



CENSORSHIP: A PERSONAL VIEW

JUDY BLUME

Judy Blume's novels have sold over 80 million copies and have been translated into over thirty languages worldwide. Hers are also among the most frequently banned or challenged books in America because of her frank treatment of issues relating to children and young adults. Among her more than two dozen novels are Are You There, God? It's Me, Margaret (1970); It's Not the End of the World (1972); Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing (1974); Forever (1975); Wifey (1978); Summer Sisters (1998); and Double Fudge (2002). Blume is founder of the charitable and educational foundation The Kids Fund. Because of her experiences with censorship, she edited Places I Never Meant to Be: Original Stories by Censored Writers (1999), a collection of short stories by authors who have been censored or banned. The introduction to that collection is reprinted here.

When I was growing up I'd heard that if a movie or book was "Banned in Boston" everybody wanted to see it or read it right away. My older brother, for example, went to see such a movie—*The Outlaw*, starring Jane Russell—and I wasn't supposed to tell my mother. I begged him to share what he saw, but he wouldn't. I was intensely curious about the adult world and hated the secrets my parents, and now my brother, kept from me.

A few years later, when I was in fifth grade, my mother was reading a novel called *A Rage to Live*, by John O'Hara, and for the first time (and, as it turned out, the only time) in my life, she told me I was never to look at that book, at least not until I was *much* older. Once I knew my mother didn't want me to read it, I figured it must be really interesting!

So, you can imagine how surprised and delighted I was when, as a junior in high school, I found John O'Hara's name on my reading list. Not a specific title by John O'Hara, but *any* title. I didn't waste a minute. I went down to the public library in Elizabeth, New Jersey, that afternoon—a place where I'd spent so many happy hours as a young child, I'd pasted a card pocket on the inside back cover of each book I owned—and looked for *A Rage to Live*. But I couldn't find it. When I asked, the librarian told me *that* book was *restricted*. It was kept in a locked closet, and I couldn't take it out without written permission from my parents.

4 Aside from my mother's one moment of fear, neither of my parents had ever told me what I could or could not read. They encouraged me to read widely. There were no "Young Adult" novels then. Serious books about teenagers were published as adult novels. It was my mother who handed me *To Kill a Mockingbird* and Anne Frank's *Diary of a Young Girl* when they were first published.

By the time I was twelve I was browsing in the bookshelves flanking the fireplace in our living room where, in my quest to make sense of the world, I discovered J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, fell in love with the romantic tragedies of Thomas Hardy and the Brontë sisters, and over-identified with "Marjorie Morningstar."

But at the Elizabeth Public Library the librarian didn't care. "Get permission in writing," she told me. When I realized she was not going to let me check out *A Rage to Live*, I was angry. I felt betrayed and held her responsible. It never occurred to me that it might not have been her choice.

At home I complained to my family, and that evening my aunt, the principal of an elementary school, brought me her copy of *A Rage to Live*. I stayed up half the night reading the forbidden book. Yes, it was sexy, but the characters and their story were what kept me turning the pages. Finally, my curiosity (about that book, anyway) was satisfied. Instead of leading me astray, as my mother must have feared, it led me to read everything else I could find by the author.

8 All of which brings me to the question *What is censorship?* If you ask a dozen people you'll get twelve different answers. When I actually looked up the word in *The Concise Columbia Encyclopedia* I found this definition: "[The] official restriction of any expression believed to threaten the political, social, or moral order." My thesaurus lists the following words that can be used in place of *ban* (as in book banning): *Forbid. Prohibit. Restrict*. But what do these words mean to writers and the stories they choose to tell? And what do they mean to readers and the books they choose to read?

I began to write when I was in my mid-twenties. By then I was married with two small children and desperately in need of creative work. I wrote *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret* right out of my own experiences and feelings when I was in sixth grade. Controversy wasn't on my mind. I wanted only to write what I knew to be true. I wanted to write the best, the most honest books I could, the kinds of books I would have liked to read when I was younger. If someone had told me then I would become one of the most banned writers in America, I'd have laughed.

When *Margaret* was published in 1970 I gave three copies to my children's elementary school but the books never reached the shelves. The male principal decided on his own that they were inappropriate for elementary school readers because of the discussion of menstruation (never mind how many fifth- and sixth-grade girls already had their periods). Then one night the phone rang and a woman asked if I was the one who had written that book. When I replied that I was, she called me a communist and hung up. I never did figure out if she equated communism with menstruation or religion.

In that decade I wrote thirteen other books: eleven for young readers, one for teenagers, and one for adults. My publishers were protective of me during those years and didn't necessarily share negative comments about my work. They believed if I didn't know some individuals were upset by my books, I wouldn't be intimidated

- 12 Of course, they couldn't keep the occasional anecdote from reaching me: the mother who admitted she'd cut two pages out of *Then Again, Maybe I Won't* rather than allow her almost thirteen-year-old son to read about wet dreams. Or the young librarian who'd been instructed by her male principal to keep *Deenie* off the shelf because in the book, Deenie masturbates. "It would be different if it were about a boy," he'd told her. "That would be normal."

