

ABSTRACT

TINGEN, JENNIFER KAY. From Laughter to Tears: What is it About Judy Blume? (Under the direction of Mary Helen Thuente.)

What is it that everyone loves about Judy Blume? I propose that Judy Blume is so popular and loved by young adults because of the candor, humor, and comfort that her novels never fail to provide. She has a way of letting young adults know that everything is going to be just fine. Her impact has affected millions over the years. Specific moments from *Forever*, *Blubber*, and *Tiger Eyes* illustrate Blume's candor and humorous way of viewing serious, realistic matters, from death and sexuality to being painfully humiliated due to one's personal appearance. These literary moments contain a great deal of pathos; they make readers laugh out loud or shed tears through Blume's distinctively candid creativity.

In *Letters to Judy: What Kids Wish they could Tell You*, Blume has helped parents see life through their children's eyes. She provides letters from children who have written to her over the years for all readers to see that childhood is not as easy as adults often think it is. These letters provide a glimpse of Blume's empathy with young adulthood that makes her so appealing to readers of all ages.

Examining these novels will allow me to select moments from Blume's writing that illustrate young adult experiences in a humorous, sad, or realistic light. It is during these moments that the reader is closest to and absorbed in the characters in *Forever*, *Blubber*, and *Tiger Eyes*. Exploring Blume's life experiences, awards, and writing style helps to provide the answer to what it is about Judy Blume that makes her such a treasured young adult author.

From Laughter to Tears: What is it About Judy Blume?

by

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DEDICATION

To Mama and Daddy, who always said “Just do your best;” and to God, who always says
“I’ll handle the rest.”

BIOGRAPHY

Jennifer Kay Tingen teaches English at N.C. State and plans to continue shaping the minds of college students throughout her life. Jennifer is from the small town of Oxford, a place where she was always surrounded with beloved family, friends, pets, and books. After a great deal of undergraduate soul-searching, Jennifer decided to pursue a career as a professor of English. If that does not work out, she will become certified as an instructor of one of her favorite pastimes: yoga. A recent trip to Europe ignited Jennifer's desire to explore the world; Australia, the Greek Isles, and Italy are next on her itinerary. Jennifer plans to continually study and contribute to the thrilling, emotional, and comforting field of young adult literature.

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INTRODUCTION

By 1985, Judy Blume had written seventeen books, sold more than one million hardcover copies, had twenty-seven paperbacks in print, and received 2,000 letters a month from young fans (Gorner 2). Blume has “sold more than seventy-five million books, been awarded the National Book Foundation's Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters, and been called one of the most banned writers in America” (Flanagan 170). Her work is popular worldwide and has been translated into fourteen languages (National Coalition). Named one of *People* magazine's most intriguing people of 1998, one begins to wonder what is it that most love (and some despise) about Judy Blume?

Judy Blume is popular and loved by young adults because of the candor, comfort, and humor that her novels never fail to provide. She has a way of letting young adults know that everything is going to be all right. Her novels have affected millions over the years. Specific moments from *Forever*, *Blubber*, and *Tiger Eyes* illustrate Blume's candor and humorous way of viewing serious, realistic matters, from death and sexuality to painful humiliation. These literary moments contain a great deal of *pathos*; they make readers laugh out loud or shed tears because, through these specific events, Blume affects readers on a deep emotional level. However, Judy Blume has been criticized for her candor and purported lack of depth. Richard Jackson believes that Blume is so often censored because she is so popular. Jackson says, “She's visible, and she's proven her lack of trustworthiness by being so loved by kids” (Weidt 35). In “Is There Life after Judy Blume,” Judith Redmond criticizes Blume and other “pop writers,” asserting that “these writers, for all their up front language and subject matter do not often deal with

life in any depth” (92). I propose that nothing could be further from the truth; Blume attracts young readers like moths to a flame because she explores emotion, social issues, and human experience in such a candid, empathetic, and often humorous light. An examination of Blume’s life, her response to criticism, her writing style, and her novels reveals how the candor and empathy provided in her works meet a need for information and advice that family, school, and other social institutions are not providing for young adults. An analysis of *Forever*, *Blubber*, and *Tiger Eyes* reveals the thematic significance, narrative skills, and symbolic resonance in her novels.

Dr. Donald Gallo, past president of the Assembly on Literature for Adolescents conducted an intriguing study in 1982. He asked nearly 3,500 students in grades four through twelve throughout Connecticut to list up to three of the best books they had read on their own in the previous two years. Blume’s name topped the list in every grade, from elementary to high school students (Gallo 32). Gallo concludes, “There probably hasn’t been any other writer in history who has been that popular. We ought to look at why and we ought to learn from it” (32). Blume’s popularity is indeed something to consider and learn from; an examination of her own life provides a key to her inspiration and her status among young adults.

CHAPTER 1

Judy Blume's Popularity: Issues and Context

Blume has been through a great deal of trauma during her life. In *Presenting Judy Blume*, Maryann Weidt discusses Blume's biographical information as well as her literary accomplishments. Blume experienced death early in life; during her childhood she lost a cousin, three grandparents, and six aunts and uncles (Weidt 6). Like Kath in *Forever*, Blume lost a grandparent while away at summer camp. Her older brother David was not a model student and spent most of his time in his basement workshop. Because he did not work hard to please others, Blume felt that she had to be "Little Miss Sunshine" all the time (Weidt 13). Blume says she still feels the need to please people.

Blume has experienced three marriages; to John Blume in 1959, to Thomas Kitchens in 1976, and to George Cooper in 1987 (Weidt xiii). She speaks openly about her marriages, admitting that when she married John Blume at the age of twenty-one, she was not emotionally ready to become a wife and shortly thereafter a mother. Blume says that following her divorce, she "wanted to taste and experience life. I wasn't terrible. I was responsible. I was working. I loved the kids. But I was rebelling, I think, in ways one should rebel at seventeen. My divorce was all part of that rebellion" (Weidt 8). Blume admits that she "was the classic story, someone who couldn't stand not being married" (Gorner 2). Blume says that John "had married this little girl, and he was happy that way...It was a nice marriage. Only I was dying" (Gorner 2). It was not until she signed up for New York University's course in writing children's books that Blume felt independent. She would take the train to Manhattan, dine alone, and head to class. Blume loved the course (and the independence it allowed her) and took it a second time. Three

years later, in 1969, Blume published her first book: *The One in the Middle is the Green Kangaroo* (Weidtt xiii).

Blume feels guilty about moving her children from one place to another. Larry and Randy lived in the same house until they were nine and eleven. After that, Blume “dragged them all over the place” (Weidt 8). The theme of moving is reflected in Blume’s writing. After marrying Tom Kitchens, “the first man who said, ‘Hello, how are you?’” after her first divorce, Blume, Larry, and Randy lived in Los Alamos, New Mexico (Weidt 9). Blume learned that Los Alamos contained many talented women who had no outlets and even fewer job opportunities. She also detested the schools in Los Alamos for not giving kids the opportunity to think or a reward for thinking. Her daughter Randy once submitted a poem written completely in lower case letters. Her teacher’s comment was, “Who do you think you are, e.e. cummings?” (Weidt 9). Thus Blume’s childhood and adulthood contained experiences that gave her literary material and empathy with adolescent crises.

Blume has confronted criticism and censorship as candidly as she has adolescence. She deals with the criticism by “not internalizing it. I pretend they’re talking about someone else” (Weidt 35). Blume says she finds “the resistance to censorship” encouraging and that “It’s wonderful to see how local people who love to read will stand up and fight the censors” (Weidt 35).

In the National Coalition against Censorship’s *Symposium : The Sex Panic : Women, Censorship and "Pornography,"* prominent feminist activists, authors (including Blume), educators, and scholars join efforts to oppose censoring sexual speech. These authors

oppose any effort to restrict sexual speech not only because it would violate our cherished First Amendment freedoms – our freedoms to read, think, speak, sing, write, paint, dance, dream, photograph, film and fantasize as we wish – but also because it would undermine our equality, our status, our dignity, and our autonomy (National Coalition 8).

Blume contributes to *Symposium* with an essay entitled “Is Puberty a Dirty Word?” This essay defends childrens’ rights to read books so often challenged by censors. Blume discusses her first experience with censorship; she was ten and her mother told her not to read John O’Hara’s *A Rage to Live* (her mother’s reading preference at the time). After this, Blume’s “goal in life was to read *that* book” (National Coalition 37). Blume notes that if she had been allowed to read *A Rage to Live* when she was ten, she would have likely stopped after the first few pages. The worst that can happen if kids read books that adults wish they would not read is likely questions, and as Blume so aptly states, “the fear of answering those questions is enough to turn some adults into book banners” (National Coalition 37). Blume writes this essay not only for the children whose reading rights are taken away, but also for other banned authors like Robert Cormier and Norma Klein.

