

# I'm Not Ready for 'Forever'

Book Banning and Judy Blume's *Forever*

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Judy Blume is the recipient of a lifetime achievement award from the American Library Association (ALA). She has also received a Living Legends Award from the Library of Congress and was awarded the 2000 National Book Foundation medal for distinguished contribution to American letters. Over 82 million copies of books Blume has written have been sold.<sup>i</sup> At the same time, Blume's books are among the most frequently challenged in America. The ALA heralded Blume's novel *Forever* as one of the best books for young adults 1966-1986.<sup>ii</sup> But the book has been the subject of repeated challenges and has often been banned from school libraries. According to the ALA, *Forever* was the 7<sup>th</sup> most challenged book during the 1990s and the 16<sup>th</sup> most challenged book during the period 200-2009.<sup>iii</sup> This paper discusses *Forever*, the frequent attempts to ban it, responses to those challenges and methods for responding to similar challenges in the future.

*Forever* is about a relationship between two high school seniors, Katherine and Michael, who meet at a party on New Year's Eve, start dating shortly thereafter, and break up during the summer before college begins. Over the course of their relationship, they fall in love and become sexually intimate. Katherine loses her virginity to Michael when she decides that she is ready to do so and not before. She visits a clinic to learn about and choose a method of birth control and has frank conversations with her best friend and with Michael about sex. Friends of Katherine's grapple with an unwanted pregnancy and with questions of sexual identity. The novel deals directly and openly with pre-marital sex between teenagers, with orgasms and with the excitement and anxiety that comes with a first serious relationship. But at heart, it is a novel about first love, and about what happens when that love ends.

*Forever* was first published in 1975. The book is dedicated to Blume's daughter Randy, who had asked her mother whether there could "ever be a book where two nice kids do it and

nobody has to die.”<sup>iv</sup> Blume decided to write *Forever* to respond to Randy’s request. Katherine and Michael are good role models for teens embarking on their first serious relationship. The topics of sexuality, birth control and first love are described in a realistic way. Katherine’s story of first love is set in the context of a typical suburban upbringing, not in the context of divorce or drugs or alcohol. Katherine comes from a comfortable, middle-class family that is stable and supportive. She has a good relationship with her parents and extended family, and she has a close set of friends. Although she has friends who experiment with marijuana, she does not. *Forever* does not encourage pre-marital sex but instead tells the realistic story of sexual desire among teenagers in an open, healthy and honest way. It is “a book for adolescents who are ready to deal openly and honestly with teenage sex.”<sup>v</sup>

*Forever* contains many matter-of-fact depictions of the protagonists’ sexual relationship.

The first time Katherine touches Michael’s penis, she is shy and unsure.

He led my hand to his penis. “Katherine...I’d like you to meet Ralph...Ralph, this is Katherine. She’s a very good friend of mine.”...He took my hand and led it back to Ralph, showing me how to hold him, moving my hand up and down according to his rhythm. Soon Michael moaned and I felt him come – a pulsating feeling, a throbbing, like the books said – then wetness. Some of it got on my hand but I didn’t let go of Ralph.<sup>vi</sup>

A few weeks further into the relationship, there is this scene: “We both left on our underpants but after a minute Michael was easing mine down and then his fingers began exploring me. I let my hand wander across his stomach and down his legs and finally I began to strike Ralph. ‘Oh, yes...yes...’ I said, as Michael made me come. And he came too.”<sup>vii</sup> The next night, they sleep together for the first time: “I felt a big thrust, followed by a quick sharp pain that made me suck in my breath. ‘Oh...oh,’ Michael cried, but I didn’t come. I wasn’t even close. ‘I’m sorry,’ he said. ‘I couldn’t hold off.’ He stopped moving. ‘It wasn’t any good for you, was it?’ ‘Everybody

says the first time is no good for a virgin. I'm not disappointed.' But I was. I wanted it to be perfect."<sup>viii</sup> As their sex life improves, there is this passage:

This time Michael made it last much, much longer and I got so carried away I grabbed his backside with both hands, trying to push him deeper and deeper into me – and I spread my legs as far apart as I could – and I raised by hips off the bed – and I moved with him, again and again and again – and at last, I came. I came right before Michael and as I did I made noises, just like my mother. Michael did too.<sup>ix</sup>

