

**“EVERY SATURDAY AT MIDNIGHT,” A NOVEL:
EXEGESIS OF “EVERY SATURDAY AT MIDNIGHT,” A NOVEL**

by

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A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ARTS

in

THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE AND POSTDOCTORAL STUDIES

(Children’s Literature)

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

(Vancouver)

July 2015

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Abstract

This thesis analyzes Judy Blume's 1975 young adult novel, *Forever*, as a moral tale informed by Second Wave feminism as represented by Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch* (1971). The analysis finds that Blume's portrayal of Katherine and Michael's romance in *Forever* establishes a model of sexuality for teenaged girls to emulate, and that the moral that model espouses is a simple one: Sex without marriage is fine, but sex without love is not. The thesis concludes with a comparison of the author's own young adult novel, *Every Saturday at Midnight*, with *Forever*, specifically with regard to the challenges (or lack thereof) that each protagonist overcomes in navigating her first sexual relationship.

Preface

This thesis is the original, unpublished, independent work of the author, Rachel Mary Balko. It is the academic portion *only* of a hybrid creative/academic thesis. The creative portion consists of the manuscript of a young adult novel, *Every Saturday at Midnight*, also by Rachel Mary Balko.

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List of Abbreviations

MACL: Master of Arts in Children's Literature

Acknowledgements

I gratefully acknowledge the contributions of the following people in the realization of this thesis:

Rhea Tregobov, the primary supervisor for my creative manuscript. My novel would not be the work it is without her outstanding instruction in the art of creative writing and her unwavering support as my thesis supervisor.

Judith Saltman, the primary supervisor for the academic portion of my thesis. Words cannot do justice to the debt that all past, present, and future students of the MACL degree owe to her for creating and nurturing this program. None of us could have done what we have done without her unique vision, tireless work, and personal dedication to our success.

Alison Acheson, the secondary supervisor for both the creative and the academic portions of my thesis. Both her encouragement and her critical insights were invaluable in making my work its best.

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Motivation and Origins of Interest

This paper is the academic/analytical portion of the Creative Hybrid thesis option for the MACL degree, in which “[t]he student develops a creative work (novel, story collection, poetry collection, illustrated work, etc.) as well as an academic work that analyzes the genre or subject area of the creative work with a critical framework (including theoretical and primary texts), and/or the creative work itself and the process behind the development of the creative work” (“Comparison of MACL Thesis Processes”).

My creative work is a 50,000-word young adult novel, *Every Saturday at Midnight*, in which the protagonist, Laurel, a 17-year-old compulsive overeater with a genius-level I.Q., moves to a new town just before her senior year of high school. During this last year of “official” childhood, Laurel has to navigate a series of new relationships—with friends, with her mother, and with potential and actual love interests. One of the major elements in my novel, both in terms of plot and in the central character’s emotional journey, is the development and disintegration of Laurel’s first sexual relationship, and what losing her virginity means to her, both physically and emotionally.

Since one of the primary themes of my creative work is how a young woman navigates and interprets her first sexual experiences, this critical analysis will explore what many scholars and practitioners in the field of youth literature consider the definitive young adult novel of first love and first sex: Judy Blume’s 1975 *Forever*.

It had been many years since I had read *Forever* myself, and when I read it again after completing my own novel, I was surprised by how easily *Forever*'s protagonist, Katherine, navigates her first sexual relationship, as compared with how difficult that journey is for my main character, Laurel. It struck me that *Forever* was an idealized version of how a girl lost her virginity, the way a “cool mom” might hope it would be for her own daughter, and as my research for this paper revealed, that is exactly what it is.

1.2 Rationale and Criteria for Primary Text Selection

Forever is both one of the most celebrated and one of the most censored young adult novels of the past forty years, and for the same reason: its positive and frank (occasionally even explicit) portrayal of teenaged sexuality—particularly, *female* teenaged sexuality. Cart calls the book “revolutionary” in its “celebration of the sexual act itself” (144), yet in 2005, a full thirty years after its initial publication, *Forever* was still the second-most challenged book in U.S. libraries for its “offensive language” and “sexual content” (“Frequently Challenged Books of the 21st Century”).

I chose *Forever* as the primary text for my analysis because it is one of the first popular works of English-language young adult fiction to represent female teenaged sexuality in a positive way. As Sullivan puts it, *Forever*'s depiction of a high-school girl losing her virginity “was the first to break the taboo by showing teens enjoying sex and going unpunished for their actions” (461).