Examples of letters from parents are used to demonstrate parents’ concerns about Judy Blume books. One letter went something like this: “Do not send us any more Judy Blume books. They are damaging to little girls because in them...

1. Children lie...sometimes to their parents.
2. Children question parents and teachers.
3. They promote women’s lib” (National Coalition 39).

Blume believes that banning books for these reasons could be detrimental to children’s intellectual development. Blume describes the message this type of banning sends to

kids: “There’s something in these books we don’t want you to know about-something we don’t want to talk about” (National Coalition 39).

Blume believes that masturbation, for instance, is the “number one issue in the censorship cases” (Gorner 2). Blume has observed that “some religious groups tell their children that masturbation is sinful. ‘Margaret’ gets banned more because it discusses menstruation. It’s as if sexuality is a dirty subject. It’s very strange” (Gorner 2). The *International Companion Encyclopedia of Children’s Literature* quotes Blume’s commentary regarding sexual comfort levels: “I think that a lot of adults in our society are uncomfortable with their own sexuality, and therefore their children’s sexuality is a threat to them...” (Hunt and Ray 566).

Blume cites letters from readers to illustrate the need for kids to read about realistic issues. One letter from a twelve-year-old tells of her mother having the talk with her long after she knew everything about sex. The young girl says, “My mother wasn’t the first one to tell me. Actually she was the last” (National Coalition 40). Blume also includes letters from readers describing child abuse and cases of rape. Letters such as these illustrate that children are not growing up in a world of magic and unicorns, but are living in difficult, often painful situations. They are looking for solace through the realistic and emotionally raw kind of young adult literature for which Blume is famous.

Blume’s novels have received more criticism “than books by any other author of books for children and young adults” (Weidt 122). One major reason for so much criticism is Blume’s style of writing and subjects in realistic fiction. She writes candidly about characters who deal with problems in life, ranging from sex and death to classroom humiliation. Blume has been criticized in primarily three areas: language, sexuality, and

lack of moral tone, which Blume describes as not “hit[ting] the reader over the head with a message” (National Coalition 38). While Blume has indeed used swear words (sparingly) within her novels, they are often said in a way that nearly every child hears at some point within their own home. They are in no way a part of every paragraph, chapter, or even book. Sexuality is discussed in various novels by Blume because it is a part of young adulthood and is the main preoccupation of young adults’ minds. Blume’s lack of objectivity and lack of didacticism and moral judgments is what many young adults are longing for. Blume has a beautiful way of sending a message that readers can comprehend without being “hit over the head” with it (National Coalition 38). In her writing, rather than focusing on the problem, Blume portrays a character’s resolution of the problem. Norma Klein comments on the nature of problem novels: “That very term is revealing; it shows the extent to which we still regard any aspect of sexual development as negative, perforce a “problem” (Weidt 115). Blume is weary of defining her novels as problem novels.

Perhaps a better way to approach Blume’s novels is to view them as emotional how-to books that bring common adolescent anxieties to life. In “Judy Blume: New Classicism for Kids,” Stephen M. Garber claims that Blume is “an Ann Landers for the younger set, an explainer of the unclear, a validator of unvalidated and confusing experiences” (56). Her characters are typical; according to Garber, they are often the illustration of a problem (57). Blume makes such emotionally-charged and potentially traumatic situations seem ordinary. Blume often uses brand names to create reader association with the characters in her novels; these names also enhance the empathy that readers experience when reading novels by Blume. In *Tiger Eyes*, Jane listens to the

Eagles, has posters of Jimmy McNichol, Eric Heiden, and Bjorn Borg, and “uses a Revlon nail-care kit” (Garber 58). Davey also remembers how she “used to go to Woolworth’s and try out all the samples on the counter” (Garber 58). When the family goes to watch the hot air balloon festival, they stop at Dunkin’ Donuts where they stuff themselves with “honey glazed crullers” and “Munchkins” (Blume, *TE* 79). In *Blubber*, Jill’s father has promised her that he will give her twenty-five dollars to spend on stamps in Gimbels if she stops biting her nails.

In “Why Judy Blume Endures”, Mark Oppenheimer points out that kids would rather read about real problems than about fantastic stories. One critic writes,

When you think back to your childhood reading, what was it that stirred, excited, thrilled you with the unfolding potential drama of life...? Was it *Black Beauty*, *Mowgli* at the ceremony of fire, Tarzan discovering his nobility, Alice pertly talking back to the Queen? Or was it a kid just like you, worrying about gas pains, tomorrow’s math test and Mom’s pap smear? (Oppenheimer 44).

Blume herself has made a similar statement regarding adults’ inability to put themselves in their children’s shoes: “Adults have always been suspicious of books that kids like. It seems as if some adults choose to forget what mattered to them when they were children...Many adults do not trust children” (Hunt and Ray 566). Oppenheimer comments on the popularity of Harper Lee, J.D. Salinger, and S. E. Hinton even as the novels become more dated. These authors are all timeless because they are “that rarest of species, realism for young people” (Oppenheimer 45). Blume’s recognition of children’s serious thoughts about “sex, religion and class made her a figure of controversy” over thirty years ago; today, however, there is evidence that the shock has worn off (Oppenheimer 45). Blume received the American Library Association’s Margaret A. Edwards Award for lifetime achievement in 1996, and “Fudge” became a Saturday

morning sitcom in 1997. Oppenheimer points out, “In 1975, when the heroine of *Forever* decided to go on the pill, the book was daring. Now it is quaint” (45).

Censors often focus their attacks on five of Blume’s books: *Are you There God? It’s Me, Margaret*; *Then Again, Maybe I Won’t*; *Deenie*; *Blubber*; and *Forever*. Over sixty attempts to ban these novels were reported to the *Newsletter on Intellectual Freedom* during the 1980s, and it is estimated that many more attempts went unreported (Hunt and Ray 504). Except for *Blubber*, the censorship of Blume’s books is the result of sexual content (Hunt and Ray 504). In the fall of 1984, Blume’s books were banned in Peoria, Illinois. However, after a mother noticed that school board officials had removed Blume’s titles from her daughter’s school, a committee was formed and all the books were returned except for three. *Blubber*, *Deenie*, and *And Then Again, Maybe I Won’t* were not returned because the board “objected to Blume’s use of the word ‘damn’ and descriptions of the sexual stirrings of two teenaged characters” (Gorner 1). Other children’s authors, including Natalie Babitt, Madeleine L’Engle, Virginia Hamilton, Milton Meltzer, Katherine Paterson, Elizabeth George Speare and William Steig defended Blume. Fighting the battle alongside these award-winning authors, children came forward and testified about what the books meant to them (Gorner 1). The American Civil Liberties Union local chapter fought for Blume as well. At last, the board allowed the books to be reinstated “with the proviso they not be loaned to students under fourteen” (Gorner 1). Blume believes that the most “frightening thing about censors is their complete sense of self-righteousness” (Hunt and Ray 566).

One argument behind much criticism of Blume is that her writing “rushes the end of youthful innocence” (Gorner 1). Blume says that her novels “may force such parents to

talk to their children about uncomfortable subjects; rather than do that, it's easier to ban the book" (Gorner 1). Blume feels that it would be great if kids could talk with their parents about anything. She says, "That doesn't happen. And not just about sex. It's the real stuff of life. It's death, money, family relationships, religion – everything about which parents want merely to say, 'You do it because that's the way it is.' That's not really enough" (Gorner 2). Perhaps Blume so thoroughly enjoys clarifying the facts of life for her readers because her family never talked about problems. Blume says that when she was nine, "her father plunked her on his knee and nervously told her the facts of life. All she absorbed was that whenever the moon was full, women all over the world were menstruating" (Gorner 2).

In response to the criticism, Blume established the KIDS fund in 1981, which assists nonprofit organizations in developing programs that encourage communication between parents and teens and "foster parent-child discussion through books" (Weidt 36). Money also goes toward projects related to sexuality education, teen pregnancy prevention, child abuse, and problems with family stress.

Some history about children's literature and young adult literature also helps us understand why Blume is one of the most popular children's authors of all time. Blume's works have been compared to courtesy books, literature that advised young boys and girls on topics of morality and proper social conduct during the sixteenth and seventeenth century (Belok 307). While values and standards of behavior have changed, the role of books "advising" young people how to behave remains important. One mother commented on Barbauld's courtesy book entitled *Lessons for Children, Evenings at Home* (1792-96): "Before Mrs. Barbauld, there was scarcely anything between

‘Cinderella’ and the ‘Spectator’ for young persons” (Hemlow 751). Maria Edgeworth, author of *Practical Education* (1798), believed that works such as these were “the best books of the kind that have ever appeared” (Hemlow 751).

