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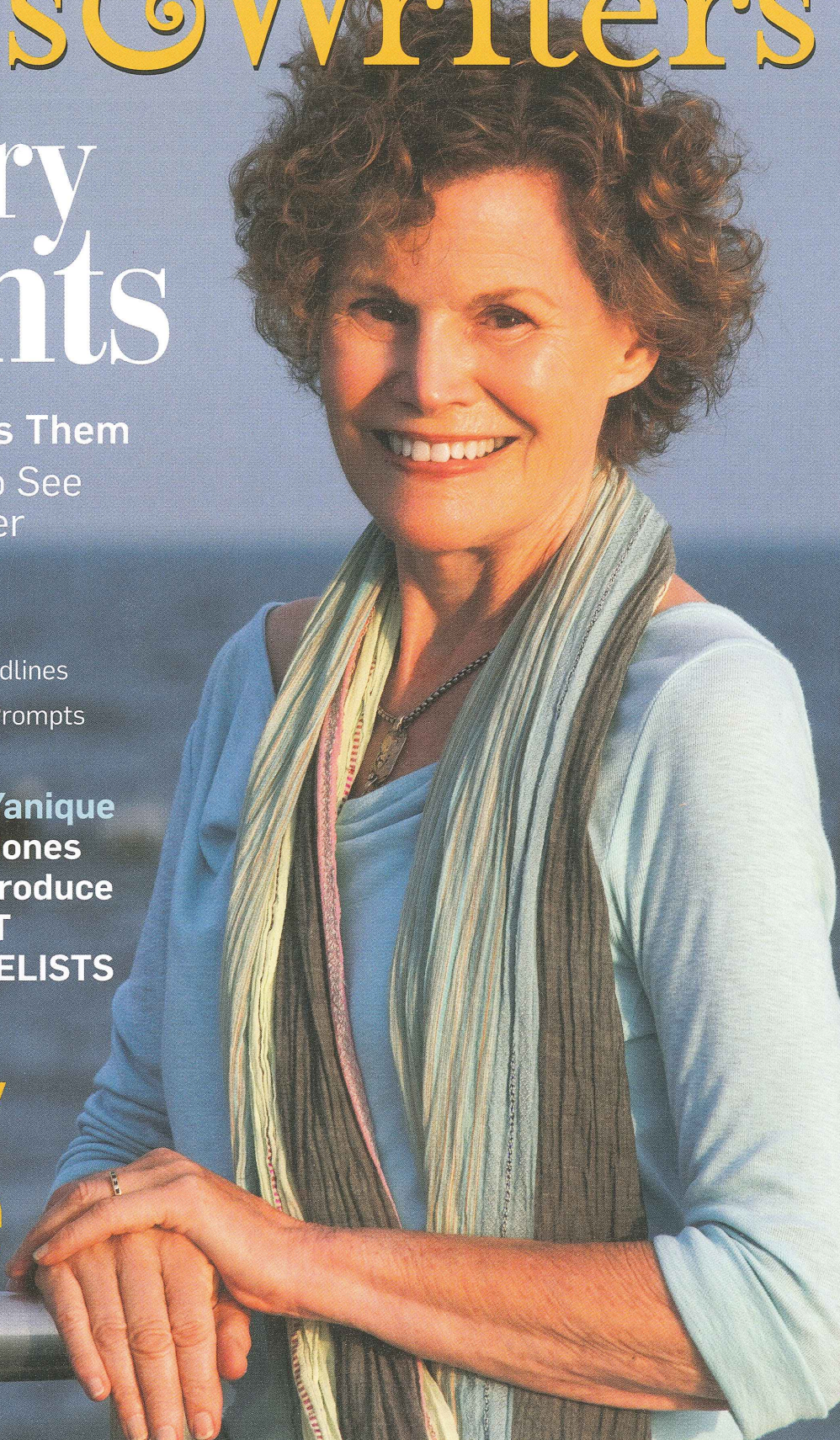
The Time Is Now: Writing Prompts

