

KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

JUDY BLUME INTERVIEW
MAKERS: WOMEN WHO MAKE AMERICA
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

Judy Blume
Author
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Interviewed by Talleah Bridges McMahan
Total Running Time: 1 hour, 14 minutes and 56 seconds

START TC: 00:00:00:00

Judy Blume
Author

INTERVIEWER:

So I want to start out talking about your childhood. Can you just describe your family to me? Was it unorthodox, really traditional?

00:00:16:00

JUDY BLUME:

We were your fifties family. My father was a dentist. My mother was at home. I have an older brother, and everything looked good to the world.

INTERVIEWER:

Now, did they have particular views that you knew of about gender roles? Did they have anything that you were aware of about boys versus girls?

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JUDY BLUME:

I identified totally with my father, not so much my mother. And I wanted to do what my father and my brother were doing. And I was always welcome. My

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father was a very creative person, very good with his hands, creative in every way. Sang songs, wrote poems, just... I adored him. And he would sit me on the work bench downstairs, the basement work bench, and give me a hammer and block of wood and some nails. And that's where I wanted to be. And I really think that he encouraged me that I could reach for the stars. Sadly, he died when I was 21 and never saw any of this.

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JUDY BLUME:

So when I was young, I really identified more with my father, wanted to be just like him. And he was actually the more nurturing parent. My mother was very anxious and she did give me her love of reading my father too. I mean, my house was filled with books and there was nothing off limits. I mean, reading was a good thing in my family. It was good that Judy sat on the floor and pulled off books. Nevermind that it was *The Fountainhead* and *Lysistrata*. It was okay. And so I read, I didn't necessarily understand what I was reading, but I loved it. And they both read a lot.

00:02:23:00

JUDY BLUME:

And my mother was very shy, very private, never could really talk to me about anything. She would arrange for my father to have the talks with me. My father told me about menstruation, and I had not a clue what he was talking about. He took me on his lap because I asked the question, I was nine. And my 13-year-old cousin said...when I said, what's wrong with you? Because she wasn't feeling well that day. She said, "You'll find out when you're 13." So all the way home from their house, it's like, what will I find out, Daddy? And he tried to explain to me a lunar cycle, and I had no idea. So I thought, when the

moon is full, every woman in the world has this wonderful thing happening to her, this menstruation thing. And I used to look out at the full moon and think, uh huh, uh huh. I didn't get it. I didn't get it. But he made an effort. He made an effort.

INTERVIEWER:

Talk to me more about yourself at that time in life. I mean, you write so well about adolescence. I'm wondering if you can paint a picture.

JUDY BLUME:

Preadolescent, I'm good at preadolescence.

INTERVIEWER:

What were you like as a preadolescent?

00:03:38:00

JUDY BLUME:

At first, I was painfully shy when I was really little and afraid of everything, like my mother. And I remember hiding behind her skirt, holding onto her leg when I was really small, when somebody wanted me to come to their house for dinner. And then I don't know what happened, but when I was about 10, we actually moved away for a while. My mother and my brother and my grandmother and I, because my brother was sick, leaving my beloved father at home. And I think those two years away, just, I don't know, they turned me into a much more outgoing, theatrical, dramatic— I lived inside my head. I mean, I had so many, such a rich imaginative life. I was never, you know, I never felt alone because I had everything going on in my head.

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INTERVIEWER:

What were you imagining?

00:04:47:00

JUDY BLUME:

I was imagining everything. My husband says, I still do. He said, "Judy hears one word and she turns it into a whole thing." He doesn't always say that kindly, although usually he does. But I had a rich inner life that I never shared with anyone. I think that is how I became a writer. I'm sure it's how many people become writers. It's not so much the books, it's the imagination. I had stories in my head all the time. I never shared them. I never wrote them down. I was afraid if I told anybody, they would think I was very strange. And that wouldn't be good.

INTERVIEWER:

So your mother wanted you to go to college and get married and basically have the life that she had. Did you follow her advice?

00:05:44:00

JUDY BLUME:

That's really interesting because looking back, was she happy? Might she have been happier if she had had work? And I think yes. I once asked her, both her younger brother and her younger sister were teachers. And when my mother was much older in life, I asked her if she had any regrets, and it was hard to talk to her because she would cry. And she said, "Well, I guess I regret that I was never a teacher." I think it was that I never had, you know, that something that they had, although she was forced into it because my

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father died, she was only 54 as he was. And what are you going to do? And my aunt encouraged her to go out and get a job. And she did.

INTERVIEWER:

So did you follow her advice? Did you go on and...

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JUDY BLUME:

I think I did. I think I did see her advice as more practical, you know, the acting bug that bit me, and my father said, we'll, you'll go to New York and you'll have lessons. And... which sounded wonderful to me except that I didn't want to give up Saturdays because I wanted to be at the football game and go dancing at the Y with the other kids. And by the time I was in high school, I think I was looking ahead to- to... Yeah, getting the degree in education in case God forbid I ever had to teach. I don't know what I was thinking, to tell you the truth, but to meet the guy, to get married, to have babies, to be the president of the PTA, that's where I was in the fifties.

INTERVIEWER:

And so you went to college?

JUDY BLUME:

I went to college.

INTERVIEWER:

You met a man.

00:07:45:00

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JUDY BLUME:

I went to college. I met someone, not at college, but through a party that I went to. And I was married at 21.

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Judy Blume, 1959

JUDY BLUME:

I was a junior in college.

INTERVIEWER:

So talk to me about your life as a married woman. You moved to New Jersey. And just describe that for me.

00:08:05:00

JUDY BLUME:

Well, we were from New Jersey. Both of us were from New Jersey, and he was a young lawyer already practicing. He was six and a half years older than I was. A grown up, I thought. I'm marrying a grown up. It never occurred to me that I should be the grown up, I'm marrying a grown up. He has grown up friends, they have children. This is so exciting. That was the fantasy part of it.

