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Unauthorized  
Biography  
of a  
Real Doll*

# BARBIE

WILLIAM MORROW AND COMPANY, INC.  
*New York*

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## WHO IS BARBIE, ANYWAY?

The theme of the convention was "Wedding Dreams," and appropriately it was held in Niagara Falls, the honeymoon capital, a setting of fierce natural beauty pimpled with fast-food joints and tawdry motels. The delegates were not newlyweds who had come to cuddle aboard the *Maid of the Mist*, poignantly hopeful that their union, unlike half of all American marriages, would last. They were not children, who had come to goggle at the cataract over which dozens of cartoon characters had plunged in barrels and miraculously survived. Nor were they shoppers attracted by Niagara's other big draw—the Factory Outlet Mall—where such brand names as Danskin and Benetton, Reebok and Burberrys, Mikasa and Revere Ware could be purchased for as much as 70 percent off retail.

They were, however, consumers, many of whom had been taught a style of consumption by the very object they were convening to celebrate. They had fled the turquoise sky and the outdoor pagentry for the dim, cramped ballroom of the Radisson Hotel. There were hundreds of them: southern ladies in creaseless pant suits dragging befuddled Rotary Club-member husbands; women in T-shirts from Saskatoon and Pittsburgh; stylish young men from

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BARBIE COLLECTORS' CONVENTION, 1992

SYLVIA PLACHY

Manhattan and West Hollywood. There were housewives and professional women; single people, married people, severely corpulent people, and bony, gangling people. A thirtysomething female from Tyler, Texas, volunteered that she had the same measurements as Twiggy, except that she was one inch wider in the hips. There were people from Austria and Guadeloupe and Scotland. Considering the purpose of the gathering, there were surprisingly few blond people.

These were delegates to the 1992 Barbie-doll collectors' convention, a celebration of the ultimate American girl-thing, an entity too perfect to be made of flesh but rather forged out of mole-free, blemish-resistant, non-biodegradable plastic. Narrow of waist, slender of hip, and generous of bosom, she was the ideal of postwar feminine beauty when Mattel, Inc., introduced her in 1959—one year before the founding of Overeaters Anonymous, two years before Weight Watchers, and many years before Carol Doda pioneered a new use for silicone. (Unless I am discussing the doll as a sculpture, I will use "she" to refer to Barbie; Barbie is made up of two distinct components: the doll-as-physical-object and the doll-as-invented-personality.) At other collector events, I have witnessed ambivalence toward the doll—T-shirts, for instance, emblazoned with: "I wanna be like Barbie. The bitch has everything." But this crowd took its polyvinyl heroine seriously.

Of course, people tend to take things seriously when money is involved, and Barbie-collecting, particularly for dealers, has become a big business. The earliest version of the doll, a so-called Number One, distinguished by a tiny hole in each foot, has fetched as much as \$4,000. The "Side-part American Girl," which features a variation on a pageboy haircut, has brought in \$3,000. And because children tend to have a destructive effect on tiny accessories, the compact from Barbie's "Roman Holiday" ensemble, an object no bigger than a baby's thumbnail, has gone for \$800. While Barbie-collecting has not replaced baseball as the national pastime, it has,

in the fourteen years since the first Barbie convention in Queens, New York, moved from the margins to the mainstream. Over twenty thousand readers buy *Barbie Bazaar*, a glossy bimonthly magazine with full-color, seductively styled photos of old Barbie paraphernalia. And twenty thousand is not an insignificant number of disciples. Christianity, after all, started out with only eleven.

In the shadowy salesroom, amid vinyl cases and cardboard dreamhouses, thousands of Barbies and Barbie's friends were strewn atop one another—naked—suggesting some disturbing hybrid of Woodstock and a Calvin Klein Obsession ad. Others stood bravely—clothed—held up by wire stands. Some were in their original cartons; "NRFB" is collector code for "never removed from box." Still others were limbless, headless, or missing a hand. "Good for parts," a dealer explained. Buyers, wary of deceitful dealers, ran weathered fingers over each small, hard torso, probing for scratches, tooth marks, or, worst of all, for an undeclared spruce-up. Even a skillful application of fresh paint can devalue a doll, as does hair that has been rerooted.

