

The Good, the Bad, and the Barbie: A Doll's History and Her Impact on Us

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During her unparalleled fifty-year history, Barbie has been the doll that some people love-and some people love to hate. There's no question she's influenced generations, but to what end? Acclaimed nonfiction author Tanya Lee Stone takes an unbiased look at how Barbie became the icon that she is, and at the impact that she's had on our culture (and vice versa). Featuring passionate anecdotes and memories from a range of girls and women, a foreword by Meg Cabot, and original color photographs, this book explores the Barbie phenomenon in a brand-new light.

The Good, the Bad, and the Barbie: A Doll's History and Her Impact on Us Details


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Elizabeth says

Barbie is one of those figures that I've always meant to learn more about, but never gotten around to. I came across a copy of The Good, The Bad, and The Barbie at my local library and thought it would be a good place to start.

This book serves as a solid overview of various aspects of Barbie. It covers her creation, her evolution, and the positive and negative opinions that have been expressed about her over the years. It deals with issues of gender and race, and tries overall to depict both opposing views of the icon that this doll has become. It includes many pictures, which I thought added a lot to the narrative, but might have been more effective in full colour. I really enjoyed how Stone tried to tackle all of the issues head on. That said, The Good, The Bad, and The Barbie is quite a short book, which makes the wide array of issues covered a little bit lacking in depth. While it did cover a bit of everything, I did find myself leaving the book with more questions than answers.

Overall, I thought this was a decent little read. It introduced me to numerous facts about a cultural icon that I didn't know, and provided additional information on opinions I hadn't before considered. That said, I think it best serves as an introduction piece. It mentioned other books and writers as sources, and I intend to look into those for more information. I recommend this to anyone who either isn't interested in anything lengthy on the topic, or to anyone who is looking for a place to start.

Amy says

A short, sweet overview of Barbie and the challenges she has faced over her 50+ years of existence. Not very long, not very in depth, but still well researched and good for a glimpse into the famous doll. A lot of the quotes or stories had me laughing out loud...especially the Forward.

I knew the author and I were going to be amazing friends after I read that Forward.

I, too, was forbidden from having that scandalous Barbie doll for fear I would grow up with a negative body image. In fact, I distinctly remember one Christmas where a neon orange skater Barbie was presented to me by less-savvy relatives. I barely got a glimpse of her before we returned it to the store. I probably ended up with something practical, like a sweater.

As much as I appreciate my Mom's worry, I tend to agree with the author on this one. Barbie is what you make her. She can be used for good or bad...in the end she is merely a doll.

Thomas says

An interesting piece of modern social history that probably gets less coverage than it deserves. How much more has been written about the Kennedy assassination than Barbie. At first glance, that may be as it should be. Still, when you think about it, what shaped the world more, a doll that influenced, and is still influencing, millions of girls the world over or the murder of one American president? I know what I would answer. Whatever happened on the grassy knoll, if anything, had not a fraction of the influence of Barbie's friend

Midge.

When I was growing up, Barbies were everywhere. I didn't dare let myself be seen actually playing with one or, I feared, my boy credit would be toast forever. Still, I remember wishing I could have a Barbie for the simple reason that my G.I. Joe's had no women in their lives. The heroes on TV shows and movies had girlfriends or wives. Many of the people they saved were women. There were female heroes. The women in my G.I. Joe's lives had to be invisible. My sister came too late to help me out. I was getting too old for action figures by the time she was born. Don't get me wrong, Barbies, in my opinion, made terrible action figures. Their arms didn't bend at the elbow, their legs barely bent, you couldn't stand them up with those tiny feet and they didn't have kung fu grip.

Still, the influence my G.I. Joes had on the world were nothing compared to the towering edifice that was Barbie. This book does a great job of telling the story of its inventor Ruth Handler and the Mattel toy company as well as the pros and cons of Barbie's massive influence. Love her or hate her, Barbie was a phenomenon that changed the world.

This was a fun read.

Denise Spicer says

Although giving opportunities for Barbie fans and defenders to comment, this is more about feminist criticisms of the doll and her "influence" on girls. (The book does include a small section about Barbie's impact on boys.) The author covers the history of the doll, the reactions in popular culture, and provides lots of pictures (mostly black and white.) An Index, Bibliography, and End Notes are included.

PlatKat says

"She's just too unreal. How do you bond with something that looks like a taffy pull with a face?" writes LA Times journalist and feminist Patt Morrison.

Imagination. Must we sacrifice that in order to stand up for our rights to equality?

