In the Unlikely Event by Judy Blume
Discussion Questions

1. What is Elizabeth, New Jersey, like before the plane crashes occur? How does the community band together after the first crash?

2. Throughout In the Unlikely Event, newspaper clippings are interspersed in the text. How do the articles help to provide context for events? How do they help the reader understand the changes in Elizabeth?

3. Class and status play a role throughout In the Unlikely Event. How does Miri see herself in the socioeconomic structure of Elizabeth? When does she feel most uncomfortable with her family’s position? How does her idea of relative wealth change once she meets Mason McKittrick?

4. What kind of relationship do Miri and her mother, Rusty, have at the beginning of the novel? Are there special pressures on Miri because she is an only child or because she is being raised by a single mother? How do Irene and Henry mitigate the mother-daughter disagreements between Miri and Rusty?

5. This is arguably a novel about the plane crashes as much as it is one about Henry Ammerman’s development as a journalist. How does Henry’s career evolve over the course of the novel? Is he ever conflicted by his role in reporting the tragedy? How has reportage changed since the 1950s?

6. How does Miri’s idea of friendship change throughout the novel? How does Miri’s visit with Natalie in the hospital set the tone for their relationship going forward?

7. Miri wishes she had a father like Dr. Osner. What does she desire in a relationship with a father? How does her reunion with her biological father, Mike Monsky, change her? Does she ever find someone to fulfill the role of father in her life?

8. How are working women portrayed in the novel? What challenges do they face? Are there any particular incidents in which working women — particularly Rusty, Daisy, and Christina — face discrimination or judgment for their roles in the workplace?

9. The crashes create a sense of palpable fear and anxiety for the residents of Elizabeth. How do they affect Miri and her friends and classmates on a psychological level? What conspiracy theories emerge after the crashes? For Miri and her peers, how do these rumors act as a means of coping?

10. Several budding romances play out over the course of In the Unlikely Event. Which relationships were most surprising?

11. What is the dynamic of the Demetrious family, particularly the relationship between sisters Athena and Christina? How does the family exemplify the conflict between duty and tradition on the one hand and independence and following one’s heart on the other? Which other characters face this dilemma?

12. Is Rusty fair in her decision not to tell Miri about her father? Are she and her mother, Irene, fair to hold Mike Monsky in such disdain when he didn’t know about Rusty’s pregnancy or Miri’s existence for 15 years? Is Miri better off for having been raised without his presence in her life? Would Mike and Rusty have been happy if they had married due to her unplanned pregnancy?

13. Natalie is convinced that Ruby Granik, the young dancer who died in the first plane crash, is speaking to her and later that Ruby’s spirit lives within her. She decides to become a dancer and her
quest to stay slim for her future career leads to anorexia and hospitalization. Was Natalie mentally ill or is there another explanation for her behavior?

14. Arthur (Dr. O) and Corinne Osner appear to have an ideal family: their son Steve is an athletic high school senior soon to head to college, eldest daughter Natalie is popular and a talented dancer, and younger daughter Fern is generally beloved by all. They are well-off financially, stylish, and leaders in their social circle. Who or what is to blame for the dissolution of the marriage and family?

15. Mason McKittrick has experienced great hardship: his mother left when he was a child and was later found dead and his father is alcoholic and abusive. He acts heroically to save many of those on board one of the crashed planes, but he deceives Miri by hiding his sexual liaison with Polina, the young Polish woman who works at the orphanage where he lives. In his relationship with Polina, who is the “responsible” one? Why doesn’t he break off that relationship once he meets and falls in love with Miri? Is he a likeable character even after his sexual relationship with Polina is disclosed?

16. The book is told from multiple points of view. What does this add to the narrative? What is the impact of the sections concerning those who will die in the crashes (Ruby Granik, Estelle Sapphire, Kathy Stein, and Tim Barnes)?

17. The novel closes with a reunion 35 years after the three plane crashes in Elizabeth. Were the trajectories of the various characters’ lives surprising? Who changed the most?

About the author
Judy Blume was born Judith Sussman in 1938 in Elizabeth, New Jersey, to Esther and Ralph Sussman; she has an older brother, David. She graduated from Battin High School in 1956, briefly attended Boston University, and earned a bachelor’s degree in education from New York University in 1961. She began writing when her children (daughter Randy and son Lawrence) were in preschool and published her first book, The One in the Middle Is the Green Kangaroo, in 1969. Her books for children and young adults include Freckle Juice (1971), Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing (1972), Otherwise Known as Sheila the Great (1972), and Superfudge (1980). Her novels for adults include Wifey (1978), Smart Women (1983), Summer Sisters (1998), and In the Unlikely Event (2015). The 2012 film version of her 1981 novel Tiger Eyes was directed by her son, Lawrence Blume.

Blume’s novels for young adults have been controversial as they tackle racism (Iggie’s House, 1970), menstruation (Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret, 1970), divorce (It's Not the End of the World, 1972; Just As Long As We're Together, 1987), bullying (Blubber, 1974), masturbation (Deenie, 1973; Then Again, Maybe I Won’t, 1971) and teen sex (Forever, 1975). Her books have been translated into 32 languages and she has won more than 90 literary awards, including the American Library Association’s Margaret A. Edwards Award for young adult literature (1996) and the National Book Foundation’s Distinguished Contribution to American Letters Medal (2004). In April 2000 the Library of Congress named her to its Living Legends in the Writers and Artists category. Blume is the founder and trustee of the charitable education foundation The Kids Fund. She serves on the board of the Author’s Guild, Society of Children’s Book Writers and Illustrators, Key West Literary Seminar, and National Coalition Against Censorship.

She married John M. Blume, a lawyer, in 1959; the couple had two children and divorced in 1976. That year she married physicist Thomas A. Kitchens; they divorced in 1978. She has been married to George Cooper, a former law professor turned non-fiction writer, since 1987; they reside in Key West, Florida.

In 1951 and 1952, there were three airplane crashes in Blume’s hometown of Elizabeth, New Jersey, killing 118 people. Blume’s father, a dentist, helped to identify the victims.