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Forever Barbie: The Unauthorized Biography of a Real Doll. By M. G. Lord. (New York: Walkerbooks, 2004 [1994]. Pp. vi+325, ISBN 0-86492-409-7)

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REVIEWS / COMPTES RENDUS

Forever Barbie: The Unauthorized Biography of a Real Doll. By M. G. Lord. (New York: Walkerbooks, 2004 (1994). Pp. vi+325, ISBN 0-86492-409-7)

While this is the 2004 paperback edition to M.G. Lord's 1994 book, the only updating she has done is to include a three-page preface in which she briefly mentions the death of Barbie's creator, Ruth Handler, and Barbie's recent break-up with Ken in favour of Australian surfer Blaine. More importantly, Lord lays out her position on Barbie, saying that femininity is a set of coded behaviours that existed long before the doll, taught to daughters by their mothers so that "femininity is the toxin, Barbie is the scapegoat" (vii). Lord wants to study Barbie's evolution and development as well as how she reflects notions of femininity. The remainder of the book's content does not progress beyond data from 1994, leading me to believe she has not done any further updating for this edition beyond the brief preface.

Although Lord discusses other peoples' attacks on Barbie, she herself seems somewhat of a Barbie apologist. Her writing style is fairly accessible to the non-academic, but intelligent and articulate enough to hold the interest of serious scholars. I did find the lack of numbers to correspond to the notes at the end of the book to be frustrating. The book is sprinkled liberally with photographs of Barbie dolls, Barbie collections, Barbie-inspired artwork (to which an entire chapter of the book is devoted), Barbie enthusiasts and Mattel staff. Lord's fieldwork includes interviews with Mattel bigwigs of the past and the present, including the Handlers themselves. She also speaks with Barbie collectors, Barbie detractors, women with eating disorders, some of whom put the blame on Barbie's slender shoulders and others who blame their mothers, transvestites who wish to look like her, and gay men who continue to enjoy playing with her. Lord devotes an entire chapter to Cindy Jackson, an American woman who, as of 1994, had endured over twenty operations in order to look more like Barbie.

In chapter one, Lord touches upon some of the prior research that has been done and gives a bare bones history of the doll. Barbie originated as a knockoff of a German sex doll named “Bild Lilli”, who was discovered by Mattel cofounder Ruth Handler while on vacation. Lord says “this makes Barbie a toy designed by women for women to teach women what — for better or for worse — is expected of them by society” (8).

Lord uses the first third of the book, chapters 2 to 6, to explore Barbie through the decades from the 1950s to the 1990s as well as her own childhood relationship with the doll. Lord explains that she felt no envy of Barbie’s generous breasts, having watched her own buxom blonde mother succumb to cancer when Lord was just beginning puberty. Ironically, Barbie’s creator, Ruth Handler, also battled breast cancer, eventually creating a company called “Nearly Me” to design breast prostheses for women who had undergone mastectomies.

Lord dissects Barbie’s declining social status as the doll goes from a high fashion teen model to a Jackie Kennedy clone in the 1950s and 60s. But she had to change with the times and in 1971 her trademark heavy-lidded downcast gaze was raised to be a direct gaze. As a response to the women’s movement, Barbie was now anything but demure. But it was the widening of her smile in 1977 to which Lord attributes her final downward plummet, transforming her from aloof to vapid. But Barbie’s “tastes remained doggedly middle- to lower-class” (195).

In chapter 10, Lord discusses how men’s sexual fetishes can be connected to Barbie, with her seductive long hair, arched foot and exaggerated breasts. She calls Barbie “a space-age fertility archetype” (216) with genitalia that is irrelevant to gender, claiming that her broad shoulders and narrow hips conspire to make Barbie’s build like that of a transvestite. Interestingly enough, Lord speaks to the Handlers’ son, Ken, for whom Barbie’s former longtime companion was named. Ken Handler wants nothing to do with either doll and refuses to let his own children play with their grandparents’ creations.

While touching upon the mixed messages sent by Mattel with the creation of a McDonald’s stand for Barbie in the same year as Great Shape Barbie was released, it is Jane Fonda whom Lord blames for starting the aerobics craze. Lord says that children can happily, even sadistically, force Barbie through a workout without feeling the urge to exercise (111). Lord feels that it is in fact mothers who influence their daughters’

sexuality and body image, and not Barbie. She goes on to explain that Barbie was created to display garments but using human-scale clothing on a doll one sixth the size of a human would cause Barbie's waistband to bulge like a spare tire. "Because fabric of a proportionally diminished gauge could not be woven on existing looms, something else had to be pared down — and that something was Barbie's figure" (228).

Lord defends Mattel's Talking Barbie who stirred up controversy and was yanked from toy store shelves for saying "Math is tough". Contrary to public outcry that insisted this sent a derogatory message to young girls, Lord believes it was a call to study hard and master math because, after all, the doll did not say "Math is tough... for girls".

Although she believes that Barbie is decked out like a parody of her own gender (298), Lord also says "Barbie is an emblem of 'femininity', a concept quite different from biological femaleness" (294). Ultimately, Lord achieves her goal, treating the reader to a behind-the-scenes look at the rise of Barbie, the fall of the Handlers, and how a plastic doll has influenced generations of young girls (and boys) in notions of sexuality, femininity, independence and acceptance. Barbie is the projection of wildly different fantasies, and "may be the most potent icon of American popular culture in the twentieth century" (6).

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Storytelling: Interdisciplinary and Intercultural Perspectives. By Irene Maria F. Blayer and Monica Sanchez, eds. (New York: Peter Lang, 2002. Pp. xi + 321, ISBN 0-8204-5125-8)

Storytelling consists of an amalgamation of eleven carefully crafted essays that bring together in one volume the collective view of its contributors, resulting in an interesting presentation of their individual perspectives from interdisciplinary and intercultural points of view. Blayer and Sanchez have succeeded in making available to the scholarly community a worthwhile and usable resource to those whose interests lie particularly in the areas of literature, sociology, anthropology, folklore, ethnography, and most relevant, storytelling. Each of the participating authors provides aspects of the story and the storytelling process from