Like many girls, I played with barbies as a child, and as the creator (Ruth Handler, a dark-haired Jew) intended, it was all about the clothes. The hourglass figures mimicked the mannequins in store windows because this shrewd businesswoman wasn't going to make money selling dolls. She was going to make money selling the millions of possibilities you could provide for the dolls (through the right fashions, accessories, and big-ticket dream houses, horses, and hears--well, I'm getting ahead of myself).

You could make Barbie do anything, and the discussion touches on Barbie's many careers and nationalities. A few studies are mentioned pertaining to how closely young girls align their sense of self with the dolls they chose to play with and how they played with them. There are happy memories of sewing with Grandma, and there are ruthless memories of cutting off their hair and setting them on fire.

The book also notes that some girls dress and play with their dolls as an indication of what they will become. Some girls played school, some played doctor. My dolls cruised Barbietown (i.e., the kids' half of the basement) in hot cars and met up with their friends. Sometimes they went on vacations to exotic destinations such as Hawaii and Tulsa. Their clothes were all over the map: some expensive, some functional, some vintage (thanks, Mom), and some homemade.

A quick mental recount of my last dozen years as an adult reveals there may be some truth to this. Yes, it would appear I was made to aimlessly roam the earth and wear clothes. It's not such a bad existence, and it is self-funded. But was I to rely on a doll to teach me that, or might I have received some outside influence on matters dealing with my finances and career? I don't know... I played with barbies *a lot*.

As the author discusses Barbie's history and her impact on society, she raises the typical questions of female equality and self-image that accompany any discussion of this 50-year-old blond, busty icon. The book also (sort of) goes into the question of whether Barbie is real (i.e., whether children see her as real). Is her glamorous image attainable? Should it be?

Although the book doesn't go in-depth, the author supplies nearly equal coverage of Barbie fans and Barbie critics. The previous quote appeared both in the book and in an article published several years ago entitled Kill Barbie. As an aside, I agree with most of what Morrison writes and enjoy her style, but she seems a little too mad to be cited in anything more serious than this fun little book and my quick-turn review of it.

Rather than launch a tirade of insults at what she dismisses as a lump of cold plastic, why not find a creative way to expose Barbie and the pitfalls of being plastic? After all, we girls can do anything.

Margaux Lange made a line of fantastic jewelry from dismembered Barbie parts. Andy Warhol and other artists paid pictorial homage to the Barbie mystique. Someone even made a life-size, Barbie-themed funeral coach ready to haul Barbie away whenever she finally dies. How awesome is that? (Of course, I may be a little biased.)

The book started to drag with Chapter 7's collection of girls (and a few boys) recounting the awful ways they would abuse their dolls and place them in compromising sexual positions. We all did this stuff, or had friends who did, but devoting a whole chapter to it was excessive. It briefly shed some light on yet another talking point in the argument of whether Barbie is "real".

There was one story of a little girl who scared her parents when they found she was regularly popping the heads off of her dolls. Did it mean she had a taste for violence? Was she silently protesting this difficult to attain model of perfection? Not even a little bit. She found it was much easier to change their clothes with their heads detached.

Whether you adore Barbie or hate everything about her bleach-blond hair down to her painfully arched feet, I think the worst you can do for yourself is take her too seriously. While she enjoyed a rise to fame in her earlier years, the information age has busted the toy market wide open and kids these days aren't playing the same way they did 20, or 50, years ago. As mentioned in the book (and this can't be stressed enough), there are *many* factors that influence a young girl's self image. Whether her parents buy her a doll is one tiny fraction of their overall treatment of her which will define her attitudes about herself and others.

People were up in arms about Black Barbie, Asian Barbie, Hispanic Barbie, etc., claiming she's not a true representation of that race. That's about as silly as me complaining that regular Barbie doesn't look like me. (Although I will deliver a swift kick in the face to anyone who says I should look like her.) Barbie and

Mattel didn't sign up to be public servants. They made a toy to be played with, not a culture to be emulated.

No matter what you do, someone isn't going to like it. Or they're going to think they don't like it because they misunderstand it. So maybe in a way, Barbie is a lot like most young girls: misunderstood... but with cooler stuff.

Wendy says

Okay, finished. It never got any better, though perhaps worth reading just to find out that in 1965 there was a slumber party Barbie that came with a scale set at 110 pounds and a miniature book called *How to Lose Weight*.

