

In Conversation: Judy Blume & Kelly Fremon Craig (Transcript)

The legendary author on why it took 50 years to make 'Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret' into a movie

NOV 25, 2023 · PAID



1



Share



PAGE TO SCREEN Clockwise from top left: *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret* director Kelly Fremon Craig, Judy Blume and Janice Min at Zibby's Bookshop in Santa Monica on Oct. 14; Blume peeked at the solar eclipse before the conversation; Fremon Craig and Blume. (Todd Williamson)

Sean McNulty (00:03):

Welcome to The Ankler Podcast. I'm Sean McNulty from The Wakeup newsletter here at The Ankler, and this holiday week we have a special episode featuring legendary author Judy Blume and director Kelly Fremon Craig of the movie version of, *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret*. The pair were interviewed in front of a live audience by Ankler's CEO, **Janice Min** on October 14th in Santa Monica at Zibby's Bookshop as the first in The Ankler's in Conversation: Page to Screen event series. A special thank you to the event sponsor, Lionsgate, and please enjoy. And our regular podcast will return next week.

Janice Min (00:41):

Good morning, everybody. I am so excited for you all to be here. I'm Janice Min. I am the CEO and editor in chief of The Ankler. First of all, thank you to Lionsgate for making this possible today. Thank you to Zibby's Bookshop, an independent bookstore, for making this possible today too. Oh my God, Judy Blume is here in Santa Monica with us. I am dying inside a lot right now, so I will keep my cool and be a professional.

(01:13):

First, I'm going to introduce Kelly Fremon Craig. She is a screenwriter, producer and film director. She wrote and directed the 2016 coming-of-age dramedy *The Edge of 17*, starring **Hailee Steinfeld**, to critical acclaim. And now she's captured another story of American girls in her 2023, this year, adaptation of Judy Blume's classic, *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret*. The film, released earlier this year, received, this is important, a 99 percent Fresh rating on Rotten Tomatoes, which yes, it's huge. Huge. I'm just going to say, not that we're making comparisons, it's way bigger than *Barbie* and *Oppenheimer*, meaning that critics really, really, really loved it, and critics are often not nice, as you may have heard. Okay, so I'm going to be ridiculous and introduce Judy Blume now.

(02:04):

Just in case some of you aren't familiar, Judy Blume is an icon. Yes, she has sold 82 million books, written 25 novels, including *Deenie*, *Blubber*, *Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing*, *Forever* and *Wifey*. I think probably everyone in here has read every single one of those. She was named one of the 100 Most Influential People in the World by *Time* this year and is recognized as a Library of Congress Living Legend. Congratulations. Some other things I love about Judy Blume, she has been called the “most censored writer in America.”

Judy Blume (02:43):

That's better than being [inaudible 00:02:45].

Janice Min (02:46):

And she actively works against book bans, a subject I hope we can spend a little bit of time on today. She's a producer of *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret*, a wonderful gem of a movie. Welcome, Kelly. Welcome, Judy. Thank you so much for taking part of this today. It's the first in our Ankler In Conversation: Page to Screen series. I'm going to get to you, Judy, but I'm going to start with Kelly.

Judy Blume (03:15):

Good.

Janice Min (03:16):

I'm going to just share a list of some of the other movies released in 2023: *Guardians of the Galaxy, Vol. 3*, *Fast X*, which is the 10th installment of *Fast and Furious*, *Mission: Impossible —Dead Reckoning*, the seventh installment of *Mission: Impossible*. Then even *Meg 2: The Trench*, about the killer giant shark. I think there was a sequel. In this climate of franchises and sequels, you decide we're going to try to make a movie of a book published in 1970, which in the stakes of Hollywood today, is a small story. What in the world were you thinking?

Kelly Fremon Craig (03:54):

That's a really good question. Well, first of all, I have to say there are just a few books that got inside me in a way that just changed me, and Judy and this book was one of them. And I know so many people who feel that way about this book and who have experienced it through all different decades, I read it in 1990, and who related so deeply. I think there's something so universal about it. That, to me, is what made it big. That's what makes this little story feel much larger than it might seem on its surface.

Janice Min (04:35):

There's this whole theme of people writing Judy letters in her life that I want to talk about later, but you decided you were going to write an email to Judy Blume. What did you do?

Judy Blume (04:44):

She's a very good writer, let me say, and a very persuasive writer.

Janice Min (04:49):

What did you say?

Kelly Fremon Craig (04:50):

Really, I just poured my heart out, which I think everybody does to you. Judy owns a bookstore now, and I am constantly hearing about people just come in and just cry when they meet you. I think that was what I was doing as I was typing the email, because you've just been such a north star for me, really since I was a little kid. You made me fall in love with reading. You made me want to be a writer. To be here is just, still surreal. I really poured my heart out and said how much I wanted to adapt this book and how important I felt it was and how now felt like a time where we could actually do it and get the support to tell a female story, to tell a story about girls, that I didn't feel we could get even four or five years prior. It felt like there was a moment, and never in a million years thought you would actually write back, to be honest.