In the context of challenges to books on the shelves of school libraries, sexual references often cause the greatest concern.<sup>x</sup> According to the ALA, when a book is challenged, these are the most common complaints: (i) the book is sexually explicit, (ii) the book contains offensive language and (iii) it was unsuited to any age group.<sup>xi</sup> *Forever*, in its frank depiction of the sexual lives of two teenagers, is filled with sexual references. The detailed nature of the depictions of sex in the novel, along with the perception that sexual activity occurs frequently in the novel have resulted in constant challenges to the placement of the book on the shelves of school libraries.<sup>xii</sup> One parent is quoted as saying of *Forever*: "I've never read anything so filthy in my entire life."<sup>xiii</sup> Another parent announced that the "particularly detailed sexually explicit descriptions can actually be characterized as pornography."<sup>xiv</sup> An Illinois parent wanted *Forever* banned because, as he noted, "this is the Bible belt, and most people here have high moral standards. It's not just sexually explicit. It's arousing to a teenager. You can't just get them aroused and leave them with no place to go."<sup>xv</sup>

There are many documented challenges to *Forever*, as well as several successful bans, and each follows a similar pattern. In 1993, the superintendent of schools in Rib Lake, Wisconsin moved the book to a parental permission shelf after deciding that it was sexually explicit. The principal of the high school removed it due to its "graphic depiction of the sex act."<sup>xvi</sup> Existing school library procedures to file a book challenge were ignored. A committee

appointed during a closed session voted 7-4 to remove the book, but the committee recommendations were suspended because closed session meetings violated the district's open meeting rules.<sup>xvii</sup> In 1995, a parent in the Elgin, Illinois school district who homeschooled her children but paid state and local taxes launched a successful campaign to remove the book from middle school library shelves because she "believed the book's sexual content, obscene language and drug references to be inappropriate for middle schoolers."<sup>xviii</sup> Repeated attempts to reinstate the books failed until all 15 librarians in the school district persuaded a committee of parents and faculty to vote unanimously to lift the ban. The committee's action led to a 2002 vote of the school board to return the book to the middle school shelves.<sup>xix</sup> More recently, parents of students at the Sugarloaf School in Summerland Key, Florida asked in late 2009 that the book be removed from the shelves of all school district libraries because of its "distorted view of sex, promiscuity [and] usurping [of] parental control."<sup>xx</sup> The school district refused to act on the request until a committee could review the book and make a recommendation. In 2010, the committee recommended that *Forever* remain on school library shelves.<sup>xxi</sup>

The Supreme Court considered the constitutionality of the removal of books in a school library by a school board in 1982 in *Board of Education v. Pico*.<sup>xxii</sup> In *Pico* the Court stated that, unlike the classroom, where the curriculum is set by others, school libraries offer a place where students could make their own reading and learning choices. Thus, if the removal of a book results from the disapproval of or disagreement with the ideas contained in the book, the removal of such book is unconstitutional.<sup>xxiii</sup> In *Case v. Unified School District No 233*, although the school board stated that it decided to remove a book about a lesbian relationship due to the book's educational unsuitability, the Court found that the removal was in fact due to the board's disagreement with the ideas contained in the book. In addition, the Court noted that the board's

action violated the school library's policies on material selection and reconsideration, and it ordered that the book be returned to the shelves.<sup>xxiv</sup>

Thus, case law supports the vigorous defense of book selection by school libraries and holds the decision to remove a book from school library shelves to a strict scrutiny standard. It is imperative that librarians not give in to the pressure to restrict access to ideas that are controversial. Instead, librarians should listen to the concerns expressed by a parent and try to engage in a real conversation centered around the *Pico* freedom of choice standard in the context of school libraries. In addition, the Supreme Court has ruled that there should be an open and transparent procedure to examine and consider all challenges made to books before their removal from library shelves.<sup>xxv</sup> Any book that has been selected for a school library according to the school's collection development policy should not be removed from the shelves without due process. During that reconsideration period, the book should remain on the library shelves.<sup>xxvi</sup> In order to provide support for librarians' decisions in collections development, every school library should have a clear policy explaining the methodology behind the selection of materials and should also adopt formal procedures to assess a challenge to a book. Those policies, along with general information regarding the case law which interprets the First Amendment to protect the intellectual and academic freedom of students, should be available in writing and on the library's website. Every member of the library staff should be familiar with these policies and should be able to explain them in a clear and straightforward manner to students and parents. The policies should be distributed to school faculty and administration as well. Through these methods, librarians may ease the pressure to remove challenged books from the shelves without proper reconsideration.