Seriously, what is this book? What is the point? Who is it written for? What are the redeeming qualities? It's padded full of 14-year-old girls psychoanalyzing themselves, with their quotes seemingly used as some kind of evidence that Barbie is or isn't anti-feminist or cool or harmful or whatever. Most of the book could have been retitled "People Emailed Me What They Think About Barbie and I Put It In a Book".

I don't hate Barbie. I don't really have strong feelings about Barbie. But this book is one of the messier works of non-fiction I've read.

Earlier:

I'm about a third of the way through this and can't imagine what else there is for the author to say. Also, my teeth hurt from the sugar.

This is the second book I've read by Stone (Almost Astronauts was first), and I think I simply don't care for her writing. I find it cutesy, full of cliches, repetitive... basically, reads like a very long Cosmo article. She does not hesitate in either book to pause from giving facts, or even interpreting them, to proselytize. In a chapter about Barbie's career options (well, it's called "It's All About the Clothes", but oddly, half is about Barbie fashion and half is about Barbie careers), she breaks in to say:

It is easy to jump on the bandwagon and say that Barbie must be sold as a pilot and not only as a stewardess, or a surgeon and not only a nurse, but it's also important to remember that the world "only" can be just as limiting to girls. If a nurse is what you want to be, then a nurse you should be! It is Choice--with a capital C--that women have fought to have. It doesn't matter what the choice turns out to be, as long as it is your own.

And then she jumps back into a historical timeline of Barbie careers.

I don't disagree with the sentiment, and should have been relieved to see it there, because I was previously annoyed by some slightly nurse-belittling language. But I don't think the above paragraph makes sense in a history/cultural analysis of the Barbie. And I flinch at someone telling me what it is "important to remember", especially when it is opinion and not fact, no matter how much I might agree.

(Also, she talks at some length about how Barbie's doctor clothes aren't suitable for doctoring in, and the pilot's too; but what about the unsuitability of Nurse Barbie's outfit, or Teacher Barbie's, if you're going to go that route?)

Okay, back to the book, but I don't think it's remotely good enough for the Newbery. Of course, I didn't think Almost Astronauts was remotely good enough for the Sibert, so.

Ericka Clouter says

This book was pretty interesting in that it explored both the history of Mattel and Barbie and modern-day opinions about her in a variety of communities.

The author left a ton of stuff undiscussed. What about Mattel's position against Barbie talking and potentially offending someone? Of course, after this book was written they abandoned that policy and now she has a cartoon. The author also failed to cover the Christmas Barbie phenomenon where tons of girls got these expensive Christmas Barbies they were told to leave in the box as collector's items. I hated that so much.

Personally, I played with Barbie as a kid and my objection was the same objection I had with all my dolls, that more of them were blonde and blue-eyed than brunette, which seemed the inverse of the world I experienced around me. I was delighted when I got a brunette and one each of redhead Barbie, black Barbie, and Hawaiian Barbie. It also helped me pretend that all the Barbies were actually different people instead of a clone universe. I had one Hispanic Barbie and one Japanese Barbie, but yeah, these were too expensive and fancy to actually play with which was a major bummer.

I kept many of my childhood Barbies and I've been handing them off one by one to my daughter. She loved them even before I gave her mine, having seen them at her friends' homes. Unbeknownst to her, I've now been building a bit of a Barbie community. I got her some young shapeless Chelsea and Skipper dolls, and some heavier and extra shapely Barbies. My Kens all disappeared from childhood so she got a new one with his own change of outfits. Unfortunately, there's still a bit of a blonde surplus in this community. We're working on it!

As a mom, another frustration is that it's now difficult to buy any affordable quality Barbie clothing. A lot of my daughter's Barbies are still rocking durable 80s outfits.

Pamela says

Good or bad, like her or not, Barbie makes for a fascinating topic. Such a success story, for being only eleven-inches tall. An American icon who is loved, hated and imitated around the world.

I rather enjoyed this fun little book. Tanya Lee Stone did an amicable job, writing subjectively and presenting a wide swath of information, history, thoughts, and opinions on all things Barbie. Not to mention, some wonderful memory-evoking photographs.

Stone starts with Barbie's creator, giving readers a condensed, yet vastly interesting biography of Ruth Handler. Truly, Handler was a woman ahead of her time. In an era when women were primarily destined to become housewives - not business moguls - Ruth was the power and inspiration behind Mattel, long before Barbie was even a thought in her mind. So say what you will about Barbie, Ruth Handler's story is amazing.

