

Final paper for 9410 Independent Study, August 2014

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Young Adult Literature, Censorship and Sex:  
The Impact of Judy Blume's *Forever*...

The Notorious Novel

Girl meets boy; girl likes boy; boy likes girl; girl forms meaningful, trusting relationship with boy; girl has mature, honest conversations with boy; girl gets birth control; girl has sex with boy; girl and boy eventually move on and break up. Girl meets new boy. The story seems typical—common, at least in real life, to the point of trivial. But in literature for young adults, this pattern is surprisingly rare, no matter how closely it might echo reality. Lately, this particular plot pattern does appear, more often as a deeply ensconced ideological framework. But in the 1970s, this precise plot, no matter its ostensible verisimilitude, was a revelation. Judy Blume's female bildungsroman novel, *Forever*, has remained relevant and in demand for more than 30 years. Since its publication in 1975, *Forever* has sold nearly four million copies. It has never gone out of print. In 2005, thirty years after its initial publication, it was named one of the ALA's the most challenged books, and has been challenged and banned again and again, in schools, in libraries and by religious groups. The book has remained incredibly relevant, enduring for nearly four decades. The 1970s were a markedly different time than the early 2000s. And yet the book has remained in demand, frequently challenged, and widely read. Those who were young adult readers when the book was initially published fondly remember their first time reading Blume's notorious novel. Thirty years later "just as many young people are reading the book today as when it was published" (Crown, 2005). The current generation of young adult readers is well acquainted with the story. Yet, upon reading the text, it is not immediately apparent why the book should remain

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so popular. The style of writing, the roles the characters play, and the way family dynamics are depicted is unquestionably outdated. The way the characters dress and speak is something from a former time. Examining political, social, and educational practices of teenage sexuality help us to understand why *Forever* remains relevant. To understand *Forever*'s enduring popularity and relevance is to understand the way Western culture – in particular, North American culture – understands and treats teenage sexuality. As a cultural artifact, *Forever*, along with its many critics and fans, is an excellent representation of the way North American culture's relationship to female sexuality has both progressed and regressed. Closely examining literature is an important step in understanding Western culture's relationship to teenage sexuality. The details surrounding *Forever*'s publication and enduring relevance gives us important insight into the treatment of teenage sexuality.

Situating *Forever*...

As an independent category, the concept of 'young adults' did not exist until very recently in Western culture. There was childhood, and then there was adulthood. Writing (and publishing) is tied closely to our cultural perceptions, and congruently, there was no specific writing for young adults. The concept of a young adult, or teenager, didn't emerge until sometime around the 1930s. Childhood lasted until you were old enough to be gainfully employed, upon which you were classified as an adult. But the dire economic conditions of the Great Depression meant that there were fewer opportunities for young adults to enter into the workforce. As a result, there was an influx of students enrolling in high school: "by 1939, 75% of fourteen-to-seventeen year olds were high school students" (Cart, 2011, 5). This advancement towards universal education raised North American literacy rates, and also laid

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the ground for the emergence of a youth culture centered on social opportunities in high school. In the 1950s, “adolescence” – from thirteen to eighteen – and “young adulthood” – from nineteen to thirty – began to be considered as distinct stages of development (Cart, 2011, 7). What Cart calls this “new category of human being” (2011, 8) slowly became a locus for writers and publishers. William Golding’s *Lord of the Flies* and J. D. Salinger’s *Catcher in the Rye*, published in 1954 and 1951, respectively, were both popular titles written for young adults. But although the books centered on young adult characters, they were originally written for and marketed towards adult readers. While books like *The Outsiders* and *The Pigman* were popular with younger readers, “there really weren’t any YA books at the time” (Sutton, 1996, 26). Arguably the first young adult novel was S. E. Hinton’s 1967 offering *The Outsiders*, which was written by a young adult about young adults. Blume herself notes that even in the 1970s, when *Forever* was first published: “they weren’t called YA books. We were writing for ‘young people’” (Blume in Sutton, 1996, 26). The 1970s were “the first golden age of young adult literature” (Cart, 2011, 31), a time during which a serious body of literature for those young people began to appear.

