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IS PUBERTY A DIRTY WORD?*

JUDY BLUME**

Well, there's good news and bad news when it comes to censorship today. But since there's a lot more bad news, I'll start with that. Actually, censorship due to sexuality isn't a new idea. I first met up with it in 1948 when I was ten and my mother was reading John O'Hara's *A Rage to Live* and she said to me, "Don't you ever look in that book and especially not page 206."

Of course, from then on my goal in life was to read *that* book. So imagine my delight when I was a junior in high school and O'Hara's name came up on my reading list. Off I went to the public library in Elizabeth, New Jersey, only to be told by the librarian that *that* book was kept in a locked closet. And I couldn't take it out without written permission from my parents. I was angry. Really angry! I felt that my rights had been abused.

That night I phoned my aunt, an elementary school principal, and told her what had happened. An hour later she appeared at our door with her copy of *A Rage to Live* in hand. I stayed up half the night reading. It was a good book. A good story. I couldn't see what all the fuss had been about. And instead of turning into a nymphomaniac—which, I guess, is what worried my mother—I went on to read everything O'Hara wrote.

In fairness to my mother, I must tell you that was the first and last time she ever told me I couldn't read a book. And it was browsing in our bookshelves at home at ages twelve and thirteen that I discovered J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*; Saul Bellow's *The Adventures of Augie March*; and Ayn Rand's *The Fountainhead*. I loved those books! I may not have understood everything in them, but it was that love of books that made me want to write.

If I had been allowed to read *A Rage to Live* at ten, I wouldn't have been interested. I'd have put it down after two pages. Children are their own best censors (in the best sense of that phrase). Anyway, what's the worst thing that can happen if a kid reads a book that you, as an adult, would rather she didn't read now? Maybe some questions. And I think the fear of answering those questions is enough to turn some adults into book banners.

I'm here today to represent the kids—because it's their books that are most frequently challenged and sometimes banned in libraries and

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** Award-winning children's author.

classrooms across the country. And I come for my friends Bob Cormier and the late Norma Klein, whose books are also banned, along with Madeline L'Engle's, accused by the censors of teaching "New Age" philosophy. I guarantee that when Madeline wrote *A Wrinkle in Time* she never heard of "New Age" philosophy.

I've lost track of how many incidents there have been involving my books since 1980—hundreds, probably thousands. And the reasons given are always the same: language, sexuality (which means anything having to do with puberty) and something called "lack of moral tone," which I think means, evil sometimes goes unpunished, or, you don't hit the reader over the head with a message.

When I began to write, twenty-something years ago, I was so naive I didn't even know I was being controversial. I wrote *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret*, out of my own sixth-grade experiences. Yes, for a year in my life I was obsessed by the idea of menstruation and breast development ("I must, I must, I must increase my bust"). And yes, I had a very special relationship with God that had nothing to do with organized religion.

In the fall of 1970 when *Margaret* was published, I gave three copies to my children's elementary school library, 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 that 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. I was flattered. When I replied that I had, she called me a *Communist* and hung up. I still don't know if she equated communism with menstruation or religion.

Over the next ten years there were some isolated complaints, but nothing to grow anxious about. In fact, if you heard Molly Ivins last night, we even had some fun with it back then. There was the young librarian who was told by the male principal at her school that *Deenie* was unsuitable for young readers because in the book Deenie masturbates. *It would be different if it was about a boy*, he'd said. Well, she and I had a long talk, and I told her that I wrote those scenes right out of my own childhood experiences—that at twelve my friends and I talked about our "special places" and "getting that good feeling" although none of us had ever heard the word masturbation. She listened, wide-eyed, and then she said, "Could I tell my principal that Judy Blume masturbated when she was twelve?" I said, "Sure, why not?" I've always wondered if *Deenie* made it back to the shelf or if all my other books were quickly whisked away.

But in 1980, everything changed. The censors crawled out of the woodwork, seemingly overnight, organized and determined. Not only would they decide what *their* children could read but what *all* children

could read. Thanks to Jerry Falwell and his Moral Majority I went from being called a "Communist" to being labeled a "Secular Humanist."

Challenges to my books then went like this: A mother in Montana, running a school book fair, wrote to my paperback publisher saying, 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.

From another letter: Judy Blume books promote *contraception, abortion, and masturbation!* When I told this to a friend he said, "God, Judy . . . if only you could convince them to let the kids masturbate, they wouldn't have to worry so much about the other two!"

