



EXPRESS

Home of
the Daily and
Sunday Express

May 31, 2015



Charlotte Heathcote

Every week in S Magazine

Life Stories

From fated meetings to tragedy, these two novels look at how dreams can be derailed by chance events

In *The Unlikely Event* by Judy Blume (Picador, £16.99)

The Unlikely Event is Judy Blume's first book for adults in more than 15 years and, before the end of the first chapter, you'll be breathing a happy sigh that the wait is over.

The story takes place in the winter of 1951. Fifteen-year-old Miri Ammerman lives with her mother, her uncle and her grandmother in the small town of Elizabeth, New Jersey, directly under the flight path for Newark Airport.

Miri has never met her father and her mother is tight-lipped on the subject, insisting they're better off without him. But Miri and her friends are happily preoccupied with parties and their first boyfriends.

Then tragedy strikes their close-knit town. Not one, but three planes crash in Elizabeth in quick succession. The deaths of passengers, crew and townsfolk send shock waves through the community and make the usual tumult of adolescence even more complicated.

Judy Blume is fantastic at assembling a cast of characters so clearly drawn that you'd recognise them in the street and so real that you care deeply about each of them after only a few lines. We're hugely

absorbed in the fortunes not just of Miri's immediate family, but also those of her first love and closest friends.

The teenage characters, in particular, are pitch perfect as they come of age and start to see that life isn't necessarily always black and white. People's previously ordered lives come crashing down, just as the planes crash into buildings and homes.

The major theme, as often in Blume's books, is the inevitability of change, connected here to a loss of innocence. This is skillfully depicted not just in Miri's own life where she must deal with paternity, infidelity and betrayal, but also as a broader phenomenon. Society is changing; the very air travel that Miri sees as calamitous will bring huge possibilities.

Blume builds a sense of period with fictitious newspaper reports that give us the social and political concerns of 1950s small-town America.

However, there are some quibbles. The 1987-set postscript feels like an episode of *Dynasty* grafted on to a Maeve Binchy novel. And there are so many plots and subplots that at times I felt like an air traffic controller, checking everyone had landed safely. But these are minor gripes. In *The Unlikely Event* is based on events from

Judy Blume's own childhood; with this novel, she's returning home. For those of us who grew up alongside Blume's beloved teenage characters, this book is a welcome homecoming too.

Sarah Franklin

<http://www.express.co.uk/entertainment/books/580802/Natural-history-books-summer-2015>