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# **“You can’t go back to holding hands.” Reading Judy Blume’s *Forever* in the #MeToo Era**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

*“Look Kath...” she said, “I’ve always been honest with you about sex...”*

*“I know.”*

*“But you have to be sure you can handle the situation before you jump into it...sex is a commitment...once you’re there you can’t go back to holding hands.”*

*“I know it.”*

*“And when you give yourself both mentally and physically...well, you’re completely vulnerable.”*

Judy Blume’s novel *Forever* (1975) was one of the first young adult novels to tackle topics like teenage sex, pregnancy, and orgasms (Cart, 2016). At the time of publication in 1975, *Forever* was met with social outrage and book challenges across the country. Because sex and sexuality are spoken of so frankly, over the decades many adults were compelled to try to keep the book out of adolescent hands (Eccleshare, 1996; Karolides, Burrell, & Kean, 1993). However, for those young readers who *could* get their hands on the book, *Forever* tackled topics youth were interested in, and furthermore, it addressed topics that were not frequently discussed openly in schools or even at home.

Despite being published in 1975, *Forever* has remained a book that both teenagers and adults are familiar with almost forty-five years later. Thanks to a rebranding of more recent editions by Simon & Schuster and MacMillan, and content that does not read as dated, the book masquerades on any library, classroom, or bookstore shelf as a contemporary realistic teen drama akin to a book by Sarah Dessen or Jenny Han. Furthermore, with one

of Blume's other popular books -- *Are you there God? It's me Margaret* -- being made into a movie almost fifty years after its original publication in 1970, Blume's work is bound to attract new attention.

This project began when we, a former school librarian and former secondary English language arts teacher, decided to informally re-read Blume's book together. As we reminisced about *Forever* with old friends and new colleagues, we were met with excited anecdotes from those who also held the book close in their reading memories and an appreciation for a book that talked about sex in an honest and open way. Colleagues shared their youthful attempts at sneaking the book out of their school library and into their closets or under their bed covers, without alerting the watchful protective eyes of their parents. One friend called the book "locker lit" and recounted that she and her high school friends never brought the book home. Instead, the "good" parts were paperclipped and the book was passed around through lockers of friends for repeated and shared readings. Another friend snuck *Forever* from her best friend's house and read it curled up on her closet floor safe from her parents' eyes, when she was supposed to be sleeping. A third friend said the book was formative for her because it discussed sex in a way that was empowering for her as a female reader, especially the idea that sex was not necessarily tied to long-term commitment.

Moreover, as we exchanged reflections while reading, the book came up in other conversations relative to news stories in the media -- the Avital Ronnell controversy at New York University and Ronnell's claims that she and her graduate student Nimrod Reitman had just been engaging in "queer intimacy," but nothing that was inappropriate (Greenberg, 2018); Brett Kavanaugh's U.S. Supreme Court confirmation hearings and the discussions not only about consent, but the toxic culture of masculinity and drinking present among young teenage boys (Zernike & Steel, 2018); and Kristin Roupenian's viral short story "Cat Person" (Roupenian, 2017) and the conversations it sparked about uncomfortable sexual encounters and the fluid nature of consent. These incidents happened over four decades after the initial publication of *Forever*, and do not map perfectly onto Blume's text; however, they are part of a conversation that is happening in our society today about sex, sexuality, consent, and power that cannot be avoided when discussing any text about adolescent sexuality.

Although Blume's book is no stranger to critical analysis, the moment is right to reconsider this text in a contemporary context and with new lenses. While the narrative and dialogue oscillate from radical to cringeworthy quickly and repeatedly, our aim is not to critique the literary construction of this book. This has been done (e.g. Cart, 2016; Trites, 2000). Rather, we use Blume's book as a cultural artifact, or a text that gives us insight into the beliefs of adults, youth, and the culture during the mid-1970s and its relevance throughout the decades until today. Blume's books, reprinted many times for multiple generations, have been censored, read, debated, paper-clipped, hidden, featured, and analyzed. *Forever* has had an undeniable impact on the way that entire generations of young people think about sex and the role of literature in those beliefs. In the article that follows, we use Critical Youth Studies and Queer Theory to explore ways that contemporary youth can participate in essential conversations and questions associated with the #MeToo movement in light of Blume's classic text, *Forever*. We ask the question: How does Judy Blume's *Forever* speak to contemporary conversations about sex in the #MeToo moment? Using *Forever*, students

and teachers, youth and adults, can move beyond one-dimensional and static conversations and toward complicated discussions about sex, sexuality, and consent.

### **FOREVER: THE NOVEL**

*Forever* is a fictional young adult novel, set in the mid-1970s in the United States, and told in first-person point of view from the perspective of Katherine Danziger. The reader learns of Katherine's growing relationship with a new acquaintance, Michael Wagner, and of their experiences with first love. When "Kath" and Michael begin dating, they quickly become physically intimate and consider having sexual intercourse. Kath grapples with what this type of physical intimacy would mean, as she increasingly desires to lose her "virginity" to Michael. Although Kath is initially not quite ready, she and Michael grow closer. After Kath receives sexual health information from her grandmother (who is a progressive political activist and feminist), and makes a secret visit to Planned Parenthood, Kath decides it is time for this type of intimacy with Michael. The reader follows along as Kath and Michael grapple with the technical details of being sexually active, including premature ejaculation and masturbation, experimentation with different positions, and the mechanics of pleasuring one's partner.