**Elliott Holt Tiphonie Yanique
Helon Habila Tayari Jones
and Darin Strauss introduce
THE SUMMER'S BEST
DEBUT NOVELISTS**

An
Afternoon
With
**Judy
Blume**

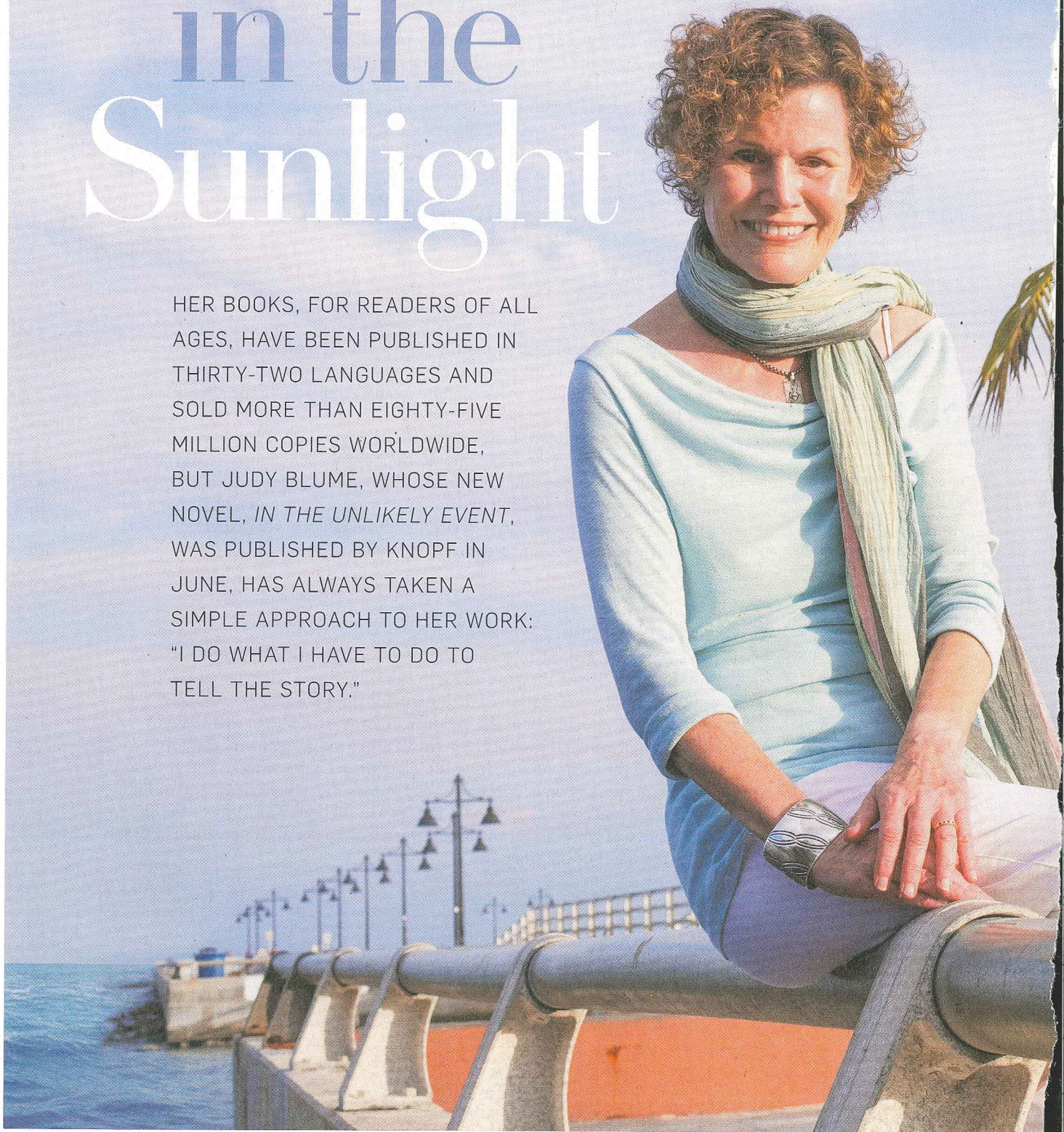



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Telling Stories in the Sunlight

