? Is there a narrative approach that's different, or is it just about subject matter?

JB: Well, the process isn't any different, it's equally awful. For an older audience I like to use different viewpoints, to skip around, to experiment in a way I haven't done when writing for younger readers. This book that I'm writing now, it's interesting because in 1952 the main characters are fifteen and eighteen, so one might think, Oh, it's a YA book, but I don't think it is. I hate categories.

I think kids should read whatever they want to read, so I'm hoping that fifteen-year-olds who read and enjoyed *Summer Sisters* will read this one, too. It's too soon to say more now.

LD: *Summer Sisters* was actually—I was excited to tell you this—it was a huge influence on *Girls*, because it was the first thing I ever consumed that looked at the way female friendship can be glorious and can be complicated and a worse betrayal than something romantic. It showed these archetypes of femininity, then totally sort of individuated them and exploded them, and I wonder if that book was brooding in you for a long time or whether it was based on particular experiences you had based on female friendship.

JB: It's probably my least autobiographical book. The whole idea started when I was in my kayak—this is when we lived on Martha's Vineyard—and I was rowing around the pond, and I heard an explosion. I don't like sudden loud noises; they scare me.

LD: Who does? But you in particular, I think we've learned.

JB: Right, and then all these people came running down the hill and jumped into the water in their finery, including a bride and groom, and that's where it all started. I thought it would be a children's or even a YA book about two girls from very different

backgrounds who summer together. Then it just kept going and going and they kept getting older.

LD: And then when the lesbianism took root it was time to move it to an adult level?

JB: That's what you think it is?

LD: I don't think it's that at all. I don't think they're lesbians, I just mean there is sexual exploration that takes place between them. I think it's the complexity, I think it's like so many female friendships. It's impossible to put a title on what exists between those two characters.

JB: I wanted to include their sexual experiments. I played sex games with my friends when we were young.

LD: Me too, maybe when we were, like, five to seven. Once I was, like, seven I was like—

JB: No, we were older, we were twelve. So, you know, we could experience sexual feelings, though I don't think we had a clue what they were. I wanted Caitlin and Vix to do that, too.

LD: I loved it. I remember it made me feel better because so many of my friends at school were doing that stuff and doing

that on sleepovers, but I just didn't feel ready. It wasn't like I had any judgment of it being two women. It would have scared me as much if not more—

JB: But how did you know they were doing it?

LD: They did it in front of me.

JB: On sleepovers?

LD: On sleepovers.

JB: Oh no, we didn't do that.

LD: It was a communal thing of making out and touching each other. It was, like, a three-month period in which the word *sleepover* was code for: let's get together and touch each other's vaginas, and I was haunted. I remember going home and feeling like I couldn't tell my mother, even though she would have understood and probably laughed.

JB: Little-girl orgies.

LD: Little-girl orgies, yeah.

JB: Ours were so private and secret, oh my god.

LD: And probably unspoken of.

JB: Unspoken of, yes.

LD: I think about how comforting... *Summer Sisters* comforted me just because I was like, OK, the things I've seen with my eyes are not so terrible. And even though I knew adult gay people and had absolutely no issue with it, it was like somehow I just couldn't articulate what made me so uncomfortable about the space I shared with my friends becoming a sexual space, and it was very healing for me to read that and feel like it was a part of other friendships, even fictional friendships that I admired.

JB: But here's the thing: any book means different things to different readers, and I've heard from many lesbians who thank me for it, and they do consider it a lesbian story because Caitlin and Vix do love each other. When we tried to break it down for a movie, which we've never been able to do, Larry, my son, always says it's a love story. It's girl meets girl, girl loses girl, girl finds girl.

LD: No, it's beautiful, and I still remember distinct passages, and I probably haven't read it at this point in ten years, but I remember Vix pulling over in the car and having sex with Gus on the side of the road, I mean, things that were so...

JB: Did they do that? I don't remember.

LD: They do, and there's some crushed flowers in the car and she can smell the flowers.

JB: Oh, I do remember that! Yes, peonies or something.