Theorists have identified a new kind of writing for young adults that emerged in the 1960s. Called ‘new realism’ or problem novels, they replaced the traditional bildungsroman (coming of age story) that was often characterized by a happy ending. Instead, authors began to focus on more concrete ways to show growth of their protagonists (Donelson and Nielsen, 1997, 77). A “change in mode” occurred, and the goal for children’s authors was to educate their readers, rather than simply entertainment. The idea behind the shift was that “young people have a better chance to be happy if they have realistic expectations and if they know both the good and the bad about the society in which they live” (Donelson and Nielsen, 1997,

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78). As a result, there was an influx of realistic stories and novels. Books were published with the goal of impressing a moral lesson upon young readers. It remains true today that books for young adults subscribe to, and generally recommend, a particular ideology (though this is perhaps true of all writing). This aspect of young adult literature becomes particularly obvious when examining the topic of sexuality in books written for young people.

The kinds of issues that young adult literature dealt with changed gradually over time. Donelson and Nielsen, in *Literature for Today's Young Adults*, write: "in the first edition of this textbook [1980], we wrote that the three sexual issues treated in young adult problem novels were rape, homosexuality, and premarital sex resulting in pregnancy. For the next two editions we added disease, incest, and child abuse, and for this edition [1997] we needed to add teenagers as parents" (97). Early books that deal with sexuality for young adults are mildly horrifying – expressions of sexuality were almost invariably met with terrifying consequences. Early depictions of teenage pregnancy had several outcomes, none of them optimistic. Tragedy was the almost inevitable conclusion to these narratives. Teenage partners who engaged in sexual relationships usually ended up dead, heartbroken, institutionalized, publicly shamed, or with some kind of venereal disease. Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*, published a decade earlier in 1963, provides a topical example of this treatment of sexuality. For Esther Green, the novel's protagonist, sexual encounters are a source of deep anxiety, and are depicted as violent, devoid of any emotion or satisfaction. Esther eventually ends up hospitalized. Although her hospitalization is not directly connected to her sexual experiences, her story follows the same pattern of other young adult characters that explore their sexuality. In 1975, W. Keith Kraus noticed that in young adult fiction: "the sexual act itself is never depicted as joyful, and any show of intimacy carries a warning of danger"

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(Kraus qtd in Donelson and Nielsen, 1997, 98). This fact was also noticed by Judy Blume, whose efforts to remedy this trend would lead her to become one of the most banned authors in the United States.

Concurrent to the emergence of a separate market for young adult writing in the 1970s was the publication of a wealth of literature that “encouraged women to explore their sexual feelings and to demand sexual pleasure from their partners” (Bowles-Reyer, 1999, 19). Feminist messages that advocated for women’s “sexual subjectivity and exploration” (Bowles-Reyer, 1999, 19) were found in many popular titles, both fiction and non-fiction. Books like *Our Bodies, Ourselves* (1970) by the Boston Women’s Health Book Collective, Germaine Greer’s *The Female Eunuch* (1970) and Nancy Friday’s *My Secret Garden* (1973) allowed for a wider prevalence of feminist themes and female sexuality. As these ideas took hold of popular culture they began to trickle down, even as far as the staunch, harsh depictions of sexuality in young adult fiction.

### Introducing Judy Blume

Judy Blume was a wife and mother of two when she began writing stories and submitting her work for publication. Blume admits to struggling in her role as a homemaker. At home with her children, writing became an incredibly important outlet for her:

“‘Writing saved my life,’ she says, seriously. ‘It saved me, it gave me everything, it took away all my illnesses. I loved having little kids, I relate to little kids, but something was missing [...] in school I had a lot of creative outlets. I danced, I sang, I painted, there was a lot of that, and suddenly I didn't have any of that. I've thought about this – I think that's why I was having such a bad time’” (Flood, 2014).

In 1966, she noticed an ad for a writing class at NYU that focused on children’s literature and promptly signed up. Once a week, she would take the train into the city, eat dinner alone,

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and go to class. It was, she says, the first time in her life that she “felt truly independent”

(Tracy 17). She began writing *Iggie’s House* (1970) while still in the class and began sending her work to magazines and publishing houses. The manuscript for *Iggie* caught the attention of Bradbury Press. Richard Jackson, the man who would become her editor, noticed immediately that she had “an incredible ear for dialogue” (Weidt 1990, 1) and bought the story from her. *Iggie’s House* was published in 1970 and was followed by *Are You There God? It’s Me, Margaret* in the same year. *Margaret* was an immediate commercial success. Among readers, parents, and critics, the book caused a “shock wave” (Tracy, 2008, 22) with its casual, detailed discussions of breast development and menstruation:

“My mother showed me how to attach the pad to my underpants...”

