



PHOTOGRAPH BY JOSEPH MAIDA

Judy Blume's refreshingly frank coming-of-age novels have brought comfort, joy and no small amount of titillation to millions of adolescent girls for decades. They've also made her one of America's most banned authors. Helena de Bertodano meets the young-at-heart 67-year-old in New York

Confessions of a teenage drama queen

You either love Judy Blume or you hate her. Last year she found herself in the curious position of receiving the National Book Foundation Medal for her contribution to American literature while, simultaneously, a Texan librarian was mounting a campaign to have her novel *Forever* – about a teenage sexual relationship – banned across the country.

Blume, sitting on a sofa in her grand New York apartment overlooking Central Park, rolls her eyes when I mention the librarian. 'Well, it's not just Texas. I hear about it every year and it's in different parts of the country: a campaign to remove *Forever*, or a campaign to remove *Deenie* [a book which alludes to teenage masturbation] – which they've been quite successful in removing, I have to say – because masturbation is scarier to a certain group than intercourse.'

Blume has never been afraid to broach taboo subjects but she has always done it in a responsible, unpatronising manner. It is this, combined with her humour and directness, that makes her such a popular writer – as well as one of the most banned authors in America. 'I set out to write books about real life, which is what I longed to read when I was a young girl,' says Blume.

With 24 titles to her name on topics ranging from bullying to bereavement, from menstruation to divorce, Blume has sold 75 million books worldwide and been translated into nearly 30 languages. Novels like *It's Not the End of the World*, *Blubber* and *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret* have been part of the collective experience of childhood for those growing up in the last three and a half decades. And a number of her books, particularly *Forever*, are still required reading for teenagers, many of

Judy Blume at home in New York

whom post glowing endorsements on her website. 'I feel like you're eavesdropping on my life!' reads one typical e-mail. *Forever*, which was recently reissued in Britain, was first published 30 years ago. And yet, although she seems astonishingly prolific, the truth is that Blume has only written one new book in the past seven years: *Double Fudge*, the fifth in her series of 'Fudge' stories for very young readers, which was published in 2002. 'I've gone a lot of years now without really writing,' says Blume in a strong, clear voice.

She tells me that she was put off writing after spending an excruciating three years on *Summer Sisters*, an adult novel about female friendship, published in 1998. 'It went through 40-something drafts and it was a mess. After that, I said, "This is it. I'm not writing any more." I begged George [Blume's husband] to help me stop publication. I said, "I want to buy it back. I don't want to go out this way. It's been such a wonderful career - this book is going to be such a bomb." He said, "You know, Judy, it would just be easier if you left the country for a few weeks when it comes out, and then come back and it will all be over."'

Of course, the book was an instant bestseller. Why did she think it was so bad? 'Who knows? Maybe I do it every time. Maybe it's a game I play with myself. Maybe it's all the insecurity. Have you ever met a writer who isn't wildly insecure when a book is going to come out? Sometimes I think I'll just write and I won't publish. I'll just write for the fun of it.'

Such insecurity is at odds with the strident confidence of some of her writing, but in person Blume does indeed appear slightly nervous. As



she talks, her hands constantly flutter to the chain-link necklace she wears, and she is up and down like a yo-yo. Every few minutes she dashes off to find a lip salve or a glass of water; to answer the phone; to turn a light on; to take her jacket off; to take her penicillin (she has a sinus infection); to find a tissue.

Aged 67, Blume is very slight, almost bird-like, and pretty with a smile that reminds me of the actress Jessica Lange. Dressed in a glittery blue sweater and with bright pink toenails, she doesn't seem to suit this sober apartment which is furnished in varying shades of beige. Indeed, she tells me she spends more time at her other homes - in Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts, and Key West, Florida - and admits that this one doesn't really feel like home. 'George says it's like a very nice hotel.'

Just in the past few weeks, Blume has started writing again and now has a rough draft for a book of short stories for children. 'Would you like to see it? No one has seen it yet, not even my publisher.' Without waiting for an answer, she dashes off to her study and returns with a purple folder. She looks at me, eyes bright, just like a young girl dying to show off her latest project. Opening it reverently, she flicks through the typescript, which is heavily annotated in pencil in rounded girlish handwriting. At the top of some of the stories, she has written 'Good', like a schoolteacher marking an essay. She starts to tell me about one of the short stories, 'Haircuts and Hairballs' - about a young boy who is so

terrified that the hairdresser will cut off his ears that he wears earmuffs - then snaps the file shut. 'But I'm giving everything away,' she cries. 'And somebody will take all my ideas.'

Blume once said that she wrote well because there was so much angst in her personal life. 'I probably made that up,' she says now, with a snort of laughter. 'I thought that I wrote best when I wasn't happy, and I wasn't happy for many years. I tease George - I say I met him and got happy and it screwed up my writing. But the truth is I can make my own angst even if I'm happy. George always says, "You make everything so hard for yourself." I don't know how to relax.'

