

>> Each year thousands of book lovers of all ages visit the nation's capital to celebrate the joys of reading and lifelong literacy at the Library of Congress National Book Festival. For the first time in the festival's nine year history President Barack Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama will serve as honorary chairs of this free event. Held on the National Mall Saturday September 26, the 2009 festival will spark reader's passion for learning as they interact with the nation's bestselling authors, illustrators and poets. Even if you can't attend in person you can still participate online. These podcasts interviews with well-known authors and other materials are available through the national book festival website at www.loc.gov/bookfest. It's now my honor of talking with one of the chief and principal names in teen and children's literature Judy Blume. She is perhaps best known for her successful book, "Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret." Ms. Blume was among the few children and teen authors to take, tackle controversial matters in her novels, "Iggie's House", "It's Not the End of the World", "Just As Long As We're Together", "Blubber", "Deenie", "Then Again, Maybe I Won't" and, "Forever." Ms. Blume has also composed successful novels for adults such as, "Wifey," and, "Smart Women." She's earned an array of literary awards including The American Library Association's Margaret A. Edwards Award for lifetime achievement, the Library of Congress Living Legends Award and the National Book Foundation Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters. Ms. Blume's most recent book, "Friend or Foe" from, "The Pain and the Great One" series was just released this past May. Ms. Blume, thank you so much for your time today.

>> Judy Blume: Thank you.

>> Very much appreciate it. Let's start out with your latest book, "Friend or-- "Friend or Fiend." I'm sorry I totally--

>> Judy Blume: Well, I was going to mention that.

>> Yea. My brain saw one word and read another. So--

>> Judy Blume: No.

>> Friend or--

>> Judy Blume: "Friend or Fiend."

>> Yea so tell me about the series and tell me about this book specifically.

>> Judy Blume: Well, I like to [inaudible] different age groups as you know and it had been a long time or maybe I had never quite written for this age group, which is a pre-Fudge audience. And you know, "Fudge" is a series of books read by I don't know, third through sixth graders. And I had this idea to do a series of four books based on a picture book I had done a very long time ago called, "The Pain and The Great One" and, "The Pain and The Great One" were originally based on my children. My daughter called her little brother the pain and named herself the great one. And these are-- you know they've taken on their own lives now, these characters and in these books they're short stories. They're chapter

books really and seven stories in each book about a brother and a sister and their feelings about each other and their lives at home and their lives at school. And in, "Friend or Fiend" which is the last of the books for now anyway, it's how your friend can sometimes turn into your fiend. And the first way is based on something that happened to me when I was in fifth-- first grade, I'm sorry. When I was in first grade and learning to read and we were sitting at reading circle and I misread a word and everyone laughed at me and I didn't know why and it was humiliating. I can still remember how it felt and in, "Friend or Fiend" that's exactly what happens to Jake in the first story.

>> Well, thank you for not laughing at me for mispronouncing a word. So, this will be the last book in the series is that correct or at least in terms of--

>> Judy Blume: Well, for now yes. I-- you know four-- after four books I need a break and I want to do something entirely different.

>> As I mentioned did very prolific in terms of books for young people, but adult books as well. What inspired you to move in that direction?

>> Judy Blume: Yea, I have to say you missed my best adult book which is, "Summer Sisters."

>> Oh dear, sorry about that.

>> Judy Blume: Which is the book that all my-- you know gave me the best book tour of my entire life, because all the 20 somethings and 30 somethings who grew up on my books came out for that. And it was a very emotional book tour, very satisfying and, "Summer Sisters" has, which is a book that almost killed me and the book that's had me saying, "That's it. I'm never ever writing another book. I'm done." You know looking back I think oh, what was I thinking? But, it was a difficult, difficult journey doing that book and it became my most successful, my most successful book for grown up readers.

>> Now, we went out to the library's Facebook page and Twitter feed to allow your fans to have an opportunity to ask you some questions as well. And I have to say that one of the most overwhelming responses that we got is simply people who are thanking you for the work that you've done. One question similar to what I just asked is do you approach your books for adults differently than your books for younger adults and children? And do you think that your adult audience are the people who read your young adult books growing up?

