American Girls Collection: Barbies with a Sense of History

by Jan Susina

G. Wayne Miller's *Toy Wars* (1998) is a fascinating study of the economic evolution of the American toy industry from an independent collection of small, family-run businesses to a highly competitive market dominated by two major Fortune 500 corporations with international distribution: Mattel and Hasbro. With an estimated $15.2 billion in wholesale sales to retailers in 1998, the toy industry remains a highly volatile market whose sales are heavily dependent on the introduction and success of new products (Canedy C11). Consequently the marketing to children and their parents has become a significant and highly sophisticated aspect of the toy industry. Children's books compete with toys, television, film, and video for children's attention, time, and dollars. Critical texts such as Ellen Seiter's *Sold Separately: Parents and Children in Consumer Culture* (1993), Stephen Kline's *Out of the Garden: Toys and Children's Culture in the Age of TV Marketing* (1993), and Gary Cross's *Kids' Stuff: Toys and the Changing World of American Childhood* (1997) have begun to map out this aspect of children's culture.

Cross argues in *Kids' Stuff* that the American Girls Collection, the popular series of historical books, dolls, and accessories developed in 1985 by Pleasant T. Rowland, is an exception "to the excesses of the 1980s" and that these books and dolls are "a clear and opposite alternative to the Barbie" (225). While there are obvious physical differences between the two sets of dolls, there are also some surprising similarities between Barbie and the American Girls Collection in regards to marketing and the development of consumerism in children. The 1998 sale of the Pleasant Company, the makers of the American Girls Collection, to Mattel, the toy company that produces Barbie, would suggest that Mattel was able to see beyond the physical differences between the two sets of dolls and recognize that the two product lines were compatible.

Tucked away in the Holiday 1998 issue of *American Girls Collection Catalogue* is a curious object that hints at the success and origins of the series: an abridged version of John Newbery's *The Little Pretty Pocket-Book* (12). It is fitting that *The Little Pretty Pocket-Book* (1744) appears as one of the many American Girls accessories. Newbery is considered to be the first British publisher of children's books "to make a permanent and profitable market for them, to make a class of book to be taken seriously as a recognized and important branch of the book-trade" (Roscoe 9).

Putting John Locke's educational theories into practice, Newbery promoted Locke's concept of "instruction with delight," using as his motto "Delectando monemus," which he prominently displayed on the frontispiece of *A Little Pretty Pocket-Book*. However, Newbery's attitude toward children's publishing is perhaps better summarized by his marketing slogan "Trade and Plumb Cake forever! Huzza!", which appeared on the frontispiece of *Twelfth Day Gift* in 1767 (Darton 4). Newbery's genius was in developing and expanding a fairly new product category, children's books, through his frequent advertisements in the press and his clever ploy of introducing additional titles and products into the body of his children's books. With the publication of *A Little Pretty Pocket-Book* and its accompanying "Ball and Pincushion, the Use of which will infallibly make Tommy a good Boy and Polly a good Girl" (Newbery 53), children's publishing became a field that regularly combines both art and commerce. As an astute marketer of children's books, Newbery helped children's literature but also encouraged consumerism on the part of the child and the parents providing for children. Moreover, the consistent theme of the children's books that Newbery published was that reading and learning are intimately connected to financial and social advancement, with *The History of Little Goody Two-Shoes* (1765) being perhaps the best known example. I would like to suggest that Pleasant Rowland and her American Girls Collection is a true spiritual heir of John Newbery.

The American Girls Collection—which *Publishers Weekly* has called a "publishing and marketing phenomenon" (Lombardi 23)—centers on six volume sets of historical novels in which a nine-year-old girl is the protagonist. Each of these fictional characters lives during a pivotal period of American history: Felicity Merriman resides in Williamsburg, Virginia, in 1774; Josefina Montoya lives on a ranch in New Mexico in 1824; Kirsten Larson emigrates from Sweden to Minnesota in 1854; Addy Walker escapes from slavery in North Carolina to freedom in Philadelphia in 1864; Samantha Parkington is an orphan who lives with her wealthy grandmother outside of New York City in 1902; and Molly McIntire experiences World War II on the home front in Jefferson, Illinois, in 1942. In addition to the series books, the Pleasant Company also markets dolls of each of the six title characters sold via catalogues that are sent to a mailing list of seven million potential customers; the initial catalogue was mailed in 1986. Newbery's famous children's book is one of the "Nighttime Necessities" ($18) to purchase in conjunction with Felicity, the Colonial character.

Pleasant Rowland's American Girls Collection is part of the tradition of the commodification of children's literature that marches under the banner of offering instruction and

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age-appropriate delight. As a 1994 "Pleasant Company Background" press release notes, "Rowland recognized a niche in the toy market that had been ignored by major toys manufacturers: there were no toys of quality based on positive values for young girls of this age" (n.p.). The primary audience for the American Girls Collection is girls ages seven to twelve, what today is considered the middle school reader. A former language arts specialist and textbook writer and editor, Rowland developed the 1982 Addison-Wesley Reading Program, a comprehensive series of readers for children from grades one to six and the supplemental teacher's material. Several of the subsequent American Girls Collections authors are writers that Rowland first worked with at Addison-Wesley.