“What’s it feel like?”

“Mostly I don’t feel anything. Sometimes it feels like it’s dripping. It doesn’t hurt coming out—but I had some cramps last night.”

“Bad ones?” Janie asked.

“Not bad. Just different.” Gretchen said. “Lower down and across my back.”

“Does it make you feel older?”

“Naturally,” Gretchen answered’ (Blume, 1970, 50).

At the time, menstruation was almost exclusively considered a taboo subject, especially in a mainstream book. Feminist historian Kathleen O’Grady points out that “in the generation before Judy Blume, a huge number of women thought when they had their first menstruation that they were dying. They had very little information” (O’Grady qtd in Tracy 22).

Margaret’s frank discussions about puberty were a revelation. The book answered readers’ questions. It provided young girls with a language to use when describing their bodies. It provided a way to get an otherwise buried conversation started.

Three years later, Blume published, *Deenie*, another book about a teenage girl. Again, Blume’s protagonist frankly narrates her masturbation, previously considered a completely private experience:

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“as soon as I got into bed I started touching myself. I have this special place and when I rub it I get a very nice feeling. I don’t know what it’s called or if anyone else has it, but when I have trouble falling asleep, touching my special place helps a lot.” (Blume, 1973, 32).

Deenie worries that her masturbating might be connected to her scoliosis. Her gym teacher, who insists that masturbation is perfectly normal, quickly corrects her worries. Deenie is also (consensually) ‘felt up’ by a male classmate, despite only being thirteen years old, which provided another point of contention for critics.

It is important that Blume’s characters worry about their sexuality and their changing bodies. As her characters openly worry about sex, puberty, and masturbation, they provide a locus to discuss the issue. They provide a vocabulary with which to broach the topic. Her books provided a perspective that was, for the most part, previously unavailable for young adults readers. It was a perspective that they found relatable, unthreatening, and even fun. Donelson and Nielsen argue that for readers, the understanding and reading about the emotional side of changing bodies is more interesting, and therefore more impactful, than simply hearing facts about the physical aspects. Blume believes that her approach was simple and unremarkable: she claims to have “had no idea she was writing anything revolutionary; she was simply writing a story that included her own experiences” (Tracy, 2008, 22). Blume credits her young age at the time of writing and emotional immaturity for her connection to her young characters: claiming that she didn’t understand or belong to the world of adults, she turned to characters to whom she felt she could relate.

*Forever...* has the distinction of being the only book of Blume’s that was written “because someone asked for it” (Sutton, 1996, 26). Blume’s daughter Randy was fourteen when Blume began writing *Forever*. Randy asked for “a story about two nice kids who have sex without either of them having to die” (Sutton, 1996, 26). At the time, Randy had been

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reading a lot of what Blume termed ‘pregnant books,’ where teenage sex was inevitably linked with punishment and shame. After examining what her daughter was reading, Blume was troubled by the fact that sex or sexuality was never connected to pleasure or responsibility. She wanted a story where two teenagers could act maturely, responsibly, and have genuine love and mutual sexual pleasure. With her daughter’s request, the increasingly liberal market for young adult fiction, and the commercial success of her previous books backing her, Blume began to write *Forever*....

#### Publication of *Forever*...

The book was initially marketed as a children’s book in stores. A bookseller recalls: “we had 10 year olds asking for it,” (Sutton, 1996, 25) due simply to Blume’s existing popularity as a children’s author. Blume herself admits that she feels ‘bothered’ by the idea of children reading *Forever*, feeling that readers should be at least twelve. When Blume requested that the book be placed with the other mass-market paperbacks, she was told that in the adult section “it just wasn’t moving, and as soon as we put it in the children’s section it flew off the shelf” (Sutton, 1996, 26). The book was promoted by her publisher, Bradbury Press, as “Judy Blume’s first book for adults” in order “to protect themselves” (Sutton, 1996, 26) from negative press and public outcry. Regardless, the story found its way to young adult readers. At the time, the book’s frank discussion of sex was considered “revolutionary stuff” (Crown, 2005). A former reader remembers her awe after first reading the book: “none of us had ever come across anything like this – a book that discussed sex frankly, but placed it in the context of a normal teenage life – school, friends, family, a loving relationship” (Crown, 2005). An initial review of *Forever*... highlights Blume’s immense popularity and brushes

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aside her writing, though notes the novel's potential for appeal with young readers:

“As usual with this immensely popular author, *Forever...* has a lot of easy, empathic verity and very little heft. Cath like Blume's other heroines is deliberately ordinary, which means here (despite friends, nice family, etc.) that outside of the love affair she's pretty much a blank. In fact this could be a real magnet for all those girls who took to *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret* just a few years ago and haven't changed all that much since” (Kirkus, 1975).