However, their commitment to each other is challenged when Kath and Michael both go away to work for the summer before college. The relationship they once thought would last forever is complicated, and eventually Kath meets someone else. Her commitment to Michael is tested. By the end of the narrative, Kath decides that her relationship with Michael would not last forever, but that it does not change the importance of her history with Michael, nor does it cause her any regret about their levels of intimacy and shared physical experiences.

### **HISTORICAL CONTEXT: TITLE IX TO #METOO**

*Forever* arrived on bookshelves during a dynamic and energetic moment in the history of women's rights, including an increased ability to access women's health care and a challenge to traditional women's roles. This decade saw legislation like Title IX signed into law in 1972, which prohibited discrimination on the basis of sex, and the landmark United States Supreme Court decision *Roe v. Wade* in 1973, which decriminalized abortion and contributed to the ongoing sexual revolution, giving women more control over their bodies and their sexual selves. *Forever* deals with cultural conversations and anxieties happening during a time when teen pregnancy was on the rise, yet did little to address more contemporary concerns in today's context like sexually transmitted infections (STIs). For example, Kath receives a birth control prescription from Planned Parenthood, but there is very little discussion about using condoms as well. Although Michael has had previous sexual partners, Kath does not question whether that puts them at risk for having unprotected sexual intercourse.

Given this setting, it is no wonder that Blume felt compelled to write a book that centered a female protagonist who had the agency to decide what to do with her body, and to furthermore explore her own desire and pleasure. *Forever* is frequently cited as a book that has stood the test of time, remains popular with readers, fills the

shelves of libraries, and endures on lists of most frequently banned and censored books (ALA, 2013; Scatton, 2015). Focusing on sex and sexuality, the book in many ways could have been written this year, just as it could have been written a decade ago, and we will likely feel the same in another decade. However, in other ways, reading *Forever* in 2018 is like opening a time capsule with a view into the lives of young adults fifty years ago. The teens go to fondue parties and use landlines to call their friends. They listen to vinyl records in their family's basement and stitch mushroom patches on their jeans.

In the current context, the hashtag #MeToo represents an online social media movement against sexual assault, sexual harassment, and sexual misconduct. Tarana Burke first used the #MeToo tag in 2006 on her MySpace page to create awareness and visibility especially among women of color who had experienced sexual abuse (Ohlheiser, 2017). However, #MeToo also became a way for sexual assault victims to convey the magnitude of this problem in our culture. Participants continue to use the hashtag #MeToo to share their own stories of sexual assault in order to empathize and empower each other through social media. #MeToo has had a significant impact on national conversations about sexual assault and consent. The movement has pushed our conversations about the systemic and very ubiquitous nature of sexual misconduct ranging from very microaggressions (unwanted attention or comments), to violent criminal offenses like rape. Conversations in the #MeToo era interrogate the nuances of consent, sexuality, and the power dynamics inherent in all relationships, and not solely between men and women. In this paper we define "consent" within a sexual relationship as a negotiation of sexual activity and pleasure, requiring both (or all) parties to actively and enthusiastically agree to participate. This modern definition of consent stands in contrast not only to rape, but also to subtle coercions used to initiate sex or gain consent, including shame, fear, and peer pressure.

For these reasons -- beyond our own nostalgia -- we use *Forever* as a cultural artifact that offers a window into how progressive sex and sexuality were portrayed four decades ago. Some may argue that this novel does not tackle issues of sexual harassment and rape, and therefore, it does not relate to the #MeToo movement. However, we argue that any book that grapples with questions of sex and sexuality is poised for analysis in this #MeToo moment. This book offers insight into what the precursor to the modern #MeToo movement looked like in the 1970s, and this long history allows us a glimpse into how far we have come, while at the same time reminding us that in some ways, we are still the same.

#### **FOUR DECADES OF CELEBRATION AND CRITIQUE OF *FOREVER***

Many authors, scholars, and teachers applaud Blume's treatment of female agency in the novel *Forever*, foregrounding Katherine's ultimate *choice* in whether or not she should have sexual intercourse and, later, her *choice* to move on from Michael and into another relationship (Cart, 2016). Katherine is a young female character who enjoys sexual intimacy and derives pleasure from the experience. Howe (2018) suggests that contemporary young readers may read literature differently in the #MeToo era as they look for female protagonists with agency as they

make decisions and narrate their fictional world. In some senses, *Forever's* Katherine does this. In others, she does not, as her agency and choice are influenced by those around her.