Judy Blume (05:44):

Okay. She said something in that email that no one had ever said before, and no one had ever come to me with a credential like *The Edge of 17*. She said, "Oh, by the way, I wrote and directed this movie, *The Edge of 17*. And I'm like, what? I had just seen the movie and I had loved the movie. No one had ever come with anything like that, a real movie that I had seen, that I had loved. She said one other thing that really got to me, "And my mentor is **James L. Brooks**, and he will be with me every step of the way as he was in producing it in *The Edge of 17*." I thought to myself, this may be something. Because I have to tell you, my son once said to me, my grown son, he said, "You wait till the women who read your books, who grew up with your books are in charge in Hollywood, and you see what's going to happen then." And he was so right.

Janice Min (06:55):

That's incredible.

Judy Blume (06:56):

Yes, because before that it had been “Judy, Sweetheart” lunches with guys. And it's like, I love you guys, but that was not... Just, they didn't have anything to say to me the way Kelly did.

Janice Min (07:09):

So people had come to you to talk about a *Margaret* movie before?

Judy Blume (07:14):

Well, I took *Margaret* off the table years ago.

Janice Min (07:16):

And why?

Judy Blume (07:17):

It's 50 years. Five-oh years, a lot of years since I wrote it.

Janice Min (07:22):

Why did you take it off the table?

Judy Blume (07:23):

Well, I used to think not every book has to be a movie. I was worried about kids. I didn't see American movies showing kids as real people. They were always cute. I was worried about that. But once Kelly and Jim came to meet me, I just felt this was the team. This was the team, it was the right time, and let's do it. And it really happened. I mean, how often your book is optioned, but it never really happens. This was no option. This was just, let's do this.

Janice Min (08:01):

You and James L. Brooks, and apologies to the audience, he has a cold. He's sick. He could not make it today. But you and James, and I want to hear how James L. Brooks fell in love with a story of a sixth grader getting her period.

Judy Blume (08:17):

She made it happen.

Janice Min (08:20):

But you flew to Key West, where Judy lives today?

Kelly Fremon Craig (08:24):

Yes. After I had reread the book as an adult and fallen in love with it all over again and for different reasons as an adult, I called up Jim. I wrote Judy a letter, and she wrote back and I was like, oh, wait a minute, there's maybe a chance. I called Jim and I said, "You have to read this book, and I don't know if you'll get it the way I do, but you have to read it." To his credit, he read it that day and called me that night and was so moved by it. And so we had lunch maybe a day later, and then we were on a plane within a week.

Janice Min (09:01):

Oh. You were like, "We're coming."

Judy Blume (09:03):

And I was like, "Oh my God, they're coming to Key West. What am I going to feed them? Oh my God."

Janice Min (09:08):

And what did you feed them? [inaudible 00:09:09] What did you do?

Judy Blume (09:11):

There was a woman then in Key West, we called her Caterer to the Stars. This was a joke. She helped us all do whatever we were doing, and I called Georgia and I said, " [inaudible 00:09:21] need something for lunch," and she brought some things-

Judy Blume (09:26):

... to the house. Tasty things. That's what I was most nervous about.

Janice Min (09:31):

And then how soon after that meeting were you shooting?

Judy Blume (09:33):

Oh, well, we knew at that meeting. I knew that I wanted to work with them.

Janice Min (09:38):

Did you say yes in the room?

Judy Blume (09:40):

I think I did.

Kelly Fremon Craig (09:41):

Yes. Actually, it was really George, Judy's husband. We were sort of standing around at the end. Jim and I were trying to field Judy out and be like, "So did we pass the test?" And then George was like, "So we're doing this, right?" And then we looked at you and you were like, "Yeah." And we were like, "Oh my God."

Janice Min (10:01):

And off you went.

Kelly Fremon Craig (10:05):

And off we went. Yeah.

Janice Min (10:07):

That's amazing.

Judy Blume (10:12):

And everything went along and then Covid hit. The movie was cast, and then Covid hit. And when you were casting, I mean, this is you with children on the cusp and you've got girls who are not quite 12, and that's how you want to get them, when they're not quite 12. Then Covid hits and you're postponed for a year.

Kelly Fremon Craig (10:38):

Oh, yeah. It was terrifying because we found **Abby Ryder Fortson**, who plays Margaret. We found her in March of 2020, and then 12 days later she was just turning 12, and then months and months kept going by, and I thought, oh my gosh. I mean, the whole movie is obviously her praying for boobs. I thought, oh God, it's going to look like God has answered. Actually, when she got there and showed up in the dressing room, God had answered. And so there is visual effects all over the film to try.

Janice Min (11:16):

Fascinating.

Kelly Fremon Craig (11:16):

I think we probably set a record for the most visual effects in a film just to flatten someone's chest.

Judy Blume (11:24):

Not everyone develops that early. I didn't, but Abby did.

Janice Min (11:31):

That's amazing. Then how did you find...? The child actors are pretty amazing. How did you do this? What were you looking for?

Kelly Fremon Craig (11:40):

It was really important to me, and I know to Judy. What Judy was saying about kids who are sort of cutesy and polished, that's...