The book was immediately made infamous for its objectionable subject matter. Reading the book became an important rite of passage: “owning, reading, and conducting whispered, and occasionally baffled, conversations about the book was a mark of maturity” (Crown, 2005).

Susan Allan, a journalist with the *Ottawa Citizen*, vividly remembers being in fifth grade in 1976 and getting “caught red-handed with the book—I didn't think to hide it—I was forced to stay in at recess.” Her teacher made her objections to book clear: “‘Premarital sex is wrong,’ Mrs. Strong explained. Since I didn't know what ‘premarital’ even meant, I had no choice but to agree” (Allan, 1998). Though younger than Blume's intended audience, Allan and her friends felt thoroughly adult and important after reading the novel. Three years after the book's publication, Joyce Maynard interviewed a group mothers and their daughters for a *New York Times* piece on *Forever...*. Maynard credits Blume's innovation and willingness to transgress boundaries for the success of her novels:

“the reason for the books' success probably goes beyond sexual explicitness. They may never become classics, but they are among the first juvenile books to abandon happy endings, the notion of perfect parents, and images of children whose most serious problems are getting a horse or a paper route. If the books seem to dwell on sexuality, it's simply because they reflect kids' concerns—and sex is high on the list” (Maynard, 1978).

Her focus group approach to the article means that Maynard also gets the perspective of young readers. Despite their mothers' hearty disapproval, the impact Blume's novel made is incredibly apparent: as a point of controversy, it sparks dialogue. By simply existing, it opens

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the issue for young readers, with their mothers, with journalists, with each other, with the media. Even if their feelings are primarily confusion or revulsion, they are still discussing and thinking about the topic of pre-martial, teenage sex:

“As for lovemaking, Heather says, ‘it sounds disgusting.’ In spite of her mother’s arrangement of hairs on pages, she is familiar enough with *Forever...* to know all the best page numbers, and the mention of the numbers alone is enough to set off shrieks in the Bensons’ living room. The girls all say that they don’t plan on ‘doing everything’ with boys for a long time. (‘How could you look them in the eye afterward?’ wonders Christiane.) ‘And you’d have to love the boy and be able to talk with him because,’ Sharon points out, ‘you’re not going to do sex all day long.’ A major deterrent for all is “How could I ever tell my mom?”— and not telling seems not to occur to anyone” (Maynard, 1978).

Maynard’s article depicts topical attitudes and feelings about sex and sexuality: it was mystifying, it was gross, it was not what anyone planned to do. The article also discusses mothers’ decision to prevent their daughters from reading the book, giving a good overview of common attitudes about the narrative. While some mothers were staunchly against it, referring the story as a “gutter influence” (Maynard, 1978) others were undecided. Some of the daughters even felt vaguely defensive of the book, even though they themselves were uncomfortable:

“Jan: I’d rather have my daughter read pornography than “Forever....” At least she’d know that was wrong, instead of having this book about a nice, normal girl who has sex and then it ends and the book’s over. Judy Blume had this beautiful opportunity to teach kids a lesson, if she’d just given an example of suffering or punishment. But the girl doesn’t get pregnant or have a nervous breakdown.

Rosemary: At the end she felt bad.

Jan: That’s not nearly enough. She didn’t have any guilt.” (Maynard, 1978)

By all accounts, it wasn’t until the 1980s that censorship and challenges to the book began to surface. Blume, along with others, credits the shift in political climate with the rise of censorship:

“When I started to write, it was the ‘70s, and throughout that decade, we didn’t have any problems with book challenges or censorship. It all started really in a big way in

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1980 [...] It came with the election, the presidential election of 1980, and the next day, I've been told, the censors were crawling out of the woodwork and challenging, like, 'It's our turn now, and we're going to say what we don't want our children to read.'" (Conan & Blume, 2011).