In Hanover, Pennsylvania, an elementary school librarian was directed by her principal to review all my books, looking for:

1. Offensive language
2. Pervasive vulgarity
3. Sexual content
4. Psychological or intellectual inappropriateness for the age group.

She didn't find any of the above, but the Board of Education decided the books should be on a restricted shelf. Now young readers needed parental permission (in writing) to check them out. *Shades of Elizabeth*, New Jersey, 1955.

What message does this send to the kids? *There's something in these books we don't want you to know about—something we don't want to talk about.* Students who have read the books are skeptical about adults who are so threatened by them. One girl wrote to me about *Deenie*: if there is something bad in this book, could you explain it to me—because I don't know what it is!

Those who would choose censorship as an option say they are protecting children from the evils of this world—at least the sexual evils. But I believe censorship grows out of fear. Fear on the part of adults who can't talk with their children about sensitive issues and sexuality is certainly one of those issues—adults who are afraid of ideas different from their own. Those who are most active in trying to ban books, as we know from attending this conference, are from the religious right. But because fear is contagious, other parents who are unsure about themselves and their relationships with their children are easily swayed by them. Book banning satisfies their need to feel in control of their children's lives. And censors are suspicious folks. If kids like it, it must be dangerous! *Undermining parental authority* has become a common complaint.

While the censors are busy counting swear words in my books, I'm getting letters like this one from a thirteen-year-old girl:

Dear Judy,

My mom never talks about the things young girls think most about. She doesn't know how I feel. I don't know where I stand in the world. I don't know who I am. That's why I read, to find myself.

And this letter, from a twelve-year-old:

Dear Judy,

Well, my mother finally decided to have the talk with me, but I knew about that subject long before my mother told me. When she was telling me, she kept asking me if I had ever heard anything about it, and I kept saying *No* as if I had never heard a word. But you know how it is, everyone picks up everything on the streets. My mother wasn't the first one to tell me. Actually she was the last.

There are some parents who believe if their children don't read about it, they won't know about it. And if they don't know about it, they won't do it. It won't even happen to them! But I have news for them—their kids are going to experience puberty anyway. They are going to menstruate, have wet dreams, maybe even masturbate. But they probably aren't going to feel very good about themselves.

A grown woman wrote:

My periods began just before my twelfth birthday, before any of my friends started. And for six months I suffered untold agonies that I was dying. I hid the evidence for fear it was something bad I had done. If your books had been around then, I would have been spared all that. Except, of course, my mother probably would not have let me read them. I have two daughters, ages eight and eleven, and I promised myself that I won't make the mistakes my own mother made with me. But because of my sheltered upbringing, I still don't know what is normal and what is not, and I am a forty-one-year-old adult.

While the censors are saying, we want to keep our kids innocent as long as we possibly can, I am hearing from kids like this:

Dear Judy,

I read your book *Deenie*. You wouldn't believe how happy I was to know that I am not the only person to do what Deenie does (masturbate). Since you are the only person who has mentioned anything about this, could you please answer my questions.

1. How did you find out about this?
2. Is it a kind of disease?
3. How did I know to start doing this?
4. Am I weird?
5. How many other letters have you received saying people do this, if any?
6. Approximately how many people do this?
7. Is what I do going to harm my insides, like by not letting me have babies?
8. Am I a fag?

Masturbation is the ultimate taboo in kids' books. Far more than intercourse. But you haven't really talked *masturbation* until you've talked it on T.V. with Pat Buchanan. I had the experience of being on *Cross Fire* when he was one of the hosts. He admitted that he'd never actually read any of my books, yet he sat there quoting highlighted passages out of context. Finally, I said to him, "Mr. Buchanan, are you hung up on masturbation or what?"

I don't have to tell you how destructive this climate of fear is. We have the language police, we have the sex police, we have adults so busy worrying about other people corrupting their children (or children in general) there is very little time left for helping kids learn to make careful decisions, to take responsibility for their own actions, to be tolerant and compassionate human beings, to think for themselves.

