

# 60 Second Interviews

with JJ Marsh

Each month, we persuade, tempt and coerce (or bully, harass and blackmail) two writers into spilling the contents of their shelves.

Twelve questions on books and writing. Plus the Joker – a wild thirteenth card which can reveal so much. Be honest, what do you put on YOUR chips?

Your intrepid reporter,  
Jill



## About Joseph

Joseph O'Connor was born in Dublin. He is the author of the novels *Cowboys and Indians* (short-listed for the Whitbread Prize), *Desperadoes*, *The Salesman*, *Inishowen*, *Star of the Sea* and *Redemption Falls*, as well as a number of bestselling works of non-fiction. He has also written film scripts and stage-plays including the award-winning *Red Roses and Petrol*. His novel *Star of the Sea* was an international bestseller, selling more than a million copies and being published in 38 languages. It won France's Prix Millepages, Italy's Premio Acerbi, the Irish Post Award for Fiction, the Neilsen Bookscan Golden Book Award, an American Library Association Award, the Hennessy / Sunday Tribune Hall of Fame Award, and the Prix Litteraire Zepher for European Novel of the Year.

He was recently voted 'Irish Writer of the Decade' by the readers of Hot Press magazine. He broadcasts a popular weekly radio diary on RTE's Drivetime With Mary Wilson and writes regularly for The Guardian Review and The Sunday Independent. In 2009 he was the Harman Visiting Professor of Creative Writing at Baruch College, the City University of New York. His most recent novel *Ghost Light* was published by Vintage in June 2010 to rave reviews internationally and spent nine weeks as a number one Irish bestseller. *Ghost Light* was also Dublin's 'One City One Book' novel for 2011.

<http://www.josephoconnorauthor.com/index.html>

## Joseph O'Connor

### Which was your favourite childhood book?

*Just William* by Richmal Crompton.

### Where do you write?

In an office at the end of my garden in Killiney, Dublin.

### Which was the book that changed your life?

*The Catcher in the Rye* by JD Salinger is the book that made me want to be a writer myself.

### What objects are on your desk, and why?

Apart from my computer and my notebooks, I have nothing on my desk. But above it is a photograph taken by my hero, the musician and writer Patti Smith, of Thomas Mann's typewriter. She gave me the picture when I was fortunate enough to meet her in New York in the winter of 2009, and I treasure it.

### Which book should every child read?

These days, something by Rick Riordan. My own children love his work.

### Do you have a word or phrase that you most overuse?

My father sometimes quotes an old Dublin saying, "Fuck the begrudgers", and I repeat it far too often.

### Is there a book you were supposed to love but didn't?

Alas, I have never been able to love any work that contains a hobbit.

### What have you learned from writing?

That it's hard.

### Which book do you wish you'd written?

My next novel.

### E-books – nemesis or genesis?

A little of both. Something in my soul shrivels every time I see someone reading a Kindle, but it's foolish not to accept that this is the future.

### How does your approach differ when writing fiction and non-fiction?

It doesn't. I try to tell a story.

### What are you working on at the moment?

A collection of short stories.

### What would be your winning Masterchef dish?

A packet of cigarettes and a glass of Merlot.



Photograph by Sigrid Estrada

## Judy Blume

### About Judy

By SA Jordan

Born in Elizabeth, New Jersey, Judy Blume is one of the biggest-selling children's authors of all time. She has written over 25 books, including three for adults, sold 80 million copies worldwide, and won over 90 literary awards. Her books have been translated into 31 different languages. Judy is a long time campaigner against censorship and works alongside The National Coalition Against Censorship protecting what she calls the freedom to read.

An established writer for over 40 years, Blume has not so much flirted with controversy as jumped into the back seat with it. An honest, refreshing and much-needed approach to taboo subjects such as; teenage sexuality *Forever* (1975), masturbation *Deenie* (1973), *Then Again Maybe I Won't* (1972) and the twin 'evils' of puberty and religion as featured in *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret* (1970) have propelled the 'Queen of Teen' to the top of the most-banned list of books in the US, time after time.

