



judy blume

THE PUBERTY GURU

WORDS SOPHIE KALAGAS

Before there was *Rookie* and *Dolly Doctor*, there was Judy Blume. Like a surrogate aunt she entered our pre-teen lives via the pages of our favourite books, divulging juicy details about sex, periods and puberty that would make innocent cheeks blush and parents cringe. But for all her liberal storytelling, Judy grew up a child of the conservative 1950s, turning 20 in the winter of '58.

"I never really knew myself in my 20s, it was probably my hardest decade," Judy says. "I was completely unprepared for marriage and adulthood." Coming from a wholesome upbringing in Elizabeth, New Jersey, Judy launched headfirst into family life at 21, an age when many were out running amok and learning to hold their liquor. From a junior studying teaching at university, she quickly became a homemaker with two small kids, juggling not only her newfound responsibility, but the shock of her father's untimely death.

"It was a terrible way to start a marriage," she says. "I felt guilty for leaving my mother, guilty for being happy." Sadly the loved-up glow didn't last. Feeling isolated and a little jaded with suburban life, Judy began to look for a creative outlet. "It was before women knew they had options. Finding writing – something I couldn't wait to get up in the morning and do – was really exciting." Over the next few years she began tapping away intently on her typewriter; meanwhile the 1960s were surging forward outside her sheltered cul-de-sac.

"Before I was 30 the world as I'd known it had changed," she remembers. "Kennedy was assassinated, followed by the assassinations of his brother, Robert Kennedy, and Martin Luther King." The Civil Rights Movement was rousing political reform, anti-war resistance was erupting in riots, and women's lib activists began to take to the streets. "It was an exciting time. I longed to be a part of it, but I had responsibilities." In her head, though, she was marching right along with them, so instead of painting placards she put pen to page.

It wasn't just global issues that got Judy's blood boiling, but injustice on a much more local scale. Her first forays into teen fiction dealt with topics like racism, divorce and bullying, although it was her no-holds-barred approach to teenage sex that really made the public squirm. "I'd always been fascinated by sexuality, I longed to know," she remembers. "We read sexy books aloud at summer camp when we were 13 or 14. I once looked up 'sex' in the encyclopaedia, but found only plant reproduction. We talked about it a lot, but most of the time we didn't have a clue." And apparently that was the way society wanted to keep it. Judy soon became one of the most censored writers in America, prompting pamphlets titled "How to Rid Your Schools and Libraries of Judy Blume Books".

Despite all the flak, Judy was adamant girls had the right to information – even the icky bits. "I would have been so relieved to read that other girls masturbated, to know it was normal," she says. Since her late 20s Judy has campaigned for the importance of intellectual freedom, banding together with other writerly folk and the National Coalition Against Censorship, and it's that unwavering resolve that she sees as her biggest achievement.

"Taking chances, going for it, not letting anyone discourage me. When I look back I can't believe I found the courage to try." Judy admits she's not one to give advice – a tad ironic for someone who helped generations of gawky girls grow up and find themselves. But even so, she has wisdom to impart. "Life is a struggle, and it's wonderful, but it takes hard work and determination. I mean, talent is nice, but you can't get anywhere without that determination." ❀

*The film version of Judy's book *Tiger Eyes* is out on DVD and digital release July 9th.*

