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Sisters' success "is no less thrilling" at this stage in her career, says Blume (on Martha's Vineyard, where the novel is set). "It was less expected, it was sweeter, it was different."



HAIR & MAKEUP: KRISTINE OULAMANI, J. BENNETT

# JUDY BLUME

The queen of preteen fiction hits home with her grown-up fans

About 150 people, mostly women, jammed into Powell's Books in Portland, Ore., last June to hear Judy Blume read from her new novel, *Summer Sisters*. By the end, many were in tears. But it wasn't necessarily the plot that had them weeping. "A lot of people felt very close to Judy, even though they had never met her," recalls the store's events coordinator, Steffen Silvis. "Some told her, 'I wouldn't be here today if it weren't for you.'" As similar scenes played out nationwide, the author learned to keep tissues at hand for readers who, she says, "come up and lay their heads down on the desk and cry."

Blume's third adult novel (the last was *Smart Women* in 1984) spent five months on *The New York Times* bestseller list this year thanks to the devotion of women, now in their 20s and 30s, for whom her 19 books for young readers (*Forever; Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret*) were as much a part of growing up as buying their first bra. "She was their favorite author when they were kids, and now she's their favorite author as adults," says Sessalee Hensley, a fiction buyer for Barnes & Noble.

That's because the Blume experience doesn't change. Rachel

Vail, the 32-year-old author of eight young adult novels, including *Wonder*, has loved Blume's writing "since I was a fourth-grade nothing," as she puts it. Reading *Summer Sisters*, says Vail, who now counts Blume as a friend and mentor, "I had the same feeling I've had every time I've read one of her books, which is, 'This is all about me.'" Blume, 60, who began writing in 1969 while at home with her two young children, long ago won over a vast audience—there are 65 million copies of her books in print—by dealing frankly with the sexual preoccupations of preteens. Daughter Randy, now 37 and the divorced mother of a 7-year-old, recalls a boyfriend pressuring her to be more sexual after he read *Forever*. In *Summer Sisters*, which explores the landmarks of sexual awakening, "I recognized some Judy Blume elements," she says. Judy, who lives in Manhattan, Martha's Vineyard and Key West with third husband George Cooper, a historical-crime writer, doesn't apologize for revisiting old themes. "This is what interests me," she says. "I'm never going to write *The X-Files*." As a generation of readers who grew up clutching her books to their hearts might tell you, sometimes the truth is in here.