

AT: Welcome to the Infinite Women podcast. I'm your host Allison Tyra and today I'm joined by Rachelle Bergstein, author of several books, including *The Genius of Judy: How Judy Blume Rewrote Childhood for All of Us*. And I definitely want to hear about that. But first could you give us a bit of background on Judy Blume and her books for anyone who might not be familiar with her work?

RB: Absolutely. So Judy Blume is one of our preeminent children's book writers. She started writing in the late 1960s, she published some of her most iconic books in the 1970s, if you've heard of *Are You There, God? It's Me, Margaret* or *Deenie* or *Forever...* or *Blubber*, those all came out in the 1970s. So she is a hugely impactful children's book writer, and she's actually still alive, so she's a bit of a living legend at this point.

AT: And so in your book, you're really exploring the impact of her books. And what did you find?

RB: Well, I don't know about you, but I was a Judy Blume fan growing up and any time I share that detail with another woman who's around my age - I'm 43 - especially a woman in a literary career or in publishing, she gets this faraway look on her eyes, like she's recalling something really blissful from her childhood, something really special from her past. And I was interested in exploring that particular thing about Judy Blume. What is it about her as compared to some of her contemporaries who were also writing brave, cutting-edge books for children, that makes her so special in all of our collective imagination? When I started working on this book, she was at this tipping point in terms of the culture. People were starting to talk about Judy Blume more. We're starting to examine her legacy in this really reverential way. And I wanted to understand why she was being elevated.

AT: In a time when books are being challenged more than ever, I would say, in the US, it's important to point out that the American Library Association has named Blume one of the most frequently challenged authors of the 21st century and things like, she was writing about puberty in the '70s And particularly girls' puberty - god help us all! So how much do you think that, I suppose authenticity, that willingness to talk about things that I feel like kids and teens often know adults are trying to hide from them. How much do you think that's playing into this?

RB: I think it's huge. Judy started writing about things, like you said, like puberty, like menstruation in *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret*, like masturbation in *Deenie*, like sexuality, like teenagers losing their virginity in *Forever...* and a lot of this stuff hadn't been written about before in books for kids. Some of it had been hinted at, some of it like teen sexuality had been written about in a scary or negative way. A lot of the books about teens who had sex when Judy was writing *Forever...* were about teens who ruined their lives by having sex, girls in particular who lost their virginity to their high school boyfriends and then their lives were destroyed, or they died in a back-alley abortion or something horrible happened. These books were very moralizing and Judy Blume wanted to change that. She felt that kids, like you said, have instinctive questions about their bodies and about what to do with them and their romantic lives and their erotic lives and that they're entitled to the answers and that too many adults, Judy was a product of the 1950s. So too many adults were trying to hide these things from their kids and it's hard to hide something that's happening. It's hard to hide something that's happening not only to you but to all of your friends and if nobody's talking about it, it's actually much scarier than it would be if it were something that was comfortable to have a conversation about, whether it was with trusted adults or in the context of a book. So she took on these topics and she was targeted by book censors for them, at different times more than others, the 1980s were a big moment for book censorship and we're back in another book banning spell. But yeah, she was really brave in what she was doing and I think it contributes a lot to her legacy.

AT: Now I would say that the mark of a truly great book is its timelessness. And the fact that we're still reading

these books today. Do you think they're as relevant to today's youth as they were 50 years ago?

RB: I actually do. I went back and read all of her books for this project. I had read many of them as a kid and I read some of them with my son, who's now 9. And what struck me was the way that he enjoyed them, despite the fact that his childhood looks really different from the way mine did. A lot of people are very quick to say kids are just growing up so differently now, they have the internet, they have cell phones. They have technology to contend with and how does it impact their social lives? But the truth is, the bones of childhood, the transition from childhood to adulthood, the things that happen to your body, the things that happen to your brain, the way that you see the world and the way you start questioning your family and your parents and your community - all of that remains true. Girls will fight with each other on the school bus whether or not that they have cell phones. Maybe Snapchat doesn't help, but female friendships, male friendships, they're really not that different than they used to be. So I do think these books really holds up. I think that they tap into something that's very universal about childhood and while a kid today might read them and say things are obviously different, there are certain details that are dated, I think that the truth of them, the heart of them still comes through.

