

© 2021 AURORA J. GRUTMAN. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits the user to copy, distribute, and transmit the work provided that the original author(s) and source are credited.

VOL. 41 SYMPOSIUM ESSAY: READING JUDY BLUME AT YALE

AURORA J. GRUTMAN

The following is a part of an essay series for the Volume 41 Symposium, "Are You There Law? It's Me, Menstruation."

The Beinecke Library at Yale University is the closest that one can get in real life to Dumbledore's pensieve.[1] When I visited Judy Blume's archives there, it was as if I had swirled a wand in the magical basin and pulled up vibrant episodes from the author's past. I have always had the sense that Judy Blume is an adult who understands and appreciates young people. After all, her characters share some of the same concerns that my friends and I had as tweens: when we would begin menstruating and what our adult bodies would look like (Are You There God? It's Me Margaret), how best to face our fears (Otherwise Known as Sheila the Great), and whether our bodies deviated from some presumed ideal (Blubber). After spending the afternoon with Blume's papers at Yale, I can confirm that Blume is more than just an aware adult. The archive reveals Judy Blume to be unpretentious, intellectually generous, and deeply connected to other people.

Blume's archives occupy 128 numbered boxes at Yale; I explored just a few of them.[2] I was not surprised to see that she had received so many letters from young readers, parents and educators praising her work. Although I knew that Blume's books have been the object of censorship by school libraries,[3] I was surprised by the amount of hate mail Blume received (and kept). One letter that stands out came from an entire class of fourth graders, no doubt coordinated by their teacher, denouncing Blume for writing "filthy" books.[4] I also left the Beinecke with an appreciation for Blume as an author from whom others sought writing advice. In one letter responding to an aspiring author, Blume said that she did not know how to write a book; she just wrote what came naturally to her. Blume's papers at Yale also reveal that she was a consummate networker, at least to the extent that one could be in the pre-Facebook era. On numerous cards and correspondence -- some with famous writers, some with personal friends -- Blume wrote "rolo" next to an address or phone number, presumably indicating that she or an assistant should enter the contact information into her Rolodex.[5] I especially appreciated seeing the proposed guest list and menu for a dinner to be held at her apartment in New York celebrating the 20th anniversary of Margaret's publication. Blume made copious notes on the draft menu, crossing out the endive salad and suggesting the Vietnamese spring rolls instead.[6] I took particular delight in a greeting card adorned with a three-dimensional facsimile of a gumball machine. As I shook the little plastic beads inside the clear sphere, I imagined Judy Blume doing the same thing. In that regard, the Beinecke Library may be even better than Dumbledore's pensieve: I was not merely an observer of Blume's memories, but I could participate in them by touching and holding the same papers that

she had.

To encounter Judy Blume through her archive is to bring greater complexity and humanity to the writer who functions as a site of memory, aspiration, and inspiration for the present-day menstrual movement. Many of today's menstrual activists, advocates and scholars in the United States read and loved Margaret. They take inspiration from Blume's talking openly about menstruation, drawing attention to its importance in everyday life. Participants in the contemporary menstrual movement can take further encouragement from the Judy Blume I encountered at the Beinecke Library: someone who understood in the moment that the reception of her work reveals fault lines in our society over public discussion of menstruation while simultaneously participating joyfully in life in all its complexity--as a mentor, friend and even party planner. Although Judy Blume is not a lawyer, I suspect that she would have advice for those working at the intersection of law and menstruation in the twenty-first century: keep doing what you are doing in the way that you know how to do it. And keep good records of your work. Someday your papers may be the pensieve that inspires others.

[1] See J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* (2000) (Chapter 30: The Pensieve).

[2] See Yale Univ. Library Catalog, *Judy Blume Papers, 1952-2018*.

[3] See, e.g., Betsy Brown, *Reading Banned Books*, N.Y. Times (Sept. 20, 1987).

[4] See *Fan Mail/Bad Language*, Box 12, Blume Archives.

[5] See *Parties: Lists and Info 1982-1989*, Box 65 Blume Archives.

[6] See *Margaret's 20th Birthday Party December 4, 1990*, Box 65, Blume Archives.

Keywords: law; menstruation; gender; symposia; *Are You There Law? It's Me Menstruation*