More than twenty years after its publication, the American Library Association's Young Adult Library Services Association still found *Forever's* contribution to young adult literature relevant. In 1996, the organization honored Blume with the Margaret A. Edwards Award (which "honors an author whose books have appealed to young adults over a period of years . . . [and] recognizes an author's work in helping adolescents become aware of themselves and in addressing questions about their role and importance in relationships, society, and in the world" ["1996 Margaret A. Edwards Award Winner"]), specifically for *Forever*:

. . . [Blume] broke new ground in her frank portrayal of Michael and Katherine, high school seniors who are in love for the first time. Their love and sexuality are described in an open, realistic manner and with great compassion. The emotions experienced by Michael and Katherine are as true today as they were when the book was written in 1975. The appeal of the book is fresh and continuous because everyday someone, somewhere finds a first love. ("1996 Margaret A. Edwards Award Winner")

Forever was written as a sort of gift to the author's then-fourteen-year-old daughter: ". . . [S]he said to me [Blume], 'Couldn't there ever be a book about two really nice kids in high school who love each other and they do it and nothing bad happens?'" (Sutton 24). Prior to *Forever*, novels for teenaged girls presented the consequences of premarital sex as dire: "She [Blume's daughter] had read several novels about teenagers in love. If they had sex, the girl was always punished—an unplanned pregnancy, a hasty trip to a relative in another state, a grisly abortion, sometimes even death. Lies. Secrets" (Whitworth). *Forever* presents an idyllic alternative: a kind and loving boyfriend, supportive parents, easily orgasmic sex, a protagonist who ends the relationship on

her own terms and with no real heartbreak, and perhaps most importantly, a heroine who experiences no negative repercussions for her sexual exploration—no pregnancy, no disease, no shame, no guilt, and no regret.

Blume has stated clearly that her intended audience for *Forever* is “junior high age” (Eaglen 241), and that she wanted the book to address the questions she had about sex at that time in her life: “. . . I wish someone had told me, ‘This is what sex might be like’” (Eaglen 242). Blume’s intention to educate is conspicuous throughout the narrative; Cart’s criticism that “it too often seems that Blume has written not a novel but a scarcely dramatized sex manual” (144) is harsh but accurate. Yet the informational nature of *Forever* could be the very reason why the book remains popular forty years after its publication. If a teenaged girl does not have a trusted adult in her life to honestly answer questions about sex, then Katherine’s fictional journey through the first love/first sex experience may well provide a useful template to follow, or at least to consider, in navigating the physical, mental, and emotional complications that losing one’s virginity can entail.

In an enthusiastic, almost fawning, 2014 interview with Blume in *The Times* (of London), the headline trumpeted her as “the woman who taught a generation about sex” (Rumbelow 40), but that bold proclamation may actually underestimate Blume’s influence on the sexual knowledge of thousands of pre-teens and teenagers. If the novel’s ideal reader is in her mid-teens (as Blume has put forth), and assuming a twenty-year family generation gap, then the junior-high-school students who read *Forever* when it was first published in 1975 might well be recommending the book to (or even confiscating it from) their own teenaged granddaughters in 2015. Intentionally

or not, *Forever* has been informing teen girls' impressions of what sex is like—and *should* be like—for three generations.

1.3 Research Question

If Pattee is correct in her assertion that “[y]oung adult novels that include explicit or sensual scenes [such as *Forever*] act as an alternate sexuality information source for readers” (34)—and I believe that she is, especially given Blume’s admittedly educational objective in writing *Forever*—then the logical question to ask is, What is *Forever* teaching its teenaged readers (particularly girls) about sex and sexual relationships? This is the question that I seek to answer in this paper by analyzing *Forever* as a moral tale informed by Second Wave feminism as represented by Germaine Greer’s classic, *The Female Eunuch* (1971).

(Although *The Female Eunuch* was originally published in 1970 in the United Kingdom, all references in this paper are to the 1971 first U.S. edition of the book, as that is the version that presumably would have been available to Blume at the time, and the edition most likely to have influenced her writing.)