Emotions ran high as deals were cut. A stocky woman in jeans haggled furiously over Barbie's 1963 roadster; I later saw her in the lobby, cradling the car as if it were her firstborn child. Others schmoozed with reliable, well-known dealers—Los Angeles-based Joe Blitman, author of *Vive La Francie*, an homage to Francie, Barbie's small-breasted cousin who was born in 1966 and lasted until 1975; and Sarah Sink Eames, from Boones Mill, Virginia, author of *Barbie Fashion*, a photographic record of the doll's wardrobe. I learned the value of established dealers when I bought "Queen of the Prom," the 1961 Barbie board game, from a shifty-eyed woman who was not a convention regular. "The set's kind of beat-up," she told me, "but all the pieces are authentic." Right, lady. Barbie's allowance, I discovered when I played the game, was five dollars. The smallest denomination in the set she sold me was \$100. (The bills were from another game.)

Selling was not the only action at the convention. There was a fashion

show in which collectors arranged their not-especially-Barbie-esque bodies into life-size versions of their favorite Barbie outfits. There was a competition of dioramas illustrating the theme "Wedding Dreams"; one, which did not strike me as lighthearted, featured a male doll (not Ken) recoiling in fear and horror from Barbie and, implicitly, Woman, on his wedding night. (His face had been whitened and his eyes widened into circles.) Employees of Mattel were treated like rock stars. Early on the second night of the convention, veteran costume designer Carol Spencer, who has been dressing Barbie since 1963, settled down in the hotel lobby to autograph boxes of "Benefit Ball Barbie," one of her creations in Mattel's *Classique Collection*, a series promoting its in-house designers. At eleven, she was still signing.

Intense feelings about Barbie do not run exclusively toward love. For every mother who embraces Barbie as a traditional toy and eagerly introduces her daughter to the doll, there is another mother who tries to banish Barbie from the house. For every fluffily blond cheerleader who leaps breast-forward into an exaggerated gender role, there is a recovering bulimic who refuses to wear dresses and blames Barbie for her ordeal. For every collector to whom the amassing of Barbie objects is a language more exquisite than words, there is a fiction writer or poet or visual artist for whom Barbie is muse and metaphor—and whose message concerns class inequities or the dark evanescence of childhood sexuality.

Barbie may be the most potent icon of American popular culture in the late twentieth century. She was a subject of the late pop artist Andy Warhol, and when I read Arthur C. Danto's review of Warhol's 1989 retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art, I thought of her. Danto wrote that pop art's goal was elevating the commonplace; but what, he wondered, would happen when the commonplace ceased to be commonplace? How would future generations interpret Warhol's paintings—generations for which Brillo boxes, Campbell soup labels, and famous faces from the 1960s and '70s would not be instantly identifiable?

Danto's meditations got me thinking about the impermanence of living icons. What, for instance, is Valentino to us today? A shadow jerking across a black-and-white screen, campy at best, no more an image of smoldering sex appeal than, say, Lassie. What is Dietrich? To the millions who read her daughter's vindictive, best-selling biography, she is an amphetamine-ridden drunk with disgusting gynecological problems, so leery of hospitals that she let a wound in her thigh fester until her leg was threatened with amputation. What is Marilyn? A caricature, a corpse, the subject of tedious documentaries linking her to RFK and JFK. And what is Elvis? To anyone over forty, he's probably still the sexy crooner from Tupelo; but younger people recall him as a bloated junkie encrusted with more rhinestones than Liberace.

Barbie has an advantage over all of them. She can never bloat. She has no children to betray her. Nor can she rot, wrinkle, overdose, or go out of style. Mattel has hundreds of people—designers, marketers, market researchers—whose full-time job it is continually to reinvent her. In 1993, fresh versions of the doll did a billion dollars' worth of business. Based on its unit sales, Mattel calculates that every second, somewhere in the world, two Barbies are sold.