LD: Yup, they were peonies. For some reason I got shy to say the word *peonies* even though I knew. It sounded too much like something else and I just couldn't take it.

JB: I like peonies, so of course they were peonies.

LD: But that book was so... I thought about it often as I wrote about these females characters who loved each other and hated each other and were sort of in love with each other.

JB: Well, yes, that's why we love your characters.

LD: That's the goal, that they would be as fully realized and take us on as much of a journey as that book did.

JB: See, I never got to live with friends as a young woman out of college. I was already married.

LD: You were already married and with children.

JB: I had Randy at twenty-three and Larry at twenty-five, so I never had that experience of being a young woman living on her own. It's just such an exciting idea for me. Maybe that's why I love your show so much. I get to live it vicariously.

VI. WHAT WE USED TO CALL HUMPING

LD: Were you scared the first time you wrote about sex? Did it scare you to do it or did it just—

JB: I wasn't scared, but working with my editor, a guy, was a bit uncomfortable when it came to *Forever*. My mother was a crack-erjack typist and she would come to my house to type the final manuscript before I sent it to my editor. It was nice for us, a way to share my work, a way to bond. But when it came time for *Forever* I did not let her do it.

LD: Really?

JB: No, I couldn't. My mother never talked about sex. Never told me anything. She'd just say, Be a good girl, Judy. Code words, I think, looking back. I was on the Dr. Ruth show once. This was years ago. It was the Mother's Day show, and I didn't know we were going to talk about female masturbation. My mother had invited all her friends over, women in their seventies, women from a generation who didn't talk about sex privately, let alone

publicly. And there I am on TV, talking with Dr. Ruth about female masturbation. None of them said anything, didn't want my mother to feel bad, and so they sat it out. Later, a daughter of one of those women told me they were horrified.

LD: It's scary to talk... My parents were open about sex and my dad makes paintings that have a sexual component and it still scares me to talk to my parents about it. Maybe not in the same way, but it's never comfortable to crack your mind open about that stuff in front of your parents.

JB: But you're getting naked: do they not watch?

LD: They both watch. I think my mom has virtually no reaction. It doesn't make my mom sheepish, maybe because we're of the same gender and my body doesn't feel alien to her. My dad definitely... he said something really smart at the beginning of the show, when he saw it. He said, "It just goes against nature to see your daughter in those situations, so even though I'm proud of you it's never going to be comfortable for me to watch you simulating sex with such a large guy." My dad once told me he would rather I had an old boyfriend than a tall boyfriend. I don't know why, I think he just feels stressed by... he's not that short, I just think the idea of a really tall guy is super anxiety-producing for him. And now I'm with neither an old guy nor a tall guy, so everything's worked out perfectly.

JB: I mean, I can see that would be difficult, but it sounds like they've done really well.

LD: They have. It would be hard if there was a shame component. There's no shame component. There's just a lightly embarrassed component, but they're supportive of my ability to do it in the world.

JB: Good, good.

LD: I get a lot of unasked-for sexual confessions. Have you got a lot of those in your day because of what you do and your books?

JB: They're probably different from yours, but yes, especially when everybody wrote by hand. Email is just not the same. Do you get this stuff by email?

LD: I get some papers—again, the letters from the men in prison come on paper—but I do occasionally... I don't really have a place where people can reach me via email, because it got a little overwhelming. People tweet things at me like “Oh, DM [direct message] me for a great story that you'll definitely need to use on the show,” which, I don't usually DM them.

JB: No, you don't want to do that. If they tell you their story and then you write anything they think is close, they'll accuse you of

stealing their idea. I never read unsolicited stories sent by people who say, “I have an idea and I want you to write this book.”

LD: But did children and adolescents say to you, I’m having this experience, I’m starting to dip my toe in the sexual waters? Do people respond to *Forever* like, Here’s how it went with my first boyfriend?

JB: Yes, sometimes. But not so much sexually explicit stuff. It’s more about their regrets at having done it. Especially girls who did it to keep a boyfriend. Their disappointments. One young man wrote to say he was thinking of killing himself when his girlfriend broke up with him, but *Forever* helped him see that life goes on.