1.4 Summary of Judy Blume’s *Forever*

When seventeen-year-old Katherine and her best friend, Erica, attend a New Year’s Eve party at the home of Sybil, Erica’s cousin, Katherine immediately finds herself attracted to Michael, a senior from a high school in a nearby town, even though he attends the party with another girl. Michael returns to Sybil’s house the next day to see Katherine, and the pair go for a drive and share their first kiss together. They begin dating regularly, and each time they see each other,

Michael tries to go further with Katherine sexually, which sometimes she allows, and sometimes she does not. Michael is respectful of Katherine's limits, usually asking her permission before he initiates something new and always stopping when she asks him to, although he's not shy about telling Katherine that her refusals frustrate him: "If I didn't know better I'd think you were a tease" (Blume 48). Katherine enjoys her escalating sexual activity with Michael: "'Oh, yes . . . yes . . .' I said, as Michael made me come. And he came too" (Blume 97). But she's conflicted about whether she should indulge in "the whole thing" (Blume 48), i.e., penetrative intercourse. Katherine wonders to herself, "What would it be like to be in bed with Michael? Sometimes I want to so much—but other times I'm afraid" (Blume 49).

They go away together on a weekend ski trip and, free of parental supervision and sharing a bed, Michael tells Katherine he loves her. She wants to tell him that she loves him, too, but is smart enough to question whether that is really true: "I was thinking, *I love you, Michael*. But can you really love someone you've seen just nineteen times in your life?" (Blume 61, italics given). The next night, after Katherine has given Michael an orgasm manually for the first time, he again tells her he loves her, and this time, Katherine says it back. Immediately, Michael wants to raise the stakes in their relationship: "'Forever?' he asked. 'Forever,' I said" (Blume 75).

Although Katherine's parents express some concern that Katherine is becoming too serious about Michael, she experiences tremendous support from the adults in her life as she makes her sexual journey. Her grandmother, an activist for the National Organization for Women, provides Katherine with informational pamphlets from Planned Parenthood and tells her not to be embarrassed about sex. When Katherine tells her that she and Michael aren't sleeping together,

her grandmother's only response is an equanimous, "Yet" (Blume 35). Katherine's father allows her to go away with Michael for the weekend, with only Michael's older sister as a chaperone: "I have to let you go sooner or later. . . . I guess you're not a little girl anymore" (Blume 56). Her mother admits that she had sex with Katherine's father before they were married, although "I was a virgin until we were engaged" (Blume 79), and she doesn't try to keep Katherine from being sexually active—"I'm not going to tell you to go ahead but I'm not going to forbid it either" (Blume 80)—asking only that she "handle it with a sense of responsibility" (Blume 80).

When Katherine does decide to have sex with Michael, she takes complete responsibility for both birth control and disease prevention. She asks him to use a condom the first time they have sex, and Michael resists ("If you're thinking about VD, I promise I'm fine" [Blume 99]), even though he's previously admitted to Katherine that he contracted gonorrhea (or "the clap" as he calls it [Blume 91]) from the only other girl he's ever slept with. Michael does agree to use a condom, at Katherine's insistence, but interestingly, later blames the fact that she doesn't experience an orgasm on the prophylactic rather than his own ineptness as a lover: "It wasn't any good for you, was it? . . . Maybe it was the rubber. . . . I should have bought the more expensive kind" (Blume 109).

After having sex for the first time, Katherine goes to Planned Parenthood, on her own, to get a prescription for the birth control pill. Shortly thereafter, when Michael takes Katherine out to celebrate her eighteenth birthday, they each share a surprise that signifies their relationship has moved to another level. Michael gives Katherine a silver necklace with her name engraved on one side and "Forever . . . Michael" on the other, and Katherine tells Michael she's now on the

pill. From that point on, they no longer use condoms, as they are worried only about pregnancy, not disease. (As Blume points out in a 1996 interview, “In all the new reprints of the book there is a letter from me about sexual responsibility, which has a different meaning in 1996 than it did in 1975” [Sutton 26].)

When they are separated for the summer (Katherine’s parents insist that she take a job as a tennis counselor at a camp in New Hampshire, while Michael’s send him to work at his uncle’s lumberyard in North Carolina), they write each other letters, each one closing with “Love forever” or simply, “Forever” (Blume 170, 171, 173, 179). Yet when Katherine finds herself attracted to Theo, one of the other camp counselors, she begins to question her love for Michael: “How can you love one person and be attracted to another?” (Blume 181). She kisses Theo and afterward writes a confessional letter to Michael—“I made promises to you that I’m not sure I can keep” (Blume 189)—but tears it up instead of sending it.

