

Questioning the Self, Questioning Others, Questioning Relationships: A Qualitative Inquiry into the Pedagogical Value of Judy Blume by Jimmie Manning, Jacqueline McNally, and Stephanie Verst

"What do you get when you cross children's novels with controversy? Judy Blume!" – Anonymous

"When we communicate, we are not just talking about the world; we are literally participating in the creation of the social universe." – W. Barnett Pearce

With sales of her books exceeding 75 million copies (and printed in 26 different languages) and with more than 90 awards to her credit (Judy Blume's Home Base 1), Judy Blume has found a successful career grounded largely in her ability to write honest, direct, and oftentimes controversial children's literature (Blume 11). The sales success and critical praise of her books, combined with the love and attention she receives from old and new fans, establishes her as a literary popular culture icon who has arguably made more of a social impact than she has a literary one. Along these lines, Blume has been at the center of controversial battles to ban or censor her work dating back to the publication of her first novel, Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret (Curry 28).

Interestingly, Blume says she never set out to write works that would be considered controversial, and she only sought to be honest with her writing (Blume 11). In reflecting upon why she wrote Margaret, a short novel exploring a pre-teen's perceptions of growing up girl, Blume offers, "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" (11).

Despite her intentions, Blume's works continue to cause a mixture of parental excitement and fright as some parents defend the books to be well-crafted works allowing young people to deal with issues they may be too afraid to discuss; while others counter that the books continue to be inappropriate and potentially confusing for young readers (Goodman 29). Of course, not all of Blume's works have been controversial. Many of her books - Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing, Otherwise Known as Sheila the Great, and Double Fudge, among others—have eluded challenged book lists. These titles largely serve as simple (if cleverly told) morality tales dealing with topics pertinent to elementary school children. For instance, Double Fudge deals with greed when the main character becomes obsessed with money; Superfudge helps children to cope with the introduction of new siblings; and The Pain and the Great One offers social support for that enduring sibling rivalry through the years of early adolescence. In contrast, some of her challenged works aimed at young adults often deal with more mature issues: Blubber realistically portrays cliques at school, racism, and offers a startling perspective of what it is like to be overweight; Deenie covers issues of parental pressures and provides an in-depth account of how scoliosis causes insecurity in one teen's life, including her sexuality; and Then Again, Maybe I Won't presents an honest description of what it is like for boys to go through puberty, complete with wet dreams and worries about erections.

These, and other novels exploring the lives of young teenagers, can evoke a sense of what it is like to be a young adult. Even if the readers do not see themselves directly reflected in the novels, they can probably understand the points of view of the characters and grasp a larger understanding of adolescent social worlds. The portrayals in the texts are explicit and candid, seldom hedging when dealing with complex issues such as religion, social stigma, or sexuality; and Blume frequently places the story's events into colloquial terms not often found in sex education classrooms. Even though Blume asserts many of these novels are morality tales (Blume 13), this did not stop some parents from challenging her books aimed at the preteen and teenage groups. A number of parents continue to grouse regarding the novels' inappropriate content, particularly content that deals with sexuality and religion (Curry 30). Many parents also demand that these books serve up lessons presenting morals directly in conflict with the values and beliefs they hope their children to attain (Foerstel 4). Still others argue that the books are harmful to the self-esteem of women, particularly because they encourage young women to engage in

what they believe to be inappropriate behavior (bullying, sexual relationships, cursing); and others even argue Blume's works offer no redeeming values at all, that they are nothing more than shock tales filled with gratuitous outrageousness and pornographic scenarios (Curry 35).

The tensions surrounding Blume's works are evident. Despite a vocal fan base, love from critics, and feminist support for the sensitive and complex approaches to the intersections between sexuality, race, class, gender, and family diversity—or, perhaps, because of these reasons - Blume's work continues to draw debate as to whether her books are appropriate for children. In observing the 100 most frequently challenged books (Challenged and Banned Books 1), Blume authors five of them. Yet the books continue to be popular with children, handed down by parents, praised by educators, and remain staples of reading not only in Blume's native country (the United States) but in a variety of other countries on six continents (Blume 5). Regardless of where the novels are being read, controversy ensues. It is for this reason that this study offers insight into how Blume's novels are being read - not literally, but in the cultural sense.