In her critical examination of *Forever*, Roberta Trites (2000) uses Blume's text as an example of how sex is often used in adolescent and young adult literature to teach readers a lesson about the dangers of sex. These texts reinforce an ideology that suggests sexual activity is a deviant and improper act that will lead to negative consequences. Trites (2000) suggests that *Forever* is a book that on first glance seems radical and liberating for women. For example, the main female character Kath claims agency over her decision to have sex and experiences orgasms when intimate with her partner. However, *Forever* ultimately fails at this goal as it continues to work within "societally sanctioned ideologies" about the patriarchal nature of sexual relationships and the consequences of being sexual too soon. Younger (2003) builds on these critiques by connecting weight and body image portrayals in *Forever* to consequences of being sexually active. Younger draws on the character of Sybil to do this. Sybil -- a first cousin of Katherine's friend Erica -- is described as being overweight and promiscuous, and thus unable to control her bodily desires in an effort "to feel loved." Katherine's more measured approach to sexual behavior, on the other hand, aligns with an ability to maintain control over her body (Katherine is described as tall and thin) and to engage in appropriate and timely sexual activity.

Other scholars and writers including Cart (2016) and Wilson (2017), along with Trites (2000), criticize *Forever* for being a thinly-veiled "how-to: manual about sex" as opposed to a true love story. These authors cite Katherine's visit to the Planned Parenthood clinic, her academic examination of numerous informational pamphlets about sex and birth control, and the somewhat clinical descriptions of sexual information, including premature ejaculation, the use of condoms, a broken hymen, and a discussion of "venereal diseases," now typically referred to as sexually transmitted infections.

*Forever* has been an object of scrutiny and celebration for many scholars and educators alike, as it has been for decades of youth and adult readers. The book, its characters, and its provocative themes are no stranger to criticism and analysis in the form of academic journal articles, or in the form of paper-clipped pages, annotated sections, and dog-eared corners by young readers. We approach *Forever* in the contemporary moment by looking at Blume's canonical text as an integral part of the long history of the #MeToo movement and our shifting understandings of sexual activity and consent.

### **THEORETICALLY FRAMING FOREVER**

To frame our discussions around sex, sexuality, and consent, we draw on Critical Youth Studies (CYS) (Kellner, 2014; Lesko, 2012), and Queer Theory (Butler, 2006; Fausto-Sterling, 2000; Sedgwick, 2008). CYS allows us as readers and as scholars to examine the stereotypes about adolescence and coming-of-age that are inherent in Blume's writing with a teenage main character. Queer Theory provides a lens to think about the sexualities of female protagonist Katherine and her boyfriend Michael as they negotiate relationships with each other.

Used together, these theoretical frameworks work to reexamine how heterosexual norms and assumptions about adolescence influence, and sometimes dictate, the portrayal of sexual behavior in young adult novels. By combining these frameworks, we suggest an inextricable link between heteronormativity and assumptions about adolescent sexuality that deserve complicating--especially in contemporary contexts where heterosexuality and sex based on heteronorms cannot be assumed for youth readers. Even as the text itself reveals characters with growing levels of agency and sexual freedom, as a cultural artifact, *Forever* highlights how youth sexuality in the 1970s was limited and defined by the heteronorms and coming-of-age narratives that still circulate today. Furthermore, we conclude that heteronormative framings of adolescent sexuality have implications in the #MeToo era.

### **CRITICAL YOUTH STUDIES**

CYS is an interdisciplinary area of scholarship drawing from the fields of psychology, cultural studies, and sociology that challenges biological and developmental paradigms for understanding youth in favor of sociocultural approaches that define adolescence as a social construct (Lesko, 2012; Lesko & Talburt, 2012; O'Loughlin & IV, 2014). Scholars have argued that biological theories of youth development, those that rely on normative expectations about linear development, have had material consequences for the way youth experiences, attitudes, and challenges are evaluated (Best, 2007; Jennifer A. Vadeboncoeur, 2005). By evaluating adolescence in this way, youth are subject to prescriptive expectations about a proper "coming of age" that is not always in line with the lived experiences of diverse youth today. For example, Lesko (2012) discusses how in schools, sexually active teenagers are typically considered promiscuous and "ahead of their time." Therefore, in an effort to keep teenagers "socially young" (p. 143), they are denied the kind of sexual health information and frank discussions about sexuality they need to prevent teenage pregnancy and the transmission of STIs.

Several scholars have looked at the ways in which these assumptions about adolescence are embedded in texts designed for and about youth. Trites (2000) considers the role of the narrative structure in reproducing the dichotomy between authority and adolescents in ways that de-legitimize adolescence and regard it as a phase that is only to be grown out of. Later, in their work analyzing Saenz's young adult novel *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*, Thein and Kedley (2015) consider how normative "coming of age" narratives have been connected to "coming out" narratives in problematic ways that do not recognize the complex and varied ways that youth struggle with sexuality and growing up. Thein and Kedley go on to suggest that "YAL that focuses on growth suggests a forward trajectory toward enlightened adulthood and coming-of-age, offering particular paths for how growth might best occur" (p. 7).