The early courtesy books were created to teach young men etiquette and how to succeed in life. In “The Courtesy Tradition and Early Schoolbooks,” Michael Belok addresses the ideal of virtue as the essential characteristic of courtesy books. Belok points out that the combining of character and learning has occurred since the days of Aristotle: “Education was for him a matter of character formation” (307). The main elements of virtue include “justice, prudence, temperance, fortitude, courtesy, [and] liberality” (Belok 307). Courtesy books also focused on the virtues of courage, calmness, self-control, and perseverance.

Courtesy books for young women focused on the virtuous behavior ladies should possess, as well as maintaining a good reputation. In *Practical Education*, Edgeworths writes, “No penance can absolve their guilty frame, Nor tears, that wash out sin, can wash out shame” (Hemlow 754). Edward Moore, author of *Fables for the Female Sex*, extols virtue: “Man may rove / Free and unquestioned through the wilds of love / ...woman no redemption knows, / The wounds of honour never close” (Hemlow 755). Other virtues that Renaissance ladies should possess include prudence, chastity, modesty, “a few modest accomplishments, silence, a melting sensibility (if real and not feigned), a blushing cheek, and a downcast eye” (Hemlow 755). Female virtues were quite different from those that courtesy books admired in young men. Men were encouraged to gain “wit, learning, savoir faire, and knowledge of the world” (Hemlow 755). Major courtesy-

book sins included artifice and coquetry; Fanny Burney criticized characters Evelina and Camilla for participating in such behavior.

Female characters possessing courtesy-book virtues also appeared in popular didactic novels. These include Harriet Byron in *Sir Charles Grandison* (1754), Miss Byron in Lady Mary Walker's *Letters from the Duchess of Crui* (1787), Sophia Melcombe in Clara Reeve's *Two Mentors* (1783), Emily in Henry Kett's *Emily, a Moral Tale* (1809), Lucilla Stanley in Hannah More's *Coelebs* (1809), Maria Hartley in Susanna Cooper's "Belinda; a Tale" *Moral Tales* (1811), Lady Aurora Granville in Madame d'Arblay's *The Wanderer* (1814), and Lavinia Tyrold in *Camilla* (1796) (Hemlow 756). These courtesy novels combine experience with the characters' values. In courtesy novels such as *Camilla*, a young woman often wins a husband after she gets rid of sinful behavior and grows to perfection through virtuous conduct. Edgar Mandlebert, the prospective husband in *Camilla*, "withdraws at the slightest evidence of coquetry, artifice, indecorum, impropriety, imprudence, singularity, levity, untractability, or vulgarity, to say nothing of the more serious defects of impiety or self-love" (Hemlow 759). Edgar only approaches his heroine when she demonstrates that she does away with all these imperfections. Stephen Garber, author of "Judy Blume: New Classicism for Kids," illustrates ways in which Blume's novels are similar to a divorce manual. In *It's Not the End of the World*, Karen and Val turn to *The Boys and Girls Book About Divorce* for guidance. Garber asserts, "Blume's fictions are probably of more use to the troubled child than Gardner's bald directives" (58). In *Tiger Eyes*, Davey refers to a magazine article and pamphlets to help Jane with her alcoholism. Not unlike these pamphlets and

the divorce manual, “Blume’s novels function as twentieth-century courtesy books, describing processes of handling problems” (Garber 59).

Blume’s novels indeed function as courtesy novels in today’s world. Unlike the courtesy books of the Renaissance which blatantly tell children how to believe and behave, Blume shows what can happen when one breaks certain moral laws and codes of conduct. Like the didactic novels, Blume allows young adults to experience mistakes without making them. In *Forever*, sexual boundaries are broken; while there are no physical consequences involved with this act, emotional turmoil is indeed a byproduct. In *Blubber*, one experiences the consequences of bullying and walking in someone else’s shoes. Like the courtesy book authors who warned young adults to live virtuously, Blume becomes a mentor/friend figure who guides readers through intense experiences while letting teenagers experience the emotions of the character. Like the warnings in courtesy novels, young adults vicariously experience negative consequences through characters such as the emotionally damaged Michael in *Forever* and Jill in *Blubber*, who learns a lesson by taking Linda’s place as the object of humility.

Like Blume’s novels, courtesy novels give readers warnings regarding negative choices and behavior. In *Camilla*, Eugenia illustrates the horrendous careers that may come upon those “who follow wrong systems of education” (Hemlow 759). Mrs. Berlinton of *Camilla* represents those “who give reins to imagination or passion” and Elinor Joddrel of *The Wanderer* demonstrates the results of adopting “new systems of morals or manners” (Hemlow 759). In the preface to *The Wanderer*, Madame d’Arblay discusses the appeal of courtesy novels: “It holds, therefore, in its hands our best affections; it exercises our imaginations; it points out the path of honour; and gives to

juvenile credulity knowledge of the world, without ruin, or repentance; and the lessons of experience without its tears” (Hemlow 759). Blume’s novels are often referred to as “emotional how-to” books. Whereas courtesy books advise young adults about proper manners and behavior, Blume’s novels help teenagers understand how to deal with their emotions. Whether they are the result or cause of a young adult’s behavior, emotions play a large part in Blume’s appeal as an author. While nineteenth and twentieth century didactic novels were informing young men and women about the rules of society, America’s social, economic, and political climate was changing; an age was developing that would lead to the rise of American young adult literature.

In *From Romance to Realism: 50 Years of Growth and Change in Young Adult Literature*, Michael Cart discusses the beginning of young adult literature in America. Most would agree that adolescence, a “stretching out of the transition between childhood and adulthood” was not recognized until after the Civil War (Cart 4). By assigning the beginning of young adulthood to this time period, one could assert that *Little Women* is the first true young adult novel (Cart 4). G. Stanley Hall, the first American Ph.D. in psychology and founder of the American Psychological Association sanctioned the existence of this “separate state” in his 1904 two-volume work *Adolescence: Its Psychology*. Some argue that it was after World War II when society required more education or training for certain professions that adolescence began. The American Library Association did not develop a Young Adult Services Division until 1958. In 1936, Helen Boylston’s *Sue Barton, Student Nurse* was published and quickly became one of the most popular books in the history of young adult literature. *Sue Barton* is about a young nurse and her career; the novel was the prototype of the career story, an

enormously popular subgenre among the earliest young adult books. *Sue Barton*'s six sequels conclude with her marrying a young doctor. Another subgenre in early young adult literature was the boy's adventure story (usually taking place at sea). In 1926 Howard Pease published *The Tattooed Man*, which is based on Pease's experience in the U.S. merchant marine during World War I. A 1939 survey of 1500 California students revealed that Pease was their favorite author (Cart 15). In 1938, John Tunis, a sportswriter for the *New York Post*, also utilized personal experience for his novel *The Iron Duke*. Rather than discuss play-by-play accounts of games, Tunis preferred to focus on the character of players and social issues.

Most scholars argue that although any of these authors could be labeled the first author of young adult literature, it was not until 1942 that the field of teenage literature began. Maureen Daly's first novel, *Seventeenth Summer*, was written when she was a teenager. Interestingly, she intended for the novel to be published as a "full adult novel" (Cart 16). The phrase was "junior novel" at the time; not until 1966 was the term "Young Adult" used for the American Library Associations' Best Books list (Cart 17). *The Catcher in the Rye*, *The Lord of the Flies*, *Mr. and Mrs. Bo Jo Jones*, *A Separate Peace*, and *To Kill A Mockingbird* were all published for adults, but were embraced by young adults. Daly's first-person writing "made it possible for readers to identify intimately with her and with her experiences" (Cart 18). Any scholar of young adult literature knows that the use of the first-person voice is "one of the most enduring characteristics of the young adult novel" (Cart 18). *Seventeenth Summer* may have spawned the young women's magazine *Seventeen*, first published in 1945. *Seventeen* magazine was known for topics such as first dates, proms, and popularity. Young adult novels covered a range

of categories, from sports and adventure stories to vocational tales and stories involving moral or ethical dilemmas. By the 1960s, this final category evolved into “problem” novels, a young adult literature category known as the “New Realism” (Cart 39).

S.E. Hinton’s *The Outsiders* played a major role in the New Realism. *The Outsiders* arrived in 1967; like Daly, Hinton was a teenager when she wrote the novel. The novel explores class warfare between two gangs through the eyes of fourteen-year-old Ponyboy Curtis, a young boy who feels as though society has made him an outsider. George Woods, children’s book editor of *The New York Times Book Review* recognized teenagers’ need for realism in 1965. He writes,

One looks for modernity, for boldness, for realism. A critic in touch with the world and aware of the needs of the young expects to see more handling of neglected subjects: narcotics, addiction, illegitimacy, alcoholism, pregnancy, discrimination, retardation. There are few, if any, definitive works in these areas (Cart 46).