Through our analysis, we seek to understand the tensions between those who are attempting to make meaning in regards to the works of Judy Blume, particularly unpacking public discourses speculating how children are interacting with her works. In order to provide a beginning exploration of these tensions, ethnographic document analysis (Silverman 40) of online message boards discussing children's literature is enacted to provide interpretivist understandings of the emergent themes in debates surrounding Blume's books. These themes are read through the theoretical lens established in Pearce and Cronen's coordinated management of meaning theory (35). While exploring the emergent themes (illustrated with textual examples), a feminist criticism of the emergent themes is offered. This criticism examines implications regarding the pedagogical value of Blume's works; tensions centered upon the discourse of what are perceived as delicate issues in children's popular culture; and the implications of censoring children's literature. Ultimately, this piece offers a case study of how tensions regarding feminist children's literature are being negotiated in terms of communication to create a social reality of Blume's texts.

Negotiating Meaning in the Works of Judy Blume

To begin our analysis, we turn to a theory helping to position the words being used via online message boards: Pearce and Cronen's coordinated management of meaning (35). Coordinated management of meaning (hereafter CMM) examines how meanings are not inherent in words, but rather that meanings are socially constructed by people as they engage words and bring meaning to them based on their experiences. One metaphorical phrase frequently associated with the theory is *all the world's a stage*, as Pearce and Cronen firmly assert life, much like theatre, is filled with actors who carry forward based on their thoughts, dreams, emotions, and desires. As the theorists posit:

Imagine a very special kind of theater. There is no audience: everyone is "on stage" and is a participant. There are many props but they are not neatly organized: in some portions of the stage are jumbles of costumes and furniture; in others, properties have been arranged as a set for a contemporary office; in yet another, they depict a medieval castle . . . Actors move about the stage, encountering sets, would-be directors, and other actors who might provide a supporting cast for a production of some play. (48)

In this study, the stage would be online message forums; the actors are the participants who both post to and read the forums; the setting is the lives of the participants and their families, communities, and world; and the props would be the works of Blume and a healthy dose of ideology. Of course, different characters have different motives; and through the online message forums these various motives can be interpreted.

One question continuously being applied to CMM theory is the question of reality: If different people bring different meanings to a situation, then how can they fully understand each other? And if a lack of understanding exists, then how can a given construct be real to the participants discussing that

construct? This is answered by the notion of social reality. As Philipsen states, "Many interactions are more messy than clean and more awkward than elegant" (19). In other words, creating understanding sometimes can be a struggle, even if it is not immediately evident. The sense that people can make from each other's words are co-constructed, and to the people engaging those words a social reality is present. The people in a conversation may not fully understand each other, but they likely think they do. This does not, however, suggest agreement regarding a topic. While two individuals may agree in regards to the meaning of individual words, they do not always agree in regards to the impact and larger social meaning of the ideas behind those words. Ontologically they may be on the same page, but epistemologically and praxeologically they likely differ.

In regards to discussions centered upon Blume texts, people socially disagree regarding a variety of issues. The web talk focused upon in this study explores opinions regarding Blume, her writings, and the implications of those writings. Through unpacking the various arguments posed, we believe larger implications can be unearthed from the data.

Methods of Analysis

This study employs a qualitative/interpretive tradition (Bodgan and Taylor 7), one intended to identify recurring themes and meanings. Through the thematic coding of 20 transcribed pages of responses from 18 on-line message forums, we collected data over a three month time period by first visiting prominent websites dedicated to exploring children's literature and snowballing to other websites discovered in the networks. Discussions focused on both positive and negative reactions to Judy Blume books. Some identified specific books, others reacted generally to overall aim and/or topics of the books, and all were initiated by web users (with no instigation or topic introduction from the researchers). Using thematic analysis, the qualitative data were analyzed in order to identify emerging themes (Flick 184). Here the "collection of data is correspondingly conducted with a method which seeks to guarantee comparability by defining topics and at the same time remaining open to the views related to them" (Flick 185).