Given the emergence of the doll as a symbol in literature and art—not to mention as a merchandising phenomenon—it's time to take a closer look at how Barbie developed and what her ascendancy might signify, even though it's impossible to calculate the doll's influence in any sort of clinical study. By the time children play with Barbie, they have too many other factors in their environment to be able to link a specific behavior trait with a particular toy. But because Barbie has both shaped and responded to the marketplace, it's possible to study her as a reflection of American popular cultural values and notions about femininity. Her houses and friends and clothes provide a window onto the often contradictory demands that the culture has placed upon women.

Barbie was knocked off from the "*Bild Lilli*" doll, a lascivious plaything



for adult men that was based on a postwar comic character in the *Bild Zeitung*, a downscale German newspaper similar to America's *National Enquirer*. The doll, sold principally in tobacco shops, was marketed as a sort of three-dimensional pinup. In her cartoon incarnation, Lilli was not merely a doxie, she was a *German* doxie—an ice-blond, pixie-nosed specimen of an Aryan ideal—who may have known hardship during the war, but as long as there were men with checkbooks, was not going to suffer again.

Significantly, the Barbie doll was invented by a woman, Mattel cofounder Ruth Handler, who later established and ran "Nearly Me," a firm that designed and marketed mastectomy prostheses. (As she herself has put it, "My life has been spent going from breasts to breasts.") After Ruth and her husband Elliot, with whom she founded Mattel, left the company in 1975, women have continued to be the key decision makers on the Barbie line; the company's current COO, a fortyish ex-cosmetics marketer given to wearing Chanel suits, has been so involved with the doll that the *Los Angeles Times* dubbed her "Barbie's Doting Sister." In many ways, this makes Barbie a toy designed by women for women to teach women what—for better or worse—is expected of them by society.

Through the efforts of an overzealous publicist, Mattel engineer Jack Ryan, a former husband of Zsa Zsa Gabor, received credit for Barbie in his obituary. Actually, he merely held patents on the waist and knee joints in a later version of the doll; he had little to do with the original. If anyone should share recognition for inventing Barbie it is Charlotte Johnson, Barbie's first dress designer, whom Handler plucked from a teaching job and installed in Tokyo for a year to supervise the production of the doll's original twenty-two outfits.

Handler tries to downplay Barbie's resemblance to Lilli, but I think she should flaunt it. Physically the two are virtually identical; in terms of ethos, they couldn't be more dissimilar. In creating Barbie, Handler credits herself with having fleshed out a two-dimensional paper doll. This does not, how-

ever, do justice to her genius. She took Lilli, whom Ryan described as a "hooker or an actress between performances," and recast her as the wholesome all-American girl. Handler knew her market; if any one character trait distinguishes the American middle class, both today and in 1959, it is an \*obsession with respectability. This is not to say the middle class is indifferent to sex, but that it defines itself in contrast to the classes below it by its display of public propriety. Pornography targeted to the middle class, for example, must have a veneer of artistic or literary pretense—hence *Playboy*, the picture book men can also buy "for the articles."

Barbie and Lilli symbolize the link between the Old World and the New. America is a nation colonized by riffraff; the *Mayflower* was filled with petty criminals and the down-and-out. When Moll Flanders, to cite an emblematic floozy, took off for our shores, she was running from the law. Consequently, what could be more American than being an unimpeachable citizen with a sordid, embarrassing forebear in Europe?

TO FIRST-GENERATION BARBIE OWNERS, OF WHICH I WAS one, Barbie was a revelation. She didn't teach us to nurture, like our clinging, dependent Betsy Wetsys and Chatty Cathys. She taught us independence. Barbie was her own woman. She could invent herself with a costume change: sing a solo in the spotlight one minute, pilot a starship the next. She was Grace Slick and Sally Ride, Marie Osmond and Marie Curie. She was all that we could be and—if you calculate what at human scale would translate to a thirty-nine-inch bust—more than we could be. And certainly more than we were. . . . at six and seven and eight when she appeared and sank her jungle-red talons into our inner lives.

