

Only once every four years? Oh, you mean football... Deborah Ross



I remember a friend of mine, a father, once telling me that although he was very close to his daughter (yes, yes, I know some women love football, but this happened to be his daughter), who was then around ten, and although she had tried to love football for his sake, "she just doesn't have it in her" — and that is how I am.

I just don't have it in me. I have tried to love football because I live with men who love football, but I've yet to watch a single World Cup match and won't be watching England tonight, so there, get over it, put that in your e-pipe (yes, they really do exist) and smoke it.

I have never had it in me. That sport thing. Never. I grew up in a tennis-loving family and was dispatched to tennis lessons once a week on a Saturday morning, but hung around the local bus station instead and spent the tuition money on a pack of Players No 6. (To this day, my mother still wonders why I can't even make any contact between racket and ball, "given all those lessons I paid for" — and why I also have a cough.)

I wasn't given much opportunity anyhow. I might have been superb at long jump, for all I know, but it



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was an exceedingly rough school and once it was discovered that someone's idea of a joke was to mix the sand with broken glass — oh, it was bloody — the pit was boarded over for all the years I was there. (Same with the high jump, and we never saw a javelin, needless to say. As it was, we weren't allowed to compass in maths.)

And there is no sport I like to watch — apart from ice dancing, but only, I think, in the secret hope that someone falls over — and no sport I like to play. I am, somewhat miraculously, quite decent at table tennis, but tend to lose on purpose to stop it dragging on for too long, which it will do if you're not careful.

I just don't have it in me; can't even comprehend why a sport is a sport. What is the characteristic

I've yet to watch a single World Cup match. So there

an activity must possess before it can be defined as such? Can I propose running backwards upstairs while blowing your nose? Would you wish to train hard all your life so you could be the fastest at that? Would you want your children to put in two hours of that before school, and then two hours after school, so they could be the fastest at running backwards upstairs while blowing their nose one day?

However, this isn't to say that I resent anyone else's enjoyment. I don't. I can see the interest is intense, as is the emotional catharsis provided. So come the World Cup (and that Euro thing) I will get in the beers and will serve meals on to laps quite happily.

But it doesn't seem to work both ways. Why can't anyone respect my lack of interest? Why is it always: "The non-football fans' guide to the World Cup", as if it were just a matter of trying harder, and never: "The football fans' guide to the non-football fan, who wishes only to be left in peace"? Well here is what football

fans need to understand about non-football fans, right now.

We are not interested in the offside rule. We never ask for it to be explained. You just take it upon yourself to do so, while pushing comments all over the table, which is kind of sweet, but get this: we don't care. It's like asking us to care about someone in Guatemala, say, who has toothache. It's not going to happen. It's not going to sink in. It's that remote. You could be pushing that mustard about on the Moon.

Being entertained to think of the World Cup as different and not just football since it's "an event" that "only happens every four years" will, I have to tell you, always fall on deaf ears. Heavens, I could say the same about sex in this house, but will I be bullying anyone into watching? ("Come on! It only happens once every four years! Bring Pringles!")

There is no need to clutter up my Twitter timeline with pictures of Thierry Henry in a cardigan. Not impressed. I like Springwatch and Chris Packham fulfils any need I might have to gawp incomprehensibly at peculiar knitwear.

We don't need to know about the teams' sex lives for the month of play. We don't need the following read out to us, as it was to me: "Brazil's players are permitted to have 'normal sex' as long as it's not 'acrobatic' and France's are also allowed to have sex as long as it doesn't 'last all night'." Great. Now I know people generally have "acrobatic" sex that isn't "normal" and may "last all night". Now I feel really good about myself.

If football fan, you are going to watch elsewhere and come home in the middle of the night, the non-football fan who is in bed and FAST ASLEEP and NOT HAVING SEX wishes you would ask yourself this: after slamming the front door so hard you can hear the plaster raining within the walls, must I then always step on the dog?

And so I hope football fans take heed and will give us a break just as I hope I've done my bit to prevent yet another football column famine. (It was awful: whole families were left without any commentary for weeks; look it up.)