AT: Well, then you just read it as historical fiction, we read things that are said in other times and places all the time. That's perfectly normal for a kid to read.

RB: Absolutely. And if you look at the *Are You There God? It's Me Margaret* movie which came out I think in 2023, they did treat it like historical fiction. They actually didn't change the time period, they treated it like it was set in the 1970s and they did the set design and it gave it a very fun period look and feel. And I think like you said that's okay, kids can understand that something was set in a different time period.

AT: Now this may be my perspective and biases, but it does seem that writing for children and teens is often minimized or belittled in terms of how important it actually is or how much skill it requires. And I don't think it's a coincidence that these are genres in which women have traditionally been more allowed to flourish.

RB: I couldn't agree with you more. I've referred to Judy Blume's prose as deceptively simple, Her writing, which has been derided, she took a long time to gain literary credibility and a lot of high-falutin' literary critics said she wasn't literary, that she wasn't gifted. One referred to her style of writing as "shopping list prose" because it was short and direct. But that's hard to do. If you're a writer, you understand that writing in fewer words and making it really smooth is like a type of poetry. It actually is quite difficult to be so succinct and to be so digestible. So, yes, I do think that her style of writing is quite hard to pull off, which is why there aren't so many people who are terrific at it. And I also agree with your second point that these are genres in which female writers have been elevated and they're also, I don't know about the statistics but I know Judy Blume in particular is someone that a lot of girls really love. And when you have a bunch of young girls saying that they love something, I think the culture's instinct overall is to say, "well that must be silly. That must be frivolous."

AT: And I think it's also noteworthy that we see this with the romance genre as well and people have pointed out that this is largely based on wish fulfillment. It is based on women getting what they want, what they arguably deserve, there is women getting treated well. And that is one reason that women are so drawn to romance as a genre and women tend to write it more is because you can create this world where women are actually treated well.

RB: I never thought about it like that, but I think you're totally right. That's really, really interesting.

AT: And I think there's a correlation here with these books where kids are seeing accurate representations of themselves, they are getting what they need out of this. And for some reason that makes people dismiss it.

RB: Yeah, and that makes me think, one of the things that I paid more attention to when I was writing this book than I did as a kid was the adults in Judy Blume's books. When you're reading as a child, you kind of don't think very much about the grown-ups, they're kind of like the Charlie Brown mom. But as an adult and as a mother when I went back to these books, I noticed how much subtle messaging Judy had slipped into the roles of the adults. In some cases the mothers are really ideal. When you look at the mother in *Forever...*, Katherine talks to her about her decision to have sex with her boyfriend Michael and her mother is really unfazed by it. She's quite supportive and she shares about herself, she's generous, she's firm, she isn't like, "just go do whatever you want." She gives boundaries. And so that's one style of mother and then there's another style, like in *Deenie* where the mother is really living through her children and she really hasn't developed into a full person. And I think that Judy in her books provided a road map especially for girls of how they can grow up in the late 20th century, how they can grow up to be stronger and more empowered in some cases than their mothers were.

AT: So how much do you think there's a balance of, from what you're describing, it sounds like realism with delivering what a child may need, because I feel like realism is also something that kids need if they're going to take something seriously. But also presenting them with that sort of archetype of, this is what an adult can be.

RB: I think it's a mixture of both. She was delivering these important messages, this important information in these extremely digestible, fun stories. So she was allowing kids to get lost in these characters and get lost in the stories and and project themselves onto them because these are normal kids, right? And that was one of Judy Blume's innovations. When she started writing, there weren't that many children's writers who were just writing about normal kids. There were people writing great children's books like Roald Dahl, like Madeleine L'Engle, but those books tended to have a fantasy element. The other golden rule of children's book writing that Judy Blume broke was that books for kids had to have a moral, that kids were supposed to walk away feeling like they learned something and that the adults in their lives were always right. And Judy didn't subscribe to that. That wasn't her experience and she didn't feel it was the experience that she saw children around her having. Now we think, "why is that so brave? There are plenty of middle grade and young adult books that show kids who are smarter than their parents or kids who diverge from their parents because their parents make mistakes," but at the time this was really innovative. This was a big deal to show kids who were seeing their parents through fresh eyes and maybe disagreeing with some of the choices they were making

AT: Well, this may be slightly beyond the scope of this conversation, but I think it's really interesting that what we're getting into here is parents who feel threatened by these books and the impact that they can have on their kids, but why do you think accurate information or realistic tellings about things like sex and pregnancy and puberty, why do you think adults find that so threatening so much of the time that they're wanting these books to be banned? Why do we find realism that kids have access to so threatening?