Janice Min (11:47):

Overtrained.

Kelly Fremon Craig (11:48):

Yeah, we really, really wanted real kids. And so we looked everywhere and the kids we found were from everywhere, were from all over the United States. For most of them, this is their very first thing that they've ever done. A lot of it was working with them improvising

during the casting process saying, "Okay, I know those are your lines, but throw them away and say it in your own words."

Janice Min (12:12):

Oh, wow.

Kelly Fremon Craig (12:13):

The kids who could do that and who could just play, and play in character, those were the kids that we chose.

Janice Min (12:20):

Okay. Let's talk about how you two collaborated, because you're a producer on the movie.

Judy Blume (12:26):

It's Kelly's movie, and Kelly made it happen and made it wonderful and made me feel that this movie is better than my book. I love it that much. I know it's ridiculous, but I do. I do. It's Kelly's. I mean, Kelly and Jim were very inclusive. I've been involved with other movies before where I've been called the writer of the original material, and we don't want to hear what that person has to say, right? But in this case, Kelly and Jim made me feel welcome. They made me feel that anything I wanted to share with them was welcome. I was on the set for five weeks, two, and then three weeks. I loved every second of it, and I just felt I was deeply involved, but I wasn't adding things to the script. I wasn't saying to Kelly, "Do this, do that."

Janice Min (13:26):

You felt good about it from day one?

Judy Blume (13:28):

I did.

Kelly Fremon Craig (13:29):

Also, I just have to say, Judy thanking us for involving her is so funny to me because we would be nuts not to involve you. You're Judy Blume. You know what I mean? We would be

insane. Also, just part of what I felt us geeking out about through the process were the little details. I love how much you love details. We would go nuts over little things.

Janice Min (13:53):

Like what?

Judy Blume (13:54):

Recipe book.

Kelly Fremon Craig (13:55):

Yes. Uh-huh.

Judy Blume (13:57):

I was there in 1970 and long before, and I remember that *Cooking With Soups*.

Kelly Fremon Craig (14:05):

Yes. Oh, the [inaudible 00:14:06].

Judy Blume (14:06):

We used *Cooking With Soups*.

Kelly Fremon Craig (14:07):

Yes.

Judy Blume (14:08):

And so they got-

Kelly Fremon Craig (14:09):

That was an idea.

Judy Blume (14:10):

... but I didn't have that recipe book, but somebody found that wonderful recipe book and mom opens it, Rachel opens it, and okay, dumps mushroom soup on top of the piece of meat that she's going to cook.

Kelly Fremon Craig (14:26):

Yes.

Janice Min (14:27):

Well, it's interesting. Movie is a period piece about periods, but it doesn't hit you over the head with the periodness of it. I want to ask, what was your strategy in sort of having that be the setting without having it be the setting?

Kelly Fremon Craig (14:43):

Yes.

Janice Min (14:44):

There was not a pulsating 1970 soundtrack.

Kelly Fremon Craig (14:47):

Yes. This was the biggest conversation that we had with the production designer, with the costume designer, **Ann Roth**, was really, how do you make it feel both of the time, but also timeless? Because I think that's what the book does. I mean, when I read it in 1990, I had no idea it was written in 1970. I experienced it as completely contemporary. You could do that more easily in a book, but in a movie, you're in a time and a place. It was a real challenge and a needle to thread to figure out how to create sort of a universal nostalgia and always be accurate to the period, but not where it hits you over the head or something about it draws you back to your own childhood, whatever decade that you grew up in.

Janice Min (15:36):

That's something I want to talk about a little more is the universality of small stories. I think we live in Hollywood, this idea of four-quadrant films and you need to appeal to men, women, young, old, and then you end up with these bloated \$150 million productions. Can you just explain a little bit, for both of you, what you see as a simplicity of a small story?

Kelly Fremon Craig (16:00):

I think the more specific you are, the more universal you are, actually. I really think so much of it is in the details. Again, I think that's so much of why this collaboration has been so wonderful, is because I think we're both equally obsessed about getting those little details so that there's something that just really makes it feel like life and makes it feel real.

Janice Min (16:27):

Right. And Judy, you have a cameo in the movie. You have a big role called, I think, Neighbor Number One walking dog number one or something like that?

Judy Blume (16:37):

Choice of dogs was a real mistake on my part. They said, here are two dogs. One was a medium-sized dog and one was a little tiny dog and I got to choose, and I chose the wrong dog, little tiny dog. It was a very, very hot day. The little tiny dog was probably an elderly dog, did not want to walk. The trainer went through all kinds of things to get that little dog to walk.

Janice Min (17:10):

And you and your husband represent just neighbors in New Jersey, is that correct?

Judy Blume (17:14):

Oh, well, I never saw anybody as dressed up walking a dog as Ann Roth loved dressing us up for that role, hat and shoes with tie-ups, and it was quite fun.

Janice Min (17:27):

Okay, let's spend a second on Ann Roth.

Kelly Fremon Craig (17:29):

Yes.

Janice Min (17:29):

Because for those of you who don't know, she is a legend. She's 91 years old, has won, I think, five Oscars, I believe? Kelly, you tell us about Ann.