Readers can see these kinds of expectations about growth at play in *Forever*. For Katherine, losing her virginity is a rite of passage. Katherine is subject to all of the experiences and expectations of adults and others around her, who see having sex as an act that must happen in certain ways and within certain time frames. Katherine does act with agency, but she is limited in other ways by these social expectations that dictate a linear trajectory in

her sexuality: she must first fall in love, then make a decision to have sex, and then begin to experiment with pleasure during sex. She cannot do this too early in her teen years, but she also must not wait too long.

### QUEER THEORY

Queer Theory, although not one unified field of study, provides us with specific tenets relative to our understanding of the young adult novel *Forever* and the categories of sex and sexuality in our analysis. Broadly, a model based in Queer Theory shifts the focus from non-normative sexual identities to all sexual identities (Butler, 2006). Sex, gender, and sexual identity categories are often thought of as 'stable, coherent, and reasonable', but queer theory suggests these categories are 'messy, slippery, and always in flux' (Ryan & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2013, p. 145). Thus, from a queer theory lens, sex, gender, and sexuality in individuals are seen as flexible rather than permanent, and recognizing their temporal nature 'has the potential to trouble the entire set of [gender and sexual identity] relations' (p. 147).

One particular tenet of queer theory relative to sexuality especially influences our argument: sexual identities change over the course of a lifetime, from generation to generation, and from context to context. This is quite apparent in *Forever*, both in the form of main character of Katherine and in other supporting characters, and in the varied and sometimes controversial readings of this young adult novel through the decades.

In the case of *Forever*, the use of Queer Theory challenges our thinking about Katherine's sexuality beyond one-dimensional and static interpretations of the physical act of sexual intimacy. Furthermore, Queer Theory prompts us to consider the limited definitions of sex and virginity that Katherine, Michael, and the setting are subjected to. For example, Katherine and Michael participate in physical intimacy many times and in various ways before they choose to have sexual intercourse. However, Kath and Michael -- and the larger society around them -- define sex and virginity in very narrow ways that limit the characters' and the readers' understandings of sex, sexuality, and consent. For Kath and Michael virginity refers to penile-vaginal penetrative sex, and this is considered without question "real sex." Any other sexual activity is a less serious activity that happens on the trajectory to losing one's virginity. When considering questions of consent and sexuality that are in the forefront of conversations in the #MeToo era, these definitions matter. If we do not consider other types of sex or physical intimacy (manual stimulation, digital penetration etc.) then what are the implications of a person saying "no" or expressing reluctance in these contexts?

### THE DEFINITION OF VIRGIN: IS SHE OR ISN'T SHE?

Adults, teenagers, and even lawmakers perpetually ask questions such as: When is it appropriate for teenagers to become sexually intimate, and in what ways? How will we support these decisions or discourage them? What counts as "sex," what does "sex" look like, and when (if at all) is consent required for sex? What does "losing one's virginity" mean? In the era of #MeToo and before, women who have experienced sexual harassment or sexual assault are often framed as either a "virgin or a vamp" (Benedict, 2017; Kovach, 1992), the latter indicating that victims are



often lacking morals and propriety and are at fault for provoking sexual attack. How do Katherine's experiences, and definitions of sex and virginity in *Forever* help us understand the long history of #MeToo and the convoluted and frequently unfair labels women negotiate as they enact sexual agency? To illustrate, before Kath and Michael have sex he calls her a "tease." This comment follows a conversation when Kath explains that she is simply not ready for vaginal-penile penetration. This label "tease" ultimately places blame on Kath for enacting her agency when she changes her mind. Although Michael stops pushing physical intimacy at this point, the verbal exchange indicates that Kath's indecision is unfair to Michael (i.e. she is teasing him, or leading him on) as opposed to a normal part of her own decision-making.

It is Blume's engagement with these questions and themes in 1975 that created--and continue to create--so much attention surrounding the young adult text *Forever*. Open and honest conversations about sex, sexuality, and consent are important topics for teens and young adults to have represented in various ways in the literature they encounter. *Forever* has offered that representation for nearly five decades, and still offers us material that is relevant as we consider these questions with our contemporary understandings of sex and sexuality. During the midst of the #MeToo movement, it is important to constantly examine what Katherine's story reveals to us about how we understand sex and virginity as presented in young adult literature, and what young readers may take from that story.

Blume's characters see the act of sex itself in traditionally heteronormative ways. *Heteronorms* are widely accepted beliefs we as a society have about sex, gender, relationships, and sexuality (Rich, 1980). Our traditions and customs may favor certain types of sexual behavior over others, and our laws reflect that. These heteronormative beliefs (sometimes institutionalized through law) are influential in the ways we act towards ourselves and in relation to others. *Compulsory heterosexuality* (Rich, 1980) is one well-known heteronorm; although many people may not have heard of the term itself, it is not a difficult concept to recognize. Compulsory heterosexuality assumes every person will eventually grow up to be heterosexually coupled through officially sanctioned (legal or religious) marriage with someone of the "opposite" sex.