RB: That's a hard question to answer and obviously I think about it a lot because Judy was the target of so much censorship and we are seeing so much censorship happen at the state and federal level now. I don't know exactly why parents are so concerned about their kids getting proper sex education, which is partly what Judy Blume's books are. I think it has to do with an innate puritanicalism in this country certainly. I think part of it is that parents are afraid And this is part of the sex ed conversation that's going on at the higher level than just Judy Blume's books, but parents are afraid that if children learn about sex, they will do it - that's the big fear. And that was the fear with sex ed from its initiation in this country after World War One that if you teach kids about sex, they're going to treat it like a manual almost and they're just going to go do it. And the research doesn't bear that out. Studies actually show that kids who learn about identifying their body parts properly, who can name them, who can describe what's going on in their reproductive systems, they actually have more bodily autonomy and they're more protective of their bodies. They make better and more informed choices and

they're not sexually active earlier. But not everybody wants to hear that. If you're talking to someone who believes in saving yourself for marriage and stop, with no gray area. And you are sending your child to a school that doesn't teach that in its sex ed. Maybe that's threatening. It has to do I think with bigger questions of morality and mindset and religion, that we're still hitting up against today.

AT: I do think it's very telling that you can show folks who are scared by this, you can show them the stats that if you have abstinence-only sex ed - I am a product of early 2000s Indiana sex ed, such as it was. It was abstinence-only, and it was no coincidence that we had a lot of pregnant teenagers at my high school. And you can point these things out to these folks and it just doesn't break through. And now we're seeing that with this idea that if they can just erase queer existence and trans existence and non-binary existence. They have this idea that "if we can just somehow keep the kids from learning about this, then they won't grow up to be queer," when centuries of human history proves that wrong. So, I don't know. I'm a very logical person and it just always baffles me that it's like, y'all are hurting your own kids by trying to restrict this.

RB: Yeah, I think that it's actually giving books too much credit in a way. It's like, could a book turn you gay? If reading a book at 9 could have turned you gay or straight or trans or whatever. I mean, really think about that, sit with that - could a reading a book about an LGBTQ character have turned you gay? And if so, maybe you already were gay. To me, there's no harm in exposing children to things that are going to teach them empathy, full stop. I think books reflect the diversity of human experience and when you introduce kids to lives and stories of people that they wouldn't necessarily get access to in real life, it's only expanding their sense of empathy and experience. I also think that, having a young child right now, there's so much stress on their attention spans - Youtube, TikTok, everything goes at such a quick pace and I'm happy to have my son sit and quietly read literally anything, because it's just not lighting up those same dopamine receptors. It's letting him have a chill, mindful experience. So I would urge people who have concerns about their kids reading to really think about if reading is the enemy in the world that we live in.

AT: I was also a huge reader when I was a kid and I typically hated the books that I had to read for school. I absolutely loved reading when I got to pick the book and I think *To Kill a Mockingbird* was the only book that I actually liked from my required reading in high school. But I'm doing all this reading outside, so I know that reading itself is not bad. But I do wonder, how many kids grow into adults who don't read, because their primary exposure is all of these books that adults think kids should be reading, that suck from a kid's standpoint. Let them read *Captain Underpants*, is what I'm saying.