In total, 36 units were analyzed using a multi-step procedure. First, a short description of each case (on-line response) was produced outlining the central topic(s). Second, cases were coded and categorized based on emerging themes. Finally, cases were compared and thematic domains developed. The five emerging categories were labeled as such: 1) learning tools, 2) connection, 3) sexuality, 4) religion, and 5) negative responses, with each code containing one to five sub-categories allowing for deeper understandings of a given area. Additionally, negative case analysis suggests most data not falling into the above themes falls into the categories of either nostalgia ("Wow this discussion brings back memories") or phatic communication ("Thanks!"). Neither of those two categories directly ties into the themes of this study, although the nostalgic element does suggest the tensions surrounding Blume books are enduring ones. A detailed description of the five dominant categories, as well as sub-categories and exemplars, are provided in the following sections along with discussion. In order to preserve the voices of the online participants, all data were left in-tact with no changes for misspelled words, grammatical errors, or use of emoticons. Additionally, in line with research ethics review board suggestions, no names (either proper or web-selected) or location data is provided (although all data included here is open access via the World Wide Web).

Judy Blume Texts as Learning Tools

The first emergent theme we discuss focuses upon Blume's books as "learning tools," exploring what participants report learning from reading Judy Blume books. Three sub-categories emerge from this code: learning about sexuality, learning about life, and learning for parents. In the first category, participants discuss how Judy Blume books taught them about female periods, erections, wet dreams, sex (also described as "the birds-and-the-bee's"), and masturbation. As one participant shares

When I was in grade four, our school library got a copy of *And Then Again, Maybe I Won't* by her. We were actually encouraged by our teach to read it. None of the guys in class wanted to because we knew about her other books, and at the time thought her primary purpose was to teach girls about their monthlys (*sic*). This book was written for guys from a guy's perspective. It taught us about erections (*sic*) and wet dreams. At a time when we were trying to decide whether girls were icky or intriguing, it explained a lot of things”.

As can be seen from this representative example, not only is sexual self-awareness dominant but so is awareness of sexed/gendered others. The respondent, like others, not only learned about the issues he faced in his own life journey, but became aware of issues regarding young women and their own issues with puberty and sexual development. One of the most prominent challenges feminists face is explorations of sex, gender, and sexuality in pedagogical processes, especially pre-college. Blume's texts raise hope that pre-teens can engage these issues in a comfortable format and offer an inspiring example other authors can follow. Moreover, these explorations cross sex lines as well as lines put into play socially regarding race, class, or religion.

Of course, while sexuality is often a focus of Blume texts, other life lessons are dominant as well. Specifically, self-empowerment themes in the books establish that one can feel good about themselves regardless of how they look or their intellectual level. Participants shared fond memories of books such as *Blubber* or *Deenie* where body issues are explored, or relish in texts where the characters falter with schoolwork even though trying to do their best. From the mundane to the extraordinary, the texts help to provide understandings of how and why things happen in life. As one participant reflects, “It helped to read that bad things happen to good people and sometimes we just don't know why.” Another states, “I read this book my freshmen year I thought it was a way good book of learning what or how life can go by so quick I thought it was the best book ever.” It can be understood, then, that these books do not seem to disrupt the lives of many young individuals (as some might claim). Instead, they offer a form of comfort, a social support necessary to the self-esteem and self-concepts of the readers. The themes in the novels can be comforting to parents, too. The final subset of the “learning tool” theme reveals how many times the books serve as a multi-dimensional learning tool for parents as well as children, allowing them to explore what their children may be facing and also allowing them the opportunity to give their children accessible books encouraging understanding without the awkwardness of face-to-face conversations. Some message board participants recommended the books as a way of parents opening the lines of communication with their children on topics that are difficult to discuss. For instance, one woman writes:

... I have two boys, aged 9 and 6, and that doesn't mean I have the answers on how to parent. Much of parenting is learning by doing, and acknowledging that even as adults our beliefs evolve. I do know that this book, and others like it, is the sort I want available to my boys. This is in some ways a tougher phase of parenting, when they don't just ask everything that pops into their heads although the questions are be more important.

