



Barbie the Icon

This chapter is about Barbie. You might be wondering what a cultural icon like Barbie is doing in a book on sex. Perhaps the following statements by our female readers will help explain:

When you were a little girl, did your Barbie doll ever have sex?

“I had lots of Barbies. She and my giant panda bear got naked and ‘did it,’ and my sister and I dressed her up in Ken’s clothes. Unfortunately, you can’t dress up Ken in Barbie’s clothes. We tried.” *female age 18*

“My basement was a temple to Barbie and all her relatives. Barbie lived in a soap opera complete with abortions, sex changes, and adultery. She and Ken frequently got naked in their Laura Ashley canopy bed.” *female age 24*

“Barbie and Ken had a very active relationship and ‘sex’ life. It’s hard to say it was a sex life without any genitalia. I guess I used them to emulate the adults around me. Barbie and Ken often went skinny dipping at the ocean, and slept nude most times.” *female age 35*

“My Barbie had Ken on her ALL the time. If I knew then what I know now, Barbie would have been on top more often.” *female age 44*

“My friend had a Ken and we used to make them have sex by making their little plastic bodies rub against each other when they were lying in Barbie’s little nylon bed. We were about ten and were disappointed that Ken’s underwear was glued on.” *female age 22*

“You know those parts in movies that parents were always trying to hide from younger children? I got a slight peek one day, but all I saw were sheets moving. After I saw that, Barbie and Ken made those sounds and simulated those actions. But I wasn’t sure what they were really doing.” *female age 22*

From the Guide To Getting It On

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“She had kinky fantasies and a lot of BDSM. Barbie was a fun girl.”

female age 18

“Not Barbies but definitely with my Lego men. Don’t ask me why, but those spacemen certainly had interesting encounters when I sent them on missions. I was pretty inventive for a 7-year-old.”

female age 19

While these women’s experiences by no means represent that of most girls, it is likely they represent a significant number. (See more reader comments on their Barbie’s sex life at the end of the chapter.)

Eleven Inches of Attitude

The year was 1959. The place was the Toy Fair in New York that’s held every February. Mattel’s new toy named Barbie was falling flat on her face, or would have if such a thing had been anatomically possible.

Since the beginning of time, toy buyers in America have placed orders for their Christmas inventory at the annual Toy Fair. It is the moment that determines which toys make it to toy-store shelves the following Christmas, and Barbie was getting the cold shoulder.

This was nearly sixty years ago, and the radical new doll named Barbie was shattering everyone’s idea of what a child’s toy should be. The price she paid for her uniqueness was to be ignored by toy buyers. Buyers for toy stores in 1959 were placing orders for dolls that were soft and huggable, dolls whose souls were made from rags.

Barbie was cloned from a mother doll named Lilli who was made in Germany. In the late 1950s, Lilli caught the eye of Ruth Handler, co-founder of the Mattel toy company. Lilli was a sexpot of a doll who was marketed to horny German males. She looked like a German streetwalker. Lilli had been adapted from an adult comic strip where she had been a comical gold-digger and barfly.

Both Barbie and Lilli were 11 inches tall. The apples did not fall far from the tree when it came to looks, but Ms. Handler made sure that Barbie was born into an entirely different social class. Lilli was definitely working class, while Barbie was Jackie Kennedy. Interestingly, Barbie’s place of birth (at least the address of Mattel) was Hawthorne, California, the same city where America’s other sex idol, Marilyn Monroe, was born.

Large Breasts and No Panties

In 1959, toy-store buyers wanted what they knew—dolls that reflected our society’s idea of what a good girl should be and what she would hopefully become: a selfless mother, teacher, housewife, or nurse. They didn’t get it when they saw Barbie, a doll who has been described by author Christopher Varaste as:

“An 11½ inch glamour queen with exotic features in a striking black and white swimsuit. She was everyone and defiantly no one. She seemed ageless, though she was supposed to be a teenager. She was beguiling, mysterious, and yet innocent. She was a symbol of a culture struggling to find a suitable identity. As a toy for young girls, her rather severe look took some getting used to. Her Asian eyes, curly bangs, and big red lips could have belonged to a wide range of ethnic backgrounds. She was, in a word, peculiar.” (From Christopher Varaste’s incredible book of Barbie photographs *Face of the American Dream—Barbie Doll, 1959 - 1971*)

If it hadn’t been for a stroke of marketing genius, Barbie would have gone down in flames. But Mattel’s strategy for selling Barbie to the American public was as unique as their product. They were one of the first companies in history to make TV commercials that were aimed at children viewers.