HER BOOKS, FOR READERS OF ALL AGES, HAVE BEEN PUBLISHED IN THIRTY-TWO LANGUAGES AND SOLD MORE THAN EIGHTY-FIVE MILLION COPIES WORLDWIDE, BUT JUDY BLUME, WHOSE NEW NOVEL, *IN THE UNLIKELY EVENT*, WAS PUBLISHED BY KNOFF IN JUNE, HAS ALWAYS TAKEN A SIMPLE APPROACH TO HER WORK: "I DO WHAT I HAVE TO DO TO TELL THE STORY."





AT THE 2009 Key West Literary Seminar, Rachel Kushner was onstage discussing her first novel, *Telex From Cuba* (Scribner, 2008), which was inspired by stories from her mother, who had grown up on the Caribbean island ninety miles to the south in the 1950s. In the audience that day was best-selling author Judy Blume, a longtime resident of Key West, Florida, and a member of the Literary Seminar board of directors. When she heard Kushner utter the phrase “the fifties,” an epiphany hit Blume with the force of a thunderclap. She had a story to tell, she realized—a big, important story rooted in the fifties but about which, curiously, she had spoken to no one for more than half a century.

Over the course of fifty-eight days in late 1951 and early '52, when

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the then Judy Sussman was in the eighth grade in her hometown of Elizabeth, New Jersey, three airplanes crashed there, all in or near residential neighborhoods and all with significant loss of life. When the first plane plummeted from the sky, it was believed to be a freak accident in an era when commercial air travel was relatively new and glamorous. When another disaster followed, the adults in Elizabeth began to wonder whether something was awry at nearby Newark Airport, while the kids—including Judy and many of her classmates at Alexander Hamilton Junior High—spoke of sabotage, aliens from outer space, perhaps even zombies. And when the third plane went down, it seemed to many that the town was under siege, or the victim of some modern version of a biblical plague. The airport was shut down for nine months pending a safety review, which ultimately failed to explain the crashes.

And for decades afterward, the future writer, who had watched her town endure unthinkable horror—her own father, a dentist, was called in to help identify burned bodies from dental records—kept those dangerous memories in some vault in her mind, locked away.

“I must have really buried this someplace so deep inside of me that for more than forty years it never occurred to me, ever, that I had this story to tell,” Blume says in a tone of wonder at the elegant Key West home she shares with her husband, nonfiction writer George Cooper. “How is that possible? It was really deep, I guess. My husband says I never told him this story. My daughter, who became a commercial airline pilot, said, ‘Mother, I cannot believe



you never told me this story.”

Better late than never. In her latest novel, *In the Unlikely Event*, published by Knopf in June, Blume unpacks the events of those two months when the sky kept raining down catastrophe on Elizabeth. The product of months of research and years of writing and editing, *In the Unlikely Event* hews closely to the actual details of the crashes and then, with the imaginative sympathy that has been a hallmark of Blume’s novels for young people and adults over the decades, describes the toxic fallout that afflicted the lives of the townspeople. The result is a portrait of a community in crisis, in which grief, fear, and outrage are balanced, to some extent, by the characters’ capacity for heroism and a faith that, even in the shadow of tragic events, life goes on.

“Because that’s what you do when something terrible happens,” the author explains. “You keep going, doing what you do.”

Along the way, Blume weaves a tasseled shawl of historical detail of New Jersey in the early fifties—the era of Frank Sinatra, Martin and Lewis, Nat King Cole, cocktails at the Riviera,

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Jewish gangsters, Liz Taylor haircuts, Joe McCarthy's Red Scare, and sci-fi movies dressing up A-bomb paranoia in Halloween costumes—in which the comfortingly mundane reality of the characters provides a vivid contrast to the disruption of the airplane crashes. The novel's heroine, Miri Ammerman, and her uncle, the young reporter Henry Ammerman, who breathlessly covers the crashes in the purple prose of small-town newspapers of the day (the word *inferno* comes up with alarming frequency), struggle to maintain their sense of normal life in the midst of extremely abnormal circumstances.