When Katherine stops answering Michael’s letters, he surprises her by visiting her at the summer camp. They argue when Katherine is unresponsive to his attempts to initiate sex, and Michael guesses that she’s been seeing someone else. When Michael demands, “I want it the way it was before” (Blume 196), Katherine tells him she can’t make any promises and returns her necklace to him. In the aftermath of their breakup, Katherine is without remorse about her experience with first love and first sex:

I wanted to tell him that I will never be sorry for loving him. That in a way I still do—that maybe I always will. I’ll never regret one single thing we did together because what

we had was very special. . . . I think it's just that I'm not ready for forever. (Blume 198-99)

Katherine may be wiser for her experience with Michael, but she is not sadder, seemingly ready for love again. The last line of the book is Katherine's mother telling her, "Theo called" (Blume 199).

Chapter 2: An Analysis of *Forever* as a Moral Tale of Teenaged Female

Sexuality

The first line of Greer's enormously popular feminist work, *The Female Eunuch*, states its orientation unequivocally: "This book is a part of the second feminist wave" (1). She finds the concerns of the First Wave feminists, "the old suffragettes" (Greer 1), passé: "The new emphasis is different. Then genteel middle-class ladies clamored for reform, now ungentle middle-class women are calling for revolution" (Greer 1-2).

A significant part of this revolution as Greer describes it, and certainly the part that accounts for much of the public attention to Greer's treatise, is sexual. In *Vogue* magazine's review of *The Female Eunuch*, Tynan remarks that Greer "doesn't understand why women don't want power or to have some fun with sex" (131), a juxtaposition that appears to equate one with the other. But despite calling for women to embrace and indulge their sexual desires—the "impotence" of women is due, in part, to "submit[ting] to sex without desire" (Greer 55)—Greer fears that the so-called sexual revolution has succeeded only in pressuring "more girls [to] permit more (joyless) liberties than they might have done before" (35).

With its "bawdy, witty, provocative [tone], dotted with intimate personal testimony and delectable historical tidbits" (Wallace), *The Female Eunuch*, eventually published in twelve languages (Raymond) became "feminism's smash-hit bestseller" of the 1970s, with the paperback version becoming the "biggest and most important consistent seller" of the next two

decades for Paladin, the publishing imprint that produced it (Wallace). No doubt Blume, like thousands of other women, was influenced by Greer (“It [*The Female Eunuch*] prompted an untold number of women to rethink their self-perceptions, their relations with men, the entire basis of their existence” [Wallace]) in the writing of *Forever*, and that impact shows. Blume’s admission that “[t]he sexual revolution that was starting in the 1960s really didn’t happen until the 1970s—at least not in suburban New Jersey where I grew up” (Whitworth) indicates that the popular feminist discourse of the 1970s did have a significant influence on her.

Whether Blume’s incorporation of the Second Wave feminist principles articulated by Greer was intentional or not, their presence is unmistakable. *The Female Eunuch* vividly describes both the “old,” male-dominated template for sexual relationships as well as the new, equality-based dynamic that Greer advocates, and *Forever*’s portrayal of Katherine and Michael’s romance reflects both styles of male–female relationships, effectively creating a hybrid model of sexuality for teenaged girls to emulate.

In order to answer my research question (i.e., What is *Forever* teaching its teenaged readers [particularly girls] about sex and sexual relationships?), I have considered *Forever* as a moral tale (i.e., didactic fiction with the primary purpose of “instruct[ing] young readers how to behave” through “the narration of realistic stories about ordinary life” [Butts]), and I have found that the moral Blume is teaching her readers is as simple as this: Sex without marriage is fine; sex without love is not.

2.1 Katherine: The Girl Who Gets It Right

Through Katherine's inner monologue, Blume outlines the "old-fashioned" rules of love, sex, and marriage: "In the old days girls were divided into two groups—those who did and those who didn't. My mother told me that. Nice girls didn't, naturally. They were the ones boys wanted to marry" (35). This ideal of keeping one's virginity as a way of catching a husband is derided by Greer as mere manipulation, describing the heroines of both romance novels and outdated sex manuals as demonstrating only "an illusory superiority . . . loving not for her own gratification, but in expression of esteem, trust and true love, until she could civilize him [her suitor] into marriage . . ." (36-37).