The woman who taught a generation about sex (including me)

For millions of girls Judy Blume's tales of adolescent angst offered the true path to womanhood. She's still relevant in the era of sexting, finds Helen Rumbelow

Take this for an unlikely bunch of people to meet over a breakfast table: Ian McEwan, one of our most esteemed literary figures; Benedict Cumberbatch, one of our most literate acting stars, and Judy Blume. The two men should between them be abreast of most major cultural phenomena, but they sat there at their hotel dining table at the Hay Festival a couple of weeks ago politely bemused. Who was this frizzy-haired grandma? Some kind of American teen author?

If you're a man and feel the same as McEwan and Cumberbatch, do not be abashed. I can probably say the name Judy Blume to you quite freely with no fear of you clenching with erotic pain, crying hot, embarrassed tears or being transported Proust-like to the moment of your first masturbation, fornication or encounter with a penis named Ralph. It is only women who truly know, who have Blume stamped deep in their sexual DNA: each one of her 82 million books sold — including iconic titles such as *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret* — represents a fumbling identity formed.

Enter into that Hay hotel story at this point actress Louise Brealey, who plays opposite Cumberbatch in *Sherlock*. Brealey began the kind of nervous and yet deeply serious "OMGs" that Blume receives from women who were the right age to feel some strange new urges in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, the so-called "Baby Blummers". "Louise was lovely," says Blume, recounting the McEwan/Cumberbatch blank faces. "She said, 'Oh, you men. Judy Blume! You don't understand. Your sisters will!'"

I confess when I first meet Blume, in a London hotel room to launch her vast back catalogue as ebooks for the new training-bra generation, I can barely meet her eye. Beforehand, every one of my female friends (male, forget it) had a gush of something long-suppressed on hearing her name;

just as when we were 12 we tried to cover this with ironic boner or boob jokes. But seeing in person her unexpected beauty (kind of Katharine Hepburn at 76) made me realise she's not just an author. She was the first to penetrate the excruciating isolation of my adolescence.

More than that she incalculated early and forcefully into impressionable female minds that sex was fun and not shameful, especially alone, and that our bodies might be unreliable but were comedy gold. In short, she was to feminism what Jesuit schools are to Catholicism. No wonder Lena Dunham has credited her as an influence on *Girls*, writing: "It's kind of impossible to overstate how much what [Blume does] has made it possible for me and so many women I admire to make their work."

As we sit down to tea I explain the baggage I'm bringing to our meeting and she nods. "I hope I don't ruin it all for you," Blume says. "Women do react. I always put tissues on the table at book signings. They cry. I cry, we touch hands and the floods start." She laughs, but her eyes fill a little at the memory. Why do these women cry? "You know what it is I represent for a lot of your age group: childhood." Or the end of childhood? "Yes, the end. That's what I set out to do when I started to write a million years ago. I wanted to write on that cusp that I remembered so well: 10, 11, 12; not a teenager, not a child. When everything is new, everything is possible, fresh. That's the time I remembered so well, the most interesting time."

And why is she crying when her readers cry on her shoulder? "Someone said to me last night: 'You are so tough in your books.' I don't know about that, but I fight sentimentality. I'm fearless in my books. But in life I've always been more fearful, certainly a very anxious child. I'm emotional. You don't think, when you're writing, of your audience, I don't think anyone should. So it's so emotional to me to meet people who read you as they grew up."



Meeting her is now a chance to re-read the books. When I mention my daughter is eight, she says, “Ah yes, coming up to Margaret”, by which she means her most famous work, *Are You There God?, the agonised tale of a girl waiting for her period*. *Godot* for the Year 6 set. She says adult women spurn the new, funky covers of the books. “I want my Margaret,” they say, but if you want your kids to read them, don’t bring out your battered ones and say, “Here, I saved them for you!” If you can afford to buy a new book, leave it around the house and

say, “Oh, don’t read that, you’re not ready for that yet.”

How times have changed if mothers are affectionately pushing Blume on their kids instead of confiscating her books as they were furiously passed from satchel to satchel. In America, Blume was repeatedly banned from public libraries and schools. Second time around I expect to find the books tame, but I don’t. Now I find them more extraordinary and almost surreal in their originality. Which other novel makes menstruation the star? Or makes God the Almighty Bestower of

Periods? Or features *Deenie*, a tale of a beautiful disabled girl who finds comfort rubbing her “special place”?

I tell her that my friend thought Deenie’s “special place” was her armpit, and she chuckles and says, “I meet women like that all the time. That’s why I say to parents: ‘Quit worrying about what kids read. It will go over their heads.’ In the States the worrying gets crazier and crazier. I never heard the word masturbation growing up, but fortunately I had girlfriends who talked about their special place. Can you get that good feeling too?” they’d say. She laughs. “That was lucky. The truth is that no one talks about masturbation even now. That’s the big taboo in America.”