RB: I totally agree. I'm just laughing because I remember reading, this is a little embarrassing, but I read *The Grapes of Wrath* in high school and I was like, "this is boring." (AT: I hated it so much.) Yes, I liked it *Of Mice and Men*. I was hungry for literature. I actually loved Faulkner, But something about *The Grapes of Wrath* was just such a downer. So I hear you and I am friendly with a parent in my son's school and this parent is a public school teacher. And he teaches literacy in high school. So he deals a lot with students who are kind of behind the curve with their reading. And I asked what he gets them to read and he said, just with a smile on the face, "smut." And I was like, "what?" and he was like, "yeah, I let them read smut because it blows their mind. It exposes them to this whole other idea of what reading can be." And he said, "they look at me with these eyes like, 'you can write that? you can put that on paper?'" And I think there's some wisdom to it. There are so many different ways to be a book lover. You could be a romance lover, you could be graphic novel lover, and I think sometimes we put too much emphasis on what the "right" thing to read is

AT: Oh, yeah, graphic novels are a huge one and I'm like, *Persepolis* is a graphic novel. They can be serious, and they can tell real stories, but also, there's value in fantasy and sci-fi and also just, like you said, if it's fun. If it gets your kid reading, that should be the priority.

RB: Right. Sometimes it's not a choice between Judy Blume and *Pride and Prejudice*, right? It's the choice between *Pride and Prejudice* and and nothing right? So you got to take baby steps.

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AT: I was actually talking on a previous episode with some history teachers who are working on a campaign to get approval for a women's AP US history class. And they were telling me that when their students are most engaged is when you're giving them the gossip, and that's when they get really interested. And I think that's because these are real people. And a lot of times in "the classics," they're written so densely, like you were saying writing simply is a very difficult skill and it's one that a lot of these books do not show. We actually elevate as literary the more, shall we say convoluted or complex? The language is, but that makes it a lot harder to read. It makes it a lot harder to engage with and to care. And I also remember when I was in high school, one of my teachers was this little old Southern lady. And I said, "I think the author is saying x because y," I did support it with evidence from the book. And her already quite prune of a face got even more wrinkled as she scrunched it up and said, "well, yes. But no." Meaning she couldn't actually deny that I had a point but she didn't like the point that I was making and so she was saying, "well, that's not my interpretation and therefore you're wrong." And that kind of attitude just cuts creative thought, whether that's interest in history or the other humanities, it cuts it off at the knees

RB: Yeah, it's a little deflating right to have an interesting takeaway and to be shot down like that.

AT: But it stops you from engaging with the material it stops you from thinking critically. (RB: I agree.) Now I'm always curious when i'm talking to someone who's written a whole book about another person and their work, what was it about her and her books specifically that made you say, "Yes, we need to dig into this"?

RB: Well, like I said, when I started writing this book I really noticed that Judy Blume was having a cultural moment and that I felt that it was only going to expand as time went on, which ended up being true. It ended up being true in a way that I didn't even anticipate. Around when her documentary came out on Amazon Prime and the *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret*. I remember it was a hand-me-down. So I read anything I could get my hands on and I remember cracking that book and thinking, I don't know if I'm going to be into this, it's about God. I'm not very religious, the first line is, "are you there God?" I didn't pray. I thought this was strange. But that book and others by Judy felt like a portal to a not-so-distant future when I was going to be a bigger kid and when I was going to have these bigger questions about myself and my body and I grew up in a dual faith household. So *Margaret* was the first time I'd ever seen that represented in a book for me. So many people have these intimate stories about their experience of Judy Blume and they're alike, but not the same. So for all of those reasons, I really was interested in exploring her work as an adult

AT: Going back to that question of timelessness today, unfortunately, there are some people who still think it's radical to talk about puberty and sex and teen pregnancy, but for a lot of us it's like, "oh, well, yeah, that's normal." How much do you think Judy Blume laid the foundation for later authors to write about these subjects for kids and teens?

RB: Very much. I don't think she did it single-handedly by any stretch. but I do think that her success showed the publishing world and the world at large that you could write about these things in books for children and children wanted to read them. She broke down a barrier and now we see in middle grade and YA books a lot of

really heavy issues being tackled and being tackled in a way that's respectful of children's intelligence and their authenticity. I think that is the word that I think of when I think of Judy Blume's books. It's respect for her readers, even though they're 11, 12, 13. It's trusting them that they don't need a moral spelled out, that they'll take away the right message, that they can be trusted with information about their bodies and that it's going to be okay. So I think Judy Blume's respect for children. It really did change the industry.

AT: Join us next time on the Infinite Women podcast and remember well-behaved women rarely make history.