Yet the solution to this outmoded "good girl/bad girl" dichotomy is not, as one might assume, the sort of rampant, occasionally indiscriminate, sexual activity suggested by the "free love" movement; both Blume and Greer maintain that sex is best, both morally and in terms of physical enjoyment, when it takes place within a context of mutual respect and caring. Greer laments the kind of meaningless—and therefore, joyless—sex that the newly "permissive society" (35) encourages: "Sex for many has become a sorry business, a mechanical release involving neither discovery nor triumph, stressing human isolation more dishearteningly than ever before" (35).

2.2 Erica and Sybil: The Girls Who Get It Wrong

In *Forever*, Katherine's best friend, Erica, reflects the "mechanical" approach to sex: She views her virginity as something to get rid of and losing it as a goal to be achieved. Katherine, on the other hand, considers herself to be beyond the "good girl/bad girl" distinctions that her mother's

generation suffered under (“I’m glad those days are over . . .” [Blume 35]), but finds casual sex morally objectionable (“ . . . I still get angry when older people assume that everyone in my generation screws around” [Blume 35]), and believes that sex—and losing one’s virginity, in particular—should be accompanied by love (“I can’t imagine what the first time would be like with someone you didn’t love” [Blume 102]), although she seems to understand that “[l]ove can exist outside of marriage” (Greer 318). Like Greer, Katherine believes that sex should be “a form of communication between potent, gentle, tender people” (Greer 8).

Carpenter’s work analyzing gender and virginity loss describes three primary orientations for the psychological interpretation of losing one’s virginity: virginity as a gift (i.e., those who believe that “virginity loss should take place in a committed love relationship with a partner who would recognize the significance of, and appropriately reciprocate, the gift of virginity” [354]), virginity as a stigma (i.e., those with “the goal of shedding the stigma of virginity without incurring a new one. . . . [Those who choose] to lose their virginity at the first available opportunity . . .” [357]), and virginity loss as a step in a process (i.e., those who maintain “an understanding of virginity loss as a desirable and essentially positive transition, which would give them knowledge about sexuality or themselves” [358]).

Erica’s outlook is a combination of the “virginity as a stigma” and “virginity loss as a step in a process” orientations, while Katherine clearly views her virginity as a gift. Blume none-too-subtly illustrates the differences in their interpretations of virginity in this exchange between the two girls:

“I’ve been thinking,” Erica said, “that it might not be a bad idea to get laid before college.”

“Just like that?”

“Well . . . I’d have to be attracted to him, naturally.”

“What about love?”

“You don’t need love to have sex.”

“But it means more that way.”

“Oh, I don’t know. They say the first time’s never any good anyway.”

“Which is why you should at least love him,” I said.

“Maybe . . . but I’d really like to get it over with.” (27-28)

Later, Erica contrasts their attitudes even more succinctly—“. . . [W]e look at sex differently . . . I see it as a physical thing and you see it as a way of expressing love” (Blume 28-29)—and Blume makes it clear that Katherine’s point of view is the correct one. Not only is she rewarded for her emotional approach to sex (Katherine loves and is loved in return, her sex with Michael is physically and emotionally satisfying, and she never regrets the relationship or its consequences), but Erica is punished for her casual attitude about sex, even though she never actually has it.

Parallel to the love story of Katherine and Michael, *Forever* presents Erica’s ongoing, and ultimately fruitless, attempts to lose her virginity with Michael’s friend, Artie. After going on several dates with him, Erica complains to Katherine that Artie has made no attempt to kiss her, and that she intends to become the aggressor sexually: “If he doesn’t try anything . . . I’m going to do something about it. I can’t sit around waiting forever” (Blume 42). Erica eventually reveals

that she believes Artie's lack of sexual interest in her is because he is a homosexual: ". . . I came right out and asked him, *Artie, are you queer?* . . . He said, *I don't know, Erica, but I'm trying to find out*" (Blume 53, italics given). Later, Erica explains to Katherine, "He's not gay . . . we've determined that. He's just impotent" (Blume 82), although interestingly, she is silent about how exactly they've "determined" Artie's difficulty. Erica then makes it her mission to cure him of his supposed impotence: "I want to make it with Artie. . . . Because I think I can help him . . ." (Blume 82). After several months of trying to initiate sex with Artie, Erica breaks up with him, and shortly thereafter, Artie attempts suicide by hanging himself. Although it is clear from the narrative that Artie has been suffering from depression all along and that he was devastated by his father's refusal to allow him to attend drama school, Erica is sure that the suicide attempt is her fault: "I shouldn't have ended it that way. . . . I should have waited . . ." (Blume 155).