From the very first commercial, Barbie was portrayed as a human with a glamorous and adventurous life. She was never described as a doll and she was never burdened with trivial limitations such as parents or a husband.

Mattel aired their first Barbie commercial during the wildly popular *Mickey Mouse Club* TV show. If parents didn’t know what to make of Barbie, their American daughters certainly did. Once the summer of 1959 started, every Barbie in every toy store was bought as quickly as it arrived.

Barbie’s official name was Barbie Millicent Roberts. When Ken was created a few years later, his name was Ken Carson. It is fitting and telling that Barbie and Ken’s namesake was Carson/Roberts. Carson/Roberts was the advertising company that played such a dramatic role in Barbie’s success.

Not Your Normal Housewife

Barbie’s persona was created by two women who had both violated the housewife norm of the 1950s. One had co-founded a large corporation, the other was a tall, striking, unmarried veteran of the fashion industry. Unlike

any doll before her, Barbie was created as a young woman whose life didn't revolve around a husband and a family. Her limitations were as thin as her waist and her possibilities as large as her breasts.

Early in Barbie's evolution, someone wanted to make a miniature vacuum cleaner that Barbie could use to vacuum the house. But Ruth Handler, Mattel's co-founder, refused to allow this. During the era when Barbie was born, it was automatically assumed that a woman's role was to be a housewife and raise babies. Keeping Barbie vacuum-cleaner-free was an important statement to little girls. It was a signal that they could exceed the boundaries that our culture had traditionally placed on them.

Barbie Is Nobody's Wife

Islamic leaders in Iran have described Barbie as being Satanic. They have expressed concerns that "the unwholesome flexibility of these dolls, their destructive beauty, and their semi-nudity have an effect on the minds and morality of young children." Plenty of American parents have felt the same.

However, if you read Mattel's press releases for Barbie, you'll see that when she dresses to the nines, it's not to capture the gaze of a guy or even a girl. Barbie dresses for Barbie. She has no need to please anyone but herself. This is one of the many Barbie qualities that throws feminists for a loop: they detest the emphasis on glamour, yet no one can ever accuse Barbie of coddling to the whims of a man. The Barbie that Ruth Handler created doesn't care if she goes home alone and she doesn't need the approval of a male to make her feel good about herself. That's been as much a part of her message to little girls as the big boobs and tiny waist.

Here's another part of the Barbie mystique that upsets feminists: Barbie succeeds and succeeds well in traditional male professions. Whether she's being a firefighter or a physician, an astronaut or a police detective, Barbie always pulls it off with her femininity fully intact. Some women have said this sets an impossible standard for little girls, but it also tells girls that you don't have to grow balls to have balls. Barbie has shown girls they don't have to surrender the things that they like about their femininity to compete in a man's world. Barbie has provided a way for girls to experiment with the positive messages their parents and teachers are hopefully giving them. She also provides a way for girls to be selfish and mean, as all children can be.

Mattel's Barbie has come with so few of the traditional limitations that any girl can make her do and be anything she wants.

Less Fighting, Better Play?

Researchers have studied what types of play lead to more bickering and what kinds lead to less. One thing they didn't expect to find was that girls who are playing with Barbie dolls tend to fight less and display more advanced levels of play than girls who are playing with traditional dolls. The range of activities that Barbie play provides is much greater than a doll that you simply hold, feed, and change. Barbie has friends, activities, and a whole life that's as expansive as her different outfits and hairstyles. In addition, Barbie's presence invites the involvement of mothers, aunts, gay uncles, and even grandmothers who had their own Barbies when they were growing up.

