

# 1996 Margaret A. Edwards Award Acceptance Speech

Judy Blume

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*Judy Blume is the winner of the 1996 Margaret A. Edwards Award, which is given for lifetime achievement in writing books for teenagers. Blume received the award for her book *Forever*, a frank portrayal of teenage first love and sexuality written in an open, realistic manner.*



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*Judy Blume*

## Introductory Remarks

Marilee Foglesong, Chair,  
1996 Margaret A. Edwards Award Committee

**I**t has been my privilege to serve with a super cracker-jack group to select our award recipient today. They have the characteristics of most librarians who work with young adults—they like to read, they like to

talk about what they have read, and they form very definite opinions that they like to share. As their chair, I can testify that there is not an introvert in this YALSA 1996 Margaret A. Edwards Committee. I'll ask them to stand as I call their names to receive my thanks and yours for their work:

- Sharon Bart, Miami-Dade Public Library
- Carol Fox, Unified School District, El Dorado, Kansas
- Penny Parker, Baltimore County Public Schools, Baltimore, Maryland
- Sandra Payne, Young Adult Specialist for Staten Island, New York, Public Library

The Margaret A. Edwards Award was established to recognize a living author or coauthor whose book or books, over a period of time, have been accepted by young people ages twelve to eighteen as an authentic voice that continues to illuminate their experiences and emotions. The award was given for the first time in 1988, and today we are celebrating the eighth recipient.

A leader and pioneer in young adult services, Margaret Edwards served as the coordinator of young adult work at the Enoch Pratt Free Library in Baltimore, Maryland, for many years. She believed that young adults have unique reading interests that are different from children and from adults. The programs that she developed for teens at Enoch Pratt have served as models for young adult services across the country. It is particularly fitting that this award to honor a young adult author be named for her.

When this year's committee studied the criteria for the award, the possibility of giving the award for one book by an author seemed to leap off the page and light up in neon. It was a departure from the previous awards, but it was an idea whose time had come. In our minds there was one book—one unique book that had been published twenty-one years ago, but like the Energizer Bunny, keeps on ticking and circulating along; one book that served as a turning point in YA literature; one groundbreaking book that was cited as one of the twelve most challenged books in a 1992 report by People for the American Way, an organization that monitors censorship in the United States; one book that must have the smallest advertising budget in publishing because it has the best advertising campaign of all—word of mouth; one book that has sold over three million copies in English, but has been read by gazillions more by passing copies from one to another; one book that has been translated into nine languages—French, Spanish, German, Hebrew, Dutch, Japanese, Danish, Czech, and, my personal favorite, Icelandic; one book that deals openly and honestly and speaks to teens in contemporary language and with teenage characters about adolescent sexuality. Is it possible that one book could be all these things? Of course, the answer is yes, and the book is *Forever*.

When I called Judy and told her we would like to present her with the Margaret A. Edwards Award for *Forever*, she said, "But that's not my best book." My snappy retort at the time was "Oh!" I wouldn't want her to think that we as a committee don't appreciate her other many fine books and feel that they aren't worthy of praise and recognition. They certainly

are, but we felt the time had come to point fingers at a book that had made a difference in the lives of millions of teens; that had opened doors for other writers to say, "It's OK to recognize that teens have hormones that rage and the actions that follow those feelings"; and to point to a writer who has stood steadfast in the face of censorship challenges and assumed a leadership role in this fight. The time had come to honor a writer and one special book that is remembered by so many young people as *the* book that reached into their private thoughts and touched their lives as no other book and writer had done. The time is now, that book is *Forever*, and the writer is our 1996 Margaret A. Edwards Award winner, Judy Blume.

It is my distinct pleasure to ask Judy and Lillian to come and join me for the presentation of the citation and the check.

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## *Forever*—A Personal Story

Judy Blume

I'm as surprised by this honor as many of you. In fact, I was so totally flabbergasted when Marilee reached me in January at my mother-in-law's apartment in Baltimore, I didn't get it at first. I thought she was asking me to serve on a committee to choose a YA author for an award. And what went through my mind was, *funny she should ask me, because I'm not a YA author.*

When it finally sank in that I was being honored and that the book being cited was *Forever*, I blurted out, "But *Forever's* not my best book for that age group!"

There was a deadly silence on the other end of the phone. Finally, Marilee asked, "What is?"

"*Tiger Eyes*," I told her.

Another silence. Then, "Oh."

That's when it hit me. You don't argue with someone who's trying to give you an award. You accept it graciously. And so, Marilee, I'm here today to tell you that I am truly honored and grateful—because the

next day, on that long train trip to Florida, when I finally digested what you were trying to say, I sat up in my tiny berth, nudged my sleeping husband, and said, "Oh my god! What a gutsy decision they've made—giving me this award in today's fearful climate, with the far right breathing down their necks, demanding family friendly libraries."