For Rowland, the American Girls Collection is intended to be "a celebration of girlhood—yesterday and today" ("Celebration" 58). Rowland views the series as a way to teach girls about American history from the point of view of a nine-year-old. The association of books and dolls, which is intended to combine the teaching of American history with imaginative playtime, is the very embodiment of Newbery's philosophy. The video *Felicity's Elegant Tea Party* ($22) records the introduction of the Felicity character at an enormous tea party that was held in her honor in 1991, attended by 11,000 girls and their mothers in Williamsburg. Here Rowland explains that the idea for the American Girls Collections came to her during a visit to the historical recreation of Williamsburg, which combines the teaching of American history with the pleasures of a theme park.

In 1994, the Pleasant Company developed "America at School," a curriculum unit that integrates social studies, language arts, and literature based on the school stories in the American Girls Collection. More than two thousand third-to-fifth grade classes have adopted the curriculum (Lombardi 23). The unit introduces games, crafts, and food associated with the various historical periods of the six major character; similar activities are found in the teacher's guides that are available for each of the characters. The teacher's guide *1774, Felicity: Colonial America* (1995) provides a teacher or parent with historical background on Williamsburg, a plot summary of the six Felicity novels, and a series of questions that can be duplicated and given to students after they read each book. The teacher's guide also provides a full-color map of Felicity's world, instructions on how to make a model of a Colonial building, and other in-class projects linked to the series.

While the Pleasant Company is certainly open to criticism from those concerned both with the use of books in the school curriculum and with consumerism issues, Rowland's own goals address another concern in children's culture. Rowland feels that the American Girls Collection is a healthy alternative to mass market culture for girls that allows them "to prolong and protect those fleeting years of childhood when girls are old enough to read and still love to play" ("A Letter"). The dolls and the characters in the books are modeled on preadolescent girls, in striking contrast to the adult and overtly sexualized body images of Barbie or the Spice Girls. Romance has little place in the American Girls Collection. These characters are much more interested in having adventures, playing with their girlfriends, or occasionally teasing their brothers rather than in preparing for a dream date with Ken or worrying about their periods, as do the characters in Judy Blume's *Are You There, God? It's Me, Margaret* (1970). In an 1993 interview with the *Washington Post*, Rowland makes it clear that the American Girls Collection is about promoting positive role models for preteen girls. She maintains:

> most of all [it is] about values—about the importance of making choices, about self-control, of being a true friend, of honesty, of standing up for what you believe, or learning how to affirm your point of view without being obnoxious, about learning to cooperate, about finding your role in the family, about allowing differences. (Rosenfeld, D1)

Besides introducing American history from a distinctly female point of view, Rowland hopes that the books and their linked dolls might help delay "a whole generation of young girls" who are being "rushed headlong into adolescence" ("Celebration" 58). She elaborates on this concept in "A Celebration of Girlhood," her essay that appeared in the 1992 *American Girls Collection Holiday Catalogue*. Using herself as an example, Rowland explained how at the age of ten she was encouraged by teachers to skip the fifth grade. Rather than playing with her dolls or reading books, she was surrounded by "older girls who were absorbed in boyfriends, make-up, and other mysteries of preadolescence," so that childhood came crashing to an abrupt end ("Celebration" 58).

The American Girls Collection is constructed to counteract the "media messages that glamorize 'growing up' at the expense of growing" ("Celebration" 58). The series promotes a strong, pro-girl message about self-esteem to readers at the very age that they experience loss of self-worth, according to Carol Gilligan in *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (1982) and Peggy Orenstein in *Schoolgirls: Young Women, Self-Esteem, and the Confidence Gap* (1994). The American Girls Collection is intended to "prolong childhood for its audience of young girls, who are constantly pressured by mass

media and pop culture to grow up prematurely" ("Background" n.p.). Rowland's argument that young girls are rushed by the media into adolescence is, in fact, remarkably similar to Mary Pipher's description of contemporary "girl-poisoning culture" (12) in her popular 1994 self-help book *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls.* Parents might view the American Girls Collection, with its pro-girlhood stance, as a positive alternative to help combat media pressures placed on their daughters to act older than their actual age.

Rowland also is in agreement with the Frankfurt School, which took a dim view of popular entertainment, as well as contemporary, culturally conservative social critics such as Tipper Gore in *Raising PG Kids in an X-Rated Society* (1987) and Marsha Kinder in *Playing with Power in Movies, Television and Video Games* (1991), who have warned of the ill effects of popular culture and mass media on the culture of childhood. Valerie Walkerdine in *Daddy's Girls: Young Girls and Popular Culture* (1997) has shown how often television, films, and advertisements eroticize young girls and in turn present this sexualized image of girls as one that girls should imitate. And Neil Postman has argued in *The Disappearance of Childhood* (1982) that contemporary technology has eroded childhood.

