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The Intentions Behind the Creation of Barbie

Abstract
Many researchers of Barbie are either entirely positive or negative in their outlook on the purpose of the doll. Some claim that Barbie was created for girls to have an imaginative outlet, but others say that Barbie was meant to confine and restrict women within a certain role. Many agree with the creator, Ruth Handler, that Barbie was a symbol of the independent woman; however, others believe she was limited to a traditional woman's place in the 1950s and 1960s. Using Barbie novels published in the early 1960s, which have been analyzed by only few authors, and other primary and secondary sources, I will attempt to write a balanced history of the intentions behind the creation of Barbie while discussing the difficulty of determining the truth behind her creation.

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The Intentions Behind the Creation of Barbie

Briana Piche

In 1992, a Barbie doll was sold every two minutes around the globe.[1] It is amazing that an 11-inch plastic doll can have an impact not only on children, but on adults, both male and female. Many researchers of Barbie are either entirely positive or negative in their outlook on the purpose of the doll. Some claim that Barbie was created for girls to have an imaginative outlet, but others say that Barbie was meant to confine and restrict women within a certain role. Many agree with the creator, Ruth Handler, that Barbie was a symbol of the independent woman; however, others believe she was limited to a traditional woman's place in the 1950s and 1960s. Using Barbie novels published in the early 1960s, which have been analyzed by only few authors, and other primary and secondary sources, I will attempt to write a balanced history of the intentions behind the creation of Barbie while discussing the difficulty of determining the truth behind her creation.

The positive interpretation of Barbie begins with ideas that contributed to her creation. The creator of Barbie, Ruth Handler, wanted girls to be able to reflect themselves upon the doll and use it to spark their imagination. Handler, in *Barbie Nation*, a film produced by Susan Stern, expresses her ideas for Barbie:

> I saw these little girls playing grown up and I knew that the only dolls available on the market were baby dolls where the child is limited to playing mommy, or toddler or companion dolls where the child is limited to playing with a girlfriend. There was no adult doll with which a child could truly dream her dreams in the early fifties.[2]

Handler recognized that girls were limited to playing with baby dolls, which assumed that girls would act as mothers. She wanted a doll that represented adulthood and allowed children to imagine themselves as teenagers or adults. Lillian D. Kozloski in *Barbie Dolls, Popular Culture or Haute Couture,* believes that Handler gave a girl "a way to express her dreams for the future, to experiment with the future from a safe distance. She felt pretending and make-believe in playtime, were important parts of growing up and aided in healthy psychological development."[3] Kozloski accepts Handler's explanation for the purpose of the Barbie doll and agrees that Handler believed this would tremendously help girls in their development. This imaginative stance is displayed in *Here's Barbie,* a Barbie novel written by Cynthia Lawrence and Betty Lou Maybee that includes short plays that children can act out at home. I

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[1] Erica Rand, *Barbie's Queer Accessories* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 26-27.

[2] Susan Stern, *Barbie Nation: An Unauthorized Tour*, VHS, El Rio Productions LLC (n.p.: New Day Films, 1998).

[3] Lillian D. Kozloski, "Barbie Dolls, Popular Culture of Haute Couture," *Ars Textrina* 27 (1997), under " Clio," http://serials.abc-clio.com/active/go/ABC-Clio-serials_v42 (accessed March 24, 2008).

suspect that the authors included these plays in the novels so children could explore adulthood and use their imagination. At the end of the play, the authors write, "Make do with what you have—its [*sic*] all make believe. The play's the thing!" [4] The novel encourages children to "make-believe" and use their imagination to create the play. M.G. Lord, author of *Forever Barbie: The Unauthorized Biography of a Real Doll,* describes a Barbie novel as a "window into a wider world."[5] Handler and other authors will agree with Lord as I continue to explore the positive intentions behind the creation of Barbie.

Barbie seems to encourage girls not only to imagine themselves in an adult or teenage setting, but also to be independent. Lord points out in her book that "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."[6] Barbie was independent because she did not have to answer to men or a family, which was uncommon for women in the 1950s and early 1960s. Lord also explains that the Barbie "stories and novels, which were published in book form by Random House between 1962 and 1965, were revolutionary: In them Barbie doesn't model herself on Mom, a self-abnegating slave in financial thrall to Dad; she finds a female mentor who points the way to independence." [7]