INTERVIEWER:

What was the reality?

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Judy Blume With Her Children, 1967

00:08:28:00

JUDY BLUME:

I was at home with two young babies. I had two babies by the time I was 25. And, you know, this is the thing, what happens to the very creative child when she grows up and she doesn't have the outlet that I had at school. I mean, there was always an outlet for the creativity as long as I was in school, even at college. And suddenly I loved, I loved baby care. I really still to this day, I like babies and I liked taking care of them, but I was... things weren't right with me. I was sick throughout my twenties, on and off, one exotic illness after another. Nobody ever knew exactly what was wrong. Once my first book was accepted for publication, that was the end of it.

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JUDY BLUME:

So, clearly, I wasn't really happy in my 20s, even though I love those babies. I think life, married life, was a lot different. The reality of it was a lot different than what I expected. I don't know what I expected. I was a romantic, and it's so interesting for me to look back and see how writing changed my life, cured me physically, allowed me to soar emotionally and intellectually, gave me everything, really made me who I am today. I don't know what would've happened to me had I not found that creative outlet. I would like to think that I would've found something, because it didn't have to be writing, but it had to be the creative outlet.

00:10:38:00

JUDY BLUME:

I don't know where I got the idea. I started to make, this is really silly, felt pictures, that is pictures out of pieces of felt for children's bedrooms to do

something. You know, I needed it. And it was exciting and it was fun. And I packed them into a suitcase one day. And I took the bus to New York and I schlepped them to Bloomingdale's. And somebody took pity on me and said, "Oh, you want to see the children's buyer? And he's in today," Children's furniture buyer. And I went up there and I unzipped the suitcase and I showed them and he said, "Oh, okay. We'd like this one and this one in these colors, and they'll be the samples. And then we'll call you and we'll pay you \$9 a piece because we're going to sell them for 18." Oh, that was so exciting. I cannot tell you how exciting.

00:11:35:00

JUDY BLUME:

And then I guess my son was about two, and he and the little girl next door would come over and they'd sit on the floor and play with little scraps as I would glue and make these. It was very, very satisfying for a while. And I made all of \$350. And it was enough. When my fingers started to peel from the glue, I got allergic to the glue. I bought an electric typewriter. And I don't know what I was thinking, maybe I was already thinking about books and rhymes. And I was going to be the next Dr. Seuss. My maiden name was Sussman, who was very close. I thought I could be the next Dr. Seuss. And so I made up rhymes, rhymes, rhymes, washing the dinner dishes, rhymes, rhymes, rhymes. And I wrote them down and I tried to illustrate them myself with colored pencils.

00:12:37:00

JUDY BLUME:

And I fastened them together with brass fasteners, like, you know, did a little project at school. And I would send them in to publishers. And the first few

times they were. They came back. The mailman knew what I was doing. And he and I, you know, we would share a little sadness there. And I would go into my closet and I would cry. But I was a kind of determined person. And one day there was an announcement in the mail about a course in writing for tweens. And I signed up for it. It was at NYU and I was already writing. And I got a tremendous amount of professional encouragement from that teacher. And I mean, that was the most exciting thing in my life.

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JUDY BLUME:

Monday nights were the highlight of my week because on Monday nights, I got to take the bus into New York and go down to NYU. And this was mine. This was mine. You know, I had two small children and my husband would take them out to dinner that night for hamburgers, whatever little kids ate. And there I was in a room with 10 other people who were interested in the same thing that I was interested in. And a teacher who was from another generation, really. She was out of the forties and gave us so many rules for writing children's books, rules that I broke right away. But she encouraged me. She was supportive of me. And that is such a gift that she gave to me. And when that course ended, I signed up and I took it again. I wasn't ready to be without that once-a-week feedback.

INTERVIEWER:

And when that class ended, then what did you do?

00:14:45:00

JUDY BLUME:

When that class ended, I sold a couple of stories while I was in that class and I was writing *Iggy's House*, a very early chapter book, my first chapter book, although we didn't call them chapter books then. I don't know what I thought it was. It was a book and I wrote it. I turned in a chapter a week. And at the end of the second semester I had a manuscript, and I read the little writer's magazines and I chose a publishing company. It said, "New young publishing company looking for realistic middle grade fiction." And I sent it to them and I got a call, "Will you come and meet with us?"

00:15:40:00

JUDY BLUME:

Oh. I have no sense of direction. And they weren't in New York. I knew how to get to New York because you took the bus or the train. But I didn't know how to get to Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey. And I had to do it in the car. And I was so nervous and I was so dressed then. I thought, this is a business meeting. And I had a little dress, very mod. So it must have been very late sixties maybe. I think the book was published in 69, so it was all stripes mod dress, and it had a little coat with the stripes going the other way. And little mod shoes and a mod haircut. And I went, and this was this tiny grungy little office because Bradbury Press was starting out within another, within an umbrella company. And I met Dick Jackson who is only the world's greatest editor.

00:16:41:00

JUDY BLUME:

And how lucky is that? You know, it was a day when you could be discovered in the slush pile. I didn't have an agent. I didn't know anybody. I didn't know anybody who wrote or had ever written. I mean, I was really alone in this, but what a thrill. And he talked to me about it. He asked me a lot of questions and

those questions released something in me. And we've always worked together the same way. He asked the questions and that would open up just floods of new ideas for me. And I remember thinking, I heard them send out for sandwiches and I thought, "Oh, are they going to invite me to stay for lunch?" And they didn't. But I went home. No promise of a contract. Just "We'd like to see your revision. We're very interested."