Barbie was never intended to be the *Leap Frog* or *Hooked On Phonics* of children's play. The fact that Barbie inspires a high quality of play and better language development was not Mattel's goal. Mattel's emphasis has been for people to buy more Barbies and especially more Barbie accessories, perhaps in the same way that companies who make computer printers hope to nail you for the cost of the pricey replacement ink cartridges. It is fascinating how Mattel has managed to achieve this goal without limiting the persona of Barbie.

Mattel has never married off Barbie. Yet Mattel has sold millions of Barbie wedding dresses and thousands of Dream-Bride Barbies or Wedding-Fantasy Barbies. The hitch has been that the wedding idea is all just a big Barbie dream or fantasy. Keeping Barbie from really being married allows little girls to marry and unmarry her as often as they desire. Being perpetually single keeps Barbie footloose and fancy-free.

Mattel never wanted Barbie to be pregnant, but plenty of children wanted her to have a baby. So they devised a "Barbie Baby-Sits" kit which contained an infant and other childcare objects.

As much as Barbie has been associated with fashion and glamour, she has never defined fashion nor been at the cutting edge. She has always been a year or two behind, like most women who can't afford this year's originals.

Keeping Barbie a Moving Target

Few people will dispute that Barbie has become an American icon. Given her iconic status, you would think she would appear the same today as she

was in 1959. But since the very beginning, Mattel has made Barbie change and evolve. Some of these changes have been technological, like using different vinyls, skin tones, and hair. Other changes have been purely stylistic.

Barbie's face has changed as well. The first Barbie's face was a combination of her harsh-looking German mother and the Geishas of Japan, the country that first manufactured and helped to refine her. You can also see how the vinyl used in the #5 Ponytail Barbie of 1961 contained an oily compound that makes her look like she has a greasy face or is perspiring. Unfortunately, the more recent Barbies have been given a bubbly, wide-eyed generic smile rather than the more intriguing streetwalker-Geisha expression of the early years. The faces on the early Barbies were all hand-painted in Japan, while the latter ones are machine stenciled.

Barbie Torture Sessions

A study by Tara Kuther of Western Connecticut State titled "Early Adolescents' experiences with, and Views of, Barbie" clearly echoes our own readers' experiences with Barbie. When Kuther interviewed 10 to 13 year old children about Barbie, she found reports of frequent Barbie torture sessions. These included seeing if Barbie can successfully fly out of a second-story window, cutting Barbie's hair off and burning her clothes because she talked too much, making her dress up as a GI Joe, tearing off her head, drowning her at sea, melting her in a microwave, burning her at the stake upside down and attaching explosives to her.