A *heterotrajectory* (Kedley & Spiering, 2017) then, is the assumed path (or trajectory) a character takes in a society that values heterosexuality. We learn to follow the heterotrajectory as children: in school we are taught that "first comes love, then comes marriage, then comes the baby in the baby carriage." Unspoken traditions dictate the expected and accepted order of these stages of our sexual lives. Taking an unconventional path, such as identifying with the LGBTQ community, remaining single, or having multiple relationships at the same time, etc., are at times accepted, but are typically not considered normal or complete. In a text like *Forever*, then, the heterotrajectory is the assumed linear path expected for characters in a society that values heterosexuality. For example, Katherine challenges the normative narrative of waiting to have sex until she is legally or religiously married. In some ways, Kath is an active participant in challenging those social norms of the 1970s, but in other ways, she and Michael negotiate their sexual relationships in a way that reinforces heteronorms. These heteronorms frame and limit the sexual beliefs and experiences of the characters -- especially Katherine and Michael -- and dictate what is seen as

normal for coupling, dating, and relationships. Furthermore, the heterotrajectory shapes the path and progression of the sexual activity of Katherine and Michael, and suggests that there is a hierarchy of intimacies; some sexually intimate moments (such as digital penetration) are not perceived to be as “close” physically or emotionally as others (such as vaginal-penile sexual intercourse).

Katherine and Michael and those around them subscribe to the idea that vaginal-penile sexual intercourse is the most intense, most desired, most “real” form of sex. Any and every other type of physical intimacy – no matter how intimate or sexual, or how desired – is simply not sex. For example, Katherine’s mother is very progressive in her support of the sexual life of her daughter. They openly talk about sex and relationships, and Katherine takes her mother’s advice seriously. However, the advice Katherine’s mother offers still subscribes to a binary that dictates “sex” is penile-vaginal penetrative intercourse. Everything else (including, but not limited to, anal sex, oral sex, digital sex, mutual masturbation, and so on) is not. She tells Katherine that “sex is a commitment...once you’re there you can’t go back to holding hands” (p. 93), indicating that there is a level of intimacy that is achieved with one type of sexual and emotional intimacy (i.e. vaginal-penile intercourse) that is not achieved with the others.

Katherine and Michael also treat the intimate act of sex in socially and culturally prescribed ways that are based on and limited by these heteronorms and the heterotrajectory. For example, Katherine’s virginity in *Forever* is something to be protected throughout a very narrow age window (early teens), while simultaneously something to get rid of during another narrow age window (later teens). There is a presumption that upon “losing” one’s virginity, Katherine and her best friend Erica (notably the female-identified characters) will be physically and emotionally different after having vaginal-penile sexual intercourse. This activity would indicate a “loss of virginity.” However, they would remain the same – emotionally and physically – after other types of sexual and physical intimate moments. Katherine and Michael have other types of intimacy to varying degrees before having vaginal-penile sexual intercourse. For example, prior to having sex, Michael and Kath spend a lot of time “making out” and Michael even shows Katherine how to manually stimulate him. Katherine and Michael’s sexually intimate moments are somewhat limited as they explore their sexuality with each other. According to the heterotrajectory, Katherine and Michael experience these moments, but only in preparation for the highest type of heterosexual intimacy-- penetrative sex.

This hierarchical view on sexual behavior is not unique to the 1970s, of course. In 2018 it is still common to uniquely link one’s virginity to an experience with vaginal-penile penetrative sex. The images on the front of *Forever* throughout the decades indicate just this. A 2015 version of the book cover printed by MacMillan depicts a single red cherry pictured alongside the phrase: “there is a first time for everything.” The cover of the 2015 version of *Forever* indicates that this particular type of sexual activity and limited definition of virginity is a major theme. In this edition, the cover suggests a theme of the book is the milestone of losing one’s virginity as a milestone in this way. Apart from virginity being considered a defining moment on the heterotrajectory, it is in line with normative, age-based expectations of “coming of age.” Katherine as a virgin is more naive in her devotion to Michael and her belief

that they will last forever, but Katherine as a sexual woman understands by the end of the book that relationships do not have to last forever and that “young love” can be fleeting.

Katherine is in another bind relative to her age as a late teen, limited by narrow definitions of virginity, and set upon the heterotrajjectory. Although virginity is something to be protected for younger girls, at some point it becomes a “rite of passage” when girls (especially girls who have been dating boys) are expected to lose their virginity, lest they be seen as undesirable or “a late bloomer.” At one point early in their relationship, Katherine has a conversation with Michael, and recounts it through first-person narration:

*He didn't pressure me. He kissed my cheek then my ear, and whispered, "Are you a virgin?"  
No boy had ever come right out and asked me that--not even Tommy Aronson. I told  
Michael, "Yes I am....does it matter?"  
"No... but it's better if I know."  
"Well, now you know."  
"Don't get defensive, Katherine. It's nothing to be ashamed of."  
It occurred to me in the middle of the night that Michael asked if I was a virgin to find out  
what I expected of him. If I hadn't been one then he probably would have made love to me. What  
scares me is I'm not sure how I feel about that. (p. 28)*

After Michael asks Katherine if she is a virgin (in a sexually narrow definition of the word), Katherine reacts strongly to the question and shuts the conversation down. Michael perceives Katherine's reaction as defensiveness stemming from embarrassment about being a virgin. Michael tells Katherine not to be ashamed of her status as a virgin. Michael also claims it would be “better” if he knew whether or not Katherine was a sexual virgin in the most traditional sense, disregarding other physical and emotional moments Katherine has had with him and with other partners.