A multi-million, award-winning, controversial author, Judy is so much more than that. She doesn't just write for children, she understands them. Her talent for immersing herself in a child's world is untouched. She may be a mother to three, but judging by the millions of letters and emails she's received, she's a mother to the masses. Such was the size of her postbag, she published *Letters to Judy: What Kids Wish They Could Tell You* (1986), a mix of readers' letters and Judy's own experiences.

It's impossible to convey the influence she's had on her millions of loyal readers, or to say just how many authors felt the first stirrings to write and reached for a pen after reading her books. There is no measure for such things and no words to explain the outstanding writer and woman that is Judy Blume.

<http://www.judyblume.com>

### Which was your favourite childhood book?

*Madeline* by Ludwig Bemelmans

### Where do you write?

In Key West, where it's always summer, in a study that opens to a garden. On Martha's Vineyard, during July and August, in a tiny writing cabin with a view out to sea. I've written many books there. Am I lucky or what?

### Which was the book that changed your life?

Books changed my life, reading changed my life. Finding myself in fiction changed my life. Of the books I've written, *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret* changed my life and made me believe I might actually be a writer.

### What objects are on your desk, and why?

That changes on any given day. I'm messiest when I'm deeply involved with what I'm writing. Today, two purple loose leaf notebooks, one filled with research and notes for the book I'm writing; the second holding a first draft of the same book. Also, a paperweight; box of Kleenex; cup holding an assortment of pens, pencils, markers; scotch tape; stapler; scissors; land line telephone; iPhone; intercom to rest of house; To Do list; computer, several pads of Post-its. Printer on a side table.

### Which book should every child read?

That would be a different book for each child. The object is to find that book that's going to make a difference, that's so going to delight, intrigue, inform that it will make that child want to read, read, read, all his/her life.

### Do you have a word or phrase that you most overuse?

Actually, I'm not sure. Aha! That's it -- *actually*.

### Is there a book you were supposed to love but didn't?

I'm trying to come up with one but so far, no luck.

### What have you learned from writing?

Everything! That determination is as important as talent. Not to let anyone discourage you. To stand up for what you believe in. To be true to your characters.

### Which book do you wish you'd written?

Too many titles come to mind. I'm not good at choosing one of anything. I once grew so discouraged by reading a great book while I was trying to write, I couldn't write a word for three months.

### E-books - nemesis or genesis?

I'm a realist. E-books are here to stay. I accept that. I have an E-reader myself. But that doesn't mean I'm giving up on books as we know them. I love to see my favs sitting on my bookshelves. And I love bookshops. But if the object is to keep more people reading and buying books, I think E-books may help.

### You've fought long and hard against censorship. Are things getting better for writers, and readers?

It's all cyclical. Those who want to control what kids think/read will always come up with a new book to ban. What's better is more schools and libraries have policies in place. What's worse is groups who are gaining popularity with parents and teachers by rating books. We should all be asking, according to whose standards?

### What are you working on at the moment?

A novel - I think it will be YA but I can't be sure yet.

### What's your favourite smell?

Vanilla.

# What Judy Means To Me...

As a child, Judy led me by the hand through all those terrible firsts. As a writer, she gave me the courage to write in the present tense and perhaps the most important of all, as a mother she has given me the words to have all those awkward teenage conversations with my son.

*Helen G. Smith, writer, Scotland*

Judy's books are about believing in yourself, questioning life and not always accepting the status quo. In *Blubber* she starts chapter 10 with the words ..... "Not crazy, just different". This sums up my philosophy on life. One person's crazy is just another person's different. Different is good. Different is being who you are. In this world of Facebook and a thousand friends, Judy Blume lets kids know it is OK to be who they are. They don't need to pretend or be fake being something they are not.

*Alison Lopez, translator, Switzerland*

Judy Blume is the author who made me want to become a writer. As a child and teen reading her work, I felt that she was one of the only adults who truly understood me. Her characters, as real to me as my own friends, made me realize that I was not alone. As an adult, I admire the way she takes on topics that are difficult to talk about and writes about them in a way that creates a dialogue.

*Janet Skeslien Charles, author of Moonlight in Odessa, Paris*

I went from Enid Blyton to Judy Blume. What a transition! I grew up with Judy - her writing is clever, funny, insightful and filled with human warmth. She transformed my reading life.