LD: Well, that’s good. It’s better that way, it really is. Basically, my new litmus test for people is like, in the first ten minutes of us talking, do they make me hear about a blow job they gave? And if they didn’t, then I can feel... It’s not that I don’t want to hear about that stuff, I just don’t want to hear about it immediately. I want to hear about it on more-comfortable terms.

JB: We weren’t doing blow jobs when I was growing up. I mean, talk about changing sexual mores. It just didn’t go that way—not for me or my friends, at least not that I know of. We made out.

We didn't jump into intercourse. We were too afraid of getting pregnant.

LD: My mom said the term *heavy petting* existed a lot when she was in high school.

JB: Heavy petting: that was fun, that was good.

LD: [*Laughs*] That's the best.

JB: I frankly wish kids would go back to it. It's very satisfying and it's not as scary, and girls, so many girls, you know this—they are having intercourse, they're giving blow jobs, because their boyfriends are telling them, If you don't, I'll find someone who will. I want to ask, What are you getting out of this? Maybe a feeling of power.

LD: And maybe a feeling of acceptance. It's funny, because now we're talking about this big dialogue in our country about the idea of "slut shaming," which is a big conversation, and of course you don't want anybody to feel shame for their sexuality but you also want to make it clear that a loud and proud approach to your sexuality at a young age isn't necessary to be a fully integrated person.

JB: So slut shaming is when it's done online? They tell you online that you're a slut?

LD: That can be it, or it can also be... people are calling the dialogue around Miley Cyrus slut shaming, that everybody's attacking her.

JB: Yeah, that's ridiculous. Because she twerked, right? What is twerking? What we used to call humping?

LD: We called it grinding.

VII. COULDN'T THEY HAVE DONE SOMETHING WITH YOUR HAIR?

LD: You have the best view in New York. I won't reveal any details of your location, but your view is incredible.

JB: I think a lot of people have the same view, so it's OK.

LD: You can see a lot of the Central Park buildings.

JB: I used to have a great view of the river, because we lived on Riverside Drive. That was a gorgeous view, watching the boats go by.

LD: I have a terrible view and I've decided it's a plus. I've decided part of my integrity as a person comes from loving my terrible view, and you're really changing my tune on that with this great view.

JB: Where do you live?

LD: My parents live in TriBeCa and I live in Brooklyn. I live in Brooklyn Heights, which I love. So, you've written some of the funniest nerds and pains-in-the-asses that ever existed in literature, and I wondered who inspired you and what kind of child you were and whether you've written yourself, or whether you've written people you knew, or an amalgamation?

JB: Tell me who they are.

LD: Well, I loved Fudge.

JB: Oh, Fudge!

LD: He's a lunatic

JB: Yeah, he's a lunatic.

LD: In the best way.

JB: In the first book, *Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing*, he was based on Larry as a toddler, but then he took on his own life.

LD: Really?

JB: Larry used to eat under the table, called himself Frisky the Cat, and my friends would come in and say, “You’d better do something about that child,” or “What’s going to happen to him when he grows up?” I love to tell this story. I say, “Well, he’s grown up now and he eats at the table. He’s fine.”

LD: He eats at the table, he’s OK.

JB: He’s OK.

LD: And were you a trouble-making child or were you a good kid?

JB: Oh god, no, I was the good kid, I was Little Miss Perfect. That’s where all the secrets come in, because you know down deep you’re not perfect, but you think your parents want you to be, so you pretend. That’s not good. That’s a burden. I took on a lot of burdens as a kid. I was like Sally J. Freedman, taking on the burden of keeping my father safe, healthy, keeping him alive, that year that we were apart. You’re nine years old and you think it’s totally up to you to protect your father. I had my little rituals, I made bargains with God. But then we went back home and

we were all together again, and I guess I didn't need the rituals anymore.

LD: A lot of children have sort of obsessive-compulsive tendencies, because children have the tendency toward magical thinking. It was only when I turned thirteen that I understood, Oh, I don't have childlike whimsy, I have a mental disorder. Which is fine, I feel great about it, but I just remember there's a certain moment...