What does this indicate in an era of #MeToo, as young adult readers continue to engage with *Forever*, and as they read about Katherine's and Michael's definitions of virginity and sex? How should teachers, librarians, and other adults work with students to comprehend these nuances? Katherine walks a narrow line between “virgin and vamp”—an innocent girl and a casually and sexually promiscuous teen. More accurately, as this excerpt with Michael indicates, Katherine exists somewhere between a pure, innocent virgin and an embarrassed, inexperienced virgin. What type of pressures may Katherine and other young adults face when their virginal status is so tightly tied to these ideas about ourselves and each other? How might a tight timeline on the heterotrajjectory influence decisions Katherine makes, in either having or not having sex? Does she feel she is “too old” to still be a virgin? Michael perceives Katherine to be ashamed of this fact. Perhaps most shockingly, Katherine believes Michael would have “made love” to her at that moment had she *not* been a virgin, yet she is not sure how she feels about that. A reader may ask themselves: does her virginity matter in this situation? Would Michael have considered getting Katherine's

consent in other ways, or is the status of a non-virgin a strong enough sign for him to go ahead? Why would Michael treat her differently as a virgin or as a non-virgin, and how is Katherine's readiness to have sex affected by this conversation?

Women who use birth control are still considered "sluts" (Fazeli Fard, 2012), and one's status as sexually active still influences who we believe in the #MeToo movement and beyond (Ax, 2018). Conversations with youth are paramount in helping students uncover their hidden and sometimes dangerous beliefs - often based in heteronorms and set upon the heterotrajjectory - in order for them to have a stronger ownership of their own sexual behavior and desire.

### **THE QUESTION OF CONSENT: DOES SHE WANT IT?**

*Forever* is also a book in which consent is negotiated, demanded, requested, and given in a sexual relationship between two young adults, each with varying levels of sexual desire and agency. These are central questions not only in the book, but also in 2018 in the midst of the #MeToo movement. Our society has been challenged to reconsider what "consent" in a sexually intimate act actually means and also how consent should look both in general and in the heat of the moment. While some still may believe that the absence of a hard "no" from a partner is actually consent to participate in a sexual activity, others believe that consent must look more like an enthusiastic "yes." The controversies surrounding Kevin Spacey (Riotta, 2018), Aziz Ansari (Way, 2018), and other high-profile #MeToo call-outs have complicated our prevailing definitions of consent and have shifted the meaning for many people. Through this process, it has become increasingly clear that although many people participate in sexual activities willingly, there are social forces behind their participation, or at the very least, reasons for not overtly saying "no" to participating.

In *Forever*, Michael is vocally upfront when he asks Katherine "Can I kiss you?" (p. 18). On page 27, Katherine recalls that Michael "doesn't pressure" her to have sex with him. Katherine and Michael frequently talk openly and honestly about when they will have sexual intercourse, and Katherine is very deliberate as she educates herself and speaks to confidants, friends, parents, and medical professionals about what that will mean for her and her body. Michael also exerts not-so-subtle pressure towards Katherine in other ways that could influence Katherine's decision to participate in this type of sexual relationship with him. One evening, Katherine does not consent to having sex, but Katherine and Michael do participate in other types of sexual intimacy. Katherine worries that Michael is mad with her. Michael reassures Katherine that he is not mad but simultaneously indicates subtle frustration with her unwillingness to be "ready" and tells her that waiting "is really rough" (p. 33). By commenting on his own emotional and physical needs (and frustrations), Michael exerts pressure on Katherine to defer her own feelings and reluctance for his.

Later, Katherine and Michael spend another evening being physically intimate, but again do not have sex. Michael pressures her again, this time not so subtly:

*"I'm not ready Michael..."*

*"Yes, you are...you are...I can feel how ready you are."*

*"No..." I pushed his hand away and sat up. "I'm talking about mentally ready."*

*"Mentally ready," Michael repeated.*

*"Yes."*

*"How does a person get mentally ready?" he asked.*

*"A person has to think...a person has to be sure..."*

*"But your body says you want to..."*

*[...]*

*"If I didn't know better I'd think you were a tease" (p. 58).*

Michael does not accept that Katherine is not ready to have sex as he tries to coerce her, pointing out that her body seems ready and thus, her feelings must be inaccurate. Michael even faults Katherine for giving him an expectation that they would have sex and then not consenting, and Michael calls her a tease. Michael uses subtle pressure that now is part of Michael and Kath's sexual relationship. Can Kath still freely choose when Michael forefronts his own desires? How does a conversation about Michael's desires (and Kath's unwillingness to participate) affect Kath's desire for seeking out her own pleasure?