Kelly Fremon Craig (17:42):

She's the greatest of all time. She's a spitfire.

Judy Blume (17:46):

Do not say I am the oldest costume designer ever to win an Oscar.

Janice Min (17:52):

We'll cut that out of this.

Judy Blume (17:53):

Okay.

Kelly Fremon Craig (17:58):

She does things that are so beautifully specific. One of my favorite things that she did is, I walked into the costume room and I saw Margaret in her outfit, and I looked down at her socks and she had her in one dingy white sock and one clean white sock. I was like, that is adolescence. That's that age. That's right. It's something that you'd never know in the movie, but we know. That feels right. It feels like it's in the right spirit.

Janice Min (18:29):

She worked on *Barbie* also, is that correct? [inaudible 00:18:33]

Kelly Fremon Craig (18:33):

She had a cameo in *Barbie*.

Janice Min (18:34):

Oh. That's right.

Kelly Fremon Craig (18:35):

Yes.

Janice Min (18:35):

Which is amazing.

Kelly Fremon Craig (18:35):

Yes.

Janice Min (18:35):

Amazing.

Judy Blume (18:38):

And she calls me Toots.

Janice Min (18:39):

Really? Oh, I love that.

Judy Blume (18:42):

She was naughty girl on the set. She would say, "Come with me." I said, "I can't go there." She said, "You're with me. You can do anything with me."

Janice Min (18:51):

Love that. Judy, I am just blown away by how ahead of the times you always were in what you wrote. You talked about sex before people talked about sex and girls.

Judy Blume (19:03):

But they were doing it.

Janice Min (19:05):

You're correct.

Judy Blume (19:07):

It's not a new idea.

Janice Min (19:11):

You also dove into so many social issues like racism, antisemitism. *Iggie's House*, written in 1970, is about a white neighborhood's reaction when a Black family moves in and Winnie the protagonist discovers that maybe even her parents aren't very welcoming. Then this, in *Starring Sally J. Freedman as Herself*, set in 1947 Miami, the protagonist is a girl who is Jewish, and she and her friend play concentration camp.

Judy Blume (19:40):

I know. That's my most autobiographical book. What can I say?

Janice Min (19:44):

Did you play that as a child?

Judy Blume (19:45):

I played everything. I played a lot. I had a big imagination. Sally is a lot like the child that I was, always had stories running around inside her head.

Janice Min (19:58):

I love this detail from the book that when she and her friend are playing concentration camp, they decide no one has to play Hitler because he is on vacation. It just sort of-

Judy Blume (20:08):

I think he's away on business.

Janice Min (20:09):

Oh, he's away on business. So poignant. And Margaret, she's estranged. Her mother is estranged from her Christian parents who could not accept her marriage to a Jewish man. I wish your books could solve the world. They haven't, but can you tell me what is the power for children to read these stories, particularly in these times today?

Judy Blume (20:32):

I can't answer that. When I wrote these books, I didn't know what I was doing. I didn't have a plan. I wasn't trying to do anything except tell a good and an honest story. I was young, from my limited experiences and viewpoint.

Janice Min (20:53):

All these letters and thousands and thousands of letters that have been written to Judy through her career are now housed at Yale in the archives. What kind of response did you get from telling those kinds of stories?

Judy Blume (21:03):

Amazing responses from kids. Boxes and boxes and boxes and boxes. Some of them very serious. Some of them very serious responses.

Janice Min (21:15):

And you wrote some of those kids back?

Judy Blume (21:17):

Yes. I still correspond with some of them.

Janice Min (21:21):

It's amazing. If you haven't seen the Judy Blume documentary, *Judy Blume Forever*, there are two adults who you corresponded with for decades. The stories are incredible. One of them is a girl who wrote you about her brother's suicide. Then she later revealed to Judy that the brother had been sexually molesting her.

Judy Blume (21:42):

For seven years.

Janice Min (21:43):

For seven years, and you helped her. You helped her. I mean, she gives you much credit.

Judy Blume (21:49):

She feels that. I was there to be supportive.

Janice Min (21:53):

And then Judy, also at another moment from the documentary... Is her name...? The one you went to her graduation?

Judy Blume (21:59):

Lorrie Kim.

Janice Min (22:00):

Lorrie Kim.

Judy Blume (22:02):

Lorrie Kim is such a wonderful character.

Janice Min (22:04):

Ah, but I think she started writing you when she was nine, I believe?

Judy Blume (22:08):

She was nine and she wrote in the style of **Louisa May Alcott**. And she said, "I quake in my boots each time a boy approaches the B shelf in the library, lest he see something he should not," which was my books. And she wrote in little teeny, teeny, teeny handwriting on paper thin paper. Sometimes she lived in America, sometimes she was in Seoul.

Janice Min (22:35):

Ah.

Judy Blume (22:35):

Yes. We'd had dinner with them, with her two teenage daughters.

Janice Min (22:41):

Oh my God.

Judy Blume (22:42):

Not that long ago.