>> Judy Blume: Let's take that one at a time. Do I approach it differently? No, the process for me is the singing. It's always very difficult. I dread first drafts whether it's for a novel or a chapter book. It's always equally difficult. And when it's done it's equally pleasurable.

>> Um huh.

>> Judy Blume: But, the process is the same. Now, what was the next part? There were three parts to that question.

>> The second part, the second part was do you think that the adults who read your books are the same ones who grew up reading your young adult books?

>> Judy Blume: I think that's true now. But, certainly when I wrote, "Wifey" that was not true, because that was in 1978.

>> Um huh.

>> Judy Blume: And so my young readers had not yet grown up. So, I don't know the audience. I don't know where it came from. It was very-- it was a happy experience, because the audience did come. And one never knows when writing will there be an audience.

>> Um huh. And again I guess playing off this notion of people who are really thankful for the realism that you brought to your books and the influence that you've had on them. One person from our Twitter feed asks you, what is the most memorable fan letter you've ever got? Can you remember any specific reaction?

>> Judy Blume: There are so many, my goodness. What's the most memorable one? Well, I guess you know the funny one liners always stick in your mind as well as the deeply personal and painful ones, but I'd rather talk about a funny one online, which is Dear Judy, how do you do these books? Do you do them, do you do them with your brain or do you use a kit?

>> And how do you answer that?

>> Judy Blume: [inaudible]. That was a long, long time ago.

>> Sure.

>> Judy Blume: I told you I wished I had a kit, but I didn't.

>> What were some of the books and authors who influenced you when you were young?

>> Judy Blume: Well, when I was young I loved a series of books by an author called Maud Hart Lovelace and the series, which is still around I'm happy to say is-- they're the Betsy-Tacy books. And if you ask a lot of women who grew up when I grew up did they read those books they will tell you yes especially women who later became writers. And I know when they reintroduced the books they asked you know various people who had grown up to become writers to do introductions to each book and it was lovely. I was-- I'd been afraid to reread those books for years, afraid that I wouldn't find them-- I would find them lacking now. And in fact, I found them just wonderful. I locked myself up for a day with all of these books and I cried my eyes out. My eyes didn't know what was going on.

>> Um huh.

>> Judy Blume: They were wonderful books. So, they did not disappoint.

>> Now, I've read that you believe that you're a lot like the main character in, "Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret." Do you find a connection like that in a lot of your writing?

>> Judy Blume: Well, you know I wrote Margaret early on in my career. And so you know the 12 year old Judy was right there. I was-- I don't know maybe I was in my 20s, in my late 20s maybe, but you know my memory for being that age was full acute. I could conjure up every feeling. I could you know just remember the whole thing. I don't know if I could do that as well now--

>> Yea.

>> Judy Blume: So I'm glad I did it then. But yea, Margaret is a character a lot like the 12 year old I was.

>> Yea.

>> Judy Blume: That's why I always tell the kids now they know my secrets.

>> Your--

>> Judy Blume: They always ask me, how do you know our secrets? How do you know my secrets? And I say, "Well, now you know my secret."

>> Your books have been translated into 31 languages. Do you think that speaks to the universal nature of the experiences that you write about?

>> Judy Blume: I hope so. I-- you know when one starts to write, I mean this is not what you think of. You know you sit down and you write, but you don't think someday this book will be translated into 31 languages. I mean I didn't get beyond oh please someday one of my books will be published and then maybe someday somebody will read them. So, it's been a surprise and it's been wonderful.

>> And I guess some other personal elements that you bring to your stories, I know a lot of your books, "Tiger Eyes", "Here's to You, Rachel Robinson" actually came from physical locations that you know very well. Do you like to set your books in places that you personally know?

>> Judy Blume: I find it impossible to write a book unless it's set in a place I know well. But, those books are not about the locations and it's funny--

>> Sure.