Blume describes the books that came before *Forever*, those that demonized sex before marriage, as depicting a world in which "Girls . . . had no sexual feelings and boys had no feelings other than sexual" (Whitworth), and this view falls in line with Greer's explanation of traditional, male-defined views of female sexuality: ". . . [T]he female is considered as a sexual object for the use of other sexual beings, men. Her sexuality is both denied and misrepresented by being identified as passivity" (5). Yet in depicting the relationship between Erica and Artie, Blume has reinforced the "boys just want sex" stereotype that she claims to be working against; when Artie rejects Erica's advances, it is presumed that there is something wrong with him. The only possible reasons given by any of the characters in *Forever* for Artie's reluctance to have sex with Erica are homosexuality and impotence. No one even considers that Artie just might not be attracted to Erica specifically; his rejection of her advances is assumed to mean that, either

psychologically or physically, he is incapable of having sex with girls. Artie's narrative arc could have been used to illustrate that the fallacy that boys *must always* want to have sex is potentially just as damaging as the fallacy that girls *must never* want to have sex, but instead Blume has used it to demonstrate that sex without love, such as Erica wanted, results in dire consequences.

Erica's emotional angst is light punishment for wanting sex without love, however; Blume saves the worst for Sybil, Erica's relatively promiscuous cousin. From its first line, *Forever* sets up Sybil as a foil for the heroine, Katherine:

Sybil Davison has a genius I.Q. and has been laid by at least six different guys. She told me herself, the last time she was visiting her cousin, Erica, who is my good friend. Erica says this is because of Sybil's fat problem and her need to feel loved—the getting laid part, that is. The genius I.Q. is just luck or genes or something. (Blume 1)

In three sentences, Blume tells readers everything they will ever know about what makes Sybil tick: She's fat, which makes her feel insecure, which makes her sleep around. Case closed.

While Katherine's self-control is emphasized time and again (she tells Michael, "I have to control my body with my mind" [Blume 48] and "You should never take chances" [Blume 91]), Sybil is portrayed as lacking agency in every possible way. Her "fat problem" (Blume 1) presumably means she eats too much and cannot control her appetite. Her intelligence is not the result of personal discipline or good study habits, but merely "luck or genes or something" (Blume 1). Even her promiscuity is something that happens to her, not a choice she has made; she does not have sex, she "has been laid" (Blume 1).

Blume's simplistic characterization of Sybil as out of control in every way feeds into the long-standing cultural bias against fat people. In discussing the general propensity for women to have more body fat than men, Greer makes her famous comparison of powerless women and the forcibly emasculated: "Historically, we may see that all repressed, indolent people have been fat, that eunuchs tend to fatten like bullocks . . ." (23). As Younger points out, in much of young adult fiction, "[t]he heavier and voluptuous characters represent passivity, irresponsibility, and sexual availability" (7). *Forever* is one of the books that set up this pattern in youth literature, and Sybil's lack of control is overtly punished: She becomes pregnant. She decides to have the baby and put it up for adoption because she "wanted to have the experience of giving birth" (Blume 162).

When Erica and Katherine discuss Sybil's pregnancy, their reaction is contempt rather than sympathy. The girls decry the fact Sybil doesn't know the identity of the father and that she's decided not to "correct" her predicament. Always-in-control Katherine declares, "I'd have an abortion . . . wouldn't you?" (Blume 140), to which Erica replies, "In a minute" (Blume 140). Sybil's humiliation is complete when Erica reveals that she was able to hide the pregnancy because "[s]he's so fat . . . nothing showed" (Blume 139), and that the only reason Sybil told her parents she was pregnant is because they were going to send her to "this fat people's clinic" (Blume 140).

Blume has derisively described the books that came before *Forever* as "pregnant books" (Sutton 26), seemingly unaware that she has reproduced the same narrative flaws in the subplot about Sybil:

“. . . [T]he girls had sex because there was something terribly wrong in their lives. They did this terrible thing with a guy not because it felt good, not because they were turned on, not because they loved him, but because something bad was happening . . . And when they inevitably got pregnant, the pregnancy was linked with punishment. Always.”