Janice Min (22:43):

She wrote you when she was having a hard time with her parents and you and George came to her graduation at Bryn Mawr. Is that correct?

Judy Blume (22:51):

We went to something called... What was it called, George?

George Cooper (22:54):

Garden Party.

Judy Blume (22:56):

Garden Party Day, the day before graduation because she wrote... She was a little manipulative. She said, "My parents are not going to be able to come from Korea and get there for Garden Party, and would you like to come?" We happened to be in New York then, and so we went to Bryn Mawr. I got out my dress, my one dress, like this is good for a garden party. I didn't know what I was going to, and it was wonderful. Her parents, of course, were there. And George said, "Don't give her that **Mapplethorpe** book in front of her parents," because that's what she wanted.

Janice Min (23:45):

I want to get into some of the, is it activism that you do today? You are on the front line. A real hero on this front. Politico, I think it was Politico wrote this about you: "Blume's books matter because they give teens and preteens the kind of information that leaves adults unsettled. And because their books consumed privately at one's own pace on one's own terms, it's a secret conversation that feels like independence."

Judy Blume (24:14):

I love that. I never saw that. I love that. Thank you.

Janice Min (24:18):

What does that mean? Explain what that means if you're a girl.

Judy Blume (24:22):

Well, if you're anybody, I think.

Janice Min (24:22):

Anybody. If you're anybody.

Judy Blume (24:26):

Books are private, right?

Janice Min (24:28):

Mm-hm.

Judy Blume (24:28):

Books are between the reader and the author. That's what I love about books. I love movies too. You know I love movies. I do. But reading experience with a book, just you and the book. I never intended for my books to be used in school or taught in school. I just meant for them to be for the kids.

Janice Min (24:54):

Yes. There are many people who are interested in, who might not be as familiar with how you got started. You didn't start until you were married.

Judy Blume (25:03):

I think I was really young. I used to tell kids, "When did you start writing?" And I would say, I was really young. I was in my late twenties. Today, that's a joke because people are publishing books when they're 12. But yeah, I was married early. I had two kids by the time I was 25. And very soon after, I started writing.

Janice Min (25:27):

Well, you probably don't think of yourself as a lesson in resilience, but I think you are, and I want to talk about this. You got many rejections. You started to send things out. You got-

Judy Blume (25:35):

Everybody gets... I mean, you're supposed to get rejections.

Janice Min (25:38):

Okay, but you're Judy Blume. I just want to point out someone, was it a male executive, wrote to you: "So get a fresh hanky out and sit back for your first lesson."

Judy Blume (25:50):

Oh, he was such a... He was not an executive. He was someone that my husband's friend knew. You know how you must know somebody? Who do we know? Who do we know? And he was writing picture books. Successful picture books for children. I can't remember what manuscript I sent.

Janice Min (26:14):

But he told you what you need to do. I think it would be called "mansplaining" today.

Judy Blume (26:18):

He didn't tell me what to do, aside from get out your hanky and cry, and basically you have no talent. But he helped give me that determination.

Janice Min (26:31):

Right. So what did you do? You got that letter and you feel like-

Judy Blume (26:35):

I remember I was sick and I was in bed and I was crying. Oh, yes. Get out your hanky and cry. Yes, I did. But all the time I was thinking, you asshole, I'm going to show you. Maybe I haven't done it yet, but I'm going to do it.

Janice Min (26:54):

And you did.

Judy Blume (26:55):

I just kept learning. I kept writing. I mean, that's how I learned.

Janice Min (26:59):

You also found a publisher who was looking for what you wanted to do, a new publisher, is-

Judy Blume (27:04):

But it wasn't what that guy saw. What that guy saw, I have to say on his behalf, what he saw was probably pretty bad stuff, but he should have seen something good anyway. Because I was writing rhyming picture books that were not brilliant. It was once I started to write novels, small novels, that everything changed.

Janice Min (27:36):

So your first advance for a novel was \$350.

Judy Blume (27:40):

That was a picture book.

Janice Min (27:41):

That was a picture book.

Judy Blume (27:42):

It was a picture book, yeah. That's *The One in the Middle Is the Green Kangaroo*.

Janice Min (27:45):

And you bought a typewriter, an electric typewriter, is that correct?

Judy Blume (27:48):

I used my college electric typewriter in the beginning. Yes, and then I guess I-

Janice Min (27:53):

Treated yourself.

Judy Blume (27:54):

... I updated. Then my then husband, who was a lawyer and had a law firm, brought home a refurbished IBM Electric. Do you remember them? Anybody remember them?

Janice Min (28:08):

Yes.

Judy Blume (28:09):

Big thing. I kept one of those in my closet for years, and I would open... I think it was red, and I bought that one myself. I would open the door and say, "I still love you, even though I'm using a computer. You are still my first love." You don't need a machine. I write. I always got all my best ideas, know how you do it, with paper and pencil. Do you?

Kelly Fremon Craig (28:36):

Something for me, my brain clicks in when I have my hands on a keyboard, but I think it's maybe because I started that way.

Janice Min (28:44):

I want to ask you, it made me angry at your first husband in the documentary, because you said you don't think he read a single thing you wrote. And then you talk about trying to find... You thought maybe you were never going to find a life partner.