"I have a fabulous memory for my early life, but I remember very few things about the crashes—which is why I had to do so much research," Blume reflects, still puzzled, one typically perfect afternoon in Key West. "I do have a very vivid memory of where I was the afternoon of the first plane crash. I was in a car with my parents on

a Sunday afternoon, and it came over the radio: 'We interrupt this program to tell you...' The crash was a block from our junior high school—one block!" She thinks back, shakes her head. "I knew that the crashes happened, but I don't remember my feelings about them. Was I scared? Was I not? I don't know." Another thoughtful pause. "But all the mundane stuff, how people lived back then, was right at the tips of my fingers. I am, after all, a kid of the fifties."

IT WAS in that seemingly carefree yet oddly stifling decade that Judy Sussman began to develop as a storyteller—not a writer yet, as she kept her tales in her head—which served as a way to explore questions that often couldn't be asked out loud, even of her parents, as beloved as they were. "Full of secrets," Blume, still peeved, says of that decade. "Nobody told you anything."

EXCERPT

In the Unlikely Event

Outside the theater, the weather had grown even worse. Miri and Rusty locked arms and walked quickly with their heads down. Miri had never felt so cold, so weak from hunger. The candy bar at the movies was the only thing she'd had to eat today. A few more blocks and they'd be home. She could almost smell the leg of lamb rubbed with garlic and rosemary that would be waiting, with pan-roasted potatoes, mint jelly, and green beans, plus a wedge of iceberg lettuce with Russian dressing. Irene would have already frosted the birthday cake she'd baked for Rusty. Miri's mouth was watering just thinking about it.

At the corner of Westfield Avenue and Lowden Street a small child, one of the Bell kids, probably, was sledding in front of her house. There was a Bell in every grade. Miri knew at least four of them. Suddenly the child screamed and pointed to the sky. Miri and Rusty looked up to see a ball of fire rushing toward them. Miri could feel the heat from above as Rusty grabbed her, pulling her across the street. They ran as fast as they could but the fireball kept coming. They heard a deafening roar. Then a splintering crash, followed by two explosions only a second apart. They were knocked down by the force, Rusty covering Miri's body with her own, trying to protect her.

When Miri opened her eyes she saw feet, dozens of feet, and at first she was so disoriented she didn't know where she was. She couldn't hear anything. There was a ringing in her ears. From every direction people were running toward the flames that were shooting up, toward the thing that had crashed and was burning in the frozen bed of the Elizabeth River.

From *In the Unlikely Event* by Judy Blume. Copyright © 2015 by Judy Blume. Excerpted by permission of Knopf, a division of Random House LLC. All rights reserved.

The 1970s were hardly better. When the author's narratives began to be recorded and published in her late twenties and early thirties, she was immediately celebrated—and in some circles deplored and censored—for her frank fictions that touched on, among other things, the physical and sexual development of girls and young women. *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret* (Bradbury Press, 1970), still perhaps Blume's best-known novel for teenagers, was primarily about its sixth-grade heroine's struggles in a mixed-faith family, but caught the disapproving eye of cultural conservatives who objected to its candor about brassieres, menstruation, sanitary napkins, and the like. In *Deenie* (Bradbury, 1973), Blume broached the topic of masturbation, and in *Forever...* (Bradbury, 1975), she graduated to teen sex. Her books' directness on these and other "adult" themes made them simultaneously among the most banned and most popular books of their era. (To date, according to her publisher, Blume's books in all genres have sold more than eighty-five million copies, making her one of the world's most commercially successful writers.)

"I was very interested in writing about real life, about growing up," Blume says. "Nobody talked about those things back then, so the books were a way to satisfy my curiosity."