00:17:40:00

JUDY BLUME:

And I worked hard and I've always been so much better at revising than at original drafts. And then one day the phone rang and he offered me \$800. That was my advance. And I said, "I read in a magazine that I'm supposed to get a thousand dollars." I don't know where I had the guts. And he said to me, "Well, we want someplace to go with the next book, don't we?" I love that. I still tease him about that. And it was a thrill. It wasn't the first book that was accepted. The first book was a picture book. *The One in the Middle Is the Green Kangaroo*.

INTERVIEWER:

That's such a great story.

JUDY BLUME:

But that didn't have the personal face to face with this editor who would become so important to my life and my career.

INTERVIEWER:

So talk to me about how your career started to build and build. And can you just describe for me how that first book went? And then...

00:18:53:00

JUDY BLUME:

I don't know what would've happened with just *Iggy's House*, but then the next book was, *Are You There God? It's me, Margaret*. And you know what it was? It was like, okay, I know all the rules, but I don't care about the rules. I'm just going to go back and write what I remember to be true about being in sixth grade. And I remembered everything. You know, I was not quite 30, I guess maybe I was just 30... going on three, but my memory was for detail, for everything. I mean, it was just right there, scratch the surface. And I was 12. I was more comfortable with 12 year old me than 30 year old me. I knew who I was when I was 12. I had no idea who I was when I was 30 or 25 or... I just didn't know.

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JUDY BLUME:

And I have to tell you, from the day the first book was accepted, I never got sick again, except the way people do. But all of those awful and exotic illnesses of my twenties disappeared because there was something to be excited about every day. Get out of bed, and you knew that you were going to get the kids off to school and get to have those quiet hours alone in that room with the little \$300 typewriter. It was very exciting. It was a wonderful time. And I had so so much inside me that I went from book to book to book to book. I would send off one and I'd start the next one. I just didn't want to be without it. It was so important to me. It so changed my life.

INTERVIEWER:

Now talk to me about why you chose 12. Because that is a really particular moment in a lifetime. And can you just go a little bit further with why that age is so special?

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JUDY BLUME:

12, as I knew it then, 12 when I was a kid was a little bit different than 12 now. Probably the equivalent of maybe 10. I mean, you are on the brink. Every experience is a first, is new, is exciting. And you're not a teenager yet. You don't have all of the hormonal problems and the angst of being a teenager. It just seemed to me like a wonderful time. Not-not, I don't mean wonderful. I mean, wonderful time to write about, wonderful time for me to think about being 10, 11.

INTERVIEWER:

Talk to me about *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret*. I mean, I'm sure most people have read, at least most girls have read that book. But just if you can describe Margaret as a character and what she was going through for people who aren't familiar.

00:21:59:00

JUDY BLUME:

Well, Margaret is... so much of me is in Margaret. Margaret, again, is on the brink. She's a late developer. The rest of her friends are already starting. She is desperate to be normal. She wants to be normal. And God is her confidant as He was mine or She was mine. After I read Erica John, I started calling Her, Her. And I talked to God as a confidant the way Margaret does, but not about

religious issues, about, you know, “Oh, please God, I just want to be normal. Please make me grow. Please let me get my period.” Actually, the reality is when I was separated from my father, much more like starring Sally Jay Friedman as herself, I am, that's my most autobiographical book and I'm really Sally Jay, or a lot of me is Sally Jay.

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JUDY BLUME:

And Sally had a relationship with God, and Sally became ritualistic and set up all these prayers to protect her father. If I say this 10 times a day, then my father will be safe. It was a terrible, terrible burden for a child to take it upon herself to protect and keep a parent safe who isn't with her. And flying was so new, then, to me. The idea of flying. I had never flown. And every month he would fly down to see us and I had to do so much to make sure that he would be safe on those planes and safe without the rest of us in the house looking after him.

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JUDY BLUME:

So, Margaret's relationship with God, after all I wrote about Margaret before I wrote about Sally, and Margaret's relationship with God was also similar to mine, but I made Margaret a child of mixed religious background. That's not true for me. And... because my brother had married someone who wasn't Jewish and I saw his children, you know, and they weren't quite sure what they were. And we weren't very religious in our family, but we were culturally Jewish. And we went to synagogue the way Margaret goes with her grandmother. And I counted hats and feathers and colors of hats the way Margaret did. And I didn't understand any of what was going on, nor did I feel

close to God when I went to synagogue. But in my room alone at night, God and I were there for each other.

00:25:03:00

JUDY BLUME:

And then Margaret, you know, she likes boys. She's just starting to like boys and I like them. I can remember in first grade thinking, "Should I marry Jimmy or Tommy?" This is how I was raised. "Should I marry Jimmy or Tommy? Which name do I like better?" That was in first grade, so goes way back.

INTERVIEWER:

So how did the book do? Talk to me about a publication of *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret*.

JUDY BLUME:

Well-

INTERVIEWER:

The reaction to it.

00:25:36:00

JUDY BLUME:

Well, Margaret got this rave review in the *New York Times*, which just floored me. I had to sit on the floor. I didn't even know what it meant really. I didn't know how important it was. And that-

ON SCREEN TEXT:

1970

JUDY BLUME:

– was the first time I thought, "Oh my God, maybe I can really do this. Maybe she knows something that I don't know. Maybe I'm a writer. Maybe I can tell these stories." I didn't really think of myself so much as a writer as maybe I can do this, whatever this was. Maybe I'm going to be able to keep doing this and wouldn't that be fun? And of course, you know, it came out very mixed... very mixed reviews from everybody. This was outrageous. My wonderful writing instructor from NYU, dear person, said to me, "Well," she said, "I don't know about all this practice in here about getting your periods, about filling your bra with cotton. I don't know about it all," but she said, "But it's a good book." And she was never anything but kind and generous to me.

00:27:02:00

JUDY BLUME:

Yeah. Margaret brought me my first readers. It was the beginning of everything that was to come. Although my children, who were in elementary school, public elementary school then in New Jersey, I gave the school library three copies and the male principal refused to have them on the shelf. That was also the beginning of what could happen if somebody in power didn't think your books were appropriate, they could be taken away.

