

WHAT BARBIE REALLY TAUGHT ME

WHAT BARBIE REALLY TAUGHT ME: Lessons from the Playroom, Both Naughty and Nice

by Yona Zeldis McDonough

Now that my son is 6 and inextricably linked to the grade-school social circuit, he gets invited to birthday parties. Whenever I telephone to say he is coming, I ask about gifts. And whenever the child is a girl I secretly hope the answer will be the dirty little word I am longing to hear. The word is Barbie. No such luck. In our Park Slope, Brooklyn, neighborhood, there is a bias against the doll. "My daughter loves her, but I can't stand her," laments one mother. "I won't let her in the house," asserts another. "Oh, please!" sniffs a third.

But I love Barbie. I loved her in 1963, when she made her entrance into my life. She had Jackie Kennedy bouffant hairdo. Her pouty mouth gave her a look both all knowing and sullen. She belonged to a grown-up world of cocktail dresses, cigarette smoke and perfume. I loved her in the years that followed, too, when she developed bendable joints, a twist and turn waist, long, ash-blond hair and lifelike lashes.

I've heard all the arguments against Barbie: she's an airhead, she's an insatiable consumer of tarty clothes, a dream house filled with pink furniture, a Barbie-mobile who teaches girls there is nothing in life quite so exciting as shopping. Her body, with its no-way-to-the-world breasts, wasp waist and endless legs, defies all human proportion. But at 6, I instinctively understood Barbie's appeal: pure sex. My other dolls were either babies or little girls, with flat chests and chubby legs. Even the other so-called fashion dolls—Tammy, in her aqua and white playsuit, and Tracy, with that useless hank: of hair—couldn't compete. Barbie was clearly a woman, and a woman was what I longed to be.

When I was 8 and had just learned about menstruation, I fashioned a small sanitary napkin for Barbie out of neatly folded tissues. Rubber bands held it in place. "Look," said my bemused mother, "Barbie's got her little period. Now she can have a baby." I was disappointed, but my girlfriends snickered in a way that satisfied me. You see, we all wanted Barbie to be, well, dirty. Our Barbies had sex, at least our childish version of it. They hugged and kissed the few available boy doll we had the clean-cut and oh-so-square Ken, the more relaxed and sexy Allan. Our Barbies also danced, pranced and strutted, but mostly they stripped. An adult friend tells me how she used to put her Barbie's low-backed bathing suit on backward, so the doll's breasts were exposed. I dressed mine in her candy-striped baby-sitter's apron—and nothing else. Girls respond intuitively to the doll's sexuality, and it lets them play out those roles in an endlessly compelling and yet ultimately safe manner.

I've also heard that Barbie is a poor role model. Is there such wide-spread contempt for the intelligence of children, that we really imagine they are stupid enough to be shaped by a doll? Girls learn how to be women from the women around them. Most often this means Mom. Mine eschewed beauty parlor. She was a painter who wore her long, black hair loose, her earrings big

of "serious" incarnations: teacher, Olympic athlete, dentist. And later this year we'll even get to see the Really Rad Barbie, a doll whose breasts and hips will be smaller and whose waist will be thicker, thus reflecting a more real (as if children want their toys to be real) female body. I personally don't think any of this matters one iota. Girls will still know the reason they love her, a reason that has nothing to do with new professions or a subtly amended

Fortunately, my Barbie love will no longer have to content itself with buying gifts for my son's female friends. I have a daughter now, and although she is just 2, she already has a half-dozen Barbies. They are, along with various articles of clothing, furniture and other accoutrements, packed away like so many sleeping princesses in translucent pink plastic boxes that line my basement shelves. The magic for which they wait is not the prince's gentle kiss. It is the heart and mind of my little girl as she picks them up and begs to play.

McDonough is a writer. This passage is from her book, *A Real-Life Barbie Turns Forty*.