JB: Well, children do have magical thinking. It was tough later on, as a teen pretending to be the girl my mother wanted me to be. When she asked, "Were you the most popular girl at the dance?" or "Did you have the prettiest dress at the dance?"

LD: And did you feel you had to say yes?

JB: I felt like that was what she wanted. So I told her what she wanted to hear, knowing it wasn't true. That was hard.

LD: Do you feel like that was universally desired, or that your mother had a particular need to present a picture of perfection to the world around her?

JB: I think my mother had that need.

LD: I was just writing for my book about my grandmother's and mother's relationship, and my grandmother subtly but clearly stated in other ways, nonverbal ways, the need for her daughters to have perfect bodies and perfect hair and how much my mom has reacted against that in raising me and how grateful I am to have been the recipient of her rebellion.

JB: Oh, you're so lucky. My mother said, if I went on television or something, "Couldn't they have done something with your hair? Why didn't they do something with your hair?"

LD: They did do something with my hair. [*Laughs*]

JB: I felt that I could never really please her. And when she was dying, which happened quickly, in a week, we did have our moment on the hospital bed and she said, "You've been a wonderful daughter."

LD: Did that feel good to hear?

JB: It did.

LD: I can only imagine. Do you feel like you reacted against her ways in your approach to being a parent? Clearly, if you let Larry be a cat under the table.

JB: Larry is funny. Do you know Larry?

LD: I've never met him, but I've heard *Tiger Eyes* [the film adaptation of Judy's book, directed by Lawrence (Larry) Blume] is really great and I really want to see it.

JB: You can see it anytime, it's on pay-per-view.

LD: Is it on demand?

JB: It is.

LD: Were you happy with how it came out?

JB: Yes, very. I mean, it was a labor of love. We had no studio behind us, so we had no money for marketing or publicity.

LD: I love the actors who are in it. I love Amy Jo Johnson from *Felicity*.

JB: Yes, and Willa Holland. I don't know if you know her; she is fantastic. She can save you pages of dialogue because her face is so expressive—with one look you know what she's thinking and feeling. She's just a natural.

LD: Do you feel like your continuing engagement with the mind of children helped you be a parent?

JB: I'm not sure that identifying so strongly with kids makes for the best parent.

LD: You mean because it doesn't allow you to create boundaries or enforce rules? Just because it doesn't allow you to have that adult distance that you need?

JB: Maybe.

LD: I don't know anything about being a parent; my dog is completely insane and I'm not helping at all.

JB: It's different from having a dog, because it's forever, it's for the rest of your life. Larry got a dog when he was twenty-five and he said, "I'm going to be responsible for this dog until I'm forty-five." And that was a scary idea for him. Most people don't go into parenthood thinking about this. Maybe they should. Anyway, I just loved Larry's dog, Mookie. She became the doggie love of my life. Mookie taught me about loving a dog. Did you have a dog?

LD: I had one growing up. I had one starting when I was fifteen, and I love him, too, but then when I went to college I sort of emotionally separated myself from him. I almost had to get in a fight with him in order to be able to comfortably go to college.

JB: Same thing with a parent. The separation thing. Kids sometimes pick fights with their parents in order to go off to college. “I’m glad I’m leaving you!”

LD: Did you always feel particularly connected to your childhood self? I know, for me, I’ve always been someone who, through that period, the pains and anxieties of being young are the things that have really stuck with me, and that I think about more than anything else, and I think some people are really connected to who they were as children and some people aren’t. Did you always feel like that was the richest period of life for you?

JB: Yes. I am deeply connected to the child inside, and I do believe that people who write for children are deeply connected to their own childhoods. I mean, Maurice Sendak always said, “No, I didn’t have children, so how do I know about children? Because I was a child.”

LD: I’ve been working on a documentary that my friend’s directing, that I’m producing, about Hilary Knight, who illustrated *Eloise*. He’s amazing, but he didn’t have children, and his whole life has been rehashing his childhood, reliving his childhood, trying to enrich the childhoods of others. It’s just his mission; it’s just what matters to him.