INTERVIEWER:

Talk to me about that. I mean you're writing about topics, puberty, all of these things. Were other writers writing about this at the same time?

JUDY BLUME:

You know, I didn't set out to do anything except tell stories as well as I could. When I started to write, I went to the library and I came home with armloads of books, and I would read them at night after the kids were asleep. These I love, these bore me, and I would make stacks.

00:28:10:00

JUDY BLUME:

The ones I loved, they, you know, these were the books, I wanted to write books like these. While they may not have been the same subjects that I wanted to write about... I was always fascinated by puberty, let's face it, I was obsessed for a year in my life with puberty. I did all those exercises. I pricked my finger and put blood on a sanitary napkin to see what it would be like. I wore it to school to prove to my friends that I had my period. I lied about getting my period, which I didn't get till I was 14. I knew that I wanted to write about this, but I wanted to write books that engaged kids in the way that Beverly Cleary's books engaged me. She was my hero, in the way that Louise Fitzhugh's *Harriet the Spy* engaged me, and in the way that the early books of E.L. Konigsburg engaged me. I wanted to write books like those, but in my own voice and telling the stories that I wanted to tell. But those were books that spoke to me and meant a great deal to me when I was starting to write.

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JUDY BLUME:

And the prayer is, please, please, please, someday let me be published and then please, please, please, someday let somebody actually read this book. And I never, never looked beyond that. I was very young and naive, maybe not

so much in years, but in experience and where I was coming from, I was naive about it all. Maybe we all were more naive back then. We didn't have the community of writers that young writers have today. And I envy them that. I think it's wonderful. I would've been so much less lonely in my life, I think, had I had Twitter. I would've found other people who were interested in what I was interested in. I went to every little meeting that I knew I could go to in New York.

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Judy Blume, 1978

JUDY BLUME:

I went to every meeting because I so longed for connection and I certainly didn't have it where I was living and the life that I was living with my husband.

INTERVIEWER:

Well, how did people around you—I mean you had these other women in your neighborhood who mocked you. You had this husband who wasn't quite sure. How did they respond when you...?

00:30:51:00

JUDY BLUME:

Well, I don't want to say that the women mocked me. In some ways, they might have just been really uncomfortable about it because it's like, what is she doing and where does that leave us? There was some mocking in the beginning, but I can't ever say that there was support. Not for... Not ever

while I was living there. But it separated me from them in a way that wasn't really acceptable in those days.

INTERVIEWER:

I mean, it sounds like what you were doing in some way challenged their own life choices.

JUDY BLUME:

I think it challenged, I think what I was doing challenged their own life choices. But this was early. And I like to say that the women's movement came very late to suburban New Jersey, to my cul-de-sac. And when it did, I think that... I know for me, it gave me courage. It gave me courage to do a lot of things, to think about a lot of things, and ultimately, probably to end my marriage. And although that's not what the women's movement was all about, it helped me find courage to make changes in my own life that I might never have made.

INTERVIEWER:

So talk to me more about that. I mean, do you see yourself as a part of the women's movement?

00:32:38:00

JUDY BLUME:

Absolutely. I'm a part of the women's movement, even if nobody ever knew it but me. It was inside me. It was... I loved it. I subscribed to *Ms. Magazine* the second I learned about it. My husband, in a very naive way, blamed fear of flying for the end of our marriage. Of course, it wasn't. But- but... he was

looking for something that went wrong. And it is absolutely true that everything changed. Everything that we grew up with, all the values that we grew up with in the fifties and that our parents gave to us. And I'm talking us, other women like me, whose mothers' hopes and dreams were a college degree, marriage to a professional man if possible, so that you would have security, you would have a nice home.

00:33:51:00

JUDY BLUME:

When I told my mother that I was getting divorced, you know what she said to me? She said, "How can you leave that beautiful house?" And that was just... I know that she didn't know what to say. She didn't know how to comfort me. I was hurting. She didn't know how to give me what I needed. But that was what she said. And the second question was, what am I going to tell my friends? Because it was so off the wall to her that Judy is going to leave this secure life and who knows what's in store for her.

INTERVIEWER:

Did you have support when you made that choice? Were there people around you who were supportive?

00:34:43:00

JUDY BLUME:

No. I was so alone in my decision to leave my marriage. I felt so alone and scared. And I had two kids. And again, I was married to a very decent guy. He was not a bad person. We just didn't change together. And I grew up some and realized that I wanted more. I was then very adventurous. I was caught up in the whole scene. I wanted freedom. I've since learned other things, but

in those days I saw freedom as the way to go. I wanted to be free to do... Who sang the song? "Freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose." I don't know what he sang, but Chris Christofferson, or somebody else sang it.

00:35:46:00

JUDY BLUME:

I wanted to be that person. I wanted to be out on the streets. I wanted to be protes- I don't mean living on the streets. I wanted to be protesting. I wanted to be yelling out. I wanted to be part of what these brave women were part of. They were braver than I was. They knew more than I. They had more connections than I had. Had I known them, I'd have been with them earlier, you know, but it was my own little feminist movement inside me.

INTERVIEWER:

Talk to me about that time in your life where you have these two little kids, but you're also seeking to basically recreate your whole life. How do you balance those two things?

00:36:39:00

JUDY BLUME:

Oh, well, I mean by the time I left my marriage, they were 12 and 14. So all the time that they were small, I was writing. And I once said to them, maybe to my son, "How was it having a working mother when we lived on that street where no other mother worked?" And he said, "I never thought of you as a working mother. You were always home." Yeah, because I worked at home. And I think, actually, I never let them see the struggle. I should have. I didn't involve them in the struggle to do this, in the determination. I was—

somehow separated the two and I was mommy, and then I was this person, determined.