Judy Blume (29:00):

Oh, well, yes. I did keep trying. George and I are 44 years together. I found my life... Oh. Oh. That's luck. Luck, timing. Just like writing, there is luck involved, there is timing involved.

Janice Min (29:24):

There is a lesson, I don't want to jump to a conclusion, but a lesson in finding those who support you in your life, yes? Hopefully, or not.

Judy Blume (29:36):

What's the lesson?

Janice Min (29:37):

The lesson, like don't waste time with people who don't value you or don't value what you do.

Judy Blume (29:42):

Oh. Well, I didn't know that for a long time.

Janice Min (29:46):

You've said this line also, that you went from being your mother's little girl to then being someone's wife.

Judy Blume (29:57):

Well, I did. I mean, we did that then. I was married in 1959. I was a college student. I was a junior in college. What a crazy thing, but we did that. I wasn't the only one. It was like if you graduated from college and you weren't engaged, where were you ever going to meet anyone?

Janice Min (30:17):

And you were living in the suburbs. You also said once you went to a party and you were working at the time as a writer, and you said, "I don't think these other women are wishing me well."

Judy Blume (30:33):

Well, that was sad. Again, it was a time when, it was before we started supporting each other in the women's movement. It was still a competitive time. It was more like, "she thinks she can write. She thinks she can do this. What is she thinking," was the attitude.

Janice Min (31:01):

Get back where you belong.

Judy Blume (31:01):

I'm still quite friendly with one woman who lived on that cul-de-sac.

Janice Min (31:06):

Wow.

Judy Blume (31:06):

But we've never gone back to talk about that. I should talk about that with her. I don't think she was ever one who didn't wish me well.

Janice Min (31:14):

Good. So Kelly, when you were doing your previous movie, you went and spent time with high schoolers to sort of get the vibe, what's going on. I want to ask you, and both of you really, what's happening with our teenage girls today? Because you've seen the really depressing data around, according to the CDC, three in five U.S. girls feel persistently sad or hopeless, and that is double that of boys. What could you see? Do you have any insights into that from spending time making movies about girls?

Judy Blume (31:50):

I think it's because it's changed even since you made *Edge of 17*, because that would've been how many years ago, five?

Kelly Fremon Craig (32:00):

2016.

Judy Blume (32:03):

2016.

Kelly Fremon Craig (32:03):

I don't think social media is helping anybody with their mental health. I constantly think about how tough it would be to grow up with that, where your life is constantly a fishbowl and you can look and see what everybody else is doing and feel like their life is better than yours. I think that's the big lie you tell yourself in adolescence is like, "I'm the only one who screwed up and everybody else has it figured out." I think social media especially just perpetuates that exponentially.

Judy Blume (32:35):

It's always been bad, I think.

Kelly Fremon Craig (32:36):

Yes.

Judy Blume (32:38):

But I came of age in the fifties and it was tough. But social media, yeah.

Janice Min (32:44):

I thought about this question. I was thinking, Judy, what would Nancy, who's sort of the ringleader of the clique, if Nancy had social media today, what would Nancy be doing?

Judy Blume (32:55):

Who knows [inaudible 00:32:57] doing Nancy. I mean, yeah, Nancy's a bit of a bully, but she's nowhere near the “mean girl” mean girl.

Kelly Fremon Craig (33:07):

Yes. That was a big thing that we talked about is even the mean girl, all of that behavior is rooted in some pain or insecurity. You know what I mean? And so it was important to humanize her.

Judy Blume (33:22):

There's a moment toward the end of the film at the party.

Kelly Fremon Craig (33:25):

Oh, yes. Yes.

Judy Blume (33:26):

At the party. The outdoor party.

Kelly Fremon Craig (33:30):

Right. Yes. Oh, okay.

Judy Blume (33:31):

The end of school, they're having a party outdoors. And Nancy, she's a wonderful, wonderful actor, and she looks over and she sees that she's lost control-

Kelly Fremon Craig (33:48):

Yes.

Judy Blume (33:49):

... of Margaret and of who else is dancing?

Kelly Fremon Craig (33:52):

Janie and Laura.

Judy Blume (33:53):

And Janie. Margaret and Janie. She has lost control. And even then...

Kelly Fremon Craig (33:58):

Gretchen, yep.

Judy Blume (33:58):

Gretchen. Gretchen, I have to remember. I named them a long time ago. Even Gretchen leaves her and they go and dance with Laura, who until then, they have really made her life miserable. You see Nancy's face, oh my God. That moment that you capture her face, it's just like, I don't understand. Why are you doing this?

Janice Min (34:29):

But the empathy of that moment is that you aren't rooting for Nancy to suffer.

Kelly Fremon Craig (34:33):

Yes.

Janice Min (34:33):

You feel incredible pain for her, right?

Kelly Fremon Craig (34:37):

Yes.

Janice Min (34:38):

You see, she's like, oh.

Kelly Fremon Craig (34:40):

Yeah. Yep.