*Sheila Bugler, writer, London*

Voraciously reading Judy Blume as a young boy was like being allowed into the secret world of the female and being privy to things that no girl would otherwise discuss with a rough and tumble young lad: periods, bras, bodily functions. It was illuminating and gave me an extra insight over non-reading contemporaries. More than anything though, it turned out that adolescent and teenage American girls weren't actually that different from young English boys: they still had much the same worries, concerns, anxieties and insecurities. Learning that at a young age was liberating. And learning it through fiction made me realise the power of writing: how a good story can be educational and entertaining, and hopefully transcend gender, race, age, nationality and era.

*Ben Myers, journalist and author of Richard, Yorkshire*

Judy Blume has an iconic place in the pantheon of writers for young people, and deservedly so. Her insights, her humanity, her ability to make characters leap off the page and into her readers' imaginations is extraordinary. As the former Publishing Director of Judy's British home, Macmillan, I was proud to play a part in bringing her novels to new generations of UK readers. Now, as an agent based in the USA, I've realized afresh just what she achieved in opening doors for young readers, sometimes against considerable odds - and what her work still means to countless Americans today who grew up enriched, entertained and imaginatively enlarged by her stories.

*Sarah Davies, Greenhouse Literary Agency, Washington DC*

When people ask me about the authors who inspired me to become a writer myself, I say John Steinbeck, John Cheever, John Updike, Dorothy Parker, J.D. Salinger, Truman Capote ... and Judy Blume. As a kid, her books consumed me like a fever. To this day, I can recall *Are You There God? It's Me Margaret*, *Then Again, Maybe I Won't* and *It's Not the End of the World* in their entirety. With their intimate, colloquial voices and their subject matter, they were like incredible older sisters and brothers - co-conspirators, really - offering frank, reassuring insights into myself, the adult world, and the process of growing up. Stories told so beautifully, with great humor, detail, and pacing. Judy Blume deserves a huge valentine from all children who came of age during her career. Certainly, she has place on my altar.

*Susan Jane Gilman, bestselling author of "Undress Me in the Temple of Heaven"*

# How I Didn't Get a Book Deal

by Lorraine Mace

Like many writers, I used to think that getting an agent was the Holy Grail. That once I had an agent everything else, such as a book deal and, who knows, maybe even movie rights, would swiftly follow. That might have been the case in the past, but in recent years it seems the industry has become much more cautious about giving book deals to debut authors - unless, of course, they already have a strong market presence.

This is the story of how I got an agent for my children's novel, received loads of positive feedback from many of the top publishing houses, but didn't get a book deal. As for the movie rights, the closest I've got to those is buying a ticket at the cinema.

My children's book is centred around a hupyre - half human, half vampire. Vlad, an eleven-year-old vegetarian, asthmatic, who can't turn into a bat and is scared of the dark, is despised by both humans and vampires alike, but by the end of the book, he finds courage, makes friends and saves the world (well, his particular corner of it, anyway).

I contacted a specialist children's agent who has had spectacular success with some of her authors. Following the instructions on her website, I sent an initial inquiry containing very little more than what is outlined in the paragraph above.

She answered by saying she received an average of ten enquiries per day and usually says her client list is full. However, she liked the sound of my manuscript and said she would love to see the opening chapters. Could I email them, please? Could I? You betcha. They went off almost before I'd finished reading her email.

So, at least I now knew I had a good concept. All that remained was to see whether she liked my writing. The answer to that question came by email two hours later. She said: "I don't usually print things off immediately and read but I looked at the first page and really liked it - so I read on. Could you email me the rest?"

Needless to say, this caused a massive celebration in the form of a daft dance around the house. Wow, how amazing was this? I could barely contain my excitement that night, but I soon learned how to because I didn't hear from her again for several weeks, and when I finally did, the news wasn't at all what I'd wanted to hear.

The rest of the book didn't live up to the promise of the early chapters - and she was kind enough to go into great detail about why the balance of the story hadn't worked for her. Although bitterly disappointed, I could see exactly what she meant. I asked if she'd look at a revised version and was thrilled when she said yes.

Over the next few weeks I rewrote - and then rewrote again and again. I had two beta readers who must have been sick to death of the story after reading so many different versions. Finally, when I couldn't bear thinking about the book, far less rewriting it yet again, I sent it off.