>> Judy Blume: That you mentioned, "Tiger Eyes", because right now I am struggling with a screenplay based on the book. My son and I are collaborating actually and that's interesting too. And it takes me back to my days in New Mexico. Yea I could certainly-- I would never have dreamed of setting a book in New Mexico except that I lived there for

seven years and I knew it well. And, "Summer Sisters", I mean I think that's the book that-- it's set on Martha's Vineyard and that's a place where I've spent summers for 20 years. And the vineyard becomes almost a character in that book I think more than any of my other books. Your place is so important and certainly it's important in, "Tiger Eyes" to--

>> Yea.

>> Judy Blume: But, I don't look for-- you know I don't go around the country looking for a place. Actually I did that once when I was writing-- after I had written actually, "Summer Sister", not "Summer Sisters", "Smart Women." I get my titles mixed up just like you. I had written a draft of, "Smart Women" and I needed to take it out of New Mexico where I was living. And so, I went around the country looking for another place. This was the only time I've ever done this and I will never ever do it again. And I needed a place where women might come after a major change in their lives, because they wanted to start new lives. And that was certainly true in Santa Fe where I was living. But, off I went to find another place and I settled on Boulder, Colorado and after I wrote it I just waited for those letters to come in saying you don't know Boulder at all. You got it all wrong. But in fact, I didn't get those letters and I got one that said well, when did you live here? You must have lived here. So, that was good. But, I will never do it again. I'm not a writer who can do that. I need to know the location. I need to know a place inside out so that I understand the characters even better.

>> Given the degree to which your books have resonated with your readers and I would even say there's an emotional attachment it seems evident with a lot of people. As your career has progressed have you felt sort of a special responsibility in terms of that personal connection that you're making?

>> Judy Blume: Well, yea. I mean but the responsibility is to write the best books that I can write. And if I-- I might never write another book if I let myself think about all those readers out there when I-- you know when I'm sitting at the computer writing, because that would be so overwhelming. As it is there have been times, sorry. There have been times when you know I feel so responsible to my readers. I mean you know there are a lot of really serious painful letters that come from particularly younger readers and I feel a responsibility to those kids. I mean I try to answer every one of those letters that I can. You know but I can't solve the problems. I always offer to try and put them in touch with somebody who might be able to really help them. And some kids have said yes, please do that.

>> The-- I guess you could say the flipside of some of the realism and very serious issues that you bring to your work is that some people have responded negatively. They've tried to take your books out of schools and out of libraries. How has that impacted you?

>> Judy Blume: Well first, I have to say that yea some of the topics are serious or real life, but the books are funny--

>> Yea.

>> Judy Blume: And that's what really brings in my readers. I don't want people to think oh, you know this is really dreary, serious stuff. It's not because the subject matter has been serious. It's because there are those who you know don't want to talk to their kids about some of these issues including--

>> Yea.

>> Judy Blume: Puberty. I mean yes, puberty is serious, but puberty is funny and puberty is natural and normal and healthy and it's going to happen to everybody whether their parents want it to or not. And the only thing is that parents let kids know early on you can come to me with your questions or do no ever come to me with questions like these, you know. So, serious in terms of sexuality, in terms of language, religion, I mean these are things that affect everybody.

>> Do you think some of the, I guess censorship that you face, is that just an overreaction? Is this people who maybe don't read your books and don't appreciate the tone and the attitude that you take with the subjects?

>> Judy Blume: This would take a whole conversation about censorship. I wouldn't put it the way that you just put it. I think that censorship grows out of fear and it's contagious. And you know it comes-- when it first hit me it was coming from the far right, the religious right and now not just for me, but for everyone out there it can come from the right or the left. There is-- you know there are those who want everything to be politically correct and life is not necessarily politically correct. There are those who you know don't want certain language and I try to explain look, I'm not saying this is okay for your kids. You tell them. You get to say what's okay for them. But, if a certain character reacts in a certain way I've got to be true to the character.