As if libraries haven't always been family friendly. I can't think of a family friendlier place. I can still see myself at four sitting on the floor of the public library in Elizabeth, New Jersey, sniffing the books and choosing *Madeline* to take home with me. I loved that book so much I hid it from my mother, so she couldn't return it.

And then the thrill of taking my own small children to the public library—and now, my almost five-year-old grandson, who chooses books for me to read to him. He negotiates at bedtime.

"Seven books, Nonie."

"How about four?"

"How about six?"

"We'll see how tired you are."

"I'm never tired."

And so, on that train, I wanted to stand up and cheer, not for myself, but because this committee is sending those would-be censors a powerful message—a message that *you* are out there protecting our young people's right to read and to choose books freely; a message that you recognize and respect my need and every writer's need to create in an atmosphere free from fear; a message that no one individual or group is going to frighten you or intimidate you—and if that's not what you're saying, don't tell me, okay?

As Carolyn Caywood wrote in *SLJ* [*School Library Journal*], she'd rather have heard what went on in that committee meeting than what I have to say today. I think we all would, Carolyn.

When I began to write in the late sixties and publish in the early seventies, I had never heard of a category called YA books, which is probably why I've never thought of myself as a YA writer. So I did some research in preparation for this talk. It was Dorothy Broderick who put me in touch with Betty Carter, who told me YA has a revisionist history. There are those who will argue that *Little Women* was the first YA novel, an idea that really appeals to me.

Betty also told me a wonderful *Forever* story about her daughter and her first summer at sleepaway camp following fifth grade. And how, when Betty asked what was the best thing about camp, her daughter said, "I read *Forever*, Mom! Each of us chipped in 25 cents to buy it but then we made the

boys pay 50 cents apiece if they wanted to read it." For this, Betty spent a hefty amount to give her young daughter a summer experience she'd never forget. There are a lot of *Forever* stories.

Until I wrote *Forever* in 1975, I had never written about older teenagers. My characters were the tens, elevens, and twelves, the kids on the brink—full of secret thoughts and active imaginations. Sometimes they had older siblings, but I wasn't as interested in their points of view. Maybe because my own teenage years were a fifties mix of the bland and the boring, when every feeling and concern was kept tightly under wraps, when we all pretended to be so happy, so fine. *What . . . problems? Not us!*

Then, in '75, Randy, my fourteen-year-old daughter, a voracious reader, was racing through a group of books a librarian friend of mine referred to as "the pregnant books"—you know the ones—if a girl succumbs, if she gives in, she faces pregnancy, abandonment, a gruesome illegal abortion, even death or, at best, a long train trip to another place. Sexuality linked with punishment.

In those books, girls never do it because they want to. They're passive, not active participants. They're never sexually turned on. And in those books, boys have no feelings, boys never have their hearts broken. So when Randy asked, "Couldn't there be a book where two nice kids from nice families do it and nobody has to die?" I began to think about sexuality linked with responsibility. About young people making decisions and living with the consequences of those decisions.

Now, I've always believed that the best books come from some place deep inside and that a good writer doesn't write to order, doesn't write what somebody else needs to read, although sometimes it turns out to be what somebody else needs to read. And maybe the reason I told Marilee *Forever* isn't my best book is because of the way it was conceived. I'm reconsidering now, Marilee. Maybe it doesn't matter where the idea originates, maybe the only thing that matters is how deeply it's felt.

But writing *Forever* was one thing. Publishing it was something else. My first thought, after the first few drafts was, *Oh oh . . . how am I going to work with Dick Jackson on this one?* Then I reminded myself, Dick and I had been through menstruation and breast development with Margaret, and we'd been through wet dreams with Tony and masturbation with Deenie. We'd been through puberty together! And somehow, some way, given Dick's humor and delicacy in working with his authors, we'd get through this too.

I remember sitting in Dick's office, at his desk, feeling awkward and shy, with such a dry mouth that I could hardly speak. I'd taken some kind of pill to calm my stomach, and it ate up all my saliva. Every time I coughed Dick would jump up, leave the room, and bring me back something to drink. I remember a discussion about whether or not Michael would dab aftershave on his (you should pardon the expression) balls. "Impossible!" Dick cried. "It would burn like hell!"

"But I know someone who did that," I argued. We went back and forth, back and forth, and finally

compromised, yet until I reread the book for today's event, I couldn't remember how we'd resolved it.