Or into my inner life, anyway. After I begged my mother for a Barbie, she reluctantly gave me a Midge—Barbie's ugly sidekick, who was named for an insect and had blemishes painted on her face. When I complained, she

compounded the error by simultaneously giving me a Barbie and a Ken. I still remember Midge's anguish—her sense of isolation—at having to tag along after a couple. In my subsequent doll play, Ken rejected Barbie and forged a tight platonic bond with Midge. He did not, however, reject Barbie's clothes—and the more girlish the better.

To study Barbie, one sometimes has to hold seemingly contradictory ideas in one's head at the same time—which, as F. Scott Fitzgerald has said, is “the test of a first-rate intelligence.” The doll functions like a Rorschach test; people project wildly dissimilar and often opposing fantasies on it. Barbie may be a universally recognized image, but what she represents in a child's inner life can be as personal as a fingerprint. It was once fashionable to tar Barbie as a materialistic dumbbell, and for some older feminists it still is; columnists Anna Quindlen and Ellen Goodman seem to be competing to chalk up the greatest number of attacks. Those of us young enough to have played with Barbie, however, realize the case is far from open and shut. In part, this is because imaginative little girls rarely play with products the way manufacturers expect them to. But it also has to do with the products themselves: at worst, Barbie projected an anomalous message; at best, she was a sort of feminist pioneer. And her meaning, like her face, has not been static over time.

Before the divorce epidemic that swept America in the late sixties, Barbie's universe and that of the suburban nuclear family were light years apart. There were no parents or husbands or offspring in Barbie's world; she didn't define herself through relationships of responsibility to men or to her family. Nor was Barbie a numb, frustrated *Hausfrau* out of *The Feminine Mystique*. In the doll's early years, Handler turned down a vacuum company's offer to make a Barbie-sized vacuum because Barbie didn't do what Charlotte Johnson termed “rough housework.” When Thorstein Veblen formulated his *Theory of the Leisure Class*, women were expected to perform vicarious leisure and vicarious consumption to show that their husbands

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were prosperous. But Barbie had no husband. Based on the career outfits in her first wardrobe, she earned her keep modeling and designing clothes. Her leisure and consumption were a testimony to herself.

True, she had a boyfriend, but he was a lackluster fellow, a mere accessory. Mattel, in fact, never wanted to produce Ken; male figure dolls had traditionally been losers in the marketplace. But consumers so pushed for a boyfriend doll that Mattel finally released Ken in 1961. The reason for their demand was obvious. Barbie taught girls what was expected of women, and a woman in the fifties would have been a failure without a male consort, even a drip with seriously abridged genitalia who wasn't very important in her life.

Feminism notwithstanding, the same appears true today, though many of my young friends who own Barbies have embraced a weirdly polygamous approach to marriage, in which an average of eight female dolls share a single overextended Ken. Some mothers facetiously speculate that they are acting out the so-called "man shortage," still referred to by dinner-party hostesses despite its having been discredited by Susan Faludi in *Backlash*. My theory, however, is that smart little girls were made uneasy by the late-eighties version of Ken. Unlike the bright-eyed, innocent Ken with whom I grew up, the later model bears a troubling resemblance to William Kennedy Smith: His brow is low, his neck thick, and his eyes too close together.

With its 1993 "Earring Magic Ken," Mattel perhaps overdid his retreat from heterosexual virility. True, the doll has a smarter-looking face, but between his earring, lavender vest, and what newspapers euphemized as a "ring pendant" ("cock ring" wouldn't, presumably, play to a family audience), he would have fit right in on Christopher Street. Watching my jaw drop at the sight of the doll at Toy Fair, Mattel publicist Donna Gibbs assured me that an earring in one's left ear was innocuous. "Of course," I said feebly, "the same ear in which Joey Buttafuoco wears his."