(Sutton 26)

And so it is with Sybil; fat, out-of-control Sybil has sex without love and gets punished with pregnancy, just like in all those moralistic books for girls that came before *Forever*. Even Erica, while remaining chaste, feels guilty about what her desire for sex without love “made” Artie do. Yet Katherine, who insists on being both in control and in love, has great sex with no guilt, no regret, and no negative consequences. The lesson of Blume’s moral tale is clear: Sex without marriage is fine; sex without love is not.

Chapter 3: Conclusions and Discussion

Forever's place in young adult literature is secure; the WorldCat (an online database of library collections worldwide) lists dozens of editions in multiple languages, with the most recent edition being printed in 2015, a full forty years after the book's initial publication ("Search Results for *Forever*"). Blume recognizes the impact her novel has had in informing young women's expectations about sex, and appears to enjoy her influence: "Everybody has a *Forever* story,' she [Blume] says with a smile. 'Everybody'" (Whitworth). There is much to be said for being one of the first books to show girls that sex without marriage does not have to end in tragedy—as long as you're in love, monogamous, thin, and attractive. Even this limited type of openness and positivity about young women's sexuality was ground-breaking for its time, and that is commendable, but 1975 really is quite a long time ago, and contemporary girls deserve more realistic portrayals of first love and first sex than *Forever*.

Every Saturday at Midnight, the young adult novel that I wrote as the creative component of my thesis, is, in some ways, the anti-*Forever*. Unlike Blume's Katherine, my protagonist, Laurel, experiences many difficulties in her first sexual relationship, and to my mind, this is much more realistic than the unquestioned support that Katherine receives on her sexual journey. Laurel's parents are in no way encouraging of her developing love life. When her mother suggests that she live at home while attending college, Laurel asks whether she would be allowed to have overnight guests, and her mother's response is firm: "Of course not, Laurel, don't be ridiculous" (Balko 20). While there are parents who believe in the "sex is your decision to make" ethos of Katherine's parents, there are also a great many whose approach to their daughter's sexuality

reflects the “not while you’re living in my house” philosophy of Laurel’s mother, and that sense of realism makes *Every Saturday at Midnight* more relatable to the experiences of many teenaged girls. Katherine’s parents are so permissive and understanding that they set up an unrealistic expectation of sexual acceptance that many girls cannot hope to experience with their own parents. Laurel’s mother, quite simply, does not want her seventeen-year-old daughter to be sexually active at all, and for readers whose parents’ views on sexuality are relatively restrictive, seeing the example of Laurel rebelling against the control her mother would like to have over her developing sexuality may strike a chord of recognition, a sense of “Oh good, it’s not just me.”

Laurel’s physical experiences of sex are also much more realistic than Katherine’s in that, while she does enjoy the foreplay that she engages in with her first lover, Liam, Laurel finds her first experience of intercourse unpleasant and painful. Like many girls, she wonders if something is wrong with her, and is relieved when she is reassured by her gynecologist, “Don’t worry, it gets better” (Balko 126). The orgasmic intercourse that Katherine experiences with Michael is not impossible, of course, but for two very inexperienced young people, it is extremely unlikely. Lloyd’s 2005 analysis of thirty-two different studies of sexuality found that “approximately 25% of women always have orgasm with intercourse . . . [and] . . . roughly one third of women rarely or never have orgasm with intercourse, while approximately 23% ‘sometimes’ do” (36). How characteristically fortunate it is that Katherine is one of the 25 percent who do achieve orgasm through intercourse—and what an unrealistic expectation that sets up for female readers, 75 percent of whom will not.

Laurel's sexual encounters with Liam, on the other hand, give readers a less idealized view of what sex can be like—sometimes exciting, sometimes embarrassing, sometimes exhilarating, sometimes awful. After Liam gives her an orgasm for the first time, Laurel's euphoria soon turns to guilt. She cries, knowing that her parents would be ashamed of her if they knew. Not all young women feel a mixture of joy and shame when they first become sexually active, but certainly there are many who do, and it is important for those conflicted girls to see their experiences reflected in young adult literature. It is also made clear in the narrative that Laurel achieves orgasm when Liam performs oral sex on her; this is important because for many women, oral sex is the most direct means of climaxing with a partner. (One 2012 study, for example, found that receiving oral sex during a sexual encounter increased the probability of college-aged women experiencing orgasm “by approximately half in hookups [i.e., casual sexual encounters] with intercourse, nearly doubling the odds in all hookups [including those without intercourse], and more than doubling the odds in [sexual encounters within] relationships” [Armstrong, England, and Fogarty 448].) Without being graphic or prurient, my novel reflects that reality; for many women, and especially for young women with relatively inexperienced partners, intercourse is often not as physically fulfilling as one may have been led to believe.