While the censors are looking for obscene passages in my books and others, I'm hearing from kids like this:

Dear Judy,

I just graduated from eighth grade, and I need an adult's advice. I need to contact someone, but I don't have the courage. I have a problem, which concerns my father and myself. It started when I was in fourth or fifth grade and it still continues. It is incest. I feel tremendously guilty, like I led him on. People tell me I'm very pretty. I feel that I am the cause of my father's behavior. After a recent incident with him, I felt so suicidal and such emptiness and such confusion. I felt like I didn't deserve anything good to happen to me ever. I didn't eat much. I would only talk if I had to. I wished myself dead. I tried to fall down the stairs. I tried to inflict pain on myself. I'd bite myself, scratch myself, make myself sick, wishing someone, primarily teachers, would ask me if something was wrong. For an English assignment I wrote on child abuse and I included a poem I wrote, but no one came to me. At the end of eighth grade, I figured out for sure that none of that silent pleading or leaving signs would help. When my homeroom teacher signed my autograph book,

she wrote, "to the most laid back person I ever met." By not having courage I lost my chance.

And by not having courage we all lose our chances.

I've been corresponding for years with a young woman I'll call Brenda, who was repeatedly raped by her brother. Finally, when she was almost thirteen, she told her best friend, who told *her* mother, and then that mother told Brenda's parents.

Brenda wrote:

But my parents didn't do anything. It's like they don't even care. They ignore the fact that it ever happened. I think my mom blames me because after she found out she changed. She got mad at me easier. She would let my other brothers beat up on me and say I deserved it. I feel so alone and afraid. I'm really depressed right now. I don't know if I'm suicidal or not, but I've been thinking about it a lot. Sometimes I go to sleep wishing tomorrow would never come. I have terrible nightmares. I'm self-conscious and worried about my appearance. I hate food. Yesterday was the first I've eaten in two days. I can't sleep at night. I sit on my bed or at my desk and think, or I write or I draw until it gets light out. I need help. Would you help me to understand incest better because I've blocked a lot of it out. Is it normal to block out painful memories?

This young woman is from a religious Christian fundamentalist family. Her parents took her out of public school and kept her at home because they didn't want her exposed to ideas different from their own. But since both her parents worked she felt isolated, which added to her depression. Her only solace came from a young librarian at the public library, six miles away, where Brenda walked every day. Where she finally looked up the word *incest*. But after the librarian moved away, Brenda began to hurt herself in order to take away the emotional pain.

Her mother blames *Satan*, and Pat Robertson might agree. Catharine MacKinnon might blame pornography, an equally simplistic answer. Find a scapegoat—that way you don't have to take responsibility.

Yes, the cost of fear is high. And this fear is causing a domino effect. The censors are watching and threatening. The school administrators don't want any trouble. The teachers and librarians are often put under pressure not to purchase controversial books in the first place. The publishers are in business to sell as many copies as they can. Word goes out to the editor . . .

When I began to write, I didn't know if anyone would publish my books, but I wasn't afraid to write them. I was lucky. I found an editor and publisher who were willing to take a chance. They encouraged me.

I was never told what I *couldn't* write. I felt only that I had to be honest, to write the best books I could. If I were starting out now, I might not even write children's books. I might find it impossible to write honestly about kids in this climate of fear.

The positive news (and I did promise good news when I began this talk) is this—there seems to be a new awareness on the part of teachers, librarians, parents, and students. This year I've received a number of letters from young people who are doing reports on censorship. And in town after town, people are becoming activists, showing that they do care about the freedom to choose what books they want to read, what books they want made available to their children.

In Loveland, Colorado, and Peoria, Illinois; Gwinnet County, Georgia, and Vancouver, Washington; and most recently in Rib Lake, Wisconsin—where a male principal took *Forever* away from a high school freshman in the school cafeteria, disregarding the policies set by his own district—we have what Molly Ivins calls *the new freedom fighters*. They may not always win, but they're fighting the good fight, helping others to become more aware. And the National Coalition Against Censorship is there for them, working quietly and effectively, offering support and encouragement.

I used to feel so alone when I heard my books were being challenged and even banned. I had nowhere to turn. The publishers weren't doing anything. But now, thanks to the NCAC, I'm part of a team. Today, when I get a message from my publisher that a distressed teacher or librarian or parent or group of students is trying to defend one of my books, I put them in touch with Leanne Katz at the NCAC and from that moment on we all work together, not just to keep my books available, but to assure readers of all ages that they will continue to have the freedom to choose. Now, I've heard recently that some feminists have labelled us *First Amendment Fundamentalists*. And I say, yeah . . . right. Consider the alternatives!