INTERVIEWER:

Why do you say you should have shown them the struggle? What do you think they would've learned?

00:37:46:00

JUDY BLUME:

I think it would've been better. I don't know. I just think that it's better if kids see how hard it is and how hard you have to work to make something happen. Doesn't just happen. I don't think they ever saw any of that. You know, it was just what I did. The second they walked into the door at three o'clock, my writing day was over, I was done. I worked while they were not at home. So they weren't really involved. They were involved in the stories that were coming out of the typewriter. You know, my daughter would pull the pages out. She was a reader and she would read them right away. But I don't think that— I do— I think it's important to let your kids know that life is a struggle and it's wonderful, but it takes hard work and determination.

INTERVIEWER:

So you decide to divorce and you have a 12 year old and a 14 year old.

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JUDY BLUME:

Yeah, the worst times possible to divorce with a 12 year old and a 14 year old. I was totally crazy then, I have to say, looking back. I don't know, I think I just went a little bit off. We got through it, but I was not a mature person then.

INTERVIEWER:

Well, I'm interested in that because it seems to me like parents are constantly trying to balance the needs of their children with the needs that they have to have personal fulfillment. And I'm just wondering what you think about that and how do you strike that balance.

00:39:42:00

JUDY BLUME:

Yeah. Well, in the seventies, personal fulfillment meant all this freedom and it meant freedom, sexual freedom. And I wanted that, and that is not the best thing for your 12 and 14 year old kids. And so, I basically, I jumped into the fire. Or what do we say from the fire to the pan, or the pan to the fire? And I married the first guy I met. I met him on a plane, I married him, it was a disaster. And what was hardest was to have to admit to my mother, to my former husband, to my children, to myself, that I had made a terrible mistake, but I was getting out of the terrible mistake. It was a very, very rough time. And you know what? Through the worst times in my life, I've been able to write. And that writing has saved me. And my daughter says that to me a lot.

00:40:51:00

JUDY BLUME:

I don't know how you can do this. How could you ever do that? And how can you do that now? And it's because when I go into that little room, I lose myself in the characters. And I think that helps keep me sane. And it helps to keep me going. I'm not crazy anymore, by the way. Some people might not agree, but I'm telling you I'm not. And I've been in a wonderful, incredible relationship, marriage for 31 years. And it was well worth waiting for. But I

didn't make that decision wisely. It just kind of fell in my lap. And, you know, here's this guy. And oh, he seems nice. And I didn't marry right away, it took seven years. But we were together from our second date because we did things like that in the seventies.

INTERVIEWER:

I want to go back to your writing because I'm wondering, I'm hoping you can describe for me a few of the books that you've written for preteens and just the kind of topics that you were tackling in the seventies that were pretty unusual for that time.

00:42:10:00

JUDY BLUME:

Yeah. I don't know that I knew that they were unusual. I mean, I read a lot, so maybe I did. I don't know. I just know that the day I finished *Margaret*, I started *Then Again, Maybe I Won't*. I figured I was a 12 year old girl. I was so fast then for six months, now I'm so slow. And now I'm going to be a 12 year old boy for the next six months.

ON SCREEN TEXT:

1971

JUDY BLUME:

And I wrote about Tony in *Then Again, Maybe I Won't*. And that was a time when women were not supposed to write about men. You were not supposed to write from a boy's point of view if you weren't a guy and vice versa. But I loved being a boy. And I learned a lot about being a boy from Tony. And

thanks to my editor, I learned a lot about a boy's puberty because some of the things that I thought and I put into the book, he said, "Oh no, that's not how it is." And so he was wonderful working with me on that book. And then, gosh, I can't remember. I wrote-

INTERVIEWER:

Well, tell me more about Tony. What was he going through?

00:43:18:00

JUDY BLUME:

Tony had an interesting family. Tony's family, blue collar, Jersey City, New Jersey. He had a paper route. His mother sold women's lingerie at Orbach's. He had a brother who was a teacher. The brother had just gotten married. Angie, his wife, announces she's pregnant. They really don't have the money. His dad works for, I can't remember what his dad works for, but he's in the basement all the time kind of like my father. He's in the basement all the time and he's inventing things, and Tony's father invents something... what were they called? I can't remember what they're called. But anyway, it was because I wanted to have lamps in the middle of the room that you didn't have to plug in. And so he called them electrical cartridges. Somebody said to me they were like batteries. And recently somebody wrote to me and said, because there was a big story in the *Times* about this new discovery, and this guy wrote to me and he said, "Well, Judy, how do you feel? Somebody's finally done electrical cartridges."

00:44:25:00

JUDY BLUME:

And he invents electrical cartridges and he gets rich. He makes it big. They move to suburban Long Island. They get a big house and Tony's life changes not for the better. To Tony, everything is falling apart. It was better when they were struggling. The mother becomes social climbing. The kid next door steals. The girl next door gets undressed and leaves the windows open. I don't think he's upset about that. He likes that, he watches with binoculars. That got me in a lot of trouble. Grandma is relegated, you know, taken out of the kitchen, which was her *raison d'etre*. And so, I like interesting family stories.

00:45:24:00

JUDY BLUME:

I like to do much more complicated books now. Sometimes I read these books and I think how simple, you know? Would I do this today? Could I do this today? I'm not sure that I could. And yet kids are still relating to them in the same way. *Blubber*, about bullying, based on something that happened in my daughter's fifth grade classroom. And then *Forever*. And my daughter was 14 and she said she was reading all these books about kids who, God forbid, if the girls succumbed and had sex, she would be punished, a grizzly abortion, maybe she would die. Being shipped off to aunt Betty's house somewhere else. And Randy said to me, "Couldn't there ever be a story about two nice kids who do it, and nobody has to die?"

00:46:24:00

JUDY BLUME:

And it's the worst reason for writing a book, frankly, but I thought, "Yeah, what's the message here?"

