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When Barbie Dated GI Joe: America's Romance with Cold War Toys (Review)

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still thriving. Any exhibit requires the curators to make some tough choices, and the choices are especially difficult in the badly underfunded world of the county historical society. What I saw at the Lawrence County Historical Society showed me that it's making the right kind of choices.

PERRY K. BLATZ

Duquesne University

When Barbie Dated GI Joe: America's Romance with Cold War Toys.

HELEN S. SCHWARTZ, exhibit historian and principal researcher; LORENA GARMEZY, educator; KEVIN MURPHY, designer; CHRISTOPHER PENSCH, LYNNE POIRIER-WILSON, and JEAN BURKS, curators. Strong Museum, Rochester, New York. Local funding from Herter, Secrest & Emery, Attorneys at Law and Marine Midland Bank.

Advertisements hyped the family bomb shelter as an alternative playroom, and children played at war with the Atomic Flash Zoomeray Gun or the Agent Zero M Weapons Set. The Risk game, first issued in 1959, had as its goal world domination. *When Barbie Dated GI Joe*, a Strong Museum exhibit which opens in a fallout shelter, is not so much about children's play, however, as it is about adult fantasies and expectations.

Exhibit historian Helen S. Schwartz argues that the strength of museum research is that it begins with the material evidence. The objects in *When Barbie Dated GI Joe* show how Cold War ideology collided explosively with cultural constructs of gender, reproducing a miniature world of aggressive, action-oriented boys and domestic, consumption-oriented girls. From the Little Lady Electric Stove to the Easy Bake Oven, 1950s-era toys prompted girls to assume a feminine stance of preparedness through shopping, cooking, and cleaning. Mattel's designers imagined a change of clothes for every occasion, from the Barbie-Q to the Theater Date. Weddings were far more exciting than the crudely limited career options or even parenting. Men were only appendages in this feminized landscape—Ken, the exhibit points out, existed only to escort Barbie. The boys' world, set in the West or on the new frontiers in space, was one of guns and gizmos such as the New Smoking Texan, Jr. and the Atomic Disintegrator cap pistols. While girls were encouraged to imagine domestic bliss with the insipid "Ken," boys modeled themselves on the manly G.I. Joes. Clearly, child's play reproduced adult contradictions. In spite of these differences, the male dolls or action figures carried boys into the same brave world of endless accessory purchases.

The exhibit juxtaposes the negligible black representation among the toys with the dramatic news photographs of the 1963 March on Washington. Mattel marketed its first black doll, Francie, in 1967, without much success, although later models were popular.

The exhibit also explores the public's ambivalent feelings about technology. Over-sized, spiny Godzillas represented the terror of radiation, but children were comforted that they could safely harness the dangerous technology for the benefit of society. Chemcraft produced The Story



StromBecker

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Moline, Illinois • New York Office: 200 Fifth Avenue (Room 340)



Ads such as this StromBecker Toys advertisement from *Playthings* magazine, March 1946, reveal how toys from the Cold War period, designed by adults, communicated adult concern. (Photograph courtesy of The Strong Museum, Rochester, New York.)

of Atomic Energy in a science kit touted as “Harmless! Exciting! Practical!” While the blue, supermarket “rocket ride” featured fins just like the family Chevrolet, boys also bought the reality-based Cape Canaveral Playset.

G.I. Joe production went on a hiatus from 1977 to 1981. In the exhibit, a pair of talking dolls, sabotaged by the Barbie Liberation Organization (BLO), suggest modern-day hostility to these still ubiquitous Cold War toys. The “surgically” modified G.I. Joe, smuggled back into toy stores, chirps, “what should I wear to the dance?” Even today, Barbies, Joes, and their plastic pals remain staples at the mall toy store, and Lego markets a line of pastel-colored home interiors not very different from the Little Miss Homemaker Bathroom Furniture marketed in the 1950s. Barbie’s career options have been enhanced, however, and new enemies like environmental polluters and sociopathic mutants have replaced the red menace. In 1991, Desert Storm collectors’ cards briefly took the place of the Fight the Red Menace Bubble Gum Cards published 40 years earlier.

The focus of the exhibit is not the Cold War, but the toys that it spawned. The toys tend to trivialize the Cold War itself, however. Allusions to historical developments are the backdrop and counterpoint to the toys, but none of these mileposts conveys the powerful undertow of fear beneath the period’s ostensible optimism. Only a small illustration, a painting by a young girl from Robert Cole’s *The Moral Life of Children* (1986), suggests the period’s crippling insecurity; it is, unfortunately, lost among the surrounding toys.

The exhibit takes great advantage, however, of the way in which toys trigger memories. Viewers add their own stories and page through a small notebook: “It scared the Hell out of me. I expected the world to end at any time.” Nuclear fears invaded the family, “I was jealous of neighbors with fallout shelters and angry that my family didn’t ‘care enough’ to try and protect us!” “I remember thinking, in the third grade, as I sat in the hall and ‘covered’ my head, ‘what was I protecting myself from?’ How were my tiny arms going to protect my body from falling lights, ceiling, roof, bricks?” A woman wrote that, as a child, inspired by a Vietnam War-era D.C. Comic featuring “Battle Nurse!” she aspired to become a nurse so that she could care heroically for atom bomb victims. The personal testimony of foreboding evokes the world of experience that the toys alone cannot capture. The low-tech handwritten visitor comments—used to even greater effect at Birmingham’s new Civil Rights Institute, where the word “dogs” speaks volumes—ultimately proves more engaging and moving than computer terminals and video components.

As the Strong Museum clearly intends, by focusing on what Eberle called “heavier topics,” *When Barbie Dated GI Joe* leaves viewers a bit more critical of their own assumptions: “I can’t believe people were so naive . . . [It] makes me wonder what we’ll learn in forty years about what we do today.”

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