To Lord, Barbie does not conform to society and takes a revolutionary path towards independence and self-sufficiency. Lord is the only author who I believe truly achieved a balanced Barbie history. In her book, she addresses both the restrictive and liberating nature of Barbie along with the positive and negative opinions that accompany them; however, she heavily cites newspaper articles, which I deem to be unreliable. In *Barbie's New York Summer,* Barbie's mother encourages Barbie to be herself when she is nervous about becoming a fashion model: "I think the fashion training will be fine for you, but there's nothing wrong with being 'just Barbie.' Darling, don't ever try and be anyone you're not."[8] Barbie desires to be a fashion model and does not appear to be pressured by her mother or by anyone else to fulfill traditional women's roles within the time period. Barbie is encouraged to be herself, which suggests to girls that they should be themselves and pursue what they desire. This suggestion is more direct when Barbie herself is giving advice to a friend: "And you should be yourself, too. When you try to become me you're just half a person, and you make me less than myself."[9] Barbie suggests to her friend and to all girls that part of being an independent woman is being yourself and following your own path.

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[4] Cynthia Lawrence and Betty Lou Maybee, *Here's Barbie* (New York: Random House, 1962), 53.

[5] M.G. Lord, *Forever Barbie: An Unauthorized Biography of a Real Doll* (New York: Avon Books, 1995), 134.

[6] Ibid., 10.

[7] Ibid., 133-34.

[8] Cynthia Lawrence, *Barbie's New York Summer* (New York: Random House, 1962), 12.

[9] Lawrence and Maybee, *Here's Barbie*, 96.

In examining the intentions behind the creation of Barbie, I also looked at Barbie commercials. Barbie's promotion of women's independence is reflected in a commercial for a Barbie from "The Career Collection." The jingle to the commercial and the phrase underneath the collection title states, "We girls can do anything!"[10] This commercial indicates to girls that Barbie has a career and she has the ability to follow her dreams. The career theme is revolutionary for the times because Barbie is economically self-sufficient and does not rely on men or others for an income. Handler expands on Barbie's career opportunities in her autobiography, *Dream Doll: The Ruth Handler Story*, when she explains,

> Unlike play with a baby doll—in which a little girl is pretty much limited to the role of Mommy—Barbie has always represented the fact that a woman has *choices*. Even in her early years Barbie did not have to settle for being only Ken's girlfriend or an inveterate shopper. She had the clothes, for example, to launch a career as a nurse, a stewardess, a nightclub singer.[11]

Handler claims to have designed Barbie to give her opportunities that a baby doll could not give to young girls. I believe Handler's intentions are credible because she noticed that her own daughter, Barbara, played with paper dolls that represented teenagers and adults.[12] Considering Handler had her daughter in mind when creating Barbie, I think her intentions to give Barbie independence and opportunity were genuine. Handler and her associates seemed to want Barbie to have numerous career options. Handler described Barbie's options by stating,

> If she wanted to work, she could be a student teacher, or a somewhat generic but chic "Career Girl." She could opt for a career as a registered nurse, assisting "Dr. Ken" (his ensemble included a stethoscope, reflector, operating gown, surgical mask, and x-rays) or an American Airlines stewardess, assisting Ken, American Airlines captain.[13]

Through this statement and through the Barbie novels, negative interpretations behind Barbie's creation become evident. Though Handler lists Barbie's career options and declares that Barbie has choices, these professions happened to be what women were limited to. Why could not Barbie be the American Airlines captain, or the surgeon instead of Ken? Barbie was the assistant to Ken in both occupations, which were positions traditionally held by women. Handler's statement suggests that Barbie is limited as a woman in the

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[10] Susan Stern, *Barbie Nation*.

[11] Ruth Handler, *Dream Doll: The Ruth Handler Story* (Stamford: Longmeadow Press, 1994), 44.

[12] Lord, *Forever Barbie, 30.*

[13] Handler, *Dream Doll*, 93.

working world and is perhaps subordinate to men. Handler co-wrote her autobiography with another author, Jacqueline Shannon. It is not clear whether Shannon wrote the autobiography or if Shannon gave suggestions to Handler on what to include. Handler addresses many situations that were controversial in her career and defends herself in numerous cases; therefore it is difficult for the reader to interpret if she is being completely honest with the reader about her intentions behind Barbie. She claims that Barbie was an imaginative tool, but Erica Rand of *Barbie's Queer Accessories* notices that Handler made statements with clear intentions. For example, Rand reports in an interview that Handler "noted proudly that Barbie got girls out of jeans and into a dress."[14] Though Handler made statements implying that she wanted to influence girls, I think that she truly intended for Barbie to be imaginative.