Barbie, too, has changed her look more than once through the years,

though her body has remained essentially unaltered. From an art history standpoint—and Barbie, significantly, has been copyrighted as a work of art—her most radical change came in 1971, and was a direct reflection of the sexual revolution. Until then, Barbie's eyes had been cast down and to one side—the averted, submissive gaze that characterized female nudes, particularly those of a pornographic nature, from the Renaissance until the nineteenth century. What had been so shocking about Manet's *Olympia* (1865) was that the model was both naked and unabashedly staring at the viewer. By 1971, however, when America had begun to accept the idea that a woman could be both sexual and unashamed, Barbie, in her "Malibu" incarnation, was allowed to have that body and look straight ahead.

The Barbie doll had its first overhaul and face change in 1967, when it acquired eyelashes and a rotating waist. Although the new "Twist 'N Turn" Barbie was not that different from the rigid old one—its gaze was still side-long—the way it was promoted was not. Girls who traded in their old, beloved Barbies were given a discount on the new model. Twist 'N Turn introduced car designer Harley Earl's idea of "dynamic obsolescence" to doll bodies. Where once only doll fashions had changed, now the doll itself changed; each year until the eighties, the doll's body would be engineered to perform some new trick—clutch a telephone, hit a tennis ball, even tilt its head back and smooch. Taste was not a big factor in devising the new dolls; in 1975, Mattel came out with "Growing Up Skipper," a preteen doll that, when you shoved its arm backward, sprouted breasts.

Fans of conspiracy theories will be disappointed to learn that Barbie's proportions were not the result of some misogynistic plot. They were dictated by the mechanics of clothing construction. The doll is one-sixth the size of a person, but the fabrics she wears are scaled for people. Barbie's middle, her first designer explained, had to be disproportionately narrow to look proportional in clothes. The inner seam on the waistband of a skirt involves four layers of cloth—and four thicknesses of human-scale fabric on

a one-sixth-human-scale doll would cause the doll's waist to appear dramatically larger than her hips.

It is one thing for a sexually initiated adult to snicker over the doll's anatomically inaccurate body, quite another to recall how she looked to us when we were children: terrifying yet beguiling; as charged and puzzling as sexuality itself. In the late fifties and early sixties, there was no talk of condoms in the schools, *National Geographic* was a kid's idea of a racy magazine, and the nearest thing to a sexually explicit music video was Annette Funicello bouncing around with the Mouseketeers. Barbie, with her shocking torpedo orbs, and Ken with his mysterious genital bulge, were the extent of our exposure to the secrets of adulthood. Sex is less shrouded now than it was thirty years ago, but today's young Barbie owners are still using the doll to unravel the mystery of gender differences.

Of course, these days, kids have a great deal more to puzzle out. One used to wake up in the morning confident of certain things—among them that there were two genders, masculine and feminine, and that “masculine” was attached to males, “feminine” to females. But on the frontiers of medicine and philosophy, this certainty has been questioned. Geneticists recognize the existence of at least five genders; prenatal hormonal irregularities can, for instance, cause fetuses that are chromosomally female to develop as anatomical males and fetuses that are chromosomally male to develop as anatomical females. Then there are feminist theorists such as Judith Butler who argue that there is no gender at all. “*Gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original,*” Butler has written. It is something performed, artificial, a “phantasmic ideal of heterosexual identity.” All gendering, consequently, is drag, “a kind of impersonation and approximation.”

No one disputes that from a young age boys and girls behave differently, but the jury is still out on why. Is such behavior rooted in biology or social conditioning? I think it's possible to look at femininity as a performance—

or “womanliness as a masquerade,” to borrow from Joan Rivière, a female Freudian who labeled the phenomenon in 1929—without chucking the possibility of biological differences.