Cart points out how realism eased its way in to the young adult literary canon: “It would be an uphill battle, though; for not only are young adults inherent romantics, they are inherent reality deniers, too” (62). Young adult literature began to delve into taboo topics: heroin abuse in Alice Childress’ *A Hero Ain’t Nothin’ But a Sandwich*; abortion in Paul Zindel’s *My Darling, My Hamburger*; homosexuality in John Donovan’s *I’ll Get There; It Better Be Worth the Trip*, and the military draft and possible avoidance of it in Nat Hentoff’s *I’m Really Dragged But Nothing Gets Me Down*.

One common complaint about the “problem” novel was that the problem (be it moral dilemma or social concern) became the focus of the novel rather than the character. Teens, however, enjoyed problem novels. Sheila Egoff offers five reasons for teens’ love of problem novels: therapeutic value (teens do not feel alone in their suffering), appeal of

the exotic (kids enjoy reading about issues foreign to themselves), flattery (young adults feel grown-up when learning about adult issues), prurience (teens “get a ‘delicious frisson’ from reading about the formerly unspeakable”), and peer pressure (everyone they know has read it) (Cart 68). Blume’s novels embody each of these traits. Numerous letters from her readers attest to the validity of the therapeutic value, appeal of the exotic, flattery, prurience, and peer pressure being the reasons for young adults’ love of Blume’s writing. Readers are better able to confront issues of human existence including sex, death, and humiliation after experiencing Kath and Michael’s relationship in *Forever*, Davey’s feelings in *Tiger Eyes*, and cruelty toward Linda (and Jill) in *Blubber*. *Forever*’s popularity is undoubtedly due to the adolescent needs and desires in Egoff’s five reasons for teens’ love of problem novels.

CHAPTER 2

Judy Blume's Major Novels

Blume wrote *Forever* because of all the “pregnant books” her daughter Randy was reading (such as *Mr. and Mrs. Bo Jo Jones*) (Weidt 37). A girl in these books had sex not because she was “excited sexually, but because she was mad at her parents. And she was always punished for it” (Weidt 37). In *Forever*, Michael, Katherine’s boyfriend, displays emotion and truly seems to care for Kath. Blume says that she wanted to “show that boys can love just as hard, feel just as much pain” (Weidt 38). *Forever* has been acknowledged as the book that made people realize that teens were considering whether or not to have sex; it also brought to light the responsibility that comes along with this choice (Hunt 390). Kath’s grandmother plays an important role by sending her information about Planned Parenthood. Grandparents (particularly grandmothers) play a key role in many other Blume novels including *Are You There God? It’s Me, Margaret*, *Then Again, Maybe I Won’t*, and *Starring Sally J. Freedman*. Blume says that she writes about grandmothers “because she hopes one day to be the kind of active grandmother portrayed in her books” (Weidt 40).

Blume believes that *Forever* is not for younger children. At book signings, children have asked her how old they should be before they read *Forever*; Blume tells them that they “should be at least twelve and then you should have somebody to talk to about it” (Sutton 25). Within the hardcover edition of *Forever*, the book’s jacket flaps state that this is “Judy Blume’s first novel for adults” (Sutton 25). Blume did not agree with this statement, but she knew that “Bradbury Press did that to protect themselves” (Sutton 25). Blume also comments on others analyzing her writing: “When I pick up a book of mine that I wrote even a few years ago, I wonder, How did I do this? I think the

more you understand something the worse off you are” (Sutton 26). Anyone who has ever written creatively understands her comment about analyzing his or her own work. Blume continues, “When you're writing, you're operating out of some different part of the brain. When it's happening, you're not aware of it, you don't know where what you write is coming from. And when you read it later, you think, Wow. I did that? It's like a surprise” (Sutton 27).

Forever has been praised for portraying the emotional part of sex. One California school teacher utilized *Forever* to discuss the emotional side of sex in a sex education class. The teacher is correct when she says, “Kids are told, be careful. You'll get V.D., but nobody ever says, be careful, you'll get your feelings hurt” (Weidt 41). Kath and Michael learn that the physical part of romantic relationships is not all that is required to maintain a lasting love. The beginning of the end for Kath and Michael occurs when they stop having fun together and focus only on sex. At the beginning of the novel, the couple enjoys talking on the phone and splashing one another with suds from the dish water. By the end of the novel, they skip school to spend the day in bed, and later spend the night on the beach and watch the sun come up the day before they are to leave for their summer jobs. By portraying Kath and Michael in this light, Blume shows readers the danger of letting a relationship become purely physical.

The character of Artie in *Forever* has been criticized due to his possible (and likely) homosexuality and events surrounding this element of his personality. Artie is Michael's friend who Katherine's friend Erica hangs out with and tries to date. Artie enjoys theater and is being pressured by his parents about college. However, Artie is not like most guys Erica had been around; he does not try to initiate any type of sexual

relationship with her. One night after receiving only a goodnight kiss on the cheek Erica asks Artie, “Are you queer?” to which Artie replies “I don’t know, Erica, but I’m trying to find out” (Blume, *Forever 761*). Artie threatens to commit suicide when Erica decides she does not want a guy who is not sure of what he wants. Eventually Artie attempted suicide by hanging himself from the shower curtain rod in his bathroom. The rod broke and Artie ended up with only a concussion and a few cuts and bruises. Cart points out that although Blume does not seem to intentionally be sending such a message, she is asserting that “If you are gay and thus unable or unwilling to have sex with a willing girl you are doomed either to kill yourself or to be declared insane and be institutionalized” (197). Cart also criticizes the lack of description of Katherine’s life outside of Michael and their newly discovered sex lives. Cart writes, “We hear her characters talking endlessly but we don’t see enough of their doing-beyond the sex act, that is-and we don’t see enough of their world, either, to be able to evaluate the validity of their responses to it” (201).

The reason for not knowing a great deal of outside information is because Blume is a master of the inside; the feelings, the strivings, the heart of the matter. When a young girl experiences her first love, her mind is not on the peripheral elements of her world such as friends, school, or the future. Her mind is focused on her boyfriend and his needs, desires, likes, and dislikes; his past, present and future plans now become her own. One observes that while family, friends, and activities that do not involve Michael are rarely discussed, Katherine does think about these parts of her life. She takes time, for example, to describe Sybil, Erica, her mother, father, grandmother, and even her younger sister Jamie’s creative abilities. Katherine also discusses her tennis skills and her feelings about

Theo, a college senior who she meets at summer camp. Katherine thinks and talks about that which is most important to her, allowing Blume to illustrate how a relationship that one thought would last a lifetime often does not make it to forever. Blume illustrates how sex eclipsed other things that should have been important in Michael and Kath's lives. Blume does not just tell the reader, but shows him or her truths of teenage sexuality, thus delivering an implicit rather than explicit message.

Both Katherine in *Forever* and Davey in *Tiger Eyes*, recognize their own weaknesses and are making an attempt to correct them. Like Katherine, Davey "volunteers in a hospital to help herself overcome her fears regarding the elderly" (Weidt 43). Katherine directs her life and considers the consequences of her choices throughout *Forever*. When Kath purchases birth control, she demonstrates that she is taking control of her own future. Although she is immature at times, she does ask Michael to wait until she feels emotionally and mentally ready to have sex. Blume asserts that the theme of the novel is not sexuality, but "making thoughtful choices regarding your life and taking responsibility for these choices" (Weidt 44).

Forever is a novel that represents the emotional, as well as the physical, side of sex. The story also portrays the importance of family love and support during the teenage years. Kath's parents are happily married and are involved with Kath but do not seem too overprotective. They do not give Kath a curfew, but they do expect her go to their bedroom and tell them when she gets home from dates or hanging out with friends. Kath's parents discussed parking with her when she first began dating "guys who drove" (Blume, *Forever* 746). She is allowed to have her dates hang out in the den; her parents feel this is safer than parking where "crazies in this world...have been known to prey on

couples” (Blume, *Forever* 746). Blume developed this part of *Forever* from her own parents’ views about bringing her boyfriends home. Blume writes, “I never had to park on a dark road to be alone with a boy. I was assured privacy at home” (*Letters* 201).

Kath is close to her sister Jamie, who is a talented artist. Kath admits that realizing that her younger sister looks up to her helped her “get over being jealous of all her talents” (Blume, *Forever* 746). Jamie likes Michael and is flattered when he compliments her artwork. She also enjoys cooking for Michael one night when only Kath, Michael, and herself will be eating together. Jamie is in the kitchen all day preparing “veal marsala, spinach salad and lemon chiffon pie. Michael devoured everything” (Blume, *Forever* 753). As Michael leaves that night, he kisses Kath goodnight and then gives Jamie a goodnight kiss on the cheek; after he leaves, Jamie says, “I think Michael is the nicest boy in the whole world” (Blume, *Forever* 755). The reader can feel Kath’s happiness grow as Jamie becomes closer to Michael.