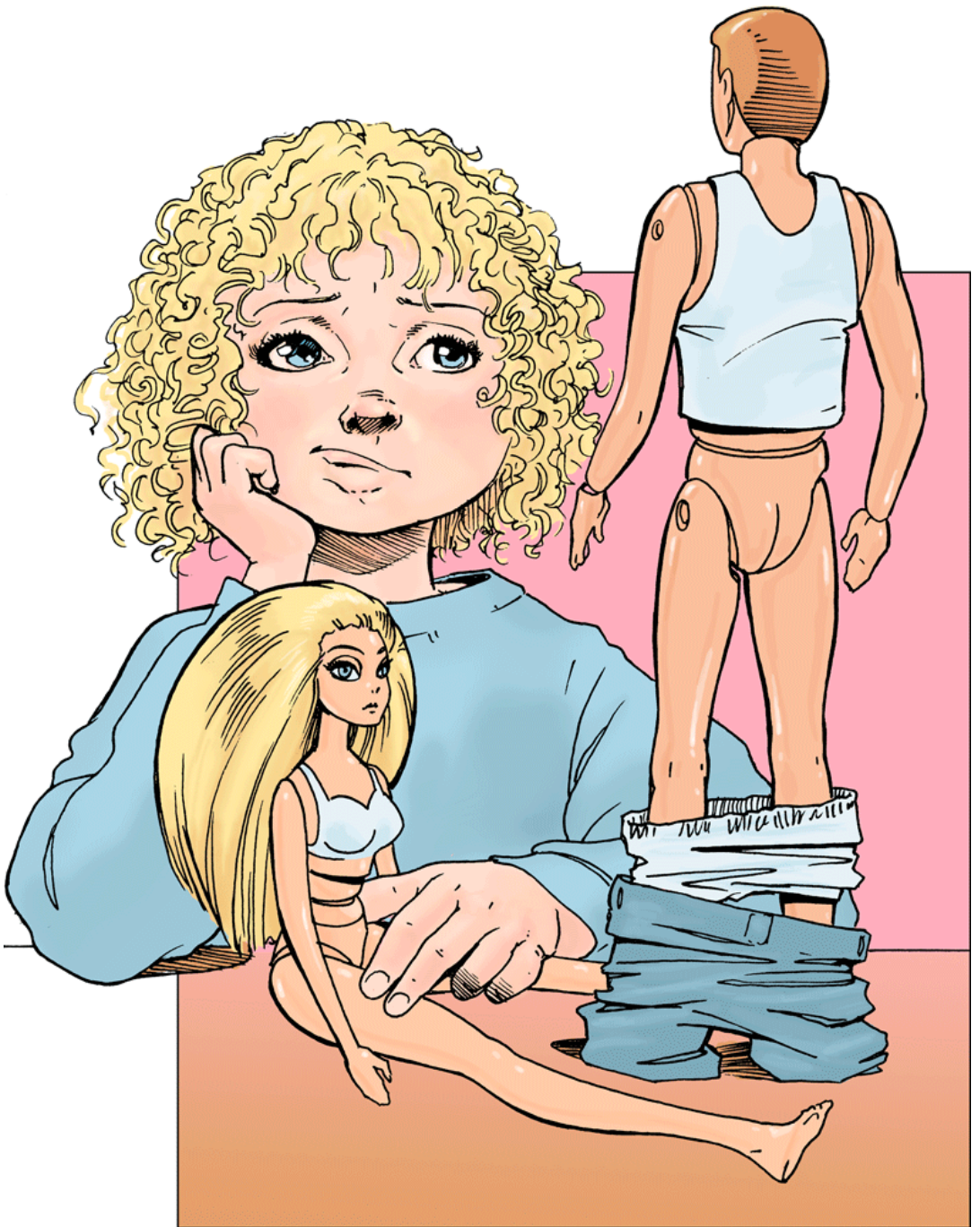
We welcome these enterprising middle schoolers as future readers of the *Guide To Getting It On!*

A Cock-Ring Ken?

Ken was an afterthought to Barbie. He was released in answer to the demand for a Barbie boyfriend, but he was always expendable.

When Ken was being conceived, the two women who had created the persona of Barbie wanted him to have a bulge between his legs. The male executives at Mattel were horrified and embarrassed at the suggestion. They wanted Ken to have the same crotch as Barbie. The women held out and Ken got a compromise bulge, although no one would ever accuse him of holding a candle to GI Joe.

In the mid-1960s, Mattel released a "Ken a Go Go" doll, where Ken played the ukulele. Not long after that, Ken was euthanized. He reappeared in 1969



with an extreme makeover that Mattel hoped would revive his dismal sales. Then, in 1993, Mattel released the truly amazing “Earring Magic Ken.” This Ken was literally swept off the shelves by a stampede of adult gay males.

“Earring Magic Ken,” also known as “Cock Ring Ken,” was dressed in a lavender vest and had a necklace around his neck with a cock ring on it. The cock ring was not only the spitting image of the cock rings that men at gay male rages were wearing around their necks, but it was scaled to the exact dimensions as well. (It seems that someone in the design department at Mattel got one by the corporate brass.)

The more recent Kens have actually appeared as if they might be straight and even have a bit of a hunk factor. If Ken really is up for servicing Barbie, Mattel should consider making a Viagra Ken. That’s because the average Ken has at least eight Barbies that he needs to put out for.