Fundamentally, a decision to remove a book, and thus to deny access to information, is tantamount to an attempt to impose the views of the remover on the rest of the community. As the National Coalition against Censorship wrote in its letter urging the reinstatement on *Forever* on the library shelves in Elgin, Illinois: “No book is right for everyone, and the role of the library is to allow students to make choices according to their own interests, experiences and family values. No one has to read something just because it’s on the library shelf...Parents who object to this book are entitled to their view, but not to impose it on others.”<sup>xxvii</sup> A parent always has the right to request that his or her child be denied access to a book, but that same parent does not have the right to restrict access to other children. Although *Forever* was published 40 years ago, it is as in demand now as it was when it was first released,<sup>xxviii</sup> which indicates that its story resonates across generations and speaks to teenagers who are grappling with growing up, sexual attraction and first love. Its honest depiction of the last years of adolescence provides comfort to teenagers wondering whether others share their feelings and doubts. Censoring *Forever* will not stop children from “growing up and becoming aware of their own sexuality.”<sup>xxix</sup> It should stay on library shelves and be a source of comfort and recognition for teens in all generations.

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## Endnotes

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- <sup>i</sup> Flood 2014.
- <sup>ii</sup> Goldberg 2002.
- <sup>iii</sup> <http://www.ala.org/bbooks/100-most-frequently-challenged-books-1990%E2%80%931999>;  
<http://www.ala.org/bbooks/top-100-bannedchallenged-books-2000-2009>
- <sup>iv</sup> Flood 2014.
- <sup>v</sup> Kaplan, 1994.
- <sup>vi</sup> Blume 2003, 71-72.
- <sup>vii</sup> Blume 2003, 93.
- <sup>viii</sup> Blume 2003, 97.
- <sup>ix</sup> Blume 2003, 130.
- <sup>x</sup> Beineke 1982, 638.
- <sup>xi</sup> <http://www.ala.org/bbooks/about>
- <sup>xii</sup> Karolides, Bald and Sova (2011), 359.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Donelson 1990, 3.
- <sup>xiv</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>xv</sup> Donelson 1997, 24.
- <sup>xvi</sup> School Library Journal 1993, 20. See also Karolides, Bald and Sova (2011), 360
- <sup>xvii</sup> *Ibid.* The high school guidance counselor was fired for vocally opposing the removal of the book from the school library and for alerting the media to the closed door school board meeting. He sued, claiming that his first amendment rights had been violated. A jury awarded him almost \$400,000 in damages and lost wages. After an appeals court reduced the jury award, the school district had to take out a loan, cancel one bus route and cut teaching and administrative positions to pay the settlement amount.
- <sup>xviii</sup> Margolis 2011, 14.
- <sup>xix</sup> *Ibid.* See also Karolides, Bald and Sova (2011), 361.
- <sup>xx</sup> Karolides, Bald and Sova (2011), 362.
- <sup>xxi</sup> *Ibid.* See also National Coalition against Censorship 2010.
- <sup>xxii</sup> 457 U.S. 853 (1982). See also *Right to Read Defense Committee v. School Committee of the City of Chelsea*, 454 F. Supp 703 (D. Mass. 1978), noting that “a school should be a readily accessible warehouse of ideas.” *Ibid* at 710.
- <sup>xxiii</sup> 457 U.S. 853, at 872.
- <sup>xxiv</sup> *Case v. Unified School District No 233*, 908 F. Supp 864 (D. Kan. 1995).
- <sup>xxv</sup> *Bantam Books, Inc. v. Sullivan*, 372 U.S. 58 (1963). See also Office for Intellectual Freedom 2015, 81.
- <sup>xxvi</sup> *Intellectual Freedom Manual* 77-79.
- <sup>xxvii</sup> Bertin 1999.
- <sup>xxviii</sup> Crown 2005.
- <sup>xxix</sup> Davis 1986, 19.