Kath’s parents trust her throughout the novel; her mom gives her an article from the *New York Times* about the emotional side of sex which invites conversation about the (often) taboo topic. The article is titled “What about the right to say ‘no’”; it discusses four questions regarding sex: “Is sexual intercourse necessary for the relationship?; What should you expect from sexual intercourse; If you should need help, where will you seek it?; Have you thought about how this relationship will end?” (Blume, *Forever* 782). Mom casually asks Kath over breakfast what she thinks of the article; Kath replies that she agrees “With some of it...like a person shouldn’t ever feel pushed into sex...or that she has to do it to please someone else...” (Blume, *Forever* 782). This is the kind of realism with which kids can identify; millions of readers have experienced similar conversations

with parents regarding sexuality (no doubt at the breakfast table). In *Letters to Judy: What Kids Wish They Could Tell You*, Blume discusses the issues parents have with talking to their kids about sex. She points out that the key is for parents to help kids make wise decisions by informing them about sexually transmitted diseases, pregnancy, and family beliefs. She writes, “We can’t control our kids’ behavior but we can share our views on what’s right for our family, and why” (Blume, *Letters* 221). Blume points out how some kids prefer to be given sexual limits, whereas others, like her son Larry, prefer “focusing on sexual facts and responsibility” (*Letters* 212). Weidt believes “Katherine is secure in the support she receives from her parents, from her grandmother, and even from her younger sister. Katherine’s strength is grounded in generations of supportive family ties, and that, after all, is the basis for the love that lasts forever” (47).

Blume receives letters galore from readers about *Forever*. Kim, age seventeen, realized after reading *Forever* that her relationship with her boyfriend “may not continue like it is now, forever. I only wish I had read it sooner. Maybe I would have held off when it came to sex with Adam” (Blume, *Letters* 216). Daniel, age nineteen, writes Blume and proves that boys very often do get hurt in relationships and can love just as hard as women. Daniel was engaged after dating his girlfriend for six months and then she broke up with him. After this, Daniel tried to commit suicide but at the last minute threw up the pills he had taken. After reading *Forever*, Daniel realized that “no one can take my memories away from me” (Blume, *Letters* 216). The last line of Daniel’s letter is quite telling about Blume’s gift as an author and friend: “You made me see how much there is to live for” (*Letters* 216). Letters like these provide support for allowing young adults to read *Forever*, rather than for censoring the novel due to its sexual material.

Blume includes a description from a letter she received from sixteen-year-old Melissa about jealousy over her friend getting married (because she was fourteen and pregnant). The next letter she received from Melissa was completely different; her friend's husband would not let her friend hang out with her anymore unless he came along also. Melissa has observed that "the romantic married life she imagined is far from realistic" (Blume, *Letters* 217). By writing about real-life situations, Blume has once again warned young adults of the dangers of sexual intercourse and the emotions that are sure to come along with it. In *Letters*, Blume repeats the four questions from the *New York Times* article she used in *Forever*. She reminds kids that "It's up to you to take control. It's your body. It's your life" (Blume, *Letters* 218). Blume warns readers to utilize the brain when emotions of love begin to cloud their minds: "It's wonderful to be in love, to discover sexual attraction, but that doesn't mean you can't think anymore" (*Letters* 218).

Forever was the first of Blume's novels to become a film. The television movie aired on CBS on February 6, 1978. Blume felt that the director, John Korty, was "true to what the story was all about" (Weidt 46). The only major change when making the book into a movie is that Michael and Kath go rock climbing instead of skiing. This is altered because the movie was filmed in San Francisco. Korty discovered the boy who plays Michael selling shoes in a store in Oakland, California. Stephanie Zimbalist, who was nineteen at the time, played Katherine. Several scripts were written, but Korty eventually used dialogue from the novel. There was conflict with the CBS executives who wanted to cut out the sex scenes, but for the most part, Korty won that battle (Weidt 46).

Blubber stemmed from an experience Blume's daughter, Randy, had at school. Blume discusses the occurrence: "Randy was especially upset by the way one girl in her

class, Cindy, had become the victim of the class leader. One day during lunch period the leader of the class and her group locked Cindy in a supply closet and held a mock trial. Cindy was found guilty. ‘Guilty of what?’ I asked Randy at the dinner table...Guilty of lack of power is my guess” (Weidt 91).

Blubber is primarily about three characters: Wendy, the cruel leader; Linda, the natural victim; and Jill, the observer. Jill and her brother Kenny are based on Randy and Larry Blume. Blume believes that “none of us realize how vicious children can be. I don’t think the kind of thing Linda is subjected to is unusual; in fact, things in the real world of the fifth grade make her experience pale in comparison” (Weidt 93). Richard Jackson thinks that “one of Judy’s points is that you can cast yourself into a loser role. And that’s your choice” (Weidt 93). Blume says, “I would never say that Linda was asking for it” (Weidt 93). She also asserts that a lot of classroom cruelty depends on the teacher. She says that teachers can reduce cruelty “by being sensitive to the students, providing an atmosphere that is warm, secure, and free from fear, and bringing the subject of how we treat each other out in the open” (Weidt 94).

The teacher in *Blubber*, Mrs. Minish, is not described in the best light. She is observed dozing while Linda is giving her report on whales. This is when Wendy passes a note around that reads, “Blubber is a good name for her” (Blume, *Blubber* 5). Because Mrs. Minish is dozing, she does not see this. One of the many letters to Blume tells of a fifth-grade teacher who reads *Blubber* to his new class every fall. After completing the novel, he discusses the problems presented in the book. Since he began doing this, “he has noticed a decline in the level of cruelty in the classroom and an increase in the level of caring” (Weidt 94).

Mrs. Minish grades harshly even when Jill gets the entire math problem correct. Mrs. Minish says, “You’re supposed to be learning how to think problems through and you aren’t thinking the right way” (Blume, *Blubber* 29). Jill stands up for herself by asking, “Isn’t there more than one way to think?” (Blume, *Blubber* 30). Mrs. Minish reprimands Jill for “talking back” (Blume, *Blubber* 30). Mrs. Minish closes her eyes figuratively over an incident concerning Linda being forced to eat a chocolate-covered ant. When the principal talks to the class about it, Mrs. Minish says “I can’t believe my class would act that way” (Weidt 94). Except for a “lunch teacher” who wonders through the halls monitoring each class, Mrs. Minish leaves the class to themselves at lunch time (along with the other teachers), which makes Jill “mad to think of them sitting in some nice restaurant eating hamburgers and french fries” (Blume, *Blubber* 52). Ms. Rothbelle, the music teacher, does not treat students any better than Mrs. Minish. Ms. Rothbelle, in fact, inflicts physical pain on her students by pulling ears, hitting one on the head with a pen, and pulling strands out of Linda Fischer’s hair for not answering her correctly. This discussion of teachers illustrates a common problem that young adults face every day: aloof, insincere educators. Reading *Blubber* invites children to experience Mrs. Minish in a humorous light, undoubtedly easing some of their own feelings regarding teacher-related problems.

Blume titles her novels in ways that are eye-catching and simple for young readers to remember. An analysis of the titles reveals an interesting pattern; each of these titles addresses the reader just as the narrator is addressed. For example, the word “forever” is directed toward Kath, Michael, and the reader. As one learns more and more about Kath and Michael’s relationship, he or she begins to realize that their love is not

going to last forever. Therefore, this title reminds readers that sexual love may not be the “forever” kind of love they desire.

Not only is *Blubber* directed toward readers in the title; it is also the subject of the novel. The novel opens with Linda giving a report on whales, during which she goes into great detail about blubber: “Removing the blubber from a whale is a job done by men called flensers. They peel off the blubber with long knives and uh...cut it into strips” (Blume, *Blubber* 4). The one who learns the lesson about humiliating others is Jill rather than Linda, the slightly overweight girl who is given the name “Blubber.” Like Jill, the reader learns that one must consider another’s perspective before jumping to conclusions. By seeing or hearing the word “Blubber,” the reader cannot help remembering the pain associated with name-calling.

In the *Bulletin of the Center for Children’s Books*, Zena Sutherland discusses the change in Jill, saying, “Realistically, no miracles happen. The social relationships settle down, but Linda is still an outsider and Wendy still arrogant. The change is in Jill, whose sense of values shifts to include the compassion that understanding another’s position brings” (Weidt 95). Like *Forever*, *Blubber* is not a book that tells kids what to do. It does not say, “Being mean is bad” just as *Forever* does not say “sex is wrong.” Blume does say, however, that “Cruelty hurts” while allowing the reader to make emotional connections and draw his or her own conclusions.