Ken Turned 50 in 2011—Rose from the Ashes, And Finally Had His Day

At the 2004 Toy Fair, Mattel executives announced that after forty-three years together, Barbie was dumping Ken. Poor Ken: Mattel put him into assisted living. Mattel was pushing one of their newer boytoys named Blaine. Blaine looked like a Southern California mall-rat druggie. As for how well Blaine might have been equipped, in one of his earlier packagings he was holding an electric guitar with a neck that was so long it was at least the equivalent of a nine-inch penis. Blaine came out like a lion, racking up respectable sales, but he had absolutely no staying power. You will be hard pressed to find him anymore.

By 2007, Mattel announced they were bringing Ken out of retirement. What with Viagra and all... The new Ken had received a great deal of reparative therapy, as he had a radical new hairdo, a more manly face, and he screamed “I’m straight.” But as of early 2009, Ken could not be found anywhere. Was it possible that Ken had a reparative-therapy relapse, and he and Blaine hooked-up?

But then came 2010. There was the Barbie Harley-Davidson Barbie and Ken Doll Gift Set. And then came Ken’s greatest moment in his almost 50 years as he starred in the blockbuster film *Toy Story 3*. While he didn’t put to rest any rumors about his sexual orientation, Ken was the *Toy Story 3* dark horse scene stealer.

Note: Just as Barbie's boys have been seriously fey, their accessories have often been quite phallic. Ken's cookout set has a long fork that is skewering a big pink weenie, his hunting outfit has a massive rifle, and his baseball outfit includes a really long bat.

Mattel Misses the Muslim Market, But Nails India

With the highly successful release of Fulla, a Middle East knockoff of Barbie, it's clear that Mattel missed what could have been a lucrative opportunity in the Muslim world. Fulla is a fine Muslim doll of Barbie proportions who comes in a bright pink box with her own prayer mat and a black abaya and headscarf. Fulla is selling like gangbusters in the Middle East.

We at Goofy Foot Press are the proud owners of a *Barbie in India* doll. The Indian Barbie comes wearing a colorful saree and ethnic jewelry. Better yet, she has a bindi, which is the traditional red spot between her eyes. We haven't undressed her to see if she might have a bindi between her gravity-defying breasts as well, but we're sure millions of Indian kids have.

2017 Update: A Latina Barbie Revives Falling Sales

In 1990, the best selling Barbie was "Totally Hair Barbie." Today, the best selling Barbie is a Latina who has curves and brown eyes.

More than five years ago, sales of Barbie had begun to tank. Mattel decided that in order to revive sales, they would diversify Barbie. So today's Barbies come in ten different skin tones and four different body types. This has been a very successful intervention: Mattel's diversification of Barbie has brought her new life and a large increase in sales.

For the first time ever, Mattel is also running ads that show fathers and daughters playing with Barbie dolls together. To see images of diverse line of Barbies, do a browser search for "Barbie's Surprising Comeback Has Everything To Do With Race—How diversity saved Mattel's iconic doll." on Huffpo.

Parents & Barbie

What follows is the ultimate discussion of Barbie by the parents of a young girl. It is from Margaret Atwood's piece *The Female Body*:

He said, I won't have one of those things around the house. It gives a young girl a false notion of beauty, not to mention anatomy. If a real woman was built like that, she'd fall flat on her face.

She said, If we don't let her have one like all the other girls she'll feel singled out. It'll become an issue. She'll long for one and she'll long to turn into one. Repression breeds sublimation. You know that.

He said, It's not just the pointy plastic tits, it's the wardrobes. The wardrobes and that stupid male doll, what's his name, the one with the underwear glued on.

She said, Better to get it over with when she's young.

He said, All right, but don't let me see it.

She came whizzing down the stairs, thrown like a dart. She was stark naked. Her hair had been chopped off, her head was turned back to front, she was missing some toes, and she'd been tattooed all over her body with purple ink, in a scrollwork design. She hit the potted azalea, trembled there for a moment like a botched angel, and fell.

He said, I guess we're safe.