As can be imagined, dissenting viewpoints regarding Blume's books as a way of allowing understanding of complex issues are brought forth, too, oftentimes centering upon the necessity of face-to-face communication. Message board participants responded to this by noting that the novels should not serve as the exclusive channel for teaching children difficult to navigate issues – rather they can offer up starting points for discussion. As one parent asserts:

As parents, we should be helping our teens know about the consequences of having sex before they actually do it. *Forever* is a great book to give your daughter - or son – along with a good book on sexuality, the reproductive system, STDs, birth control, and puberty. After they read *Forever* TALK with them about it. Talk about feelings. Talk about consequences. Talk about double standards.

Others did state, however, that they used the books as a source to avoid having “the talk” with their children, and this raises many questions regarding whether the books can act as the sole outlet of exposure. Still, if parents are too shy or cannot bring themselves to discuss such issues with their children, the books would be better than nothing; and, much like a literature class, the texts would be helpful to parents in breaking the ice with the topic, allowing their children a sense of privacy and comfort in initially exploring the sensitive issues raised, and giving the family a reference point in discussions. It is of note that regardless of whether or not message board participants were fans of Judy Blume’s texts, the majority stated that her books have educational value.

Judy Blume Books Offering Connection

The second emergent category explored in this study is “connection,” with sub-categories centered upon connecting with family and connecting with friends. Several participants describe these books as providing a way of bonding with friends or connecting with siblings. As one participant shares:

In Celebration of the 25th anniversary of Banned Books Week, I’m starting off my book picks with one of the 10 most challenged books – Judy Blume’s Forever. First, let’s get the silly part out of the way ... RALPH. Doesn’t that remind you of reading all the naughty bits of Forever during eighth grade recess? If not, you’ve missed out on a major right of passage in many American girl’s lives. Forever was THE book to read in junior high for both me and my five-years-younger sister. We couldn’t say the work “Ralph” without going into a major giggling fit. It still makes me smile.

Not only does she connect with her peers in reading the text, but she shares a moment of family bonding with her sister. Others describe connections that were made with friends or classmates, whether they were assigned to read a Blume book through school or, in some cases, where they made friends with others in sharing the books. For example, one participant shares:

If there were no New Jersey there would be no Judy Blume. And if there were no Judy Blume, I would never have been the most popular girl in fourth grade, thanks to my copy of Forever which I shared with my entire class in the hallway outside the school library. (Especially page 64, heh-heh.)

These books became a channel of commonality where people could discuss, share humor, and form bonds based on knowledge obtained from these texts. Moreover, the texts allow discussions of sexuality to enter the public realm. Granted, the discussions occurring may not always be of a serious nature (and, based on the research data, are likely not), but they do allow for the breaking of silence on an issue many consider to be awkward.

Sexuality

Of course, it is evident from the previous two emergent themes and their subcategories that human sexuality is a major driving force both in Blume’s books and in the discussions emerging from them. The third emerging theme we discuss, “sexuality,” centers on the sexually graphic nature of Blume books and demonstrates how, in addition to the other factors, this area of understanding takes on a meaning of its own. To this end, many of the cases explored fall into a first sub-category of graphic positive experiences. Here responses focus on the graphic and explicit depictions of sexuality and what one participant refers to as the “interesting parts” of Blume’s books. Responses, then, play out either as a positive learning experience (represented in part by the data displayed in the discussion of the previous two emergent themes) or, as the following example shows, positive in a pleasurable way:

I read all of them as a teenager. And if my mother knew what was in Wifey, she would have totally freaked. If I remember correctly, it’s even more graphic than some of the books I have read as an adult! 🤔 Totally!!!! Judy Blume was like porn for preteens!...like you said more graphic than

most books you'd read as an adult....AND the school library (in Jr. High) had them available to check out. I haven't read any since the 8th grade..."Tales of a Fourth grade Nothing", "Fudge", etc. were awesome elementary school level books. The trip was all of a sudden at Jr. High level the style totally changed into preteen erotica...I don't think parents caught it because she was such a great children's book writer.