Blume’s novels often force readers to understand another’s position. In *Blubber*, for example, Jill discusses the way Linda is treated with her mother. Jill’s mother discusses how she would “laugh it off” if someone called her names because “A person who can laugh at herself will be respected” (Blume, *Blubber* 62). Jill implies that Linda

lets everyone in class “walk all over her,” to which her mother replies, “You should try putting yourself in her place” (Blume, *Blubber* 62). Just as Jill is receiving her mother’s tender advice, the reader, who sees the story from an outside perspective, cannot help agreeing with Jill’s mother.

Tiger Eyes was written after Blume’s “second marriage had ended disastrously” (Weidt 103). Fear is the key theme throughout *Tiger Eyes*; “the fear of violence, of strangers, of danger, and the greatest of all, of annihilation” (Weidt 104). Blume discusses how childhood fears may be heightened by adults’ attempts to hide them. She asserts,

I hate the idea that you should always protect children. They live in the same world we do. They see things and hear things. The worst is when there are secrets, because what they imagine, and have to deal with alone, is usually scarier than the truth. Sexuality and death-those are the two big secrets we try to keep from children, partly because the adult world isn’t comfortable with them either. But it certainly hasn’t kept kids from being frightened of those things. (Weidt 104).

Blume believes that children live in the real world and must deal with tough issues. In *Tiger Eyes*, fear of death is interplayed with fear of the atomic bomb. Davey, her mom, and her brother Jason are “struggling to come to grips with decimating anonymous violence while seeking security in Los Alamos (the Atomic City)” (Weidt 107). Davey is keenly aware of the “hypocrisy of, among other things, a middle class which designs bombs during the week and worships on Sundays” (Weidt 107). Uncle Walter is an ordinary man who builds bombs. Walter explains that his job helps ensure that “no one will ever attack us. But if they really do, we’ll be ready. And being ready is more than half the battle” (Blume, *Tiger Eyes* 73). After Davey counters, “But if nobody made bombs in the first place...” Walter purports that that would be nice but “that’s not the way of the world” (Blume, *TE* 73).

Davey makes friends with Jane who is smart and wealthy but also an unconfident alcoholic. Jane is a candystriper and Davey decides to become one also. Here she meets Mr. Ortiz who is dying of cancer and is also her boyfriend Wolf's father. They help Davey through her grief, anger, and fear. Davey is fifteen when her father is killed; Blume was twenty-one when her father died from a heart attack at the age of fifty-four. According to Weidt, "Her father's sudden death from a heart attack at the age of fifty-four made Judy realize what a fragile thing life really was...When he died, part of Judy died, too" (107).

Walter and Bitsy take no chances in life. Davey says, "They will probably live to be 100" (Weidt 108). These fears are accentuated when they do not allow Davey to learn to drive or ski. Davey is bored with Los Alamos, claiming, "This town suffers from a chronic case of the blahs" (Blume, *TE* 159). She takes charge when she demands that her mom stop taking headache medicine. This shows her maturity and that she is coming to grips with the situation. Further signs of Davey's maturity are the love and care she shows for her younger brother Jason. She has to become the mother figure for him when their mother decides to stay in her room all the time. When Davey's mother is ready to leave Los Alamos, Bitsy says that Atlantic City is not safe. Her mother says that she cannot let safety and security become the focus of her life.

A similar idea is discussed in *Forever* when Kath and Michael begin to argue after Kath touches a nerve about venereal disease. Kath warns Michael about taking sexual risks: "You should never take chances" (Blume, *Forever* 776). Michael replies by saying, "That's easy for you to say...you always think of everything, don't you?" (Blume, *Forever* 776). Michael says, "You probably never took a chance in your life"

(Blume, *Forever* 776). After this intense fighting scene, Kath and Michael realize that things are not going the way they planned after being apart for a week and decide to start the night over. This idea of taking chances is important to Blume because she believes in taking chances and experiencing life. After Blume's divorce from her first husband, she experienced a deep desire to "taste and experience life" (Weidt 8).

An interesting scene occurs in *Tiger Eyes* when Davey, her mother, Jason, Walter, and Bitsy drive to Albuquerque to watch the annual hot air balloon festival. Everyone watches the sky full of beautiful colors; when Jason asks Davey if she would go up in one, she replies "In a minute" (Blume, *TE* 79). Right away Bitsy comments on the danger of the balloons: "It's beautiful to watch, but only a fool would actually participate" (Blume, *TE* 79). Walter further reinforces the hazard of hot air balloons and the fact that he will not allow Davey or Jason to ride in one: "There's no point in arguing over whether you would or wouldn't; it's a moot question" (Blume, *TE* 79). Jason asks what "moot" means and Walter replies, "It means it doesn't matter because it isn't going to happen" (Blume, *TE* 79). Davey is ready to seize the day and live life to the fullest. Her desire to try new things such as riding in a hot air balloon starkly contrasts with Walter and Bitsy's fear of anything potentially dangerous. Davey's mother views the balloons as a method of escaping the sadness of life without her husband. She says that she would like to "go up and never come down" (Blume, *TE* 79). As they ride home, Davey promises herself that one day she will ride in a hot air balloon. Jason is enthralled with the balloons and keeps talking about them; Bitsy says, "there are accidents almost every year... something always goes wrong" (Blume, *TE* 80). Davey remembers this comment

and monitors the local newspaper every day for a week; she does not find a story about any hot air balloon accidents.

Davey displays no fear when she climbs down into the canyon (which Walter and Bitsy told her not to do) and contemplates her own death and how quickly life can be over. She calls out to her dead father, and the voice that answers is that of Wolf. After this Davey is hungry for the first time since her father died; she eats a chicken sandwich Bitsy left for her. After that she sings in the shower, which is also something she has not done since the tragedy. She imagines herself singing for the Resorts International Hotel and Casino; everyone in her fantasy enjoys her performance. She imagines Wolf “rush[ing] up to the stage” with a bouquet of white roses after her show is finished (Blume, *TE* 55). This is Davey’s first fantasy about the future since her dad’s death; she is happy because Wolf makes her feel alive.

Wolf gives Davey the name “Tiger Eyes.” It is Davey who tells Wolf that he can call her Tiger when he asks her name. Because Davey likes to listen to Wolf tell stories of the Anasazi, the Ancient Ones, Wolf buys her a book called *The First Americans* which is about the history of the area. On the first page Wolf has written, “To Tiger Eyes, who makes me laugh. From Wolf” (Blume, *TE* 84). Wolf calls her this because of the way her eyes “change color in the light, from golden to brown” (Blume, *TE* 85). Davey is touched by this term of endearment from Wolf, who makes her feel glad to be alive. She even writes his name over and over again to remind herself of the joy of being alive, rather than dwell on thoughts of the night of her father’s shooting. She writes it in all caps, lowercase letters, and even spells it backward (which she is “surprised to find that it spells a word”) (Blume, *TE* 61). Davey enjoys imagining her and Wolf living in a cave

together hundreds of years ago: “We would make love on rocks that have been warmed by the sunshine. We would raise babies, fat and happy” (Blume, *TE* 84). Spending time with Wolf brings Davey back to life in many ways, including fantasizing about having a family of her own one day. By titling the novel *Tiger Eyes*, Blume tells readers to be hopeful for the future and not afraid of unknown fears and challenges. This is a comfort to young adults who often fear the unknown. The reader, like Davey, learns that “La vida es una buena aventura” (Life is a good adventure) (Blume, *TE* 216).

Another reassuring feature of Blume’s novels is that many of her characters feel empowered and that life makes sense at the end. Like most adolescents, Davey often feels alienated and powerless. Throughout *Tiger Eyes*, Davey overcomes her fears by helping others with their own problems. Davey warns her friend Jane to stop being scared of boys, the likely cause of her alcoholism. Jane is also afraid of Spanish-speaking boys when she and Davey go shopping in Santa Fe. Davey tells Jane that it is foolish to be afraid of people you don’t even know.

Blume also uses symbolic details effectively. Sunsets are a key symbol in the novel. Davey watches the sunset when Mr. Ortiz, one of her patients and, conveniently, also Wolf’s father, tells her he is dying. Like the sun disappearing, Mr. Ortiz is slowly disappearing. His toy bear slowly stops dancing, much like Mr. Ortiz is slowly dying. Mr. Ortiz tells Davey that he is ready to die; he has been “in and out of the hospital” battling cancer (Blume, *TE* 107). After he tells her this, she stares out the window at the New Mexican sunset. Davey describes the colors of the sunset: “The whole sky turns pink, then red, then purple” (Blume, *TE* 107). Her next thought is “Why did he have to tell me he is dying?” (Blume, *TE* 107). At this point in the novel, Davey is still dealing with her

father's death. By communicating with a man who is ready to die, she becomes more comfortable with death in general.