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ON SCREEN TEXT:

1975

JUDY BLUME:

I wanted to show sexuality with responsibility. And damn, I wanted girls to have a good time. I was a girl. I mean, this was fun. I got so many angry letters from women who said, "How dare you let her have an orgasm? How dare you? I've been married for 30 years and I've never had one." And I'm like, "Well, I don't know. I always did, so I just didn't think it was a big deal," but I got in a lot of trouble for that.

INTERVIEWER:

Talk to me about that because it started to become a really big deal. You keep publishing these books and-

00:47:12:00

JUDY BLUME:

Not in the seventies. The seventies was a great time for children's book writers, children's books, and therefore young readers, I think. And in 1980, everything started to go the other way. You know, with the presidential election in 1980, the next day, the censors were out calling the American Library Association. They wanted this banned and that banned and this off the shelf. They were challenging everything. Schools, school libraries weren't prepared. They didn't have any policy in place. And, you know, a parent would run into school waving some book and saying, take this off the shelf. And the librarian, often because she or he didn't know what to do, would take it off the shelf. Today, I'm happy to say librarians and teachers know, usually,

that there are policies in place. There are formal challenges that have to be made, committees have to go— But it still happens all the time. It happened to my books in the Florida Keys. I lived there and it happened recently in the Florida Keys.

INTERVIEWER:

How did that make you feel when it originally started to happen in the eighties?

00:48:34:00

JUDY BLUME:

Well, at first it was scary and sad. And not unlike those first rejections that made me cry because I didn't know what else to do. And then when I learned about organizations I could join and I could work with them to help, not just keep my books on the shelf, but there were so many books being challenged. There still are. Then I felt more empowered. It's always, you know, it's the group. You're part of a group. You can't necessarily do it on your own, although I certainly tried before I met up with NCAC, National Coalition Against Censorship. But once I did, it's that being part of the group, I'm not alone. The same thing going back to the women's movement, I'm not alone.

INTERVIEWER:

What were these parents saying?

00:49:39:00

JUDY BLUME:

In those days, the complaints, the challenges to books were all coming from the religious right. That of course, it's contagious. And so all these years later

it's coming from every side, all over the place. In those days it was really coming from the religious right. There were pamphlets put out called how to rid your schools and libraries of Judy Blume books. And I had my secretary send away for one. They were actually being handed out at supermarkets and malls. And, you know, never did it say you had to read the book. It just said you have to say this and this and this, page something, and cite things totally out of context. And, I mean, it was infuriating. It was infuriating before I came to, never accept it, but I came to understand that this was happening, it was going to happen, and we had better do something about it.

INTERVIEWER:

What specifically were they taking issue with? If you can just describe their argument against the books.

00:50:54:00

JUDY BLUME:

They believed that puberty was a dirty word, that anything that had to do with puberty. Not that it was natural and normal and every child was going to go through it whether they wanted them to or not, it was, "I want to be the one to tell my child," but of course they never did. They never did. Or their children wouldn't have read it first in my books and come to them with questions.

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Judy Blume, 2006

JUDY BLUME:

They did not want their kids to read these books that would lead to questions. There was this feeling that if my kids don't know about it, my kids won't do it. If my kids don't read about it, they won't know about it and it'll never happen to them. Puberty, you know, that's what it was all about. My books were challenged mainly for puberty language and something, oh, if only I can remember it, lack of moral something or other, I can't even remember what it was.

00:51:54:00

JUDY BLUME:

Something that like, what? Because I didn't hit the kids over the head for instance, in *Blubber*, which is very tough even today to read. Grownups don't want to read about how bad life can be for kids when they're young, the things that happen at school. And now of course, PC, like everything is anti-bullying programs here and there. Maybe they'll work, I hope they do. I don't know because there's a universality to a child's life and adults can't control it. And that's tough. And all you can do is you can be there for the kids. And yeah, you can try in schools to bring it. I think that any teacher who was brave enough to read *Blubber* aloud in the classroom and then talk about it, because you can't close the book and forget about it, talk about it, bring it to the surface.

00:52:27:00

JUDY BLUME:

That's good. That's positive. But I know a teacher, this was long ago now, –

ON SCREEN TEXT:

1974

JUDY BLUME:

– who read that book every year at the start of fifth grade, read it to his class. And he was no longer allowed to. His principal told him you can't read that anymore. And he stopped teaching. How many good teachers did we lose during this period because they were told? And it was fear. I mean, it's all about fear. So, I think we're doing a little better there. Although, I did just get a... I just got a tweet from somebody who said, "I'm a substitute at elementary schools. And when I read your books aloud, I read every word the way you wrote it. But the kids in the class said, 'oh, our teacher goes, beep beep beep, or our teacher substitutes silly for stupid,'" So it still happens.

INTERVIEWER:

So you started earlier, you mentioned that you took three copies of the book to your daughter's school and the principal, if you can just tell that story.

00:54:05:00

JUDY BLUME:

Yeah, I gave three copies of *Are You There God? It's me, Margaret*, because I was proud and excited— to my children's elementary school. And the male principal took them off the shelf, refused to have them there because he said girls in this school are not old enough to read about menstruation. Now, how about the fifth and sixth grade girls who had their periods, right? No, he didn't want anybody to be able to read about menstruation. Can you believe menstruation was such a wicked subject? It's hard to believe looking back now.

INTERVIEWER:

And did you fight him on that?

00:54:51:00

JUDY BLUME:

I did not fight him. I fought him once and he chased me down the hall with a chair like this. But that was about something else. We were never, I don't think we were ever friends. I was a little rebellious then. The kids had been locked out of school on a hot day and nobody was there. All the kids, the bus didn't come, and they were locked out. Nobody had cell phones then. And when I went to talk to him about it, he chased me down the hallway with this chair threatening me.