JB: But I wouldn't want that to be my whole life. It's important to me to have a life outside of writing, a life with George, with my children and grandchildren, with friends, some of whom go back to elementary school.

LD: You have a love of people who—

JB: Who knew me before all of this stuff.

LD: That must be comforting. Complicated sometimes, but mostly comforting.

JB: It is.

LD: So many of the issues that are taboo for teenagers to talk about, you've covered in your work. So many of the issues for children... I know I keep stressing the word *teenagers*...

JB: That's OK.

LD: So many of the issues that are complex for young people and complex for parents to explain to young people, you've looked at. Do you feel like there are areas that are impossible to discuss in the lives of young people? Do feel like there are still taboos, even in writing?

JB: Taboos in writing? I've never really thought in terms of taboos. I think that books can help parents and kids talk together about difficult subjects. I've always felt that way: the parent reads the book, the kid reads the book, and then they can talk about the characters instead of talking about themselves. I think that's very helpful. I mean, that's what I did with my daughter. She was a reader, but she was very private, didn't want to talk about things, but we read the same books. That gave us a connection. And that connection is there even if you don't talk about it, when you've read the same books.

LD: You gain knowledge, you gain shared knowledge and then approach the world using the knowledge. I think that's why people find so much comfort in book clubs and why they're so popular.

JB: Isn't that interesting, all the book clubs? I've never belonged to one. Have you?

LD: No, but I thought about starting a novella club because it seemed less ambitious. I don't know if all my friends would have the opportunity to read the same novel, but if we all read novellas, maybe? But then we never started it.

JB: I don't necessarily want to talk about a book that I've read. Even when I love it. I want to keep those things inside.

LD: You want to ruminate on it privately.

JB: Exactly.

LD: I've just read this novel, *The Love Affairs of Nathaniel P.* I really love it.

JB: I'll have to read it.

LD: Adelle Waldman. It's having a really hot moment. Unlike many hot books, it's actually really wonderful. I tend to have that reaction of: I don't want to read it if everybody's reading it.

JB: I will read it.

LD: It's amazing. It was a really interesting insight into being young and male now that made me feel really thankful for my boyfriend, because he wasn't that protagonist, but I know so many people that are like that protagonist.

JB: So it's about being young and male and is written by a woman?

LD: But written by a woman and beautifully written by a woman. Everyone on my staff was reading it at the same time, and everyone wanted to talk about it. I was glad everyone was reading it, because I was glad it was being supported, but I was

enraged when people wanted to discuss it with me, which was probably evidence I would be bad at a book club.

JB: I don't think I would be good at a book club either. My daughter is the biggest reader I know. She can't read as much now, because she's working long hours, but she doesn't belong to a book club.

LD: It's almost like book clubs are maybe for people who need encouragement to read. They need to feel like they're doing it with other people. They need it to become social.

JB: And that's fine. I just don't like to talk about why the author did this or that. Because maybe the author never intended to answer certain questions, didn't have anything in mind except his/her characters and the story.

LD: Like teachers' guides.

JB: They can make me uncomfortable. Although I'll talk endlessly about movies, usually.

LD: I love talking about movies, I love talking about music, I love talking about breaking down the MTV Video Music Awards and the state of American pop culture forever.

JB: You know, we missed the MTV Video Music Awards this year. We didn't mean to, but we forgot.

LD: They were a real shit show.

JB: I heard.

LD: It was really intense, and that was where the twerking nightmare came from. It's amazing for me, just when I was researching you and looking back on everything of yours I've read for this interview, it was amazing for me to realize that—this is probably embarrassing or unnecessary for you to hear—but the breadth of what you've accomplished, and this is again a totally selfish question because I want to soak up all the knowledge that I can from you, but have you been able to enjoy all the success of the books?

JB: Yes. Every day. I feel so lucky.

LD: Good.

JB: Have you been able to enjoy the success of the show?

LD: Sometimes, mostly.

JB: I hope so. My success was such a surprise. Such an absolute shocking surprise to me, to find out that this thing that you're

sure you don't even know how to do speaks to so many people, touches so many people in some way.