From there, Stone builds her chapters chronologically, following the creation and evolution of Barbie,

Barbie's sisters, cousins, friends, and all their accessories. Who knew there were so many different variations of busty, plastic-molded, painted-faced fashion dolls? I certainly didn't.

Then again, I wasn't all that much into fashion. I was more of a Hot Wheels, bike riding, high adventure tomboy sort of girl. Sure, I had a Skipper doll (Barbie's flat-chested sister), a brunette Francie, and a Midge doll, along with a Barbie. I dressed them up and played nice on occasion. But boy howdy, the best fun was in the backyard. I had a grand time solving mysteries and fighting evil - jumping off the swing-set, flying over the jungle gym, and whacking through the Amazon jungle aka the honeysuckle bush with Barbie and G.I. Joe as her sidekick.

Great memories!!!

As for the controversial debate surrounding Barbie and her disproportionate figure being detrimental to little girls self esteem and body image, it never was an issue for me. At least not via Barbie. Though I can see where it might be a problem for others. Stone presents opinions from a wide array of people who have weighed in on all the pros and cons of Barbie. And she does so respectfully, often with a dash of devil's advocate jockeying and a dash of humor.

Overall, a thought-provoking, memory-evoking, good read.

*** Three Stars ***

Treasure says

This nonfiction book is an easy, interesting read covering the life of Barbie's creator, the history of the Mattel company, and the controversy surrounding the infamous doll. While no means comprehensive, it offers an excellent overview of what all the hullabaloo is about and offers both the feminist, anti-Barbie side and the (also surprisingly) feminist, pro-Barbie side. Heck, the author even tosses in the "why is this such a big deal, it's just a frigging doll and we know it's not real, morons" side.

The book is funny, honest, and manages to not choose a side in the never ending debate about the doll's impact on girls' self esteem and body image. There are plenty of great pictures and context to help readers understand the importance of Barbie's arrival during times of great change for women and African Americans. A great introduction for those interested in the topic, ideal for a middle or high school report, and just a plain old interesting book for someone who used to own at least 20 Barbies..... :)

Destinee Sutton says

There is something about Tanya Lee Stone's writing that I don't like. The tone, I think. When it comes to non-fiction, I like an authoritative, detached perspective from the author. Stone, to my everlasting dismay, subtly editorializes right and left in an overtly feminist "Rah Rah Women!" kind of way. I'm totally pro-woman, but it irks me to see her pushing her perspective when I think she should let the facts speak for themselves. I had this exact same issue with *Almost Astronauts*, probably even more so than I do with this Barbie book.

So, yeah, what about Barbie? There are many, many opinions about Barbie filling up the pages here. Most of

them came from random people and did not really interest me. I liked the story of the invention of Barbie, but after that I stopped caring. Is Barbie good or bad? There are criticisms for sure, but the overall impression I got is that Stone is pro-Barbie and sees Ruth Handler, Barbie's inventor, as a great female role model. I have a feeling that if Barbie had been invented by a man, Stone would have written a different book.

Sadiedelashmit says

Tanya Lee Stone introduces a controversial topic in her nonfiction book: *The Good, The Bad, And The Barbie: A Doll's History and Her Impact on Us*. Tanya is straightforward. She begins by giving the readers the background as to how Barbie was created and then pulls opinions from all over. She really did her research. She receives opinions from Barbie supporters to Barbie-Bashers. Tanya gives examples of how Barbie dresses to work in what was generally a male dominated workforce. While on the other hand, many of the Barbie-Bashers feel like this doll created an unrealistic idea of what a woman should look like, present herself, and wear. Sarah Newman, age eleven stated "The dolls and movies give a different message than Barbie's slogan, 'Be who you wanna be.' The real message is, 'You can be who you wanna be... if you're pretty.'" (p. 41)

What I found really interesting about this book was how Tanya showed the reader how the doll has progressed and changed over the years. Also, she showed Barbie dolls from around the world. (p.74-81) This just shows that as much as people say that Barbie has greatly influenced young girls' outlooks on self-image (which I am not arguing) Barbie has also been shaped by our society. Originally created as a fashion toy, this doll has turned into an unexpected sensation.