Of course, there is no other editor like Dick Jackson. I know all his writers feel the same warmth toward him as I do, but when I think of the books we've done together, when I think of how he's nurtured me as a writer, encouraged me to tell whatever stories I needed to tell, to write as honestly as I could, as naturally as I could—well, this is his award as much as mine.

The seventies was a good time for writers and a good time for young readers. "Be glad you wrote those books when you did," Dick said recently. That's such a sad comment on where we are today.

I don't remember being concerned about how *Forever* would be published. I don't think I knew enough then to be concerned. I just assumed Dick and Bob Verrone at Bradbury Press would know what to do, and they'd do it.

I finally asked Dick about that, and he told me he and Bob didn't have a clue. They knew *Forever* wasn't for the eleven-year-olds who were reading my other books. And they didn't publish anything else like it, nothing in that new category called YA. So they dodged the issue by labeling it my first book for adults, which they knew it wasn't—and when I saw that line on the dust jacket, I was *not* happy, to say the least. No one had discussed it with me. I'm sure if Dick and Bob knew how that label would play to the censors years later, they'd never have used it.

So *Forever* was launched. The only review that's stayed with me was written by Margaret Drabble for the *Times* in London, where I was then living. She wrote about

how fascinated the English have always been by how American teens managed to do all those things to one another in their cars, whereas English teens, if they were lucky, had only minis. Although I enjoyed and admired Margaret Drabble's novels, I never understood her point since in *Forever* Katherine and Michael don't use his car for anything but transportation.

When I returned from London in the summer of '76, to move to New Mexico, Pocketbooks was about to publish the paperback edition of *Forever*. I have to thank my agent Claire Smith for sending the book to Phyllis Grann, then the editor of Pocketbooks, who bought it as a mass-market title.

I spoke to Phyllis yesterday and asked if she remembered anything about that decision. She told me it was because her daughter, Allison, a young teenager, had read the book in galleys and had proudly told her friends that *her* mom wasn't afraid to talk to her about sex and wasn't afraid to give her books about it either. Allison Grann is a physician today, with a baby daughter, in case any of you are wondering how the first readers of *Forever* turned out. And Phyllis' decision to publish the book on a mass-market list helped it reach a much wider audience than it might have otherwise.

Whenever I go into bookstores, I check to see where *Forever* is shelved. And more than once, I've found it mixed in with the children's books. In Santa Fe, I once grabbed it off the shelf, where it was sitting next to *Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing*. "Look," I told the manager of the store, "this book doesn't belong in the children's section. It's not meant for my younger readers."

"Oh, I know," the manager said, "and we tried shelving it with adult fiction, but it just wasn't moving—and since we put it with the children's books, it's been flying out of the store!"

What's an author to do? It's a real dilemma because I enjoy writing for different age groups. I think it helps to keep my writing fresh, and I know it helps to keep me excited about writing.

I have a wonderful collection of letters from my readers about *Forever*. My favorite is from the mother who wrote to tell me about her ten-year-old daughter who was determined to read the book. The mother had already read it and felt ten was too young. But she also knew her daughter was going to read it one way or another, so rather than forbid it, she said, "All right, but I want to answer all your questions after you've read it . . . okay?" The daughter agreed.

And then the mother waited nervously, and she waited, wondering if she'd be able to answer those questions when the time came. She rehearsed what she might say, until she felt comfortable. And finally her ten-year-old handed her the book. "I'm done," she said. The mother looked at her and said, "Do you have any questions?"

"Yes, Mom . . . what's fondue?"

The mother laughed hysterically until she cried.

And another letter:

Dear Ms. Blume,

On behalf of all boys named Ralph . . . how could you do this to us?

And just one more:

Dear Ms. Blume,

I have read *Forever* twenty-one

times. The only thing wrong with it is the ending. Kath and Michael belong together. The only thing I am requesting is that you write a sequel. Because it makes me cry whenever I think about it. I write tons of stories, so I hope you don't mind, but I rewrote the ending of your book, so I wouldn't be so sad.

Most of the letters are about the love story, and they would break your hearts; but this is July Fourth weekend, and I've promised myself I will *not* cry during this talk, so I'll save them for another time.

And then there are the inevitable *Forever* questions whenever I talk to kids:

"Where'd you get the idea?" Usually asked by a thirteen- or fourteen-year-old girl whose friends are egging her on.

"Did you . . . ah . . . have experiences like Katherine's?" Lots of giggling. Major disappointment when I tell them I didn't.

"Wasn't your mother embarrassed when she read the book?" My mother was so shy, so afraid to talk to me about anything, we never really discussed it, anymore than we discussed *Wifey*. Actually, my mother went to high school with Philip Roth's mother in Elizabeth, New Jersey, and when *Wifey* was published they ran into each other. Mrs. Roth said to my mother, "Listen, Essie . . . when they ask you how she knows all those things you say, 'I don't know, but not from me!'"