According to the Intellectual Freedom Committee of the Young Adult Library Services (1996) *Forever...* was challenged in the early 1980s by Midvalley Junior-Senior Scranton, Pennsylvania high school library, Orlando, Florida schools, and Akron, Ohio school district libraries for using “four-letter words” and for talking about “masturbation, birth control and disobedience to parents.” But wasn’t just book by Blume being censored: in a 1981 *New York Times* article, Colin Campbell wrote that “a censorial spirit is at work in the United States, and for the past year or so, it has focused more and more on books.” (Szymanski, 2007). The number of challenges made to the American Library Association’s Office of Intellectual Freedom jumped dramatically: in the early 1970s, approximately one hundred challenges were made each year, in the late 1970s that number increased to three hundred per year and in 1981, nearly a thousand challenges were reported. It was a dramatic shift in a culture that previously had been heading towards increased liberalization. All of a sudden, the right to read was being challenged, and for a host of different issues: “most often, vulgarity or sexuality was cited as the reason for challenging a book, but other controversial issues included unorthodox family structure, speculation about Christianity, unflattering depictions of authority, critiques of corporate business and radical political ideals” (Szymanski, 2007). Given the socially conservative environment, it is unsurprising that contemporary reviews reveal generations of readers who remember reading the text as their first encounter with such a frank discussion of sexuality. Many readers, now adults, remember *Forever...* with a profound sense of gratitude:

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“a quick scan of hundreds of messages posted on the Blume web site reveals the extent to which the memory of her prose, and its impact, remains fresh. "You helped me understand my preteen trials and tribulations," writes one. "You allowed us to see our feelings are completely normal," says another, "you made me feel I wasn't alone." (Allan, 1998)

In 1996, Judy Blume was the recipient of the Margaret A. Edwards Award. This award, according to the Young Adult Literature Services Association (1996) honors an author whose “books have appealed to young adults over a period of years. It recognizes an author's work in helping adolescents become aware of themselves and in addressing questions about their role and importance in relationships, society, and in the world.” Blume received the award in recognition of breaking new ground for young adult literature, though as a literary offering the book still has many critics. Current scholarship criticizes the book’s portrayal of body image, with the atypical bodies othered. Katherine (and her mother) are described as rail thin and in rigid control of their own impulses, the decidedly more promiscuous Sybil, the cousin of Katherine’s friend, has her ‘fatness’ connected to a lack of control over her own body. Though her mother is described as weighing the same as her teenage daughter, Katherine criticizes her mother’s “flabby thighs” (Blume, 1975, 44). Critics have also noted that the stable characters in the book are heterosexual and white, while queerness othered and connected to suicide. Many have called the story itself banal and the writing juvenile.

### Teenage Sexuality

Understanding the distinction between sex and sexuality is crucial: “In contrast to ‘sex,’ which is a purely biological act, Foucault defines ‘sexuality’ as a discursive construct” (as cited in Seelinger Trites, 2000, 86), meaning that sexuality is “influenced by, even created by, language.” As Roberta Seelinger Trites points out, this is a useful approach for literature,

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which is “always already and only constructed by language” (86). According to Foucault,

Western cultures have separated sexuality from sex as a way to regulate it: “sex is the biological action in Foucault’s economy; sexuality is the all-encompassing mores and discourses that have arisen to define and regulate human sex acts” (as cited in Seelinger Trites, 2000, 86). The way our culture treats sexuality is different than in the 1970s. Blume wrote *Forever...* in a time when it was just beginning to be socially acceptable to discuss sex and sexuality. Of course: “the expectation in the late 1970s was that this process of liberalization would continue. If anything, the reverse has been true” (Crown, 2005). The political climate in North American has had a dramatic affect on the way our culture treats sexuality. The pressure to censor and to cease conversation is evident in political and religious spheres:

“the rise of the religious rightwing is evident today in the ubiquity of pressure groups such as True Love Waits,” and the Bush administration “doubled federal funding for abstinence education and introduced the partial birth abortion bill, seen as the pro-choice lobby as a move to limit the control women gained over their bodies following the landmark Roe vs. Wade case in 1973” (Crown, 2005).