Many of the aspects within Barbie's world can appear to be restrictive or liberating for her and ultimately for women. Handler's statements about Barbie's career options can be interpreted in both ways. The Barbie novels likewise prove to be contradictory. Barbie defines what makes one beautiful when talking about a co-worker: "You know how pretty Linda is; her mother was the original. . . a raven-haired, regal beauty. And from what I've heard, she had inner beauty, too. She was a perfect mother, wife *and* society leader, all in one."[15] Barbie indicates that a woman with inner beauty is one who can be a wife, mother, and leader within society. Depending on how one defines a "society leader," (I assume it to be a traditional role for women inside the domestic sphere because Barbie previews the term by mentioning the other traditional roles of wife and mother) Barbie restricts the definition of women's beauty by limiting it to including traditional roles for women. Linda is praised because she fulfills her duties to her family and her husband. Earlier Lord claimed that Barbie did not define herself through any type of family relationship, but it is clear that Barbie revered inner beauty and the roles attached to it. Though Lord makes positive statements about Barbie's freedom, independence, and imaginative qualities, she also makes negative statements about the intentions of Barbie.

Lord has a negative stance when evaluating Barbie's relationships with men. She presents an argument that proves Barbie was confined to the traditions of the time by being dependent on and confined by men. When looking at the construction of Barbie's body, Lord notices that "Historically, men have hobbled women to prevent them from running away. Women of Old China had their feet bound in childhood; Arab women wore sandals on stilts. . . Western women were hampered by long, restrictive skirts and precarious heels."[16] Barbie only had arched feet and could wear no other shoe but a high heeled shoe. Since Barbie's feet could not flex, Barbie was limited to wearing heels and confined by men through an old global tradition.

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[14] Rand, *Barbie's Queer,* 77.

[15] Cynthia Lawrence and Betty Lou Maybee, *The World of Barbie* (New York: Random House, 1962), 102.

[16] Lord, *Forever Barbie*, 89.

In Barbie novels, commercials, and advertisements, Ken is the leading man in Barbie's life. Ken is Barbie's best-friend in the novels, but in many instances it is evident that Barbie and Ken have feelings for each other. In her book, Rand gives a negative interpretation of Barbie's relationships with men and Ken: "In the novels, as in the artifacts, it is Barbie's sexuality that violates social norms and defied parental standards. True, Barbie always returns virginal to the lumpless Ken, implying that girls' dangerous sexuality can be controlled through proper socialization."[17] Rand's tone in this sentence appears critical and disapproving because Barbie is being sexually restricted. Rand tends to be very critical of Barbie and her sexuality because *Barbie's Queer Accessories* discusses how Barbie is sexually explicit. Because Barbie never went steady with any of the men she dated and rather worried about Ken's feelings, her sexuality and its usage were artfully controlled. Others may think that Rand has slanted interpretations because she is described as a "dyke activist,"[18] but I believe her interpretations are credible because she closely examines other artifacts in women's studies. Rand is negative when considering Barbie's dependence on men, and Lord will reveal similar negative interpretations.

Any evaluation of Barbie's independence, freedom, and imaginative capabilities must consider her relationship to Ken. When Ken was created in 1961, girls who purchased Barbie dolls were excited and feminists were angered. Lord explains that feminists thought Ken was created because "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."[19] Many feminists thought Barbie was dependent on Ken and would seem to have been a failure without him. Rand explains further feminist thought when she writes about the intentions behind the creation of Ken:

> Cy Schneider, who was working for Mattel's ad company at the time, has a similar take on what Ken offered Barbie: Ken enabled her, in nineties terms, to "get a life": "With the advent of Ken, a richer story in Barbie's life blossomed. It was easier to take Barbie on her 60-second (later 30-second) television adventures when an escort was involved. Her activities became virtually unlimited." Well, not quite. Today, the sexist presumption in the idea that Barbie needed a boyfriend or, as Schneider terms him, a (male) "fantasy escort" in order to have a personality and a life needs little discussion.[20]

In order for Barbie to "get a life," Mattel's advertisement agency gave Barbie a boyfriend. Since Barbie did not have a variety of activities to

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[17] Rand, *Barbie's Queer,* 47.
[18] Rand, *Barbie's Queer,* 5.
[19] Lord, *Forever Barbie,*11.
[20] Rand, *Barbie's Queer,* 42.

participate in without Ken, many interpret Schneider's explanation as a message to women that they cannot live a satisfactory life without men. The agency could have given her a female friend to create more adventures; however, Barbie would no longer be the independent, self-sufficient woman she was prior to the creation of other playmates.

On the other hand, there were money-related and consumer-driven concerns that pertain to the creation of Ken. There was a fair amount of consumer demand for a boyfriend for Barbie. Mattel is a toy company in a competitive market, and companies need to keep up with the demands of consumers to stay competitive in their market. I believe that Ken was created to satisfy consumers and to give Barbie more options in commercials as this would seem to highly benefit Mattel as a company.