Recently I was interviewed by a graduate student at NYU, for a magazine on the Net. She asked if I had deliberately set out to create female characters who are sexual beings, rather than sexual objects. Until she asked the question I had

never thought about it. *Sexual beings rather than sexual objects*. Yes, that made sense to me. Female sexuality. Isn't that what frightens so many adults about the book? The idea that Katherine enjoys her sexuality? Or that Deenie does? Or Margaret or any of my characters?

I thanked that young woman for making her point. I love those wonderful twenty-and-thirty-somethings who grew up reading my books. They seem to be intelligent, thoughtful, decent human beings. I'm proud they remember my characters so well.

In the book I'm trying to finish this summer, a book about two friends whose lives are woven together from ages twelve to thirty, a book that doesn't fit neatly into any category, there's a lot of talk about sex.

There's experimental sex between girlfriends at twelve, there's self-sex (the safest kind, after all), there's falling madly in love at seventeen sex, there's confused sex, and there's *Last Night Never Happened* sex (the title of the book). None of it is as explicit as the scenes in *Forever*, yet it's a much more sophisticated book.

I lost three months of writing time over the winter because I couldn't figure out who the audience would be for this book. I'd ask myself the same question over and over, although by then I was deeply involved in my characters' lives, and there was no way I was going to give up on them. Finally I thought, maybe it's for all those readers who grew up reading *Forever*.

George, my husband, grew so tired of my dilemma that one morning when I turned on my computer, dancing across my screen in

purple letters was a message: *It's Forever, stupid . . . It's Forever . . .*

I can't talk about *Forever* without talking about responsibility. I've had endless discussions with Leanne Katz, director of the National Coalition Against Censorship. (And today's generous cash award will be contributed to NCAC.) The question I always ask Leanne is: Is it responsible in the age of AIDS for young people to read a story like *Forever*? And every time Leanne reminds me it's *fiction*. It's a *love* story. "What are you going to do?" she says. "Remove every love story that takes place before AIDS? Better to let the kids read it and talk with them about it."

Still, because the book is read as a contemporary love story, I felt the need to add a note to my readers. (It appears in all the newer editions of the book.) I tell them when I wrote *Forever* in 1975, sexual responsibility meant emotional readiness, plus preventing unplanned pregnancy. Today it means much more. I tell them where to go for help. I also tell them I'm glad that some things, like feelings, never change.

We all want today's kids to be aware, to be intelligent, to practice safe sex. They don't, you know. The *safest* sex is reading about it. Norma Klein used to say, reading about it satisfied her curiosity and kept her a virgin. Me, too. But it's probably not going to keep today's teens virgins. So we'd better try to prepare them for the decisions they're going to have to make, not by hiding from the issues but by facing them. *Forever* can be used to foster discussion. Katherine and Michael can help adults talk to young people without personalizing, patronizing, or preaching.

I can't begin to count the number of times *Forever* has been challenged in schools and libraries since its publication. I know how many of you have bravely defended not just *Forever* but my other books, and the books of other authors. You've stood up for your students and your beliefs, sometimes risking your jobs, and there's no way any of us can thank you enough.

If it happens in your community, if it happens to you, don't keep it a secret! Censors work quietly through intimidation. They *hate* publicity. So pick up the phone, call the National Coalition Against Censorship at (212) 807-NCAC. Call ALA's Office of Intellectual Freedom. Send a fax to me via my publisher, and I'll send you a *Forever* packet. Involve the students, their parents, the community. And remember, you're not alone!

Of course, it's easy for me to stand here and tell you what to do. Ultimately you have to make your own decisions. But every time a book is removed from the library, it's the kids who are the real losers. It's the kids who get a negative message about books and reading, and too often, about their own sexuality, as well.

I've been blessed with the most loyal and loving group of readers any writer could ask for. I've been blessed with loyal and supportive publishers and editors, some of whom are here today, and I thank all of them for keeping my books in print and available, even when they've come under fire. Most of all, thanks to every one of you for being here today and for sharing this moment with me. Where would I be without you?



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*1996 Margaret A. Edwards Award Winner Judy Blume (center) is flanked by 1996–97 YALSA President Deborah Taylor (left) and YALSA Past President Patricia Muller.*



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*Author Judy Blume (third from left) poses with the 1996 Margaret A. Edwards Award Committee (l–r) Sharon Bart, Marilee Foglesong, Carol A. Fox, Penny Parker, and Sandra Payne.*