Blume herself has made note of this important shift and its impact: “The 70s was a much more open decade in America [...] *Forever...* was used in several school programmes then, helping to spur discussions of sexual responsibility. This would never happen today” (as cited in Crown, 2005). Political shifts have empowered religious groups with staunchly puritan agendas: “From the 1980s onwards, the religious fundamentalist have grown in power. Fear is contagious and those who wish America to become a faith-based society are do their best to spread it” (as cited in Crown, 2005). The political climate in North American has had a direct affect on our culture practices. Publishing became much more conservative: “In the 80s and 90s this fear affected what a publisher was willing to take a chance on” (as cited in

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Crown, 2005). As Howsam points out: “the conventional book history categories of

authorships, reading, and publishing are chronologically and geographically contingent, specific to the modern period and western culture” (Howsam, 2006, 62). What is being published is a direct reflection on the current political and social climate. The trend self-perpetuates as readers define themselves by representations they see in books and other media. Though birth control and public discussion of sexuality were slowly becoming more acceptable in the 1970s, there was a huge societal regression when it came to tolerance for discussing and engaging in sexual behaviour. One important setback was impact of AIDS, as well as increasingly awareness of other sexually transmitted infections, on socially acceptable sexual practices and the understanding of safe sex. Some have “felt that *Forever...* should be pulled from shelves because Katherine and Michael don’t practice safe sex” (Sutton, 1996, 26) In every reprint of *Forever...*, Blume has included a letter explaining the meaning of sexual responsibility and how it has changed.

Examining *Forever...* draws particular focus to female sexuality in our culture. In North American culture, there is a long history of female sexuality inspiring “anxiety and even fear” (Stein, 2012, 415). For women especially, understanding and speaking about sexuality has been remarkably difficult, especially in the public sphere: “coming to terms with sexuality ‘in a society that treats women's bodies in a sexually brutal and commercially rapacious way’ is a prevalent and pervasive struggle for young women” (Brumberg, 1997, 210). Literature, especially for young adults with few other resources, has therefore been an incredibly important outlet and source of information:

This struggle may be one of the reasons so many girls turn to Young Adult fiction, a genre that provides multitudinous representations of young girls as sexual beings. More subtly, these texts reveal that young female bodies are important sites of cultural contestation” (Younger, 2003, 45).

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Looking at young adult literature displays the way our culture treats and relates to young female bodies. The early so-called pregnancy novels are a prime example of the concepts Western culture associated with female sexuality and the female body: more often than not, with shame, guilt, and disgust. Blume was initially surprised by the backlash *Forever...* received from female readers: “I really got it for allowing a young woman to enjoy her first sexual experiences. I can remember an angry letter from a librarian who said ‘How dare you? Women don’t enjoy their first sexual experiences. It takes years and years’” (Sutton, 1996, 27). Floods of letters from readers have enabled Blume to stay in touch with the current norms: “many girls tell me that they rarely enjoy sexual intercourse. They do it to please their boyfriends.” (Blume, 1986, 202). Blume’s letters from her readers provide a fascinating insight. One reader confided that: “she uses sex to prove that she is loveable and worthy” (Blume, 1986, 202), while another, “a young woman, Pat, wrote that she had been taught it was wrong to respond sexually. She held back for so long that it is now difficult for her to relax and enjoy making love with her husband” (Blume, 1986, 202). Blume published letters from these readers, among many others, in her 1986 book called *Letters to Judy*, which showcased typical letters from readers and had individual chapters focusing on some of the issues her books uncover, including sexuality and sexual behaviour. Unsurprisingly, Blume feels that developing a healthy sexuality is an important step in emotional development, and it doesn’t mean she’s advocating for intercourse: “I do think we can encourage kids to enjoy their sexuality without early intercourse” (Blume, 1986, 202). While Blume’s books do work towards this goal, Karen Stein raises an excellent point in her article discussion of young female sexuality. She notes

“the surface ideology of [Blume’s] novels present sex and masturbation as

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uncomplicated, anxiety-free actions that enrich – but do not define – the lives of young adults. Admittedly, this may seem like a refreshing representation of sex [...] However, by their authors' deliberately making it the goal of these novels to advocate for anxiety-free sex and sexuality, they inevitably acknowledge the prevailing societal nervousness regarding sexual activity" (Stein, 2012, 421).

Stein points to a "very adult voice is trying earnestly to alleviate the assumed fears and ignorance of the ideal reader" (Stein, 2012, 422). Blume is still telling young adults how to feel; she makes an effort to impress upon her readers her own ideological ideals. The mere existence of her books is an important signifier of our culture's deep discomfort with sexuality, in particular teenage sexuality.