Janice Min (34:41):

So Judy, you have said before that a book cannot harm a child, which I think many-

Judy Blume (34:47):

I hope that's true.

Janice Min (34:48):

I think it's true, but we are in a political climate right now where lots of our country would disagree with that statement. I'm just wanting to talk about some of the things that have gone on recently. There was something called the Parents' Bill of Rights that passed in the US House this spring that reminds parents they can inspect books in school libraries. Idaho debated a bill that would subject librarians to penalties for featuring certain kinds of books. The Florida House of Representatives, your state, passed a bill that would bar schools from discussing menstruation until middle school, which is after many children, many girls have gotten their periods.

Judy Blume (35:28):

I always say, "How are they going to enforce that law? They're going to go to kids at a bus stop?"

Janice Min (35:33):

I know.

Judy Blume (35:33):

And say, "You're in jail. You're talking about getting your period."

Janice Min (35:37):

Well, maybe.

Judy Blume (35:38):

Well, maybe it's going to come to that.

Janice Min (35:39):

And *Forever* was one of 80 books banned from Florida's Martin County School System. That list included *Handmaid's Tale*, **Toni Morrison's** *The Bluest Eye*, and a ton of books around gender and LGBTQ storylines. 2022 was a record year for book bans, which I feel is going to be exceeded by 2023.

Judy Blume (36:00):

So let's go back to when it all started-

Janice Min (36:04):

Yes.

Judy Blume (36:04):

... really big time. That was 1980. That was right after the election of **Ronald Reagan**. For some reason, the censors felt, it's our turn now, and they crawled out of the woodwork overnight. We thought the eighties was bad. We had **Meese** as the Attorney General. We had so much going on and I did, for a while, feel terribly alone and sad until I found the National Coalition Against Censorship. I like to take action when things happen, no matter what. I now had an organization that I could work with. That was the eighties. If we thought the eighties were bad – next to nothing compared to today. Because the difference is, then it was a parent coming into school, waving a book. I want this book taken out of the library. And then librarians and schools got their policies in place. And so if a parent came in waving a book, they knew what to do. We're going to have a discussion on this book and we will see what happens.

(37:21):

Now cut to today and it is not... It's coming from the government. That's what's so scary, it's coming from state legislators. Yes, they are threatening the livelihoods of teachers and librarians. Pensions are at stake. I've had a lot of people come into the bookstore from

different parts of the country and different parts of Florida. We used to say, "We live in Key West. We don't live in Florida." But unfortunately, we do have the same governor and it's very, very bad. Their pensions, they can be fired and their pensions can be taken away from them. Yes, there is some law that says they can go to jail for a felony or a misdemeanor or something. I don't know. I don't think that's happened yet. I don't know that that would ever happen.

(38:18):

But they were told over the summer, this is in Florida, to go into your libraries, your school libraries, and go through every book and remove any book that isn't age appropriate. What does that mean? I was reading adult books when I was 12. I was reading from my parents' bookshelves and that was good. My very anxious mother never was anxious over what I was reading because she loved to read. I could take any book from anywhere and read it. That was a good thing. Judy is reading. That's good. But now it's books are bad and books are dangerous, and if you read this book, any book that has to do with LGBTQ-

Janice Min (39:10):

Yes.

Judy Blume (39:11):

... plus, you're going to turn into that kind of person, and we can't... And racism, anything about race, very, very scary stuff. And so I think I urge everybody to take a stand if you love to read, if you love books, if you want kids to be able to read and learn. They don't want kids to learn because learning is dangerous. Asking questions, sorry, is dangerous.

Janice Min (39:42):

Not everyone in this room is Judy Blume. What can people do?

Judy Blume (39:46):

Well, you can speak out. You can join any of the great organizations, national organizations and local organizations. I just met in New York with the head of PEN and the new head of National Coalition Against Censorship because I need to know what's going on. They have wonderful programs and I know that there are two women in Florida, citizens, regular women, they had kids and they just wanted their kids to be able to read. They started their

own group. They're working with PEN, they're working with the NCAC. Everybody wants to work with them. They're terrific. They are from one of those counties that-

Janice Min (40:31):

I'm curious, why books when there's a whole internet that shows you the worst things? As we saw this week with videos out of the Middle East, why books?

Judy Blume (40:42):

Why books? Because they can. Because they want to control. It's really all about control, and because if you feel so out of control of your kids and you want to be in control, you feel, I guess, that this is a way to do it, to take away the books.

Kelly Fremon Craig (41:07):

It's tangible.

Judy Blume (41:07):

It's crazy.

Janice Min (41:09):

And the internet is infinite complicated.

Judy Blume (41:11):

But they can't do anything about that.

Janice Min (41:13):

Correct.

Judy Blume (41:13):

They can take it away from their kids, maybe.

Janice Min (41:17):

You once said that you're not going to debate the zealots.

Judy Blume (41:20):

I can't. There's no point. There isn't any point. I tried once or twice years ago, but you learn pretty quick.

Janice Min (41:30):

You had a very funny line when you went on *Crossfire*. Do you recall this?

Judy Blume (41:34):

Oh, do I recall being on *Crossfire* with **Pat Buchanan**? Yes.