INTERVIEWER:

He sounds like quite a character. Did you ever think that maybe there's some validity to the arguments that these parents are making, that it is up to them to decide when to introduce these ideas to their own children?

00:55:34:00

JUDY BLUME:

Well, I think that's fine, but you can't decide what's right for everybody else's children. You can't challenge a book, demand that a book be removed from the shelf because you don't want your child to read about it. Then you have to monitor what your child is reading. Of course you can't, because your child can go to a friend's house or the public library or anywhere else. But you cannot, you cannot say I don't want this book in the library because I don't

want my child to read it when everybody else's children have the right to read it. You can't do that.

INTERVIEWER:

So I've been talking a lot about the backlash that your books have received. But we should talk about how much people love them. At what point-

JUDY BLUME:

That's the nice part. Thank you. That's the fun part.

INTERVIEWER:

Can you talk to me about when you realized that your books were connecting with these young readers?

00:56:35:00

JUDY BLUME:

My first letters, snail mail then, came from girls who were reading Margaret. And then it just grew and grew and grew and grew to the point where I once thought I need to collect these letters and put them in a book because maybe that will speak to other children and parents. And I did that. I thought it would be a six month project. It took me three years. And three intensely emotional years. And I was sorry once I got into it that I was doing it. Because the way I connected the topics that the children were writing about was by sharing my personal life. And that was tough at the time. And some of it very painful, some of it ridiculously naive. I keep saying that. Do you think you keep saying that till you die I wonder? Will I look back at 85 and say, "Oh, I was so naive at 73." I don't don't know.

KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

INTERVIEWER:

I'm wondering if you can tell me specifically, what were these kids saying in these letters?

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Blume Visits With Sixth Graders In 1977

00:57:48:00

JUDY BLUME:

They were sharing their innermost feelings. I think sometimes it's easier to take a pencil and write it down and put it in an envelope and send it away than it is to tell it to your parents, the people who see you at the breakfast table every day. And they were sharing their deepest concerns, whether it was about friendship or family life, the pain of divorce and separation, loss, death, things that they were thinking about, things that they were going through. Certainly puberty, sexuality, drugs, everything. Everything. Today, I still get a lot of mail, but it basically comes, it's email, that comes to my website.

00:58:50:00

JUDY BLUME:

And sometimes it's still very, very, very tough. I just had one from a child whose parents were divorced. Her mother died after the divorce and now her father was remarrying. And she was at a loss. What do I do? Who do I talk to? She was not happy about this. Turned out that she also had a sister who then wrote to me. I'm not sure that there aren't more children in that family. And those are letters that I take very seriously and I answer myself. But there are

so many other places that kids can go now to find out that they're not alone because they can go online and find out I'm not the only one who's feeling this way. And that's good.

INTERVIEWER:

So I grew up reading pretty much all of your books. And now have a niece who's 12 and she's read all of your books. And I'm wondering, why do you think they continue to resonate over time? What is it about them that ...

00:59:59:00

JUDY BLUME:

Oh, I wish I knew. They identify, I don't know. I don't know what it is. If I knew maybe I would never be able to do it again. I don't know that we ever understand what it is that makes our readers care so much about our characters and our books. But what I do tell moms and aunts is don't tell the next generation, "Oh, I grew up on these books and I want you to love them too," because that's sure to turn them off. You have to just leave them around the house because otherwise it's like they can't be cool if my mom read them. And now probably soon it'll be grandma read them. So just leave them around. But it is wonderful to have— My earliest readers are in their forties, my first readers are in their forties. And they go down to today's seven year old, six year olds. And it's been the most rewarding career, I think, anyone could have. I feel very lucky.

INTERVIEWER:

People respond so strongly to your books either negatively or positively. And I'm wondering, do you ever think about the audience when you're writing? Over time does that start to influence your writing process?

01:01:30:00

JUDY BLUME:

I think it's a bad idea to think about your audience when you're writing. And it's a bad idea to think about your critics. And I think I was really lucky when I started out that I didn't know anybody who wrote, and I didn't know anything about publishing or anything about the world of writing and writers. And so I just did it spontaneously. I just did it. It's much harder now because I know so much more. But I do find when I'm in that room because I'm writing now, and I have no idea what age group I'm writing for. I don't know who's going to read this book. I just know that I have to tell this story. And it's the first book that I've ever set really in the fifties when I was coming of age. And the one thing about the fifties was that we all pretended.

01:02:30:00

JUDY BLUME:

We pretended that everything was okay. People did not talk about what was going on. There were family secrets and you kept them. You didn't tell your best friend. I had a best friend who is still my best friend. We met in seventh grade and we were so close, and we still are. But in those days, we didn't really tell each other what was deep, deep, deep inside. We knew we liked each other a lot. We had a great time together. But no, those '50s kind of things that were kept buried because what would the neighbors say or how would this look if it got out? Our family has to be perfect and no family is

perfect and we all have family secrets. I'm writing about that, only this time, I get to know all the family secrets.

INTERVIEWER:

It seems like, in some way, you were always writing about that, that's a throughline through a lot of your books, that there are these secrets in these families.

01:03:44:00

JUDY BLUME:

Yeah. I hated secrets. I hated it when I was a kid and I knew that they were keeping secrets. Don't tell the children, don't tell the children. I knew it, and so I invented it, and what I invented was usually much worse than the reality. If they had been honest with me and told me and talked to me about some of it, I wouldn't have been so anxious and I wouldn't have been creating these stories of what it was all about. Yes, Sally Freedman hates the secrets and Sally Freedman has the imagination and is always coming up with crazy stories.