#### Current State of YA Literature

Interestingly, the several recent young adult series today feature decidedly chaste romances. Two of the most overwhelmingly popular and commercially successful series for young adults today do deal with sexuality, but promulgate perspectives that are decidedly different from mainstream secular discourse about teenage sexuality. While Judy Blume's characters are guided by peers and adults who advocate for sexual education and birth control, the characters in Veronica Roth's *Divergent* series and Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* series depict an approach to sexuality that is nearly sexless. The *Twilight* series, written by Stephanie Meyer, have been immensely popular since the first book's publication in 2005. Anna Silver purports that the "old-fashioned courtship" (127) between Bella and her vampire boyfriend, Edward, is part of what makes the series so popular. Edward advocates strongly for abstinence before marriage, invoking what many critics believe to be Mormon concepts of sexuality and sin (Silver, 2010, 128). Many readers, religious and parent organizations have praised the novels for its depiction of a chaste romance, though the series has been

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banned for strong erotic undertones as well as its depiction of the sex that occurs after

Edward and Bella have been married (Karolides, Bald & Sova, 2011, 425). Edward and Bella discuss in detail why they won't have sex before marriage, making their feelings and choices transparent to the reader. The young adult dystopian trilogy *Divergent* has also been a great commercial success, making Veronica Roth one of the best-selling authors in the world. The protagonist, Tris, is young, and Roth's writing features her in another passionate yet chaste romance. Tris' fledgling sexually is an important selling point for the book: she finds herself intensely attracted to Four, her trainer. While Four returns her feelings, the pair have limited sexual experiences. Throughout the books, their sexual tension is titillating, but their physical contact remains minimal. Their romance culminates with a kiss, and, later in the books, lying next to each other fully clothed. When pressed, Roth says this was a conscious choice. It was important, she says, for her to not alienate her younger readers: "I didn't want to have smut on the page. I don't want to titillate" (Kidd, 2014). Roth was raised without a religious background, and she became a devout Christian after attending a bible study in high school. She has never explicitly connected her religious background to depiction of sexuality in her books. It's important to keep in mind that sexuality doesn't necessarily have to culminate in physical intimacy. Neither series denies the fact that a strong physical attraction or longing for physical contact exists. Rather, the characters simply do not act on it. It's interesting to consider why this particular depiction of sexuality has been featured in two of the most popular young adult series in recent years.

The 1990s to the present day have seen an enormous expansion in the publishing for young adults. The young adult publishing industry today is prolific and extremely profitable. The profitability and popularity of these books means that there is greater variety in the

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content of the texts. Coupled with increasing liberalization and openness about sexuality, the landscape for sexuality in young adult literature has changed greatly. There have been several recent, more positive depictions of sexuality in literature for young adults. John Green's *The Fault in Our Stars* is a recently published and popular example of young adult titles that feature sex in a positive way. While in both books the main characters have sex for the first time, the focus of the story no longer has to be on that precise plot point. Green's narration relays a realistic depiction of a first sexual encounter that strives to be romantic and funny:

“The whole affair was the precise opposite of what I figured it would be: slow and patient and quiet and neither particularly painful nor particularly ecstatic. There were a lot of condomy problems that I did not get a particularly good look at. No headboards were broken. No screaming. Honestly, it was probably the longest time we'd ever spent together without talking” (Green, 2012, 242).

Though Green is still far from the explicitness Blume employs in *Forever...*, this scene is still noteworthy. Like Blume before him, Green's narration provides young adults with a language to discuss their sexual experiences. It's okay to have 'condomy problems.' It's okay for a sexual experience to be slow and quiet: in fact, it's to be expected.

The progression and regression of the way North American culture treats sexuality for young adults is an important factor when considering the role of the library and young adult literature in sex education. The library becomes an essential place “to supplement inadequate information or to correct misinformation” (Cornog and Perper, 1996). For many young adults, the books and resources available in the library are somewhere to turn when other outlets have been cut off. In light of abstinence-only education, the library becomes an essential source for information. The desire and need that young people have for education about sexuality highlights the importance of the library remaining a politically neutral place. For librarians who find their collections challenged, it must be stressed to patrons that “the

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emphasis is not on arousing you, the reader, but on what sexual arousal is and means”

(Cornog and Perper, 1996). The library exists to educate, to enable understanding and freedom of thought. As Eleanor Wood suggests:

“sexuality is not just about the physical act, but also about orientation, inclination, exposure, interest, healthy and unhealthy relationships, and overall sexual health. Sexual health includes a positive and respectful approach to sexuality and relationships and emphasizes that potential sexual interactions should be safe and pleasurable” (Wood, 2010)

When young adults are denied this culture at home or at school, the library becomes an essential resource. Navigating the fine line between children’s literature and young adult literature becomes tricky when it comes to the topic of sexuality: librarians want to avoid exposing children to inappropriate sexual material without limiting access for young adults. It’s important to be aware of past and current trends, and of your community, and of your collection. Seelinger Trites proposes:

“parents and teachers and librarians and literary critics take serious looks at the ideological intent behind most of the YA novels published with the seeming intent of validating teenagers’ self-assurance about human sexuality,” noting “Most YA novels about teenage sexuality have at best a conflicting ideology and at worst a repressive ideology that both reflects and perpetuates Western culture’s confused sexual more” (95-96).