What does she worry about? 'Family stuff,' she says vaguely. 'A mother always wants her children to be happy and for everyone to love each other - all of that nonsense.'

Blume grew up in the town of Elizabeth, New Jersey, where her father was a dentist. Although she says her childhood was happy, she found it hard to approach her parents about anything that troubled her. 'My mother was painfully shy and couldn't talk about anything. My father always said, "You can ask anything", but I didn't. He took me on his lap once and tried to explain menstruation, but it was some mishmash about a lunar cycle and it left me completely muddled. I watched the moon and I kept thinking, "Aha! All the women in the world are having that 'thing' tonight."'

As a bored suburban housewife living in New Jersey with two young children of her own (Larry and Randy), Blume started to write books for children as a form of escape. Her first few attempts were rejected but

finally, in 1969, a publisher accepted *The One in the Middle Is the Green Kangaroo* and gave her a \$350 advance. 'There's never been a day to equal that one,' Blume has said in the past. The next year saw the publication of *Iggie's House* and *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret*, which brought her critical acclaim and her first fan-mail.

She has a particular knack for putting herself into the mind of a child. 'What will happen to me if they get divorced?' asks Karen Newman, the young narrator of *It's Not the End of the World*. 'Who will I live with? Where will I go to school? Will my friends laugh? I want a mother and father and I want them to live together - right here - in this house! I don't care if they fight. I would rather have them fight than be divorced. I'm scared... I'm so scared. I wish somebody would talk to me and tell me it's going to be all right. I miss Daddy already. I hate them both. I wish I was dead.'

The volume of mail never abates and she once compiled some of her favourite letters into a book, *Letters to Judy: What Your Kids Wish They Could Tell You*. 'Some of the letters are about abuse or incest,' she says today. 'There was a time when I felt overwhelmed and I had to go to a counsellor and say, "I don't know how to do this." There were a couple of kids I really wanted to save and I didn't know how to separate myself. The counsellor said, "Just the fact that you've heard them and are letting them know you've read it and you're thinking about them is enough." But there were several that I became deeply involved with and I still correspond with.' Blume even paid for one of her correspondents to go to college. 'She's been

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a real success story. She has a good job now, small children, a husband.'

It wasn't until ten years after she started writing that her books began to excite controversy, a fact that she puts down to the growth of the religious right in America. 'There were some objections earlier but nothing organised. It started properly in about 1980 and I was baffled by it and took it personally. I now know better, but then I felt totally alone and really, really down.'

She wrote *Forever* when her daughter, Randy, then a teenager, asked her mother why there weren't any books describing sex between teenagers in which nothing bad happens: pregnancy, disease, a terrible abortion. Blume says that she herself did not have sex as a teenager. 'I was always in love but we were supposed to be virgins when we married. And I was.' She pauses and laughs. 'Well, no, I didn't exactly wait until the wedding night but I was with my husband-to-be.'

Blume married young – too young, she thinks now. 'I was 21, a junior in college. I think we were probably the wrong personalities for each other.' After years of unhappiness, trying to be the perfect suburban wife, she eventually parted from her husband. But, she tells me, her marriage was not like the one in *It's Not the End of the World*. In that book, the couple is endlessly bickering and everyone in the house is miserable. 'We didn't have that kind of marriage,' says Blume. 'In fact the counsellor I saw at that time said, "It's going to be harder for your children because they never saw any real fighting or unhappiness." It was



Judy Blume at home with her cat in 1978

tough, and then I jumped into a second marriage and it was truly rough. It lasted about four years and it never should have been in the first place; it was very, very painful and difficult. So when I met George at least I knew better than to jump straight in again.'

She and George, who is a former law professor and writer of popular history, met in Santa Fe, New Mexico. 'It was a blind date set up by his ex-wife,' she says. 'We went out for dinner on Sunday night and on Tuesday he moved in. That was more than 25 years ago. We lived together for seven years and then we got married for our 50th birthday [the couple have birthdays within weeks of each other]. Until then we thought, "It's working – why mess it up?" In fact,' she adds, sounding surprised, 'marriage didn't mess it up.'

I ask her what she enjoys doing most. She turns to her husband, who has just come home, a tall good-looking bearded man dressed from head to toe in black. 'George, what am I happiest doing?' 'Writing,' says George without hesitation. 'The truth is,' says Blume, turning back to me, eyes wide with astonishment, 'I only realised that this summer. I love going into that little cabin that I have on the Vineyard. Whatever stresses I feel I am under just melt away. Even though I think I don't like it, it's not true: I realise now that I love to write.' ●

'Forever' (Macmillan) by Judy Blume is available from Telegraph Books (0870 428 4115) at £5.99 plus 99p p&p



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