What Judy Blume Can Teach You Today About Writing and Life

InStyle

Courtesy MasterClass

MARI KASANUKI Dec 14, 2017 @ 11:30 am

When Judy Blume writes a story, you read. When Judy Blume teaches a lesson, you listen. And when Judy Blume offers to share what she has learned in her 50-plus-year career, any writer or fan should take her words to heart.

Since the now-79-year-old author published her first book in 1969—*The One in the Middle Is the Green Kangaroo*—she has become one of the world's most beloved writers of children's literature and has produced countless women and men who've grown up reading works like Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing and the Fudge series. In the '70s—the decade when she published *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret.*; *Then Again, Maybe I Won't*; *Blubber;* and *Iggie's House*—she opened up readers' minds to not-so-openly-talked-about subjects like periods, masturbation, bullying, racism, and in ways that children, teens, and adults could relate to while still being entertained.

Now she's imparting her wisdom with the public in the form of her own MasterClass, an online course of 24 video lessons with interactive elements to inform and teach.

At its core, Blume's message about writing is that it's hard, inspiration in droves helps, and reading A LOT is a prerequisite to any improvement. "This is what I tell people in my class: There's only one way to really learn how to write and that's to read. You read, read, read. And then you say, oh this is the way you do it! And then maybe I'll try doing it this way," she tells *InStyle*. Through her MasterClass ($90 for unlimited lifetime access; masterclass.com), she goes into more details with lessons like "Finding Ideas," "Creating Plot Structure," and "Working with Editors" to "Rejection" and "Controversy and Censorship."

VIDEO: This Non-Profit Is Helping Disadvantaged Schools, One Library at a Time

These days her home base is Key West, Fla., where she co-founded a nonprofit bookstore, Books and Books Key West, with her husband George Cooper. The independent store opened its doors January 2016 and she works a full schedule there. (She's off three days a week except around the holidays, she says. "At Christmas, I will *not* be off three days a week. ... Even though it's nonprofit, it's a business.")

Here, Blume discusses how she's "a communicator," her favorite reads of the past year, the new movie she just saw that "was fabulous," and the very personal project that's been sitting on her mind's backburner.

How did your MasterClass come about? What about teaching an online course appealed to you?
What happened was, of course, they contacted me. And I didn't know anything about it. And so I had access to some classes and I wish I had had time to watch many more because I was incredibly inspired myself by the two I watched: Shonda Rhimes and James Patterson.

And even though we do completely different work, we're all writers. And I thought that the classes were really good and I said to my husband, I would be proud to do something like this. And I've never taught—you know, most writers do teach—but I've never taught. And I didn't know whether I could, whether I'd be able to do a good job. ... But then I thought, you know, I've been writing for 50 years. And this is the right time to do it, if I'm ever going to do it. While I still can. So I thought, maybe I do have things that I can share that will help people, inspire people, support them.

RELATED: 10 Celebrities You Never Knew Were Novelists and Children's Book Authors

When I started out in the late '60s, I took a writing class and I just felt it was an omen because I had started to write for children. I had no idea what I was doing, of course, but I was a reader. And what I got from that class was not so much how to write. Because I don't know how much anyone can really teach you how to write. But what I got was inspiration. I got inspiration from just being there with someone who was a published writer. And I got from her a great deal of encouragement. That was so important. And to this day, I use when I'm writing, some of the tools that I learned in that class. And that's what I wanted to share. And it was a question of, can I share? Can I offer something? Inspiration. Encouragement. Enthusiasm.

I think any of those things. Anytime I go to a conference or hear another writer speak, I come away inspired. And that's what keeps you going.

Nowadays in what forms do you get reader feedback? Email? Letters? Social media?
Mostly online now. Mostly I get emails. It's wonderful, I love it. I still think that the letters that used to come, that when a child picked up a pencil and wrote a letter—and I still get those but not nearly as many as email. The child who picks up a pencil and pours out her heart: It's not the same as sending an email. Usually, they don't do that in an email.

Or a tweet.

Or, well, a tweet. [laughs] I don't know that kids are tweeting at all. Tweeting is fun: I realize I haven't tweeted in weeks now, maybe. Tweeting can be fun. It was fun. I hope it still is fun, for me, because then I'll stop if it's not fun. But it's a way to share. And for me now with my bookstore, it's fun in that I can tweet something that happens at the bookstore. I like that. I like sharing that.

Twitter, email, letters: They're just different forms of writing.

It's all a way of communicating. And I'm a communicator. I like to talk to the people who come to the bookshop. I like to email. I'm working now, fulltime. It's very different than writing, which was certainly a "full time" job. But I wasn't out and about and doing it that way. I was at home. So there was more time to answer emails, there was more time to communicate in other ways. And now I'm at a shop. I'm a "shop girl"—and I love it. And there is not much time for other things—including reading, which is the worst!

When it comes to reading and information children today have access to so much more. Is *what* they're reading book-wise, social media-wise something that should be curated?

Well, I don't know that children are going to curate what they're reading. They're always going to read what they're interested in. When parents say to me, "My child doesn't like to read." If there's nothing physically stopping that child from reading—if that child doesn't have some reading disability … if that parent says my child doesn't like to read—I say, "Your child just hasn't found the right book.