We turn to *Forever*, highly controversial when it came out in 1975 and still remarkable because the heroine has sex and is not punished for it. “I have had some angry letters, including from librarians, saying: ‘How dare you let her have a climax right away?’ It’s been 30 years for me and I still haven’t had one.” In a stroke of genius, *Forever* is also possibly the first known instance of a character naming his own penis. “Oh yes, Ralph,” she says fondly, as of a much-loved pet. “I do not know where that came from.” It’s a comedy trope that *Sex and the City* would later run with.

All this from a woman who was born in the 1930s, married at 21 and began writing while her kids were at pre-school. How did she get so brave? “I was young, naive, inexperienced. It wasn’t shocking to me. It was what I

remembered was most on my mind that year I was 11 turning 12.”

Last year Dunham sought Blume out and they spent hours together. Dunham subsequently cited as a special influence Blume’s book

Summer Sisters, a complicated portrait of female friendship that veers

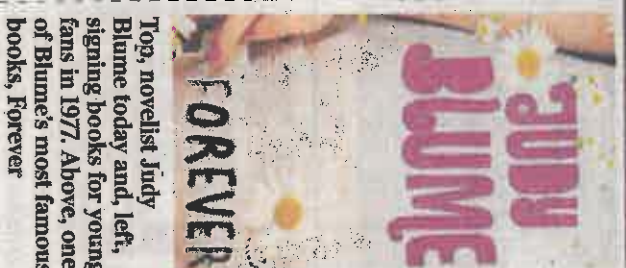
between homo and heterosexual. After we meet, Blume is off to see “Lena’s mom’s art show”. Of Dunham, Blume says: “You would think we’re so removed generationally. She could be my grandchild, but we were just girlfriends, yacking, yacking. Lena is pretty fearless. I liked her very much. I felt, and still feel because we email, that we’ve bonded in some way.”

I tell Blume that I understand the connection because, although *Girls* is for a different age group, I get the same heady and conflicting mix of emotions from it as from Blume: anxiety from their eye-popping frankness about female biology and psychology, soothed by identifiable, warm and funny heroines. Does

Blume ever want to write her own take on the new challenges faced by teens today, from sexting to revenge porn? “I’ll leave that to my friends.” She does not believe novels are under threat now teenagers can find out anything on the internet. “Information is good, but that doesn’t stop you from wanting to read a story about people going through it. It’s a safe way to explore what’s down the road.”

She’s by nature unable to tut-tut about “youth today” — “I always took the child’s side in everything: that doesn’t necessarily make you the best parent” — but does concede that the permanence of an internet photo trail has made it harder for teens to move beyond their mistakes. “None of us always makes wise decisions, but today one mistake can really be bad.”

It’s a strange feeling for me to see my daughter ready for Blume — but the author, who has brought up two generations with her books, has no qualms. “We were all together with my daughter and her son. And she said, ‘I think it’s time for you to give him his *Forever*’. He was maybe 13. I had a collection of *Forever* covers. I put them all out. He chose one. That was the end of him, he went into his room and we didn’t see him until he was done.”



Top, novelist Judy Blume today and, left, signing books for young fans in 1977. Above, one of Blume’s most famous books, *Forever*

grandmother conspiring to give an adolescent boy his first sex novel probably strikes fear into many male hearts, but still: she’s no normal grandmother. She has survived two failed marriages, two bouts of cancer. Near the end of our conversation her third husband, with whom she’s lived in Key West for three decades, pops his head around the door, full of plans for a fun day. She still needs a creative project on the go just as when she started writing out of baby boredom.

She’s just submitted her latest adult novel for editing. Maybe next she’ll write a memoir of her 12-year-old self. Most of all she’d love to see a musical based on her books. Blume can’t be outdated because she is so young herself. With her skinny shoulders and burning wide eyes, the decades fall off her as she talks. By the time I leave she seems 12 again. I feel grateful for that. In the words of Margaret at the end of *Are You There God?*: “I know you’re there God. I know you wouldn’t have missed this for anything! Thank you God. Thanks an awful lot ...”

Judy Blume’s books, including *Forever*, are now available in ebook, from Macmillan Children’s Books