Another important theme of *Every Saturday at Midnight* is Laurel's relationship to her own body, both in terms of being overweight and in terms of sharing her body sexually with another person. Since childhood, her peers have mocked her for being fat; even her mother, who truly loves her and whom she truly loves, makes unkind comments about Laurel's weight and has attempted many times to restrict Laurel's eating, although that results only in her binge-eating in secret. This insecurity about her body is part of what makes her susceptible to Liam's advances;

Laurel considers herself so ugly that when he expresses his attraction to her, she believes—mistakenly—that he must be in love with her. She tells a friend, “He told me I was beautiful. Nobody could think I was beautiful unless they loved me” (Balko 153). This is a problem that Katherine, who is underweight at “five-feet-six and 109 pounds” (Blume 12), could never experience. Laurel would like to control her body with her mind, the way that Katherine does, and often tries to, but such a task is much more difficult when one has a complicated home life, rocky relationships with friends, and binge-eating disorder. Yet Laurel’s dissatisfaction with her body does not prevent others from finding her attractive (she kisses both Liam and a friend named Mitch, as well as having a “kinda-maybe-almost-kiss” [Balko 32] with a classmate, Kevin), nor does it keep her from giving and receiving pleasure in her first sexual relationship, although it is not universally orgasmic like Katherine’s. Neither is Laurel punished with pregnancy, disease, or other moralistic horrors for being “out of control” like insecure, fat, promiscuous Sybil. Yes, Laurel has her heart broken because she loves Liam and realizes he does not love her back, but that kind of pain can happen to anyone, regardless of how much they weigh. In the real world and in my novel, meaningful relationships and sexual pleasure are not reserved exclusively for the borderline-anorexic, always-in-control girls like Katherine.

Like Blume, I wanted my novel to show teenaged girls “[t]his is what sex might be like” (Eaglen 242), but *Every Saturday at Midnight* is not an idealized version of first love and first sex, no “cool mom’s” wish for her daughter. In real life, both love and sex are often disappointing, sometimes even painful, and it is by processing that pain that we grow as people. Laurel does not have it as easy as Katherine in any way: She’s overweight; her parents are divorced; she isn’t sure how she’ll pay for college; and through her relationship with Liam, she finds out the hard

way that love and sex are two separate things. Yet despite—even because of—all these difficulties, Laurel really has grown up by the end of the novel.

My novel is for the girls who are much more like Laurel than like Katherine—the ones whose parents aren't universally supportive, the ones who don't have multiple suitors to choose from, the ones who aren't always in control of their bodies or their minds, the ones who are afraid that everyone else is doing everything right while they do everything wrong. To me, these are the real girls, because real girls have real problems. *Every Saturday at Midnight*, above all, is a book for—and about—the real girls.

The “virginity loss” narrative is an intriguing one because both “scholars and lay people alike . . . [understand it] as a central event in the process through which girls and boys become adult women and men” (Carpenter 345). Even though I believe that my novel depicts a more realistic story of virginity loss than *Forever*'s moral tale provides, both books are limited in that they focus on the experiences of protagonists who are white females in their late teens who come from middle-class families (although Laurel is lower-middle-class, while Katherine is upper-middle-class). A fascinating area for further research would be to analyze narratives of virginity loss that represent a greater variety of cultural perspectives to determine the dominant themes of such narratives. Are virginity loss narratives about protagonists who are persons of color significantly different from those about white protagonists, and in what ways? How do virginity loss narratives from a boy's perspective differ from the girl's point of view? What challenges might a person with physical disabilities encounter in navigating a first sexual relationship that those of us who are able-bodied may not have even considered? These are just a few of the areas

that future researchers may investigate in analyzing virginity loss narratives from diverse perspectives.

Losing one's virginity is one of the most personal experiences anyone can have, and yet, it is also one of the most universal. I am certain that authors of young adult literature will continue to write books that explore the sexual dimensions of the coming-of-age story, and that scholars of young adult literature will conduct ever more research regarding how such narratives both influence and reflect the values of society from multiple points of view.

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