INTERVIEWER:

So, I just want to switch gears into the women's movement. Do you identify yourself as a feminist? Is that-

01:04:32:00

JUDY BLUME:

Absolutely. A feminist, to me, is a good word. A feminist, to my husband, is a good word. He would tell you, "I'm a feminist." The way I saw it was equality between the sexes. Men and women are equal and there's no reason why

women can't do all the things that men do, a whole list of them, and vice versa. That was what it was all about for me. I don't want to be imprisoned, I want to be set free. My generation married, many of us, all the women I know, married before we were out of college or right almost after we graduated from college.

01:05:29:00

JUDY BLUME:

We didn't have a chance to grow up, we didn't have a chance to find out what we might have been able to do. We had to take our chances much later. Again, my generation, many of them didn't start finding out what they could do as early as I did, but the lucky ones found out later and they went and they made careers for themselves, within those original marriages or not. But that was good. That was good.

INTERVIEWER:

Why do you think so many people, particularly in my generation or younger, see feminism as a dirty word? Why does it have this bad reputation?

01:06:10:00

JUDY BLUME:

Why? I don't understand why younger people think feminism is a bad word. Maybe they just don't know. They don't know. They don't know what it was like to worry all the time about getting pregnant, to be terrified. You know, even within our marriages. Some young people today, I think, don't get what it was like before abortion was legal. For instance, I went to an all girls public high school and in my graduating class, two of the top girls, I think one was valedictorian, two of the top girls were pregnant at graduation, they didn't

tell us at the time. Those hasty marriages and having babies, that just changed their lives.

01:07:15:00

JUDY BLUME:

That was a huge thing in life. Those of us who call ourselves feminists and came of age in the women's movement, it was never that we didn't like men, we wanted to be free in the way that men were free. Yes, we wanted men to grow up with us, and many of them did. I see my son, as a man in his 40s today, has a very, very, very different outlook than any guy I knew when I was young. He understands women, he likes women as people. My husband really enjoys talking to women. He may like them sexually, there's always that question, but can men and women really be friends without any sexual anything going on between them? I can't answer that question. I'm not sure, I don't know. I don't know. Maybe eventually we can. Again, I'm looking forward to that 85, but I'm not sure, I'm not at all sure. So, it's there, it doesn't mean you're going to act on it. But I like men and women working together and doing things together and being friends together.

INTERVIEWER:

Do you think there have been any downsides to the women's movement?

01:08:53:00

JUDY BLUME:

I don't know. I don't know. Not for me. Not for me. The only thing is, I hear from some very thoughtful young women, and I might agree with them on this, that they were raised to think that they could have it all. And I say you can have it all, but maybe not all at the same time. Maybe you can have it all,

but serially, different times in your life. And you shouldn't think that you should be having it all at the same time and then beat up on yourself because you've got these babies and you can't pull it off, you can't do the work and have the babies and have a relationship. It's just really hard.

INTERVIEWER:

That is a perfect segue into the advice that we're hoping you can give to young women.

JUDY BLUME:

I'm very cautious about giving advice. I have one piece of advice. The only advice I feel comfortable giving is to say to anybody, really, don't let anybody discourage you. If you feel it, if you need to do it, then you have to go out there, even though they tell you you can't do it.

01:10:29:00

JUDY BLUME:

I think, should I retire? Is it time to retire? And then I'll get this creative urge and it's so exciting to have it again. I think, I'm never going to retire. As long as my mind is working, why should I retire? This year, I made a movie based on one of my books and that was such a thrilling experience. One I don't want to do again, but it was a thrilling experience. Now, I've got this new novel that I'm very excited about writing, and so it's just great. I mean, I feel blessed. Every other writer I know kind of feels the same way. There's no age limit on it, as long as it's working, as long as there's a story to tell.

INTERVIEWER:

Actually, I do have one more question before we do the one-word answers.
What did your mother think about your success?

01:11:30:00

JUDY BLUME:

Oh, my mother loved it. She loved it. My mother was a crackerjack typist, and maybe by the time I started writing, my mother had retired from her job at the law firm where she was a crackerjack typist. She came and typed the final manuscript of my first few books and she liked that. I don't think I let her type forever, I'm pretty sure I didn't. My mother went to high school with Philip Roth's mother. Mrs. Roth met my mother on the street one day and they were chatting and she said, "I have advice for you, Essie. When they ask you, where did she learn those things, you say, 'I don't know, but not from me.'" But my mother was my greatest fan.

01:12:30:00

JUDY BLUME:

Although, I have to say, I was once on Dr. Ruth's show, this was a long time ago, and we were talking about female masturbation. It was a Mother's Day show and that's what we were talking about. My mother didn't know what we were going to be talking about and invited a group of her friends down to watch Judy on television. It wasn't my mother who told me what happened, but one of the daughters of my mother's friends said when that started, they all left. My mother was horrified, as were all of her friends, because my mother could never ever talk about that. How I wish you... I wrote Deenie because nobody ever talked to me about that and yet, my friends and I talked all the time, "Do you have a special place? Can you get that good feeling? Oh, me too." But nobody ever said to us, "Here's a little book and this is what it's

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about," or just sit down and talk to us. No, so we thought it was bad, but at least we knew that we weren't alone, because we all had made this great discovery.

INTERVIEWER:

That's great. So, now, one-word answers.

JUDY BLUME:

Uh-oh, one-word answers.

INTERVIEWER:

When you were a kid, what did you want to be when you grew up?

01:13:50:00

JUDY BLUME:

A cowgirl or a movie star or a detective.

INTERVIEWER:

What was your very first paying job?

JUDY BLUME:

You know what? I never had a paying job. I never had a job until I started to write. I was never paid for anything.

INTERVIEWER:

Which person who you've never met has had the biggest influence on your life?

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JUDY BLUME:

I think my father is the person who had the most influence on my life.

INTERVIEWER:

Which three adjectives best describe you?

JUDY BLUME:

I'm friendly, I'm a worrier, and I'm emotional in life, but less so in my writing.

INTERVIEWER:

That's great.

END TC: 01:14:56:00