As this passage (and others similar to it) represents, the graphic nature of the "sex scenes" in Blume's texts were used for pleasure. To this end, the depictions of sexuality fall into a sex-positive category where people understand human sexuality is not only a part of life, but it can be a part of life filled with joy. Of course, the participant's discourse above does not paint such an eloquent picture of the joy gained from the book – it is obvious this person's joy ties into a voyeuristic look into another's sex life – something often described by participants both positively and negatively as pornography. It is this pornographic nature that often causes some readers to feel uncomfortable. As one participant posits, "It was a bit graphic and detailed..... just a bit Yeah, sok book.. Ive read better, but it got taken out of my library at school cause it was too graphic according to the librarians. I agree."

Perhaps sexuality is one of the most complex codes to emerge in Judy Blume's discourse, in large part because it harkens back to enduring questions about sexuality and children's exposure to material of a sexual nature. Are Judy Blume's books pornography? If one buys into a definition of pornography as simply seeking to offer pleasure, then the answer is no. If one looks at pornography from a feminist viewpoint, where many times it is questioned as being degrading to women, the answer would be no as well. Most of the sexual situations come with a focused human viewpoint complete with complex considerations and understanding. As this study demonstrates from adult rememberings of childhood experiences, Blume's books are more than simple tales of sexuality used to bring pleasure to children. Yet, at the same time, evidence provided in this study demonstrates reflections of reading the books explicitly for pleasure. These accounts likely dive into the heart of what many parents may fear about their children engaging Blume texts: What if my child is exposed to material of a sexual nature? Even worse, what if they like it? These questions are tough to answer, but it is evident from this study that even if some people thought the books were a "bit to graphic" that the books offer concrete details and avenues for discussion.

Religion

While sexuality is certainly a controversial area of discussion in many cultures, religion has the possibility to be the most volatile. The fourth emerging theme from this analysis is "religion." Interestingly enough, despite many of her books dealing with religious issues (particularly Starring Sally J. Friedman as Herself) the message board discussion focuses almost exclusively on the book Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret and the participants' identification with the main character's struggle with religious identity. Some state this book caused them to question their religious beliefs for the first time; or that for those who religion has been forced on them as children this book provides a new way of thinking in terms of spirituality and how to "make sense of it all." In fact, the discussion regarding religion in Margaret focuses almost exclusively on identity forming. As one participant shares:

This is really embarrassing. I'd also forgotten how much of the story is about religion. Granted, I had a heathen childhood, so that aspect of the story must not have resonated quite as much as the puberty and social aspects, but you'd think that the title would have been a little bit of a tip-off. I mean, DUH. Margaret's struggle to find her own personal religious identity is so well done - - compassionately and (again) realistically. The religious and personal struggles her parents have had with their parents is explained in terms of her upbringing, but it stays mostly in the background. The story is about Margaret. Which is as it should be.

Evident both in this particular example and the message board discourse surrounding the title in general is the self-reported inability of the participants to fully understand the religious contexts of the book as children. Only through reflection now does this theme become fully evident for the readers. Of course, this adds to the view for some parents contending Blume's novels are dangerous, confusing, and inappropriate for children to read – after all, religious pieties are perhaps the most sacred. It is understandable that tension may mount if they feel Blume is encouraging their children to question their faith. Yet, as participants share, the book is still largely faith-positive. It is not that Margaret needs to abandon faith, it is that she wants to understand it.