Two agonising months later I got the phone call I'd been praying for - and had an agent. Which is where this article started - I'd landed the Holy Grail and everything was about to fall into my lap, right? Wrong.

The opening chapters of *Vlad* were duly sent off to Scholastic and HarperCollins US. Scholastic asked to see the rest of the book, but HarperCollins US declined. The editor liked my writing style and humour but thought the vampire market might be getting saturated in the US - or could be by the time a new manuscript got to publication. Also they thought the vampire theme worked better for teen readers - at least in the US. So although that was a rejection, I still had a maybe in Scholastic.

Sadly, they too eventually declined, but asked to see my next book, so it wasn't a rejection of me as such, just my lovely book, which felt almost as bad. But that paled into insignificance because the next sign of interest came from the publisher every writer of children's novels prays will like their work - Bloomsbury.

When the email from my agent dropped into my inbox saying the editor wanted to see the next in the series, my heart almost stopped beating. My daughter was visiting from Gibraltar at the time, so I had company for the daft dance around the house. The only problem was that book two was only at first draft stage - and knowing how much rewriting I'd had to do on the first one, book two definitely wasn't fit to be sent anywhere.

Nevertheless, my agent asked me to send it to her - maybe it wasn't as raw as I thought it was. A couple of weeks later she told me I was right, the book shouldn't go anywhere without multiple rewrites and we didn't have time for that. So I put together a synopsis, which my agent rejected three times before we had something she was happy to send on.

And then we waited - and waited - and waited. By the time the rejection landed it was pretty much expected. Had it been a yes we'd have heard virtually straight away.

I don't know what effect that had on my agent, but it certainly deflated me. When I spoke to her she said that had she submitted *Vlad* a couple of years earlier we would definitely have had offers almost immediately, but recession and a change in the way publishers regarded debut authors had made it much harder to sell. Plus the fact that vampires were seen by many publishers as old hat -

apparently ghouls were the new vampires.

She continued to do her best for Vlad and me, but obviously selling authors had to take precedence where her time was concerned. I have garnered a wonderful collection of personalised rejections from some of the top publishing houses in the UK, including many compliments on my writing style, sense of humour and ability to write exciting plots, none of which was enough to get that elusive deal.

I went on to write half of another children's novel, but my heart wasn't really in it. However, I completed (and rewrote I don't know how many times) a crime novel, which a lovely publisher has expressed interest in. As I've been there and done that (and destroyed the t-shirt) I'm not holding my breath waiting to hear if that book will get me that longed-for yes, we want to publish, please sign here.

But yesterday I woke up feeling enthusiastic about writing for children for the first time in months and I read through the half-written ms. Before I knew what I was doing, my fingers were flying over the keyboard writing the next chapter. This one is written to appeal to young male readers. It's a mix of Randall and Hopkirk (deceased) and Buffy (but without a vampire in sight - I've got that message loud and clear - vampires are dead, even deader than dead).

You'd think after my experience of not getting a book deal with Vlad I'd give up, but the thing is, I'm a writer-holic and, like most addicts, I'm completely hooked.



Vlad had never known such hunger. Weak with longing, he was driven insane by the smell of the ripe flesh he held in his shaking hands. He let his fangs pierce the soft downy skin and sank to his knees. Nothing had ever tasted as wonderful as this; knowing it was forbidden added to the sensation. He closed his eyes and bit deeper, filling his mouth with the sweet fluid.

The bedroom door flew open, hitting the stone wall with such force windows rattled, spiders scuttled back to their cobwebs and half the candles blew out.

Aunt Valentyna towered above him, red eyes glaring, jet black hair standing on end, and ruby lips curled into a snarl.

"I knew it!" she thundered. "I knew you were doing something disgusting. What exactly are you eating, you repulsive excuse for a child?"

Vlad choked and dropped his feast, splattering flesh on the flagstone floor.

"Well, I'm waiting. What is that?" his aunt demanded, touching the half-eaten peach with the pointed toe of her shoe before reaching down to pick it up.

*Excerpt from Vlad the Inhaler  
Illustration by Marcus Smith (age 5)*

Lorraine Mace is a columnist with *Writing Magazine*, a writing judge, a tutor for the Writers Bureau and winner of an international poetry award. [www.lorrainemace.com](http://www.lorrainemace.com)