Kristen-Paige Madonia, author of the young-adult novel *Fingerprints of You* (Simon & Schuster, 2012), grew up feeling similarly about Blume's novels for teens. "My sister and I took turns reading *Margaret*, which was incredibly important to us," says Madonia, who got to know Blume personally years later. "Judy took subjects that were masked and muddy and made them okay and understandable. She was very clear about things that were happening to us as young girls—boobs and periods, all that—and you felt you were in dialogue with her. She was with us, speaking to us, which was far more comfortable than having that conversation with your mother or a teacher.

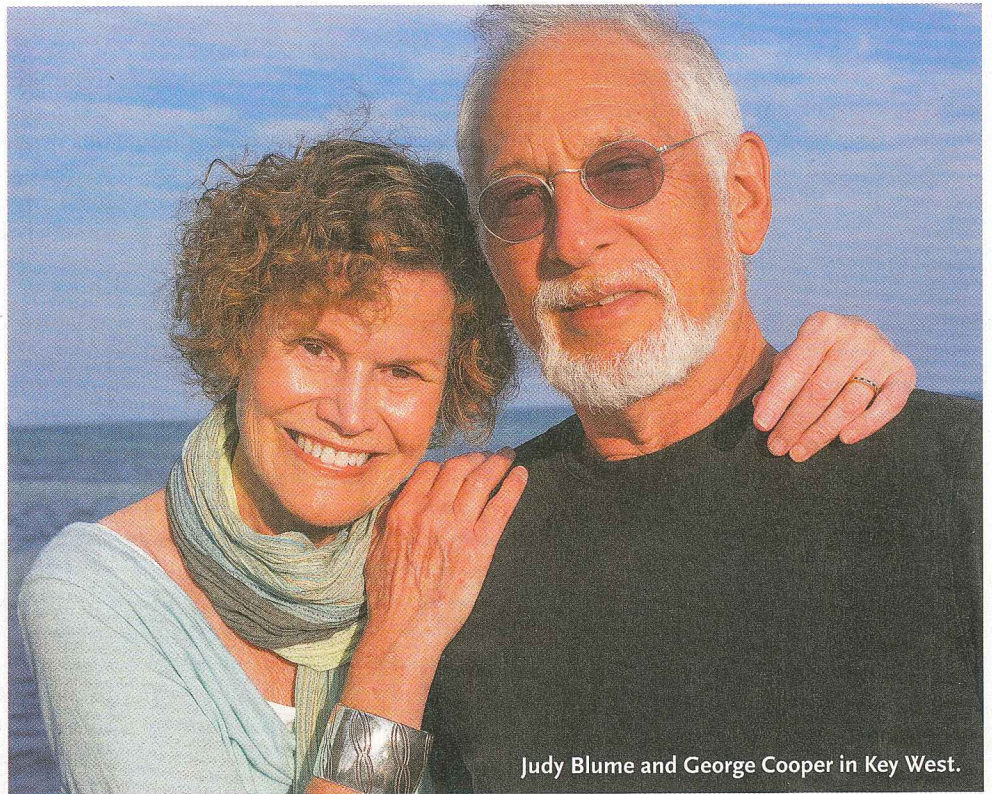
Her voice is so accessible, so warm and down-to-earth, and I think that's why she's connected to so many readers over the years."

In later years Blume turned to adult fiction, producing a pair of best-sellers, *Wifey* (1978) and *Smart Women* (1983), both published by Putnam. Although writing had always been a joy—"I felt as if I were reborn every morning," she says—Blume suffered an existential funk in the early 1980s after reading *Dad* (Knopf, 1981) by William Wharton, whose prose struck her as so superior to her own that she felt paralyzed. "I was so caught up in the book that it totally took away all my confidence,"

she says. "I just felt, 'Why am I doing this? I can't write this well. I will never write as well as this.' And I couldn't write at all for three months."

Eventually, Blume got her groove back, in part by making peace with what she sees as her own limitations as a prose stylist. "It was never about putting the words on paper," she says now, over a dinner of grilled snapper and Key lime pie at an open-air beachfront restaurant. "I'm not that kind of writer, as many people would tell you. It's about getting the story out, the story and the characters. It's not about the language. I do what I have to do to tell the story."