Punishment and Disdain

The fifth and final emergent theme for this study is “negative responses” with sub-categories regarding consequences and rejecting ideology. While previous emergent themes and sub-categories mentioned in this study offer room for joy in engaging Blume's texts, discourses in this category generally do not. For example, in the consequences sub-category many responses focus on negative consequences experienced as a result of reading Judy Blume books – not in terms of cognitive dissonance or personal disturbance, but in terms of outside punishment from others. Specifically, participants often describe the consequences of “getting caught with” Blume books. One contributor shares about Forever, “I remember reading this book in 6th grade and I remember doing a week of afterschool detention for getting caught with it!” Others describe the feeling that they had done something wrong by reading and being interested in the topics discussed in the books. One participant adds, “I remember reading this book and being excited to read such things that my young mind was so curious about, but then feeling like I had done something wrong.” As can easily be imagined, those who were punished often felt shame about the topics covered in the books and were reluctant to bring them up in conversations.

Of course, some of the message board participants rejected Blume's writings altogether. This passionate monologue largely sums up these feelings:

... I can't stand Judy Blume's books, and the dweeby freaks who think she is the end all are really scary. Unfortunately, most of them are children's editors. In one week I read that some chick-lit hack is going to write some homage to JB in a short story collection or some ridiculous thing (hey, when you're published, you can write anything), and a book review--long-winded and no cuss words--by a woman who used every Judy Blume book she had read to rag on a book by Simon Pulse called Rainbow Party. Granted, this book needed plenty of ragging on (instead of getting a rainbow on your penis from seven girls with seven different lipsticks, why not get one girl, seven lipsticks, and a paper towel? Logistics, people, logistics!), but the theme of the review led me to believe that this woman was brought into womanhood by JB's books. What? You had to read Judy Blume to get through puberty? You folks who can't get published in the kiddie lit world now have your answer. The reason you can't get “in” is because the editors who review your work were all weaned on this pre-yuppie, post-hippie “it's all about me and getting my period” bullshit...

To be fair, most of the participants expressing views similar to the one listed above were not as direct or profane; yet, at the same time, the essence of their view is clear: Judy Blume has crossed a line. She is entering into sacred territories (or, perhaps, creating them) and it is not wanted or needed.

Those rejecting the ideological content of Blume's works often were met with gentle but direct resistance from those on message boards, and the responses often carried feminist understandings: Blume's works are not essential, but they are certainly helpful. Blume's works offer support and solace for issues children are already facing; they do not force child readers to engage those issues. Most of all, Blume's books suggest it is normal to question things in life, including sexuality, racism, religion, and relationships. As one message board respondent shares:

Go ahead. Censor the books. Your kids will find them. And they'll find the stuff in them. I feel sorry for the parents who spaz (*sic*) out over their kid reading about a pad. I hope to God they have someone who will tell them what's up when they start to bleed, or when they go hard for the first time, or when someone dies. Come on people. This is going to happen to everyone. Pulling Judy Blume away ain't gonna stop it!

Conclusion

As can be inferred from this study, Judy Blume books, despite their controversy, are being seen by many as sophisticated and profound explorations of issues prevalent in everyday life including sexuality, religion, and sensitive life events. It is evident Blume's texts both serve as a pedagogical tool and the site for beginning discussion of serious or awkward issues relevant to everyday living. While tensions certainly surround why and how the books should be used, and if they are appropriate at all, a feminist view of the books suggests they are sex positive, affirmative to diverse understandings, and are being constructed by many as useful even if they may present uncomfortable situations. Obviously, many reject the writings of Judy Blume based on moral disagreement. Some participants share this can lead to uneasiness or tension, including punishment for reading Blume's works. Based on the evidence found in our study, we question those punishing children for reading Blume's books and find no compelling reason to follow those rejecting Blume's ideology, especially given the practical and helpful nature of the books that many participants share. In examining how participants involved with online literary message boards are constructing realities about Blume's texts, it would seem they are largely championing them as excellent tools for readers to explore themselves, explore others, and explore relationships they may enter.

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