Janice Min (41:40):

He was saying, "Why do you care about masturbation so much?" And you-

Judy Blume (41:46):

No, I said to him, "Mr. Buchanan, are you hung up on masturbation or what?" And then that became a big headline in the *Washington Post* that weekend. Mr. Buchanan, are you hung up? I mean, you can see it in the documentary, he was badgering me, badgering me, badgering. I didn't even know this show. I never should have gone on this show. My son said, when they called me at the last minute and my son said, "That's a really interesting show. You should do that show." It's from the left and it's from the right, but the guy on the left never jumped in to help save me. He just left me with Pat Buchanan. And when there was a break, the camera crew was all young guys and I said, "This isn't real, is it? This is like some-"

Janice Min (42:36):

Satire.

Judy Blume (42:37):

Yeah, and they said, "It's real."

Janice Min (42:41):

Wow, well, you held your own. How about that?

Judy Blume (42:44):

I was glad I spoke up to him.

Janice Min (42:46):

Yes. It's fantastic. All right, so Kelly and Judy, are we going to see more books from you? Do you plan to publish?

Judy Blume (42:52):

No.

Janice Min (42:53):

Never? Come on.

Judy Blume (42:55):

No. 50 years is enough. My last book, *In The Unlikely Event*, a book that's very dear to me and I love very much, that was five years to be locked up and writing it. I'm 85. I don't want to be locked up. I was very lucky when I said, "That's it. I'm done. I've said what I want to say. I've written the books I want to write." Then boom, the fairy godmother came down and said, "Here's a bookstore. Don't you want to open a bookstore?" It was like, yes. And so George and I founded... We needed a bookstore in Key West, basically. We tried to get wonderful **Mitch Kaplan** from Miami to come down and open a Books & Books. He couldn't do it. He said, "If you and George find a way." So we're a nonprofit. Wonderful, wonderful bookstore.

Janice Min (43:52):

And are you in there most days?

Judy Blume (43:54):

Yeah, I've been away three months now. It's the longest I've ever been away from the baby. The interesting thing is, the baby is doing very well without us. And George says, "That was always the idea, Judy, to get a staff that's so good that we can be away and everything goes well." I mean, this is quiet time in Key West, but it's still doing well.

Janice Min (44:22):

Wow.

Judy Blume (44:22):

Doing well.

Janice Min (44:22):

Congratulations.

Judy Blume (44:23):

But when I'm in town, am I there working? Yes, at least three days a week.

Janice Min (44:28):

Are there people who come in who don't know you're Judy Blume?

Judy Blume (44:30):

It's getting hard. I like to dust and put my books out and do displays and things, and it's getting hard. By mid-July, when we left, being known, being recognized, it had taken some of the fun out of it for me.

Janice Min (44:52):

I see. Okay.

Judy Blume (44:53):

We do have Cardboard Judy who's there. George and my daughters, for my 85th birthday, they created Cardboard Judy. She's life size, and so she's there and she holds up signs for Banned Books Week.

Janice Min (45:11):

Amazing.

Judy Blume (45:12):

She wears beads when it's appropriate to, the love beads that we throw around. She's there.

Janice Min (45:19):

Amazing. And Kelly, what's your next project?

Kelly Fremon Craig (45:22):

I'm in a writing period right now, so yeah, just hunkered down.

Janice Min (45:26):

Is it about girls?

Kelly Fremon Craig (45:27):

It is. It's mother, daughter, it's family. Yep.

Janice Min (45:34):

All right. Well, I'm excited for the announcement, whenever you're ready. I know that can be short time or long time with writing.

Judy Blume (45:42):

I always think that you need not to talk about what you're writing, because if you talk about it a lot, then you don't need to write it. But Kelly knows what... She's a great writer. She's really [inaudible 00:45:57].

Janice Min (45:58):

And now that you've heard this conversation, you should all go rewatch *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret*. Because you'll see all the nuance and all the artistry that went into what they just talked about, so kudos to Kelly.

Judy Blume (46:10):

I will be forever grateful to Kelly for doing this.

Kelly Fremon Craig (46:13):

Oh my God.

Judy Blume (46:15):

You know that. You know that.

Kelly Fremon Craig (46:17):

I'll be forever grateful that you said yes and that you were you.

Judy Blume (46:22):

Okay. Our love fest.

Janice Min (46:26):

Gratitude. Amazing. Okay, so I want to close out with a quote that I think encompasses what this movie is. It's from **Richard Rushfield**, who's one of the columnists for The Ankler. He wrote just this week, which seems appropriate to now: “More and more of what we put out seems factory made. It's humanity, the humanity of the storytelling, that's been eclipsed. If humanity is going to survive, it needs storytellers to show us why this thing called the human experience still means something. Thank you to you both for putting out something that I think really lives that.”

(47:01):

All right. Thank you. Thank you, Kelly Fremon Craig. Thank you, Judy Blume. Oh my God, thank you. Thank you to all of you for joining us today for our very first, The Ankler In Conversation: Page to Screen.



1 Like

Comments



Write a comment...