The stories go on and on but really, I wasn't that concerned. There was no organized effort to ban my books or any other books, none that I knew of, anyway. The seventies were a good decade for writers and readers. Many of us came of age during those years, writing from our hearts and guts, finding editors and publishers who believed in us, who willingly took risks to help us find our audience. We were free to write about real kids in the real world. Kids with feelings and emotions, kids with real families, kids like we once were. And young readers gobbled up our books, hungry for characters with whom they could identify, including my own daughter and son, who had become avid readers. No mother could have been more proud to see the tradition of family reading passed on to the next generation.

Then, almost overnight, following the presidential election of 1980, the censors crawled out of the woodwork, organized and determined. Not only would they decide what *their* children could read but what *all* children could read. It was the beginning of the decade that wouldn't go away, that still won't go away almost twenty years later. Suddenly books were seen as dangerous to young minds. Thinking was seen as dangerous, unless those thoughts were approved by groups like the Moral Majority, who believed with certainty they knew what was best for everyone.

So now we had individual parents running into schools, waving books, demanding their removal—books they hadn't read except for certain passages. Most often their objections had to do with language, sexuality, and something called "lack of moral tone."

- 16 Those who were most active in trying to ban books came from the "religious right" but the impulse to censor spread like a contagious disease. Other parents, confused and uncertain, were happy to jump on the bandwagon. Book banning satisfied their need to feel in control of their children's lives. Those who censored were easily frightened. They were afraid of exposing their children to ideas different from their own. Afraid to answer children's questions or talk with them about sensitive subjects. And they were suspicious. They believed if kids liked a book, it must be dangerous.

Too few schools had policies in place enabling them to deal with challenged materials. So what happened? The domino effect. School administrators sent down the word: Anything that could be seen as controversial had to go. Often books were quietly removed from school libraries and classrooms or, if seen as potential troublemakers, were never purchased in the first place. These decisions were based not on what was best for the students, but what would not offend the censors.

I found myself at the center of the storm. My books were being challenged daily, often placed on *restricted* shelves (shades of Elizabeth, New Jersey, in 1955) and sometimes removed. A friend was handed a pamphlet outside a supermarket urging parents to rid their schools and libraries of Judy Blume books. Never once did the pamphlet suggest the books actually be read. Of course I wasn't the only target.

Across the country, the Sex Police and the Language Police were thumbing through books at record speed, looking for illustrations, words or phrases that, taken out of context, could be used as evidence against them.

Puberty became a dirty word, as if children who didn't read about it wouldn't know about it, and if they didn't know about it, it would never happen.

- 20 The Moral Tone Brigade attacked *Blubber* (a story of victimization in the classroom) with a vengeance because, as they saw it, in this book evil goes unpunished. As if kids need to be hit over the head, as if they don't get it without having the message spelled out for them.

I had letters from angry parents accusing me of ruining Christmas because of a chapter in *Superfudge* called "Santa Who?" Some sent lists showing me how easily I could have substituted one word for another: meanie for bitch; darn for damn; nasty for ass. More words taken out of context. A teacher wrote to say she blacked out offending words and passages with a felt-tip marker. Perhaps most shocking of all was a letter from a nine-year-old addressed to *Jewdy Blume* telling me I had no right to write about Jewish angels in *Starring Sally J. Freedman as Herself*.

My worst moment came when I was working with my editor on the manuscript of *Tiger Eyes* (the story of a fifteen-year-old girl, Davey, whose beloved father dies suddenly and violently). When we came to the scene in which Davey allows herself to *feel* again after months of numbness following her father's death, I saw that a few lines alluding to masturbation had been circled. My editor put down his pencil and faced me. "We want this book to reach as many readers as possible, don't we?" he asked.

I felt my face grow hot, my stomach clench. This was the same editor who had worked with me on *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret*; *Then Again, Maybe I Won't*; *Deenie*; *Blubber*; *Forever*—always encouraging, always supportive. The scene was psychologically sound, he assured me, and delicately handled. But it also spelled trouble. I got the message. If you leave in those lines, the censors will come after this book. Librarians and teachers won't buy it. Book clubs won't take it. Everyone is too scared. The political climate has changed.

- 24 I tried to make a case for why that brief moment in Davey's life was important. He asked me *how* important? Important enough to keep the book from reaching its audience? I willed myself not to give in to the tears of frustration and disappointment I felt coming. I thought about the ways a writer brings a character to life on the page, the same way an artist brings a face to life on canvas—through a series of brush strokes, each detail adding to the others, until we see the essence of the person. I floundered, uncertain. Ultimately, not strong enough or brave enough to defy the editor I trusted and respected, I caved in and took out those lines. I still remember how alone I felt at that moment.

What effect does this climate have on a writer? *Chilling*. It's easy to become discouraged, to second-guess everything you write. There seemed to be no one to stand up to the censors. No group as organized as they were; none I knew of, anyway. I've never forgiven myself for caving in to editorial pressure based on fear, for playing into the hands of the censors. I knew then it was all over for me unless I took a stand. So I began to speak out about my experiences. And once I did, I found that I wasn't as alone as I'd thought.