Finally, near the end of the book as the couple readies for college, Katherine's grandfather suddenly dies, and Michael visits Katherine at a summer camp. Katherine avoids physical intimacy with Michael and tells Michael they need to talk. The reader knows that Katherine would like to end the relationship with Michael. Michael tells her: "You're thinking about your grandfather aren't you? [...] But he'd want us to be together... you don't have to feel guilty" (p. 214). Insensitively, Michael uses the death of Katherine's grandfather as a justification for consent, ignoring the plethora of other signs Katherine gives him, all of which indicate that she is not as interested in being with Michael as she once was.

Michael is not the only character who may complicate readers' understandings of pressure, consent, and sex in the young adult novel *Forever*. As illustrated on page 93, Katherine's mother tells Katherine that once a person has sexual intercourse that person "can't go back to holding hands." She reminds Katherine to consider this in her relationship with Michael. Throughout the book, Katherine's mother is very open and progressive, supports Katherine's decisions relative to her relationship with Michael, and acknowledges the realities of teenage sexuality. However, Katherine's mothers' comment shows that she privileges one type of sexual intimacy over others; with some sex acts there is no "going back."

If Katherine and Michael choose to have sex, what in their relationship would prevent them from "going back" to holding hands? What does this mean for Katherine's ability (or Michael's ability) to consent to future sexual encounters with each other and with others? Does one's ability to say "no" decrease once they have participated in sexual activities? This conversation prompts readers to think about social pressures and heteronorms that contribute

to Katherine's desire to say "yes" or "no" to this type of sexual intimacy with Michael, regardless of her sexual desire or agency. Katherine's mother's comments push us to think about what this means in an era of #MeToo, when our understandings of consent and power are perpetually complicated by news stories and our own experiences. Youth must learn to recognize subtle outside pressure from people in their lives, even beyond partners and parents. Heteronorms and a heterotrajectory that one cannot travel backwards on, or "go back," dictate the decisions Katherine and Michael make in social and sexual settings and limit their ability to negotiate consent.

To read Blume's young adult novel *Forever* in 2018 is to read about consent and choice. Social pressures to say "yes" or say "no" to sexual intimacy existed then and exists now. Many people have actively, unethically, and illegally ignored a lack of consent, or never sought it in the first place. For many, it took the #MeToo movement to uncover and problematize these power dynamics. Heteronorms dictating a proper timeline for sexual experiences of youth (i.e. the heterotrajectory) existed in 1975. They influence Katherine's friend Erica to express that she wants to have sex just to "get it over with" (p. 36). Heteronorms continue to exist today for contemporary readers of Blume's book and influence our understandings of sex and consent as we enter and leave sexual relationships. Finally, when the definition of "sex" is limited to vaginal-penile penetrative sex, what does this mean for consent relative to other sexual activities that Katherine, Michael and other young people engage in? Is consent only required for specific sexual activities? If one consents to the activity at the top of the sexual hierarchy, can they limit consent to activities lower on the hierarchy for the future, such as holding hands? What purpose does it serve Michael to call Katherine a "tease" and to tell Katherine that not having sex is very "rough" for him? What type of pressure can we presume Katherine might feel in future encounters as she decides to say "yes" or "no"? How might Katherine's own intrinsic sexual desire become secondary if she is worried about being a tease or concerned about making it hard for Michael? These textual exemplars from *Forever* provide a foundation for critical discussions about consent between sexual partners that go beyond "enthusiastic yes" and "lack of no" declarations. As we listen to, empathize with, and empower those who share their #MeToo experiences, *Forever* is a cultural artifact from the 1970s that prompts timeless discussions with youth.

### **THE ISSUE OF A YOUNG ADULT'S AGE: (DE)HUMANIZING YOUTH SEX AND SEXUALITY**

When reading young adult literature--literature that is created for and about young adults, but often written by an adult--students and teachers must interrogate the way in which authors represent adolescence and adolescents. Readers and scholars must understand that young adult literature is frequently an adult interpretation of youth experiences. Thus, adolescence can be described in ways that respect and honor youth as an important time in one's life. Or, adolescence can be represented in ways that dehumanize and reduce youth to stereotypes of awkward teens stumbling around on their way to adulthood.

*Forever* is a text that humanizes its youth characters, yet simultaneously reduces them to stereotypes and limits. As Katherine contemplates becoming sexually active with Michael, confidantes, friends, parents, and medical personnel freely offer their advice and thoughts. Katherine's grandmother is a politically active independent woman

who is involved with the National Organization for Women (NOW) and Planned Parenthood. She sends Katherine an unsolicited package in the mail filled with pamphlets about birth control and information about “venereal disease” (p. 128). Another time, Katherine’s mother saves Katherine an article she clipped out of *The New York Times* entitled “What about the right way to say ‘no’?: Sexual liberation” (p. 120). Katherine’s grandmother even suggests that sex would be an inevitable outcome of Katherine’s growing relationship with Michael; Katherine explains to her grandmother that she and Michael had not had sex, and her grandmother replies “yet” (p. 44).