Erin says

In *The Good, the Bad, and the Barbie: A Doll's History and Her Impact on Us*, Stone not only tells the history of the Barbie doll but also explores and examines Barbie's cultural and psychological impact on girls, boys, women, and even men. The book starts out with a brief but detailed biography of Ruth Handler and those she worked with leading up to and founding her toy company Mattel, whose success really took off with the popularity of the Barbie doll. It was interesting to read that Handler loosely modeled the Barbie doll initially after the pinup girls and movie stars of the 1950's since they set the standards for ideals of women and beauty at the time. It's no wonder Barbie sparked controversy from her very beginnings, she wasn't the typical baby-faced doll usually marketed to young girls, she was a teen model of fashion and beauty, at least that's what Mattel originally intended. With each passing decade Barbie changed with the times, as ideals of women's roles and beauty changed, so did the Barbie doll. Stone touches upon several aspects of the doll and her impact on us, however, much of her book focuses on the physical beauty attributes of the doll, the doll's racial and cultural identities, her various physical changes over the decades, and what, if any, psychological effects the doll and her metamorphoses has had on young girls throughout the Barbie years.

Stone includes input from professionals in the psychology fields, authors who have written about Barbie, and tons of responses from young girls up through adult women on their own personal experiences with Barbie. This was perhaps one of my favorite aspects of the book, reading the words and insights of so many young girls and young women really demonstrated Barbie's major impact on our society and reinforced her identity as an American icon. The images throughout the book of Barbie over the years also exemplified this, it was

interesting and often amusing to see all these different Barbie's and Barbie companions and how each one changed (some drastically) over the decades. As a young girl I had less than five Barbie dolls over my entire doll-playing years, so I was coming from a middle-ground point of view in my opinion, I wasn't a Barbie-fanatic and I wasn't a Barbie-hater either. While reading this book I often tried to relate my experiences to those I was reading about, and I think reader's own Barbie experiences will offer them varying reading experiences as a result. Since I was not a huge Barbie fan I think I geared more toward the "what's the harm" side initially, however, after reading both sides I can also see where much of the "Barbie-bashers" are coming from as well. Overall, this book was really fun to read, very interesting, and it really made me look at Barbie in a whole new light, definitely a recommended read for anyone who has ever played with a Barbie (or wanted to but their parents wouldn't buy them one).

Amber says

A rather short examination of Barbie. The scope of the work vs the length given leaves chapters feeling like there is a lot to be expanded on. However, this book does a good job of balancing positive and negative opinions that have been made about Barbie.

Melissa says

Award-winning author Tanya Lee Stone is back with another hit. This time, Stone tackles the biography of one of the world's most loved (and hated) icons – Barbie. Whether you see her as an innocent child's doll or a reflection of society's obsession with beauty; this book has something for everyone. The genius of this book begins in the foreword by Meg Cabot, who eloquently offers us her memories of being Barbie obsessed, "supporting my Barbie fix was what started me on a path to eventually becoming a money-hoarding multimillionaire." Stone deftly weaves the history of Barbie, and her creator; with "every girl" (and guy) recollections culled from hundreds of interviews and solicited emails. In retro handbag cutouts, Stone highlights quotes from young, old, male, female, rich & famous, and the girl next door. Black and white photos, some archival and some staged purposely for this book, are placed throughout keeping the book from becoming text heavy. A wonderful eight page color insert introduces us to Barbie through the years. Chapters cover everything from Barbie's invention by Ruth Handler in 1959, to society's reaction to her clothes, body and her impact on girls' vision of themselves. Stone says, "There is not much middle-of-the-road when it comes to Barbie," and that is certainly apparent in the research and interviews presented in the chapters on Barbie and her impact on body image. "In America, girls between the ages of three and six own an average of twelve dolls, and 90 percent of girls between three and ten own at least one" making this book a perfect fit for any collection. The final version of the book will include photo credits, an extensive bibliography, source notes and an index. Melissa McBride, School Librarian, Southold Elementary School, Southold, NY.

Lisa N says

Brief history of the Mattel Company and the creation of Barbie thrown together with a wacky mix of juvenile sensation elements and conjecture.

The story of Ruth Handler and the start up of Mattel was very interesting. Ruth was gutsy and took a lot of rewarding risks. One such venture was her gamble on the untried idea of marketing to kids, by making a huge advertising commitment to the ABC network with the new show, The Mickey Mouse Club. Mattel's Burp Gun sales went through the roof.

Mattel was a progressive employer. Their first head of production was an African American man. They had a very integrated work force, which was virtually unheard of in the early 1950s.

It took several years for Ruth's concept of Barbie to materialize to the toy shelves. The author could have elaborated much more here. It almost sounds like Ruth copied a German doll.

I enjoyed reading about the evolution of Barbie along with the pictures; however, this book fell far short of its potential.