LD: And it seems like you kind of can't stop doing it, you just keep doing it.

JB: Well, after *Summer Sisters* I said: I'm never going to do it again.

LD: Really?

JB: I thought it was going to kill me.

LD: Because it was so exhausting to write that book?

JB: It was so intense. Three years. I didn't know where I was going. I couldn't figure out what it was I was writing. I started using organized binders after that, because I had twenty drafts and they were all over the place and I could never put anything together. It was just really difficult. Before the book came out I begged George to buy it back from the publisher. Give them back their advance! Stop it from coming out!

LD: I don't want it!

JB: I don't want to go down this way. I've had a wonderful career. This is when you stop being fearless and you start being scared. That's dangerous. George is like the most easygoing person in the world. He said, "Just leave the country and when you come back it will be over." But they sent me on a big book tour, so I couldn't leave the country, and it turned out to be one of the best experiences of my life. I mean, it was Kleenex on every table at every signing, friends patting friends on the back, and when they cried, I cried. You just never know. It could just as easily have gone the other way.

LD: I just hope there would be some crying on my book tour.

JB: Laughing is just as good, maybe better. So tell me what you're writing.

LD: Oh, I mean...

JB: I was with my Random House publisher and I told her about this interview and she said, "You know, I'm pretty sure she's writing a book for us."

LD: I am, and it's been an amazing experience. I love my editor, his name is Andy Ward, he's amazing. It's a book of essays, like personal, I guess, memoir essays.

JB: But your grandmother and your mother are in it?

LD: My grandmother, my mother, my sister, my friends. I mean, it's really about a mix of topics—about doing this job, this weird, lucky situation I've been put in. Getting to meet people. You're actually in the book, because there's an illustrated compendium of all the females that have sort of formed my point of view. So I hope you like the drawing of you. My friend did it off pictures on the internet, so I hope it doesn't upset you.

JB: Does it have teeth?

LD: It does! It has a big smile. I was actually noticing that. I was looking at how in all your author pictures you always look very chic with a big smile.

JB: I'm not chic, but I do smile because I don't know what else to do with my mouth. And I have good teeth! You're an actor, you must know how to relax your mouth. I don't know how to do that.

LD: I just went to a fashion show and I felt like it wasn't OK to smile at the fashion show so I did something else and it looked really bad. I sort of like pouted.

JB: So tell me, when will the book be ready?

LD: It comes out on October 7, 2014, so I'm going to finish it in December and then spend the spring editing it and laying it out. My best friend from childhood has done illustrations for it because I want adult books to have more illustrations.

JB: When *Girls* is in editing, are you there, in the editing room?

LD: I'm in the editing room probably about two hours a day, otherwise I'm working on the book or thinking about working on the book.

JB: Editing is interesting. When people ask, What would you do if you weren't a writer—everybody always asks that. I don't know why but they do.

LD: It never even occurred to me to ask you that.

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LD: Well, thank you so much for answering these questions. It's a real honor.

JB: This was my honor and every bit as exciting for me. Maybe more. And I feel...

LD: I feel connected to you.

JB: I feel connected to you. We are connected. So let this be the beginning of our friendship.

LD: I can't wait. ☆



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JUDY BLUME spent her childhood in Elizabeth, New Jersey, making up stories inside her head. She has spent her adult years in many places, doing the same thing. Adults as well as children will recognize such Blume titles as *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret*; *Blubber*; *Just as Long as We're Together*; and the five-book series about the irrepressible Fudge. She has also written three novels for adults: *Summer Sisters*, *Smart Women*, and *Wifey*, all of them *New York Times* best sellers. She and her husband, George Cooper, live in Key West, a good place to write.

LENA DUNHAM is a writer, director, and actor who lives and works in Brooklyn. She directed the feature film *Tiny Furniture* and created the HBO series *Girls*. Her first book, *Not That Kind of Girl*, will be published by Random House in October 2014. Her passions include but are not limited to pop music, wallpaper, list-making, damaged dogs, and her parents' secrets.