My life changed when I learned about the National Coalition Against Censorship (NCAC) and met Leanne Katz, the tiny dynamo who was its first and longtime director. Leanne's intelligence, her wit, her strong commitment to the First Amendment and helping those who were out on a limb trying to defend it, made her my hero. Every day she worked with the teachers, librarians, parents and students caught in the cross fire. Many put themselves and their jobs on the line fighting for what they believed in.

In Panama City, Florida, junior high school teacher Gloria Pipkin's award-winning English program was targeted by the censors for using Young Adult literature that was *depressing, vulgar and immoral*, specifically *I Am the Cheese*, by Robert Cormier, and *About David*, by Susan Beth Pfeffer.

- 28 A year later, when a new book selection policy was introduced forbidding vulgar, obscene and sexually related materials, the school superintendent zealously applied it to remove more than sixty-five books, many of them classics, from the curriculum and classroom libraries. They included *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *The Red Badge of Courage*, *The Great Gatsby*, *Wuthering Heights*, and *Of Mice and Men*. Also banned were Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, *The Merchant of Venice*, and *Twelfth Night*.

Gloria Pipkin fought a five-year battle, jeopardizing her job and personal safety (she and the reporter covering the story received death threats) to help reinstate the books. Eventually, the professional isolation as well as the watered-down curriculum led her to resign. She remains without a teaching position.

Claudia Johnson, Florida State University professor and parent, also defended classic books by Aristophanes and Chaucer against a censor who condemned them for promoting "women's lib and pornography." She went on to fight other battles—in defense of John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*, and a student performance of Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*.

English teacher Cecilia Lacks was fired by a high school in St. Louis for permitting her creative writing students to express themselves in the language they heard and used outside of school everyday. In the court case that followed, many of her students testified on their teacher's behalf. Though she won her case, the decision was eventually reversed and at this time Lacks is still without a job.

- 32 Colorado English teacher Alfred Wilder was fired for teaching a classic film about fascism, Bernardo Bertolucci's *1900*.

And in Rib Lake, Wisconsin, guidance counselor Mike Dishnow was fired for writing critically of the Board of Education's decision to ban my book *Forever* from the junior high school library. Ultimately he won a court settlement, but by then his life had been turned upside down.

And these are just a few examples.

This obsession with banning books continues as we approach the year 2000. Today it is not only Sex, Swear Words and Lack of Moral Tone—it is Evil, which, according to the censors, can be found lurking everywhere. Stories about Halloween, witches, and devils are . . . [all] suspect for promoting Satanism. *Romeo and Juliet* is under fire for promoting suicide; Madeleine L'Engle's *A Wrinkle in Time*, for promoting New Age-ism. If the censors had their way it would be good-bye to Shakespeare as well as science fiction. There's not an *ism* you can think of that's not bringing some book to the battlefield.

36 What I worry about most is the loss to young people. If no one speaks out for them, if they don't speak out for themselves, all they'll get for required reading will be the most bland books available. And instead of finding the information they need at the library, instead of finding the novels that illuminate life, they will find only those materials to which nobody could possibly object.

Some people would like to rate books in schools and libraries the way they rate movies: G, PG, R, X, or even more explicitly. But according to whose standards would the books be rated? I don't know about you but I don't want anyone rating my books or the books my children or grandchildren choose to read. We can make our own decisions, thank you. Be wary of the censors' code words—*family friendly*; *family values*; *excellence in education*. As if the rest of us don't want excellence in education, as if we don't have our own family values, as if libraries haven't always been family-friendly places!

And the demands are not all coming from the religious right. No . . . the urge to decide not only what's right for their kids but for all kids has caught on with others across the political spectrum. Each year *Huckleberry Finn* is challenged and sometimes removed from the classroom because, to some, its language, which includes racial epithets, is offensive. Better to acknowledge the language, bring it out in the open, and discuss why the book remains important than to ban it. Teachers and parents can talk with their students and children about any book considered controversial.

I gave a friend's child one of my favorite picture books, James Marshall's *The Stupids Step Out*, and was amazed when she said, "I'm sorry, but we can't accept that book. My children are not permitted to use that word. Ever. It should be changed to 'The Sillies Step Out.'" I may not agree, but I have to respect this woman's right to keep that book from her child as long as she isn't trying to keep it from other people's children. Still, I can't help lamenting the lack of humor in her decision. *The Stupids Step Out* is a very funny book. Instead of banning it from her home, I wish she could have used it as an opportunity to talk with her child about why she felt the way she did, about why she never wanted to hear her child call anyone stupid. Even very young children can understand. So many adults are exhausting themselves worrying about other people corrupting their children with books, they're turning kids off to reading instead of turning them on.

40 In this age of censorship I mourn the loss of books that will never be written, I mourn the voices that will be silenced—writers' voices, teachers' voices, students' voices—and all because of fear. How many have resorted to self-censorship? How many are saying to themselves, "Nope . . . can't write about that. Can't teach that book. Can't have that book in our collection. Can't let my student write that editorial in the school paper."