So think about what your child is interested in. And then try to pair her up with the right book that way." You just have to keep trying—you can't just accept "my child doesn't like to read." *Read* to your child and see. Because that's great fun too. I mean, sharing books. And that's what I love about this class. It's a chance to share about 50 years of writing: Here's what I've learned. Here's the way I do it. Doesn't mean it's for you, but this is what I know. I don't know about all the other things but I can tell you what I know about my way of writing. So it's the same thing with reading.

What are the best books you've read this past year?

Oh my god, I've read so many great books this year! Recently, *My Absolute Darling* [by Gabriel Tallent], and *Little Fires Everywhere* [by Celeste Ng]. I just am about 10 pages away from finishing [Jennifer Egan's] *Manhattan Beach*. I adored a book called *Stephen Florida* [by Gabe Habash] and a new book called *Marlena* [by Julie Buntin]. Oh, I know I'm leaving out so many books. [Nathan Hill's] *The Nix* was a book that I just thought was absolutely fabulous. That's last year, it came out, but I'm still talking about it because I just think it's a remarkable book. Well, that's a lot of books but I can't begin to remember all of them.

RELATED: *InStyle* Editors' Favorite Children's Books

What genres do you generally read?

I'm a great lover of fiction and my husband reads of a lot of nonfiction so that's a good mix because we like to recommend books. His favorite book—absolutely favorite book of the year is *Sapiens*. Sells it all the time [at Books and Books Key West]. It's good when you're enthusiastic about a book—or anything else. Because I think enthusiasm is contagious and this is good.

Aside from reading, what forms of entertainment do you enjoy?
Well, I'll tell you the truth. We've been very bad because we love to go to the movies. We have a beautiful theater here in Key West, with four screens, called the Tropic Cinema. We've been so tired! At the end of the day that we haven't been able to go to the movies as much as we'd like. But I did see—recently we had a little film festival here and I saw *The Shape of Water*. I *loved* it. I thought it was fabulous. And you know, I'm not in fantasy. If you ask me what I want to read, I don't want to read fantasy, I read reality. And this is fantasy. But it's fantasy and it's reality and it's wonderful. It just takes you into another world. And I loved it.

Have you had any urges to venture into the fantasy/sci-fi genre?
Are you talking about writing? Absolutely not! Never. No. It's not what I can do. I mean, we do what *we do*. That's not what comes natural to me. And I talk about that in my class. I'm an intuitive writer. And so write what comes natural to me. That doesn't mean I can't enjoy reading something else or seeing a movie or theater about something else. But for the most part, the movies that I love are real-life movies. It's just this movie just grabbed me because it feels so real. I believed it. And I think that's what it's all about with storytelling. Can you make someone believe it?

You've talked about how when you published your first book for an adult audience—1978's *Wifey*—a lot of the initial reactions to your branching out were "What are you doing?" or "You'll ruin your career."
I promise you, and the general public: No, I am not thinking about this [venturing into the fantasy genre].

When I wrote adult books, it was an extension. Because it was, yes, I was a kid and I remember that really clearly and I like writing about that but then there was this woman, also. And she was having different experiences and different feelings. And she was asking different kinds of questions. And I had this urge to also let this other person out who was inside me.

When I started to write, I hadn't had a lot of adult experiences—which I know sounds funny because I had had babies and I was married. But that was different. And I didn't even tackle really having children in my first adult book—I was like, that was too much for me. I gave her children and I sent them away for the summer when the book takes place because I didn't want to deal with that. And I came to want to deal with that and I did.

And the last book, which took me five years to research and write—the book to end all books for me—*In the Unlikely Event*. I don't want to—I just feel like I've done it. I'm very glad that that's the novel I'm going out on. I don't want to write any more long novels.

There may be little things that want to come out from time to time. I don't know. And I will let them out if they want to come out. There's one that have in my mind but it can sit there for a while.

I've seen you mention in an interview from more than three years ago that you were thinking about a memoir of sorts.
It's not that kind of memoir. What's in my mind is a kind of family memoir but from a child's point of view, up to the age of 12, maybe. It's the same thing that's sitting on

the backburner. It wouldn't be the stories that I told in the MasterClass, probably. Because these are very personal stories and I don't think I've told them.

Roald Dahl's book *Boy* comes to mind.
You know, I haven't read that! I need to read that.

It's nonfiction, stories about his life from childhood to adulthood.
I know! I've seen it on the shelf in my store. That's a very good idea. I'm going go look for that.

Are there any societal issues that you've yet to tackle or do a deep dive on that you've been considering within children's writing?
No. [*laughs*] I know people think that that's how I came to choose what I was writing about but it was usually a family situation that would come into my mind. It wasn't so much a societal issue. I wasn't thinking that way at least I don't think I was when I was starting out. Because that's not where the best books come from. You know, "OK, I'm going to tackle this. I'm going to tackle that." We're going to get a lot of books about sexual abuse or books about sexual harassment. And that's OK. But I'm not going to write it.

Any last thoughts?

I just want to say that I'm glad I did [the MasterClass]. I enjoyed doing it, and I only hope that it means something to the people who watch it.

This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.