Why *Forever...* endures

The importance of *Forever...*, as a leisure read and as a cultural artifact, really should not be underestimated. The book’s publication was a crucial step towards a great understanding of teenage sexuality. Lynn Hamilton argues:

“Blume demystifies the purported ‘crisis.’ Pain, religion, death, and sex, she says in effect, are ‘no big deal.’ Her young heroines are given the answers before they have had a chance to grapple with the questions. By reducing, dismissing, or denying these crises, Blume prevents them from occasioning passage. Her heroines adjust and cope; they do not suffer and change” (Weidt, 1990, 118).

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When asked why the book *Forever...* remains relevant and still in demand, Blume says that she believes young adults today “read it as an absolutely contemporary novel” (as cited in Sutton, 1996, 27). She feels that the story itself is and always will be relevant: “What I hear from my readers,” Blume says, “is that the story itself is timeless. There will always be first love, first sexual feelings, first sexual relationships” (Crown, 2005). There is also the fact that the frank, explicit detail that Blume uses to describe sex is still something of a novelty: “I think I could count on one hand those [YA literature] that feature on-the-page sex the way *Forever...* does” (Sutton, 1996, 27). David Rees labels *Forever...* “amazingly trivial” and “second rate,” and dismisses the novel as being without literary merit (1980, 173). But in his 1985 article *Reconsidering Judy Blume's Forever...*, John Gough speculates that *Forever...* remains a very popular text in part because teens can “find themselves truthfully presented, undistorted, not in extremis-just ordinary life and its awful emotions” (Younger, 2003, 47). Her “candid, unjudgmental treatment of teenage sexual relations” (Crown, 2005) remains remarkably rare. And unlike so many Hollywood depictions of teenage relationships, no one escapes with a completely happy ending: “these teenagers may be enjoying their sexuality, but the consequences are devastating to them, and Blume wants the reader to know that” (Seelinger Trites, 2006, 88). The story preaches responsibility for your own actions. It “offers the possibility of a new sexual identity for adolescent readers” (Bowles-Reyer, 21, 1999). By voicing what was previously considered indecent or private, Blume “empowers girls by validating them with a language to express their sexuality” (Bowles-Reyer, 22, 1999). The text becomes an important tool for self-definition: “feminist writer Kate Millet argues in *Sexual Politics* (1970) that the way women are represented in literature has an impact on the way they define themselves as subjects in their own lives” (Bowles-Reyer,

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1999, 22). *Forever...* “shattered the prevailing conspiracy of silence and made it possible for the writers who came after her to deal more maturely with one of the most important aspects of life” (Cart, 2011, 145). Studying texts as artifacts forces us to challenge the “assumption that books possess a uniformity not just of content, but even of interpretation” (Howsam, 2006, 68). The way we relate to the text demonstrates how our culture’s relationship with teenage sexuality has changed.

*Forever...* functions as an important tool for examining the practices that surround our culture’s perspective on teenage sexuality. Tracing the trajectory of *Forever...*, from the novel’s initial publication and reception in the 1970s to its continued relevance provides us with fascinating insight about the way teenage sexuality has been and is treated, the way women relate to their bodies. Examining *Forever...* teaches us about censorship and the right to read. It shows us the way censorship functions. It shows us the way young adults, parents, censors, and educators interact around the issue of sexuality. It teaches us about the importance of the library and the role it plays in sexual education. *Forever...*’s publication was nothing short of revolutionary. It opened new doors for young adult literature, fostering discussion and providing language for young adults to use. The book’s continued relevance is a testament to the societal struggle to openly discuss and accept teenage sexuality. The societal progression and regression where teenage sexuality is concerned has been dramatic and impactful across generations. Reading and writing about issues that are difficult is the first step towards acceptance, understanding, and education.

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