With that pragmatic approach, Blume has written several new books in recent years, including a third blockbuster for adult readers, *Summer Sisters* (Delacorte, 1998). But her editor at Knopf, Carole Baron, says that Blume's way of describing her writing process doesn't do it justice. "She's a great writer, whether she believes it or not," says Baron, who also edited *Summer Sisters*. "Her dialogue in particular



Judy Blume and George Cooper in Key West.

is perfection. And I do believe that's one of the reasons—whether in adult books or books for the young—that Blume has always connected with her readers. She knows how to speak to them through the words of her characters. Her writing is deceptively simple, but it delivers a blow. To say that it's not about the language, she's selling herself hugely short."

As for the popular (and vaguely dismissive) characterization of Blume by some as a "YA writer" who occasionally writes books for adults, the author shrugs. "Children's books, YA books, adult books—it's all the same process," she says. "Lots of times, I don't know which it is. I'm just telling a story." With a knife, she slices through a thick layer of meringue on the pie, as if hacking away at the fluff of the argument. "I hate categories," she says with a rare frown. "You have to be published by a certain department, and there are children's book buyers, YA book buyers, adult book buyers. But that's about the marketplace, not the book."

LAST year, as the deadline for the delivery of the manuscript of *In the Unlikely Event* began to loom, two issues—both related to language and storytelling, as it happened—presented themselves as potential roadblocks in the publication schedule.

One was that after having written the first of the novel's four parts, Blume took two years off from the project to work on the film adaptation of her novel *Tiger Eyes* (Bradbury, 1981), directed by her son, Lawrence Blume. (As a published author, she chose to retain the surname of her first husband, John M. Blume, an attorney. They divorced in 1976, after which she married a physicist, Thomas Kitchens. They divorced after two years, and she married Cooper in 1987. "I've been with George for thirty-five happy years," she says with a smile, "to make up for everything else.") When Blume returned to work on *In the Unlikely Event*, she came to see Part One as too slowly paced and too crowded with characters. "I kept telling

Carole, 'I want to speed it up!' You know you're in danger of damaging your book when you want to take out big chunks of it and throw them away. And Carole would say, 'Put that back!'"

As Baron recalls, "My feeling was that when we experienced the horror of the first airplane crash, we should know who the people were." She got her way.

The second issue was that the newspaper articles about the airplane crashes, attributed in the book to Henry Ammerman, were largely based on actual accounts that originally appeared in two local newspapers, the *Elizabeth Daily Journal* and the *Newark Evening News*, both now defunct. It didn't feel right to publish the real-life newspaper stories verbatim under Henry Ammerman's fictional byline, but with her deadline approaching, Blume despaired of finding enough time to rewrite the stories.

At that point, Cooper entered the fray. "I'll be your Henry Ammerman," he said. Under Blume's supervision in the role of a tough "city editor," as he put it, Cooper got to work, recrafting the newspaper articles, retaining and sometimes putting his own spin on their hyperventilating prose style. "I took all the stories and added some flourishes of my own," he says now. "I tried to tailor them to the fictional narrative, building on the story that was building in the fiction."

"I would have said the exact opposite," Blume says. "The news stories gave me the structure for my narrative."

DURING the writing of *Summer Sisters*, Blume, who then lived in New York City, frequently talked about her love of summer, so Cooper said to her, "You could have more summer in your life if we went someplace in winter." "Great," she said, "let's try to rent a place somewhere for a month." They rented a place in Key West, fell in love with the island, and returned again and again, eventually making it their home in 1997.

"You live a regular life here," the

author says during a contented walk on the beach at sunset, "and you forget how lucky you are until someone reminds you."

The self-styled Conch Republic has been good to Blume, and not only because of its nearly endless summer. For decades the island has nurtured a community of poets and writers, including Ernest Hemingway, Tennessee Williams, Robert Frost, Elizabeth Bishop, John Hersey, James Merrill, and Shel Silverstein, a context in which Blume fits like bougainvillea on a breezy Old Town veranda. And from her twin perches as a best-selling author and a board member of the Literary Seminar, she has been well positioned to mentor many young writers whose work she admires, providing advice and much-needed advocacy at some of the most crucial stages of their careers.