Indeed, some of Barbie’s most ardent imitators are probably not what Carole King had in mind when she wrote “Natural Woman.” Many drag queens proudly cite Barbie’s influence; as a child, singer Ru-Paul not only collected Barbies but cut off their breasts. Barbie has, in fact, a drag queen’s body: broad shoulders and narrow hips, which are quintessentially male, and exaggerated breasts, which aren’t. Then there are biological women whose emulation of Barbie has relied heavily on artifice: the Barbi Twins, identical *Playboy* covergirls who maintain their wasp waists through a diet of Beech-Nut strained veal; and Cindy Jackson, the London-based cosmetic surgery maven who has had more than twenty operations to make her resemble the doll.

When Ella King Torrey, a friend of mine and consultant on this book, began researching Barbie at Yale University in 1979, her work was considered cutting-edge and controversial. But these days everybody’s deconstructing the doll. Barbie has been the subject of papers presented at the Modern Language Association’s 1992 convention and the Ninth Berkshire Conference on the History of Women; rarely does a pop culture conference pass without some mention of the postmodern female fetish figure. Gilles Brougère, a French sociologist, has conducted an exhaustive study of French women and children to determine how different age groups perceive the doll. When scholars deal with Barbie, however, they often take a single aspect of the doll and construct an argument around it. I have resisted that approach. What fascinates me is the whole, ragged, contradictory story—its intrigues, its inconsistencies, and the personalities of its players.

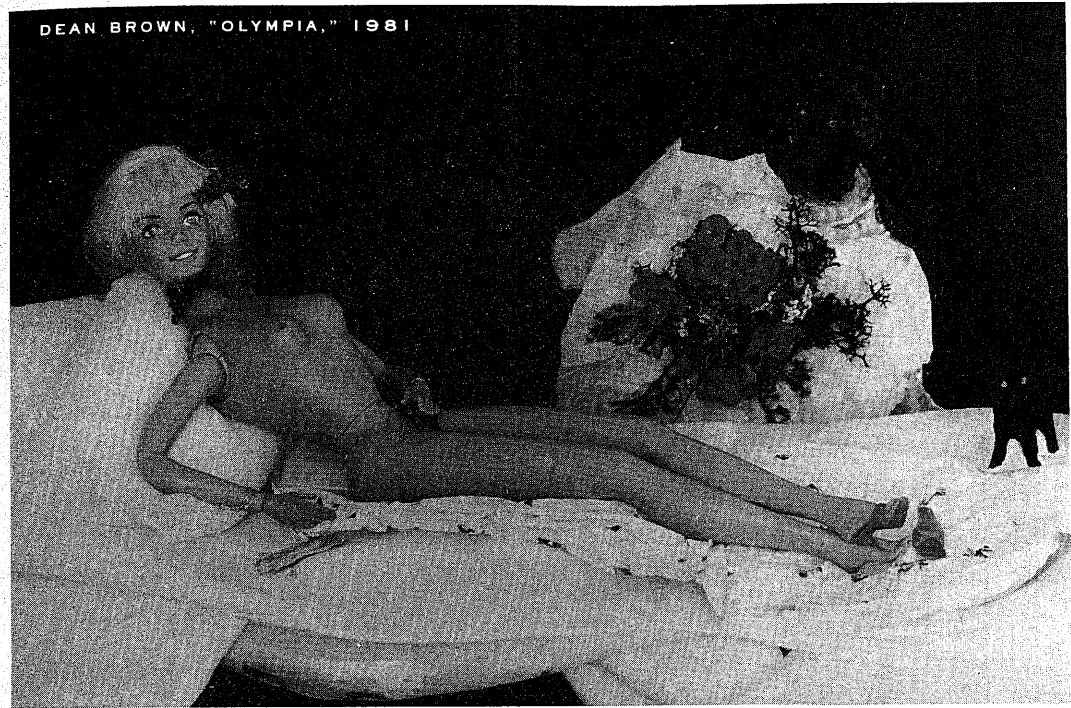
I’ve tried to pin down exactly what happened in Barbie’s first years. Mattel’s focus on the future, which may be the secret of its success, has been at the expense of its past. The company has no archive. This may help con-

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ceal its embarrassments, but it has also buried its achievements—such as subsidizing Shindana Toys in response to the 1965 Watts riots. The African-American-run, South Central Los Angeles-based company produced ethnically correct playthings long before they were fashionable.