She begins to talk about death with her friend Jane when they meet after candy striping. As they begin walking home, Davey asks, "Would you rather die slowly, of cancer, or fast, like being shot?" (Blume, *TE* 108). Jane replies, "I'm not sure. With the cancer you'd probably have time to get ready. And you'd feel so sick you'd probably want it to be over. If you got shot, well, it'd be so sudden..." (Blume, *TE* 108). Davey then interrupts Jane and says, "You wouldn't have time to say goodbye" (Blume, *TE* 108). Davey's willingness to discuss death with Jane, as well as with Wolf and Mr. Ortiz, signifies the progress that Davey is making regarding her father's death. Slowly but surely, Davey becomes more comfortable with the tragedy of human existence.

When shopping with Jane, Davey spots a candle covered with picturesque sunsets and buys it for her dad because he always loved sunsets. A beautiful healing scene occurs when Davey burns her dad's Christmas present. This scene is quite moving; as she watches the candle burn and the New Mexican sunset disappear, Davey says 'Merry Christmas, Daddy. I wish you were here' (Blume, *TE* 154). The colors of the sunset seem to speak to Davey and give her comfort that life is beautiful even in its purple, near-death stage. Like a sunset, life can become dim after a family member dies. The rising sun, however, represents the gift Davey receives each morning: a brand new day.

CHAPTER 3

Letters to Judy

In *Letters to Judy: What Kids Wish they Could Tell You*, Blume shares letters from her young fans that range in subject area from social acceptance and health problems to crushes and incest. These letters illustrate the close relationship she has with her young adult readers. This relationship is one of empathy and honesty; letters from readers reveal that Blume is trustworthy and able to help them with their problems. Children indeed look to Blume as not only an understanding author, but a friend and mentor. She lets kids believe the lyrics of “I Will Survive” by illustrating tough situations that so many children go through and ways in which they come out alright on the other side.

Blume writes her own commentary at the end of each section, includes stories from her own life, and discusses ways she overcame personal issues. Many readers write to her recommending that she write a book about a topic that is of great importance to them. One reader, Olivia, who suffers from cystic fibrosis volunteers herself along with a few friends to be Blume’s “reference sources” as she writes the book (Blume, *Letters* 79). Olivia tells Blume the issues she has regarding classmates who do not understand her disease, and recommends that Blume’s book “mix facts with the character’s personality” because “that is important in a good book” (Blume, *Letters* 79). Mixing facts with a character’s personality is precisely the approach Blume takes in many of her novels. Audrey, fifteen, can relate to Deenie, a character based on Wendy, a fourteen-year-old who Blume met in 1970 who suffered from scoliosis. Audrey, like Deenie, felt extremely embarrassed when having to walk the halls of high school while fellow students whispered about her. She eventually realized, however, that the kids simply “wanted to

know what my brace was for” (Blume, *Letters* 80). Blume consistently discusses the need of young adults to understand the facts of life, particularly when it comes to physical illnesses, rather than be left in the dark. In *Letters*, Blume writes, “What kids imagine is usually worse than the truth, so instead of hiding the facts from them, talk to them. Share your feelings and encourage them to share theirs. And remind them that curiosity should not be mistaken for lack of sensitivity” (86).

Children use their letters to Blume to cry out for help regarding their feelings about divorce. In *Letters*, Blume writes candidly about her experiences with two ex-husbands, along with the pain she caused Randy and Larry during those difficult times. She writes about how she jumped “from the frying pan into the fire” by marrying the first man who came along after her first divorce (Blume, *Letters* 93). Blume encourages parents and children going through a divorce to face the facts, get real with one another, and not “try to get through it alone” (*Letters* 92). Yvette, age ten, worries about her mother wanting to move to California and the frightening possibility of leaving her father. She concludes her letter with “Help!” (Blume, *Letters* 96). When Candace, age eleven, comes home one day to find her mother’s clothes gone from the closet, she describes her shock because her parents had “a little spat every now and then, but no real serious fights, at least not around me” (Blume, *Letters* 93). Candace discusses how “two-faced” she feels over having to adjust herself “to a whole new way of life” after visiting her father (Blume, *Letters* 94). Candace tells Blume that her previously creative mind has been unable to develop and write stories about pictures since the divorce. Candace lets Blume know that she is in “desperate need of help” and that she is writing “in need of a

friend, not a famous writer” (Blume, *Letters* 94). Her novels’ realism and promise of hope forge many such bonds with young readers.

By sharing letters from adults as well as children, Blume helps kids understand their parents or teacher’s views about particular issues. Richard, a divorced father who was having fights with his ex-wife about how much time the kids should spend with him, writes to Blume about her novel *Smart Women*. Richard read the novel looking for insights that could help with the fight with his ex-wife. Richard cites the passage that struck him; it occurs when Michelle, seventeen, is reflecting on her visit with her father, Freddy:

During Christmas vacation one of Freddy’s friends had come over to visit. He had three messed up teenagers from his first marriage but now he was married again and his new wife was pregnant. “This time I’m going to do it right,” he’d told Freddy. “I know a lot more about raising kids now. Forget the permissive stuff. What they need is authority!” Bull...Michelle thought. What they need is love. (Blume, *Letters* 100).

Richard pondered the line “What they need is love,” phoned his ex, and ended the fight. He then thanks Blume for the insight and the “plug for divorced fathers. We needed that!” (Blume, *Letters* 101). Blume maintains a broad audience comprised of adults as well as children. Letters such as this one illuminate Blume’s ability to empathize with readers during major life events such as divorce and custody battles.

Blume also includes letters from children dealing with divorce who are trying to come to grips with their feelings about their parents’ new partners. Alana, age eleven, writes of her worries about her, her mom, and her little sister managing on their own. She is also mad at her father “for going out with another woman while he was married” (Blume, *Letters* 103). The part that really makes Alana furious is the way her dad is “going to that other woman’s house” and “playing with her kids” (Blume, *Letters* 103).

At the end of her letter, Alana reveals that although she feels angry and sad about everything, she really does love her dad “deep down inside” (Blume, *Letters* 104). Darlene, age eleven, writes about her misery concerning the guy her mom is planning to marry: “she doesn’t care about me anymore. I get to see my dad about every two weeks. What should I do? I need your help” (Blume, *Letters* 104). Blume writes about Randy and Larry’s adjustment to her new husband and the difficulties they faced. She discusses her second marriage and the way she wanted her kids to quickly accept and love her new husband. Blume also comments on the need of the primary parent to not feel caught in the middle of his or her children and the new spouse. Blume’s second husband “admitted that he felt jealous of the time and attention” she gave Larry and Randy; Blume realized that “he didn’t want to share me with them or with anyone else, making life “an impossible competition” (*Letters* 107). By including this candid, personal information for readers, Blume allows children to experience their parents’ struggles while revealing parental views concerning their children’s emotions.

Blume confides in her readers as she writes about the pain involved with being a stepmother (through her current husband): “It’s the hardest role I’ve ever played” (*Letters* 112). One stepmother, Barbara, confides in Blume after seeing her on television. On the show, Blume said, “It’s terrible, but I have never received a positive letter from one of my young readers concerning a stepmother” (*Letters* 112). Barbara goes on to describe the anguish she feels because her sixteen-year-old stepdaughter does not talk to her or even look at her. Blume suggests looking at the situation from both points of view. She advises parents to assume a child’s perspective: “Suddenly you’re competing for your parent’s attention and affection with a stranger. How do you feel? How do you behave?”

And doesn't this new person resent you, too?" (*Letters* 113). She also points out the need for children to have individual time with their primary (biological) parent. Blume empathizes with parents and children by asking them to empathize with each other. This consideration of another's emotions illustrates Blume's depth as a person and as an author.

With regard to one parent dying and the other remarrying, Blume observes that "the myth of *Cinderella* is still alive and well" (*Letters* 116). Letters from readers describe feelings of anger, sadness, and disappointment regarding their parents' choice of a new spouse. Some discuss mean stepfathers who make them do chores that the deceased parent never made them do; most discuss evil stepmothers who make all the decisions within the home. Audra, age twelve, writes that her stepmother does not like her friends, her boyfriend, and made her change schools; she wanted to play soccer, but because her stepmother "said no I don't get to play" (Blume, *Letters* 115). Kelly, age thirteen, writes about how her stepmother does not believe her or have any confidence in her. Kelly does not like seeing her give "her children a pat on the back or a compliment or a kiss. She never does these things to me" (Blume, *Letters* 116). Letters such as these indeed prove that the *Cinderella* myth is not such a myth after all. Blume reminds stepparents that kids need to talk about the parent who died; "It would be good if the new stepparent didn't turn such feelings into a competition" (*Letters* 117). Blume also points out the need for parents to "consider not only their own feelings and needs but those of their kids" after such a traumatic event (*Letters* 119).

