

MARKING TIME

PRODUCER JULIE ANSELL SHARES HER THOUGHTS ON BRINGING A CONTROVERSIAL JUDY BLUME CLASSIC TO LIFE AS A THEATRICAL FEATURE, AND WHY IT TOOK MORE THAN 50 YEARS FOR THE AUTHOR TO SIGN OFF ON IT.

Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret

Julie Ansell, p.g.a.

Given the trove of books written by acclaimed author Judy Blume—more than 25 children's and young-adult novels, with more than 80 million copies sold—theatrical adaptations have been surprisingly rare. In fact, only *Tiger Eyes* reached the big screen. That was in 2012, 31 years after its publication. Come April, though, another Blume classic, *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret*, will be arriving at a theater near you, courtesy of Gracie

Films and Lionsgate.

Producer Julie Ansell—who began her career at Gracie Films, eventually rising to president of motion pictures in 1998—has worked closely with company founder James L. Brooks on several movies, including *Jerry Maguire* (1996) and *As Good as It Gets* (1997). Her producer credits include *How Do You Know* (2010), *Spanglish* (2004) and *Riding in Cars With Boys* (2001).

Are You There God? marks the second collaboration between Ansell and writer-director Kelly Fremon Craig after *The Edge of Seventeen* (2016), another coming-of-age drama, but centered around a trou-

bled high schooler. Margaret's protagonist is a sixth-grader. The Blume book deals with issues that were considered risqué for middle-school readers at the time of publication (1970), like menstruation and religious skepticism. The frankness of her themes has made Blume a frequent target of censors, but no less lionized by the literary establishment. *Are You There God?* was selected by *The New York Times* as the Outstanding Book of The Year.

Ansell, who earned the Producers Mark for her efforts, addresses what makes Blume's story timeless, and Gracie Film's approach toward maintaining the book's integrity.



Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret producer Julie Ansell, left, with the book's author, Judy Blume.

GIVEN THE DIVISIVE POLITICAL CLIMATE, WERE THERE ANY CONCERNS ABOUT THE SUBJECT MATTER GIVEN THE TENDER AGE OF THE MAIN CHARACTERS?

The top priority for us was honoring Judy Blume's classic book, a book that women have grown up with for generations. The idea that somehow a story depicting female puberty could still be controversial 30 years after the book was published was reason in itself to make the movie. Very few films or television shows have fully explored this time in every woman's life: growing breasts, getting her period, and the emotions and fear that surround all of it. Judy's book has allowed women to feel like they aren't alone.

WHY DID IT TAKE MORE THAN 50 YEARS FOR MS. BLUME TO SIGN OVER THE RIGHTS?

Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret is the crown jewel among many diamonds in Judy's oeuvre. It was her first baby (among the author's young-adult novels) and is very close to her heart. Seeing a bad or even mediocre movie made from it was, I imagine, a scary prospect. But as the 50th anniversary of the publication of *Margaret* approached, she was willing to at least discuss a film adaptation. The combination of Jim Brooks/Gracie Films producing and Kelly Fremont Craig writing and directing gave her a comfort level and confidence that now is the time.

IS YOUR MOVIE GEARED TOWARD YOUNGER AUDIENCES?

Our core audience is really women of all ages, and men who are open to a story about their wives/sisters/daughters. Puberty hits us all, and whether you are a teenager in the throes of it or a middle-aged woman remembering the day she got her first period, the story hits close to home. Our film is a comedy-dra-

ma that looks at three generations of women who are all at a crossroads.

IS THE FILM VERSION ALSO SET IN 1970, WHEN THE BOOK WAS PUBLISHED, OR IS THE TIME FRAME CONTEMPORARY?

We kept the film set in 1970 as that seemed the best way to stay true to the book. While teenagers today obviously have much more access to information about puberty online and through the perpetual presence of cell phones, the emotions, difficulties and joys of puberty remain the same.

CAN YOU TELL US ABOUT AN OBSTACLE YOU ENCOUNTERED AND HOW YOU OVERCAME IT?

We were faced with a difficult issue about a week into production when the schedule of one of our actresses became incompatible with the production schedule. We were obviously locked into several locations and were walking a thin line juggling all the other actors' availabilities. After looking at the possible budgetary hit and the flexibility of our locations, we decided the best course of action was to take a two-week hiatus in the middle of our schedule. It honestly turned out to be a blessing in disguise. The two weeks gave the whole crew some rest, while at the same time allowing us to review what we had shot so far, which informed the rest of production. It allowed a real focus and continuity we would not have achieved otherwise.

THE STORY IS SET MOSTLY IN THE NEW JERSEY SUBURBS; WHY SHOOT IN NORTH CAROLINA?

The tax incentives were a big draw, as was the weather. Our story spans all seasons, and thus by shooting in the spring in Charlotte we were able to easily cover spring and summer. A little snow and visual effects pulled off fall and winter. There were some wonderful neighbor-



hoods that felt like 1970s suburban New Jersey, and we were able to gather a strong crew from Charlotte-Wilmington, as well as drawing from Atlanta.

GRACIE FILMS IS KNOWN FOR WORKSHOPPING ITS SCRIPTS TO A FINE POLISH IN PREPRODUCTION. WAS THAT THE CASE WITH KELLY FREMONT CRAIG'S ADAPTATION?

Absolutely! The script is always vitally important to us, but especially on this project as we were adapting a beloved and important book. I believe Kelly worked on this script with Jim's guidance for over a year. It was a real challenge to adapt the story and spirit of the book but at the same time, create a movie with pace, drama, emotion and, of course, humor. ■

Certification via the Producers Mark indicates that a producer performed a major portion of the producing functions on a specific project. Criteria, its definition, the process for earning the mark and other particulars can be viewed at producersguild.org.