Although Barbie's sales have never substantially flagged, Mattel has been a financial roller coaster. It nearly went broke in 1974, when the imaginative accounting practices of Ruth Handler and some of her top executives led to indictments against them for falsifying SEC information, and again in 1984, when the company shifted its focus from toys to electronic games that nobody wanted to buy. The second time, Michael Milken galloped to the rescue. "I believed in Barbie," Milken told Barbara Walters in 1993. "I called up the head of Mattel and I told him that I personally would be willing to



invest two hundred million dollars in his company. There's more Barbie dolls in this country than there are people."

The Barbie story is filled with loose ends and loose screws, but unfortunately very few loose lips. In a world as small as the toy industry, people are discreet about former colleagues because they may have to work with them again. As for welcoming outsiders, the company has much in common with the Kremlin at the height of the Cold War. To a degree, secrecy is vital in the toy business: if a rival learns in August of a clever new toy, he or she can steal the idea and have a knock-off in the stores by Christmas.

Nor am I what Mattel had in mind as its Boswell. Inspired perhaps by Quindlen and Goodman, or, more likely, by fear and a deadline, I had owned up in my weekly *Newsday* column to having cross-dressed Ken because of antipathy toward his girlfriend. This was years before I gave serious thought to Barbie's iconic import, but it was not sufficiently far in the past to have escaped the attention of Mattel publicist Donna Gibbs, who, when I first called her, did not treat me warmly. Miraculously, after a few months, Donna and her colleagues became gracious, charming, and remarkably accommodating. I was baffled, but took it as a sign to keep—like the entity I was studying—on my toes. Still, it was hard not to be seduced by the company, especially by its elves—the designers and sculptors, the “rooters and groomers,” as the hair people are called—who really did seem to have a great time playing with their eleven-and-a-half-inch pals.

Toys have always said a lot about the culture that produced them, and especially about how that culture viewed its children. The ancient Greeks, for instance, left behind few playthings. Their custom of exposing weak babies on mountainsides to die does not suggest a concern for the very young. Ghoulish though it may sound, until the eighteenth century, childhood didn't count for much because few people survived it. Children were even dressed like little adults. Although in 1959, much fuss was made over Mattel's “adult” doll, the fact was that until 1820 all dolls were adults. Baby

dolls came into existence in the early decades of the nineteenth century along with, significantly, special clothing for children.

Published in 1762, Rousseau's *Émile*, a treatise on education, began to focus attention on the concerns of youngsters, but the cult of childhood didn't take root until Queen Victoria ascended the throne in 1837. "Childhood was invented in the eighteenth century in response to dehumanizing trends of the industrial revolution," psychoanalyst Louise J. Kaplan has observed. "By the nineteenth century, when artists began to see themselves as alienated beings trapped in a dehumanizing social world, the child became the savior of mankind, the symbol of free imagination and natural goodness."

The child was also a consumer of toys, the making of which, by the late nineteenth century, had become an industry. Until World War I, Germany dominated the marketplace; but when German troops began shooting at U.S. soldiers, Americans lost their taste for enemy playthings. This burst of patriotism gave the U.S. toy industry its first rapid growth spurt; its second came after World War II, with the revolution in plastics.

Just as children were "discovered" in the eighteenth century, they were again "discovered" in post-World War II America—this time by marketers. The evolution of the child-as-consumer was indispensable to Barbie's success. Mattel not only pioneered advertising on television, but through that medium it pitched Barbie directly to kids.

It is with an eye toward using objects to understand ourselves that I beg Barbie's knee-jerk defenders and knee-jerk revilers to cease temporarily their defending and reviling. Barbie is too complicated for either an encomium or an indictment. But we will not refrain from looking under rocks.

For women under forty, the implications of such an investigation are obvious. Barbie is a direct reflection of the cultural impulses that formed us. Barbie is our reality. And unsettling though the concept may be, I don't think it's hyperbolic to say: Barbie is us.