When evaluating Barbie's role within the domestic sphere, Lord reveals additional negative interpretations. Lord refers to Barbie's physical construction and comments on Barbie's infamous breasts: "Barbie's large breasts make sense as a function of her time—postwar America. Breasts are emblematic of the home; they produce milk and provide security and comfort."[21] Mothers were horrified by Barbie's large breasts and were frightened by the possibility they would sexually empower her. Lord believes they symbolized Barbie's domestic womanhood, which is fitting for postwar America, but limiting for Barbie and girls around the world. Other limitations will be apparent as I individually examine Barbie novels from the early 1960s.

When studying the Barbie novels, I found evidence that was inconsistent with one of Lord's points. Early in her book, Lord declared that Barbie had no responsibility to her parents or her family; however, I found that Barbie has parents in the Barbie novels. She answers to them and needs their approval for everything from getting a job to volunteering. In *Barbie Solves a Mystery*, Barbie is advised by her friend Midge to talk to her parents: "First, you should ask your parents if they want you to have a part-time job."[22] Barbie has to gain permission from her parents to get a job and cannot pursue her interests independently. Barbie's society values family and parental consent, which contradicts Lord's statement rejecting Barbie's personal definition through parents and a family. In *Barbie and Ken*, Barbie has a similar predicament when wanting to perform a play at the children's home. She tells her friends, "I'll just have to ask my mother."[23] Barbie has to ask her mother to participate in many activities, which informs the reader that parental consent is valued and Barbie is strongly dependent on her parents. Aside from Barbie's attachment to her parents, which offsets the positive interpretation of her revolutionary independent nature, Barbie is also depicted as having responsibility within a family.

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[21] Lord, *Forever Barbie,* 209.

[22] Cynthia Lawrence, *Barbie Solves a Mystery* (New York: Random House, 1963), 8.

[23] Cynthia Lawrence and Bette Lou Maybee, *Barbie and Ken* (New York: Random House, 1963), 125.

Family and parental values that were reflected in the novels were affirmed when Barbie acquired a little sister. Kozolski makes this point in her journal article by explaining, "The early 1960s marked a high point for traditional family life. Television shows such as *Father Knows Best* showed the average American family in strong unity with close family relationships. Barbie styles and addition of a sister, Skipper, reflected family life."[24] After Skipper's creation, Barbie had responsibility to her sister and more responsibility within the family. Though Barbie's exact age is never revealed, Barbie is described as a teenager who often discusses graduation plans and her future in fashion. As Barbie often experiments with independence and her fashion future, Barbie is still part of a family and is defined by her responsibility to them. This responsibility hinders her independent and family-free life that can be considered positive, liberating, and ahead of the times.

I also explored Barbie's limitations through miniature plays within two of the Barbie novels: *Barbie and Ken* and *Here's Barbie*. Although the explanation of the play suggests that the reader should use his/her imagination and creativity to direct the play, giving particular dialogue and situations for readers to act out is restrictive within itself. Readers are not inclined to create their own scenarios, characters, and dialogue and are instead guided by the acts in the novel. What is implied through the novels about a woman's role in society, her place within the domestic sphere, and her association to men is acted out by children. Since children are very impressionable, I believe that physically acting out these limited roles seems like it would have a direct influence on female readers. Girls are encouraged by these novels to fulfill women's roles within the time-period and are not free to explore their own desires and dreams. I interpret the miniature plays as contributing to the negative view about Barbie's intentions.

In my attempt to write the history of the intentions behind the creation of Barbie, I explored both independent and imaginative intentions and restrictive and tradition-based intentions. When examining the different intentions behind Barbie, I tended to favor the negative interpretations because I thought the negative arguments that Rand presented were very compelling. I also tended to favor negative interpretations because early in my research I read that Handler had been responsible for issuing contradictory press releases, falsifying financial records, and disguising losses in the early 1970s that resulted in five class action lawsuits and an SEC investigation. [25] I tried to remove my bias when examining Handler's interpretations because her criminal record deems her an unreliable source. I believe that the truth about Barbie's intentions is complex because consumer-driven and market-driven decisions were constantly made when producing the novels, dolls, and advertisements. Most mothers wanted Barbie dolls to be traditional and fulfill the roles of the time. Mattel needed to be aware of mothers' opinions because they were the ones who purchased the dolls for

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[24] Kozloski,"Barbie Dolls," 78-79.
[25] Lord, *Forever Barbie,* 93.

their children. Mattel had intentions for Barbie to be independent, imaginative, and innovative, but they may have changed her concept as a response to a competitive toy market and consumer requests.