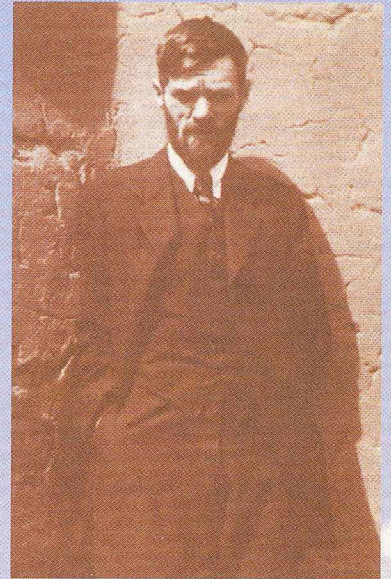
"I wanted to be a writer because of Judy Blume and her books," says Carolyn Mackler, who first met the author while interviewing her in Key West for an article in *Ms. Magazine*. "She was my hero, and she was very welcoming and generous and kind to me on that visit. I was twenty-four, and during the interview, I mentioned that I wanted to write novels like hers. She said, 'When you get a draft that you feel comfortable with, call me and we'll talk.' She really ended up guiding me through writing and publishing my first novel, *Love and Other Four-Letter Words* [Delacorte, 2000]. She read an advance copy and gave it a wonderful book-jacket quote. She's been a mentor to me for seventeen years."

Something similar happened to Madonia, whose short story, "Cheap Red Meat," won the first Key West Literary Seminar Fiction Contest, in 2008—largely because, unbeknownst to the young writer, Blume had come across the story in the contest slush pile and fallen in love with it.

"I got down there and was waiting in line to have my book signed by Judy Blume," Madonia recalls. "She saw my name tag and said, 'It's you!' She loved what she saw in that short story, and

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really fostered my career from that moment. Half an hour later we were exchanging numbers and making plans to have breakfast. You know, you meet her and forget that you're talking to someone unbelievably famous. And whenever I've hesitated in my career or had doubts, she's always been the one I reach out to. She always says, 'Go write another book. That's who you are.'

AFTER decades of feeling reborn every morning at her writing desk, Blume herself has reached a point in her life when she's not sure whether she'll write another book. And if she does do so, she insists that it won't be another lengthy, scrupulously researched tome like *In the Unlikely Event*, which arrives in bookstores at a muscular 416 pages.

"I'm seventy-seven years old and I don't want to write another long novel," she says. "I don't want to spend three to five years doing that. I'm not saying that

I'm never going to do anything, because I have a lot of creative energy."

Baron isn't buying it, at least not entirely. "I think the thing about this new book that's different from her other novels is that there's a basis of fact in dealing with these airplane crashes," she says. "Judy is so thorough about her research, so adamant about getting every single fact right, that it added a layer to her editorial process that I don't think she's ever experienced before. So, sure, I believe she's not going to undertake another book that has such a basis in nonfiction. But Judy is a storyteller, and storytellers are always telling stories. She said the same thing to me about this maybe being her last novel, and I said to her, 'When you're ready, I have an idea.'"

Who knows? Thanks in part to the comfortable climate and her long walks around Key West every morning with Cooper, the author appears significantly younger and more energetic than her actual age might suggest. But

as always, Judy Blume is a pragmatist who understands her limitations. After many happy years in their gorgeously landscaped, high-modernist home in Old Town, Blume and Cooper are making plans to sell the house and downsize to a much smaller condo on the nearby beach. The heavy spade-work of *In the Unlikely Event*—the digging up of what had been buried for so long—has been done. An assignment has been completed, a burden lifted.


Standing on a Key West pier taking in yet another gorgeous sunset, Blume heaves an unmistakable sigh of relief. "If this is my last book, then I'm really happy about it," she says. "I feel I was meant to tell this story, and now I've told it." ∞

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