The impact of a parent's death is a topic which adults, as well as children, must learn to accept and understand. Because of the traumatic content of *Tiger Eyes*, many

readers identify with Davey and her emotional roller coaster ride after her father was shot while working in his convenient store. Ashley, age fifteen, can relate to Davey after her mom begins dating “the Nerd.” Ashley writes, “I try to like him but it’s hard. I sometimes feel he might try to take the place of my father and no one could ever do that” (Blume, *Letters* 136). The book helped Ashley come to grips with her feelings and know that she, like Davey, has to be strong, “if only for my mother’s sake” (Blume, *Letters* 136). Emily, age fifteen, lost her father to a heart attack and read *Tiger Eyes* after her teacher recommended it. Emily discusses her mother’s sadness and how tough it is to adjust to not having her father present. She seems to have benefited from the message of *Tiger Eyes* in her final statement: “I miss him but life goes on” (Blume, *Letters* 137). Nicholas, age fourteen, discusses the death of his grandmother and the impact it had on him. He was depressed for about a year before trying to kill himself by jumping from a window. After being hospitalized and released, Nicholas discovered *Tiger Eyes* and learned, “there are so many memories...but you can’t go back. Not ever. You have to pick up the pieces and keep moving on” (Blume, *Letters* 260).

Children look to Blume as a mentor, someone with whom they can share their darkest feelings, a friend who understands what they are going through. Edie, age eleven, confides in Blume, saying “I talk to the wind and I tell my house goodnight. I’ve never told anybody that, not even my mother” (*Letters* 135). She tells Blume how her father died a year ago and how writing a book about all of her emotions would perhaps make her feel better. Edie desires to talk with Blume about her feelings: “You would be the best person plus the one I would be most comfortable talking to about this” (*Letters* 135).

Another reader, Doria, admits a truth about Blume with which other readers so often sympathize: “I know you aren’t any psychiatrist or Abby, but I thought you would be able to help me with my problem since you seem to be like us” (*Letters* 138). This element of “seem[ing] to be like us” is part of Blume’s appeal for young readers. They recognize that they have experienced similar emotions as their favorite author. Audra writes about her grandfather’s death and the pain she feels. She also mentions how “everyone is changing now. My mom and dad and aunts and uncles seem to be having a need for the inheritance money” (Blume, *Letters* 138). Kelly, age thirteen, is quite blunt in her letter to Blume: “From now on you’re going to be getting a lot of letters from me. I’m going to tell you everything that’s on my mind. I just like writing to you. It’s like talking to a friend” (*Letters* 147). It seems that after kids read Blume’s works, they feel that a friend has just confided in them about their emotions involving monumental or simply everyday life events.

Blume includes a chapter in *Letters* called “Dear Diary.” She often writes back to readers such as Kelly and advises them to write their feelings in a diary. Blume encourages parents to give their kids diaries and be clear that there are no rules when it comes to journaling. It is also important, she reminds parents, to respect their child’s privacy and not read their diary. She does, however, admit to reading Randy’s diary when she did not return home from school as expected. By doing this, Blume learned that Randy “was feeling alienated, frightened and confused and that we needed help” (*Letters* 151). Although Randy was angry, she also seemed relieved that Blume had read from her “emotional outlet” (*Letters* 152). By advising young adults to keep a journal, Blume gives them a way to vent their frustration, anger, and worries. Teens are often unsure

about how much information their parents want or need to hear about their young adult lives. A journal gives them freedom to express each thought candidly. Like Blume's novels, journals appeal to young adults because they can be a source of candor, comfort, and sometimes even humor.

Meg, a foster child, writes about Blume's ability to make her feel normal. Meg tells Blume, "There have been times in the last few years that the only way I knew I wasn't strange was because you told me in your books that feeling lonely, rejected and scared were okay feelings. To release my feelings I write, mainly poetry. Like you, I want to write what I wish someone had written for me to read" (*Letters* 222). Meg clearly feels that Blume (or at least her characters) understand the feelings that, for Meg, come from a broken home and being in foster care. Meg even shares a poem with Blume entitled, "The Man who Isn't There":

My father is a man that I do not know
Except for the things I have heard.
I dream of him but I cannot see his face.
I know he talks but I cannot hear his words.
I see his presence but cannot feel his warmth.
I dream of him but I cannot share his feelings.
I see him reach out but I cannot feel his touch.
I reach into my dream but he is no longer there. (*Letters* 222).

Meg concludes her letter by describing her goal as well as Blume's impact: "I want so much to let other kids know they are not the only people with various feelings, like you let us know" (*Letters* 222).

Blume's chapter entitled "Runaways" is short but incredibly poignant. Readers discuss their feelings about siblings who ran away and the stress it caused their families. Blume shares the need for families to sit down and face reality together so they can live

together peacefully. She describes her own personal experience of her brother running away. Blume discusses the way her brother hurt her:

I hated him for the pain he was causing our family. I hated him because I saw my father break down and sob, blaming himself. I hated him because I felt that I would somehow have to explain his behavior to friends, who would ask about him. Why couldn't he just be like everyone else? I wondered, Why did he have to have so many problems? (*Letters* 225).

It is precisely this kind of emotional expression that readers love about Blume. She has a way of making readers feel the same way they did (or do) as a young adult. Colette, age eleven, experienced the drama of having a troubled sixteen-year-old sister. Her sister not only ran away with her boyfriend, but also receives two burglary charges in the process. Colette is sad over the pain her parents have to go through, but she is “not trying to get pity” (Blume, *Letters* 226). What she wants, like so many of Blume’s young adult readers, “Is someone to tell me, ‘You’ll live through this’” (*Letters* 226). As the title of this book summarizes, this is the kind of information “kids wish they could tell you.” These letters demonstrate that readers empathize with the characters and experiences within Blume’s novels; by writing *Letters*, Blume has given young adults additional situations and characters with which readers can identify.

Blume uses youthful language to categorize various issues with which her readers deal everyday. The section involving divorce and stepfamilies, for example, is called “When Your World is Turning Topsy-Turvy.” This language helps to raise parental awareness of what their children are feeling. Chapter titles include, “I love my parents, but...,” “Life at School and Life with Friends,” “I am just like everyone else, except...,” “When someone you love dies,” “Dear diary,” “Kids really need to know...,” “Boys and girls together,” “Trouble in the family,” “Out of Control,” and “Now that they’ve told

you...” (Blume, *Letters*). Young adults can easily turn to the chapter they need for guidance, advice, and comfort. *Letters* concludes with a “Resources” section in which kids or parents can find useful information on topics ranging from alcoholism and learning disabilities to stepfamilies and depression. Using youthful language and providing further resources enables Blume to relate to her readers with candor and comfort.

CONCLUSION

When comparing popular novels of 2007, such as the Gossip Girls series with Blume's works, one realizes that the questions Blume answers and the guidance she provides are much more relevant to the lives of the typical American young adult than the snobbish content of Gossip Girl novels. Plot ideas for Gossip Girl books stem from Cecily von Ziegeleson's life: "Like the heavy-drinking, heavy-petting girls she writes about, von Ziegeleson attended one of Manhattan's most exclusive private schools: Nightingale-Bamford" (Pattee 166). While von Ziegeleson is the named author of the series, the ultimate story of each Gossip Girl book is a product of "her collaboration with a committee of advisors and conceptual 'owners'" (Pattee 163). The novel is a product of Alloy, Inc., a company that sells teens everything from fashion to films. Many readers do not know that von Ziegeleson does not actually write the books, and they view her as a mentor-like figure. Judy Blume, however, can be viewed as a mentor who has had similar experiences as the characters in her novels. Blume's readers become attached to her as well as her characters because she is "a familiar personality, not the artifact of a literary machine" (Pattee 164).

Examining three of Blume's works helps one understand the impact of Blume's writing on millions of young adults over the past thirty-seven years. Her style and subject matter enables readers to associate with the characters in her novel, including Davey, Kath, Michael, Jill, and Linda. Portraying Kath and Michael's first sexual experience as loving and kind, with emotional rather than physical pain, allowed Blume to create a new view of teenage sexuality. Exemplifying classroom humiliation in *Blubber* may be tough for parents to read, but it truly does pale in comparison to today's fifth-grade experience.

Finally, the process of overcoming fear in *Tiger Eyes* helps young readers to realize that they, too, can overcome whatever fears or worries may be bothering them. *Letters to Judy: What Kids Wish They Could Tell You* illustrates Blume's impact on young adult as well as adult readers who are looking for guidance while dealing with the deep emotions and important social issues that are part of human experience. Blume's awards and selling figures demonstrate that her "up front language and subject matter" reaches a wide audience (Redmond 92). Both personally and professionally, Blume expresses her belief that "La vida es una buena aventura" (TE 216).

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