Reader's Comments

"Ways Barbie impacted my femininity? She made me hate clothes."

female age 21

"Ways Barbie impacted my femininity? I dress better now."

female age 20

"My sister and I were a little obsessed with Barbie. We turned old dressers and coffee tables into Barbie mansions. I played with Barbie from the time I was 4 until I was 11 or 12. I'm not sure when Barbie and Ken started having sex (they weren't just sleeping in the same bed), maybe when I was 7, that's when I learned what intercourse involved. Mostly, I got the dolls undressed, put them in bed and twisted their bodies back and forth. They couldn't really do anything since Barbie didn't have a vagina and Ken didn't have a penis. However, once Barbie and Ken started having sex, they never stopped. Every night. That's how I thought it was done, only at night, only in bed. Several Barbies went through a sex change. I got her ready for the operation (remember Dr. Barbie?), wheeled her into the operating room, and when she came out, she'd been replaced with a Ken doll. All of Barbie's friends talked about her

behind her back when she got the change—her mother (grandma Barbie) had a hard time coping. I’m being glib, but I did act all of this out. My Barbies had detailed conversations, had intimate family lives, detailed jobs, etc. There was a lot of adultery in Barbie’s world which resulted in divorces, private investigators, and alcoholism. All the adultery was acted out in full detail, from Ken coming on to his secretary at work to the act itself to Barbie throwing all of Ken’s clothes out the window... Barbie helped me act out my own questions about being an adult. I’m a feminist now, I have a healthy relationship, earn more than my spouse, don’t wear make-up or high-heeled shoes, and my husband helps with all the housework. It’s okay to let little girls play with Barbie.” *female age 24*

“Ways Barbie impacted your femininity and/or sexuality: There was one summer when I was fairly obsessed with the fact that Ken had no dick. Beach Ken had a totally inaccurately placed suggestion of one, but no balls.” *female age 21*

“My cousin and I were addicted to our Barbies, from as early as I can remember. I think I was 7 or 8 when our Barbies started having all sorts of high-drama romances, and there were ALL SORTS of different sexual experiences going on. My cousin and I were very creative with our Barbies’ sexual escapades. I remember mine even having some homosexual experiences, which my cousin thought was weird. I actually think that my Barbies were a big outlet for my sexual curiosity growing up. When I was a teenager and no longer played with Barbies, I wondered if maybe it was odd that I made my Barbies have all sorts of sexual experiences when I was so young. But as I’ve gotten older, I’ve realized that sexually, I’m a very open and curious person, and I think it’s just that I’ve always been that way. When I played with Barbies with my cousin though, I almost always had to play Ken. I find myself now very comfortable filling a lot of traditionally masculine roles in my relationships. The two may or may not be related.” *female age 22*

“Ugh, as much as I hate to admit it, yes, my Barbies had sex. And since I also had a twelve-inch Luke Skywalker doll, they did it A LOT. I also played with a girlfriend at the time. We did sex play with our dolls.” *female age 34*

Excellent Resources: This discussion of Barbie has provided only a small sketch of the truly rich and fascinating history of this cultural icon. If it has piqued your interest, you are strongly encouraged to check out at least two excellent books on the subject. One is M.G. Lord's *Forever Barbie—The Unauthorized Biography of a Real Doll*, Avon Books. One of Lord's many fine observations can be found in her discussion of Barbie's friend, Midge: "If plastic dolls could kill themselves, I'm sure Midge would have tried." Talk about having to spend your entire life playing second fiddle!

Regarding the second highly recommended book, *Face of the American Dream, Barbie Doll (1959-1971)* by Christopher Varaste, Hobby House Press, who knew that photos of the early Barbie could be so fascinating and compelling? Barbie's face and expression during this period was much more interesting than now, and Varaste does an exceptional job of capturing it.

The references for the Margaret Atwood quote: *The Female Body* by Margaret Atwood, originally printed in Vol. XXIX, No. 4, Fall 1990 issue of *Michigan Quarterly Review*, edited by Laurence Goldstein.

Thanks to Emily Peck for her article: "Barbie's Surprising Comeback Has Everything To Do With Race—How diversity saved Mattel's iconic doll," in the Huffington Post, March 2, 2017.

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