
Book Reviews

Deconstructing Dolls: Girlhoods and the Meanings of Play

Miriam Forman-Brunell, ed.

New York: Berghahn Books, 2021.

Preface, acknowledgments, introduction, images, bibliography, and index. 160 pp.

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As a curator of dolls and a feminist, I am an enthusiast of most works by Miriam Forman-Brunell. Biases aside, *Deconstructing Dolls: Girlhoods and the Meanings of Play*, edited by Forman-Brunell, proves a noteworthy source for readers interested in dolls, girlhood, and emerging contexts and disciplinary developments. The eight contributors demonstrate how a variety of backgrounds and interpretive frameworks provide unique understandings of dolls' meanings.

The first three essays explore dolls and literature from an intertextual perspective. Two of these essays focus on American Girl, a brand founded in 1986 by Pleasant Rowland, a former educator, newscaster, and author of children's books and educational materials. According to corporate documents, the company manufactures dolls intended to "enrich the

lives of American girls by fostering pride in the traditions of growing up female in America and celebrating the lifestyle of girls today." American Girl has enjoyed enormous successes over the years but not without sharp criticisms. In "Dolling Up History: Fictions of Jewish American Girlhood," Lisa Marcus critically examines American Girl doll Rebecca Rubin and the set of books that accompany her, and she argues that girls deserve more complex history lessons. Marcus calls attention to what Jeanne Brady called the "chocolate cake with vitamins" approach touted by American Girl. She contends "narratives that stress immigrant assimilation and belonging not only promote an exceptionalist vision of America as benign, tolerant, and just; in their erasure of conflict, oppression, and resistance, they also fail to offer models for confronting injustice in a complex world" (p. 30). Many familiar with the brand also accused American Girl of whitewashing history when it introduced Addy Walker, a nine-year-old born into slavery, and her stories. In "From American Girls into American Women: A Critique of Women's Nostalgic Readings of the American Girl Dolls," Molly

Brookfield further explores the brand incorporating postmodern theories of nostalgia and the meanings of objects. She finds that many of the women who played with American Girl Dolls as children have come to understand the irony of nostalgia and materialism.

From discussions of Barbie and Modular to Black Barbie and Nicki Minaj, the second set of essays examines doll productions and performances. “Homemade Identities: Girls, Dolls, and DIY” by April Renee Mandrona was one of the more compelling pieces. Mandrona uses textuality (the study of the relationship between material culture and social meaning), integrating her girlhood self, to examine the doll-making activities of girls. In providing a brief history of craft movements, she reminds readers that the making of handmade items provides women with a “form of self-determination that could be achieved through physical labor of all sorts, and a newly discovered malleability of the corresponding feminine identities of various domestic items” (p. 97). This is a perspective remarkably different from the mentalities of the evolving middle class in nineteenth-century America. Doll making was a means of domestic economy and morality, especially as parents felt these values at risk with the rise of commercially manufactured fashion dolls. Mandrona’s research suggests that “through the making of handmade dolls, girls can be brought more fully into production of knowledge at the level of object creation” and this might “enable girls to be repositioned as more active participants (cultural agents) in the creation or re-creation of meanings enacted by dolls and, ultimately, girlhood identities” (p. 99).

The DIY movement serves as a source of empowerment.

I was hesitant to read, “An Afternoon of Productive Play with Problematic Dolls: The Importance of Foregrounding Children’s Voices in Research” by Rebecca Hines because the introduction discusses Bratz, a line of fashion-forward rebel dolls by MGA Entertainment. Since their introduction twenty years ago, when Bratz dolls successfully rivaled Barbie, the American Psychological Association accused the dolls of being “associated with an objectified adult sexuality,” and Professor of Law Orly Lobel wrote *You Don’t Own Me: How Mattel v. MGA Entertainment Exposed Barbie’s Dark Side*. What more could be said about Bratz dolls? Hains successfully expands the conversation about girls and Bratz dolls by examining how Black girls in her study used Bratz dolls to explore race and history.

The addition of a study that incorporates LGBTQI resources in relationship to dolls may have enhanced the discourse. Still, overall, Forman-Brunell organized a valuable collection of essays that demonstrate the emerging scholarship in girlhood studies. Dolls play a significant roll in the lives of girls and young women and are an artifact rich with meaning.

—Michelle Parnett-Dwyer, *The Strong*, Rochester, NY

Who’s in the Game: Identity and Intersectionality in Classic Board Games

Terri Toles Patkin

Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company,