>> Um huh. You--

>> Judy Blume: And that gets me in trouble, yea.

>> You have been involved with the National Coalition Against Censorship. What kind of work have you done with that organization?

>> Judy Blume: Yes, it is a wonderful, wonderful small organization that is there to help teachers who come under fire, writers whose books are challenged, readers who don't know where to turn when some of their books, favorite books are removed. And it's an organization that really changed my life, because I felt alone, painfully alone when censorship first started you know, 1980ish. And I didn't know where to turn and in those days it was before-- you know publishers are involved today. I'm proud that my-- one of my publishers, Random House has taken a real stand against censorship. And-- but in those days I didn't know where to go. And somehow I found this little organization or they found me and they changed my life in helping me understand that I wasn't alone and that this was happening to other people too. And together you know with other

writers and again with publishers and groups we stand, we stand proud and tall and we fight back.

>> You mentioned publishers I guess getting a little bit stronger in terms of their attitudes. What do you think is the general trend within society in terms of efforts to remove books? Do you think it's getting better or worse?

>> Judy Blume: I think that it's changed, because more libraries have policies in place. There was a time when you know school library, teachers and librarians they didn't know what to do. Now, there are policies. You know the ALA, American Library Association is there to help and librarians now they don't give in. When a parent comes into school waving a book and saying take this book away. I don't like this book. I won't say in all cases, but in many cases that will not happen anymore. It has to go through a proper review board. The complaining parent will have to fill out a complaint you know, put it in writing.

>> Um huh.

>> It makes it a little bit different. So, I think this is good. Are there fewer complaints now? I'm not sure. There's always, there's always the latest book. You know it's funny, I mean censors never go after books unless they're books that kids like. It's almost as if kids like these books there must be something wrong with them; so we better get rid of them. It's always been that way. You know if you look at the list of books, I mean, "Harry Potter." For a while I'm not sure, but Harry was you know the most challenged of books. And if Harry hadn't become popular nobody would have bothered.

>> Yea. Before I let you go Judy Blume are there any other projects or books that you're working on you'd like to talk about?

>> Judy Blume: Well, I did start research on a book that came to me out of the blue. I never even thought of it. Usually books, ideas sit in my head for a really long time kind of on the back burner and I'm not even aware of it. But, this came to me in a flash and I was very excited, more excited than I had been in a long time and it required research, something that I've never really had the pleasure of doing, because I've found it to be a very, very satisfying, pleasurable experience. And a friend of mine who writes only nonfiction said yea, that's the research part. Wait until you have to sit down and start the writing, which is true. I mean usually I'm inventing you know the whole way and this will be. I mean it will be a novel and, of course, the characters will all be invented. But, it is based on something that happened in my town when I was growing up that I'm not talking about yet.

>> Yea.

>> Judy Blume: If you don't think I'm being coy, but I just find it better. And I had planned over the summer to try to get, really get going on a first draft of this novel. But, the project with my son and, "Tiger Eyes" kind of fell into his lap and therefore into mine and what's more important, you know, a project with your grown son or a novel?

>> [inaudible]

>> Judy Blume: So, for at least a few months I will be working with him and then when that's done I can get back to this novel. I hope that my enthusiasm will still be there. I'm sure it will be. I see it. You know it's a notebook sitting on my desk and I keep thinking ooh, I'd really like to open that book and start on you.

>> Umm. Well, Judy Blume you've had quite an influence on me personally I have to say and certainly millions and millions of other people. It's been such a pleasure talking with you today.

>> Judy Blume: Thank you. And just let me say to all of my readers out there who may be listening thank you from the bottom of my heart. You have given me everything.

>> Well, we are certainly excited to hear more from you. That'll be at the National Book Festival on Saturday, September 26 on the National Mall from 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. As always the event is free and open to the public and if you'd like more details and a complete list of participating authors you can visit www.loc.gov/bookfest. From the Library of Congress this is Matt Raymond, thank you so much for listening.