Neither Katherine’s grandmother or her mother avoids these sometimes difficult conversations about Katherine’s relationships and sexual partnerships. They want Katherine to have vital information about sex and protecting her body, and they do not try to convince her that she should remain a virgin or that she should not have sex with Michael. In other young adult problem novels of *Forever’s* generation (Cart, 2016), there is often a teen character who makes wrong decisions and then suffers the consequences. The author self-frames themselves as the more knowledgeable adult who is poised to teach youth a lesson. In Blume’s book, Katherine’s family becomes this didactic force. Although her mother and grandmother are positioned as progressive characters, their wisdom about sexual relationships is tied to their status as adults.

Blume’s text asks readers to consider what the openness of her mother and grandmother -- relative to sharing opinions about Katherine’s sexual life -- suggests about how they see Katherine, and in turn, about how Judy Blume chooses to represent youth and sexual experiences in the 1970s. How do Blume’s representations humanize or dehumanize youth, and how do these representations draw on stereotypes or empower youth agency?

On the other hand, some adults in Katherine’s life lecture Katherine -- from an adult perspective -- as they recognize her sexual independence. Katherine’s father explicitly states that he does not believe Katherine is mature enough to be sexually active with Michael. On page 90 he explains the issue he has with her being so serious about Michael:

*“I don’t want to see you tied down.”*

*“Who’s tied down?”*

*My father sighed. “Will you stop throwing questions back at me...what I’m trying to say is, you’re too young to make lifetime decisions.”*

*“I’m not making lifetime decisions.”*

*“You have to consider the future, Kath.”*

Katherine’s father connects a sexual relationship with Michael to being “tied down” and connects having sex with making “lifetime decisions.” Given the historical context for the novel, Katherine’s dad is surely thinking about teenage pregnancy and possibly STIs or his daughter’s emotional health, but he is also relying on the heterotrajectory to pace her relationship with Michael. Katherine’s father suggests to Katherine that she is too young to make life decisions, and that Katherine’s decisions at this point could limit the path of her life and her future. He

assumes that once Katherine becomes sexually active she may be on the way to engaging in many heteronorms like marriage and a family. Katherine, on the other hand, acknowledges that her choices do not have to carry that kind of weight. She can be a sexual teen without altering the course of her life. Her father ignores that fact and thus he denies her reality and her humanity.

Young adult romance novels, a common venue for sexual content, are not always a humanizing genre. When writing for youth, descriptions of sexual activity can be euphemistic and avoid technical language that could be perceived as instructive. However, in denying youth open and honest conversations about sex, some young adult literature keeps young people “socially young” (Lesko, 2011) in ways that do not recognize their varying degrees of sexuality. *Forever* is a novel that depicts sex that is typically consensual, and casual sex in a way that honors Katherine’s agency as a young woman. Katherine chooses to have sex and then she works to figure out the attendant intricacies of that decision: orgasm, (premature) ejaculation, positions, and pain/pleasure. For Katherine and Michael, sex, while engaged in “responsibly” is not an act with dire consequences, and they are not considered promiscuous by the characters around them.

Blume writes characters who are emotionally ready to have sex and in a field of young adult literature that is known for its didactic impulses (Trites, 2000). This is not without merit, especially given its time. In this current context and in light of debates associated with the #MeToo movement, it is worth considering, as Lesko (2012) did: What are the consequences of withholding sexual health information, or not having open discussions about sex with young people? How might these conversations about youth sexuality empower young people in their own relationships, now and in the future? Open and honest conversations with youth that consider the entire and whole selves of young adults (including sexual selves) are imperative as we move forward with more just and clear definitions of consent and remove our heteronormative limits on our sexuality and sexual behavior.

## **CONCLUSION**

Judy Blume’s *Forever*, an object of scrutiny and discussion for decades, is an important text and cultural artifact for engaging students in discussions about sex and sexuality, both historically and in the contemporary moment. Students and youth can consider how historical context and national anxieties about sex shape not only how young adult literature is written for youth, but also their own reading of young adult romances. This kind of reading has the power to shape how students and youth engage with books that tackle the topic of sex in bold and provocative ways. This can also influence our prevailing conversations of sex and consent, working to make sexual relationships reciprocal.

#MeToo—more than a conversation about sexual assault—defines how the contemporary moment influences people to think about sex, sexuality, and relationships. Although Judy Blume’s *Forever* has been an object of scrutiny and discussion for decades, it is still an important text and cultural artifact that has the power to engage students in discussions about sex and sexuality in the contemporary moment. By virtue of its cultural status, *Forever* is impactful as it has been handed down and passed around for almost forty-five years. Used in classrooms or



libraries, read as “locker lit” or more openly, Blume’s text can move conversations beyond one-dimensional and one-sided discussions of consent, challenge limiting heteronorms and the heterotrajectory, and push youth and adults towards a more dynamic discussion that reflects and respects the lived experiences of youth today.

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