THE CONVERSATION

Academic rigour, journalistic flair

Author and producer Judy Blume and actors Abby Ryder Fortson and Rachel McAdams at the premiere of Are You There God It’s Me Margaret in LA. Chris Pizello/AP

Even the word ‘period’ is now politicised. That makes Judy Blume’s classic ode to puberty especially relevant

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A few years ago, my friends and I reminisced about our favourite novels as children. One of them was Judy Blume’s 1970 classic, Are You There God? It’s Me, Margaret, released this week (in the US, though not yet in Australia) as a film.

Blume’s novel centres on a year in the life of 11-year-old Margaret Simon, after she moves from New York City to the suburbs of New Jersey. Margaret was raised without religion: her mother was disowned by her Christian parents when she married Margaret’s Jewish father.

But Margaret secretly talks to God as she grapples with the challenges of puberty, friendship and finding her religious identity. Margaret and her friends, who dub themselves the Pre-Teen Sensations, are obsessed with growing breasts and getting their periods.

Judy Blume’s 1970 classic is now a film for the first time.

Despite Blume’s novels’ enduring legacies, there have been few screen adaptations of her work – and Blume has frequently been disappointed by them.

But she was convinced by the passion of director Kelly Fremon Craig (The Edge of Seventeen) and producer James L. Brooks (Broadcast News, The Simpsons).

Read more: ***Sex and other reasons why we ban books for young people***

Speaking out against censorship

Blume has spoken out against current movements to ban and censor books, observing the climate is worse now than in the 1980s, “because it’s become political.”

Are You There God? It’s Me, Margaret and Forever (1975) – also slated for a screen adaptation, by Netflix – are Blume’s most controversial books, for their frank depictions of puberty and teen sexuality.

Are You There God? It’s Me, Margaret was listed in the American Library Association’s 100 most challenged books – books people were seeking to ban – from the 1990s (when the association first started tracking) until the 2010s. It was even banned in Blume’s children’s school library.

Forever, a no-holds-barred, sweet and funny account of first love and first sex, published in 1975, ranks number seven on the most challenged books list. Most recently, it was banned by a school district in Florida.

Are You There God? It’s Me, Margaret was also controversial for its treatment of religion. Many of us might remember it for the Pre-Teen Sensations’ preoccupation with periods, breasts and boys. But Margaret’s search for a religious identity – and her understanding of how this shapes her family relationships – is at the heart of the novel. Ultimately, the book’s message seems to be that organised religion matters less than Margaret’s personal relationship to God.

According to a PEN America report released late last year, there are currently 1,648 unique book titles affected by bans in the United States.

Of these, 49% of banned books are intended for a young adult audience, 22% of books are banned for sexual content – including depictions of puberty – and 4% are banned for featuring stories with religious minorities, including Judaism. But reading diverse and sometimes difficult stories is important for developing empathy and understanding.

Read more: ***Book bans reflect outdated beliefs about how children read***

‘Don’t Say Period’ legislation

In an era where so-called “Don’t Say Period” legislation is being debated in Florida, Are You There God? It’s me, Margaret’s focus on menstruation and puberty has renewed political and cultural significance.

The legislation seeks to ban instruction about menstruation in US schools before grade six – Margaret’s own age in the novel.

“Even if they don’t let them read books, their bodies are still going to change and their feelings about their bodies are going to change,” says Blume about the ban. “And you can’t control that. They have to be able to read, to question.”

Blume’s books are already on banned lists in Florida. So it’s perhaps overly optimistic to hope Florida school libraries will overlook copies of Margaret in the stacks to ensure this generation of readers can find an empathetic voice in this context.

Many young readers found a kindred spirit in Margaret. She helped normalise the confusing feelings of puberty and the complicated process of figuring out who you are for generations of readers, and still does.

Margaret helped normalise the confusing feelings of puberty and the complicated process of figuring out who you are. IMDB

Read more: ***Friday essay: I looked at 100 ads for menstrual products spanning 100 years — shame and secrecy prevailed***

Menstrual belts and new-generation updates

My friends and I howled with laughter about the confusion our adolescent selves had felt about the menstrual belt described in the novel – a form of menstrual hygiene product already on its way out in the 1970s, let alone when we were reading the novel in the 1980s and early 1990s.

As Margaret awaits her period’s arrival, she practises wearing a menstrual belt and pad. So, she is well-prepared when her period finally does arrive on the last day of sixth grade. After reading the novel as a child, I remember rummaging through my mother’s bathroom supplies in search of such a contraption, finding only adhesive pads.

When I reread the novel as an adult, The Belt was nowhere to be found – Margaret uses adhesive pads instead. I wondered: did we misremember it?

The answer is no: the novel itself was updated in 1998. Other period (pardon the pun) details are unchanged. Margaret’s mother gives her a cream rinse and sets her hair in rollers before a party. The girls split into pairs to call each other nightly on the landline telephone (no group chat here!). And it only costs five dollars to have a neighbourhood kid mow the lawn.

Unlike the recent controversial changes made to Roald Dahl’s children’s books, the changes to Are You There God? It’s Me, Margaret were made by Blume herself.

For Blume, it was more important to ensure that a new generation of readers were receiving useful health information than to capture in amber a moment of menstrual history. Similarly, revised editions for her 1975 novel, Forever, include a preface where Blume points out the outdated sexual health advice provided to the protagonist, and refers readers to services such as Planned Parenthood.

Older generations of nostalgic readers might miss The Belt (it can still be found in some e-book versions), but Blume’s attitude to revising her own work to benefit each generation of new readers highlights her sense of responsibility to them.

It also emphasises the important role literature plays in educating young readers. Certainly, they might miss out on learning a historical fact about menstrual hygiene in the 1970s, but the revised versions might make them better equipped to deal with menstruation today.

Enduring spirit

Where the 1970s might be hard to interpret on page, it provides a vibrant visual setting on screen that will engage newer generations in the visual and cultural details of the novel’s original context. (And help them learn the definitive way of performing the Pre-Teen Sensations’ iconic chant, “we must increase our bust”.)

Importantly, the spirit of the story and the characters remains the same. At its heart, Are You There God? It’s me, Margaret is a coming-of-age story about identity, relationships with others, and relationships with your own body.

The specifics of menstrual belts, tampons, or period underwear matter less than seeing the glorious, confusing awkwardness of puberty and girlhood taking up space on the big screen.