Simultaneously, critics with a different agenda have identified the erosion of the disinterested nature of childhood pursuits. Seiter and Kline have shown that much of what goes for children's entertainment is nothing more than a way to market products to them. Tom Engelhardt in his glumly titled "Reading May Be Harmful to Your Kids: In the Nadirland of Today's Children's Books" suggests that in the mid-1970s a shift began in U.S. children's publishing to produce what he has termed "the book designed for the consumer child" (57). Despite her intentions to combat the overt sexualizing of girls by toys such as Barbie, it can be argued that Rowland has adopted a consumerist approach to the problem that is similar to the marketing strategy of Barbie dolls. One might even suggest that at times Rowland out-Barbies Barbie in terms of cost and collectability, all in the name of allowing girls to remain girls. It appears that Rowland assumes that the pro-girl values of the American Girls Collection justifies the overt consumerism it encourages.

And in some ways, the American Girls Collection is successful in combating the excessive commercialization of contemporary childhood represented by Barbie, *Goosebumps*, or *The Baby-Sitters Club.* While the Pleasant Company is named after its founder, Pleasant Rowland, it seems appropriate to those interested in the history of children's publishing that the company's name echoes John Locke's famous suggestion in *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693) that

> some easy pleasant book, suited to his capacity, should be put into his hands wherein the entertainment that he finds might draw him on and reward his pains in reading, and yet not such as should fill his head with perfectly useless trumpery, or lay the principles of vice and folly. (336)

The books in the American Girls Collections are well written and carefully researched informational books. Each series is composed of six illustrated books of approximately sixty to seventy pages. The books are short enough not to overwhelm slow readers and easy to read in a single sitting by advanced readers.

The six series are highly formulaic in that the first book, *Meet —: An American Girl*, introduces the protagonist and her family and friends within the specific historical setting. Each novel includes an illustrated family tree of the characters and "Looking Back," a nonfiction illustrated essay that explores the historical period and events discussed in the text. The second book, *— Learns a Lesson: A School Story*, explores the world of school during the period. The third book, *—'s Surprise: A Christmas Story,* discusses holiday traditions, while the fourth book, *Happy Birthday —: A Springtime Story,* examines birthday celebrations. The fifth title, *— Saves the Day: A Summer Story*, is an adventure story in which the protagonist is the heroine. The series conclude with *Changes for —: A Winter Story* with the protagonist moving to maturity. This uniformity allows the series to be read horizontally or vertically, so that one can read all the Felicity books to follow one character, or read all the birthday stories to learn how events have changed over time. The format also encourages collectability.

The books can be purchased individually for $5.95 in paper or $12.95 in hardcover either through the catalogue or bookstores. The paperback books are the least expensive and perhaps most educationally oriented and pro-girl items of the American Girls Collection, which makes them a low-cost and parent-friendly point of entry to the world of American Girls. They have been heavily promoted in schools through book clubs such as Scholastic. They are also sold as boxed sets both in paper for $34.95 and hard cover for $74.95.

Like the books, the six eighteen-inch period dolls have been carefully researched. In "A Message to Parents," which appears in the 1993 *Holiday American Girls Collection Catalogue*, Rowland explains that the dolls are "quality pieces—not plastic playthings—and are made for children over eight years old to treasure" (62). They are what Sara Crewe in Frances Hodgson Burnett's *A Little Princess* (1905) calls "my last doll" (63). Rowland has said that one of her motivations to create the American Girls Collection was an unsuccessful search for a Christmas gift for a niece in

1984 when she was "dismayed and disheartened by the lack of dolls of quality for young girls ("About" 1). Rowland felt that she must not be the only one longing for "an alternative to mass market culture for girls—for something of quality and beauty and lasting value" ("About" 1). After learning of the $82 cost for each of the dolls, which includes the introductory paperback of the series, an adult might feel one needs to be a little princess to be able to purchase one of the dolls in the American Girls Collection. But Rowland counters that the cost of the dolls is equivalent to that of Nintendo Game Boy, which is about $80, and that in saving up for the dolls they become desirable (Rosenfeld D1). As a comparison, a no-frills Barbie can be purchased for about $10, a WNBA Barbie for $17.99, and a 40th Anniversary Barbie for $44.99, although specialty Barbies, depending on clothing or accessories, can cost hundreds of dollars. Still, there are many households in which the parents prefer to put wholesome American Girl dolls into the arms of their daughters.

The thirty-six books in the American Girls Collection are a fairly limited number, when compared to the number of titles in other series books intended for the same audience. Ann Martin's *The Baby-Sitters Club* has one hundred and three titles, Francine Pascal's *Sweet Valley Twins* had ninety-nine titles, and R. L. Stine's *Goosebumps* has more than a hundred titles. It is in the accessories, not the books or dolls alone, that the American Girls Collection can give Barbie, or young girls, a run for their money.

This is because within the American Girls Collection it is difficult to separate the books from the merchandising. Indeed, every book includes a tear-out, prepaid postcard in the back inviting the reader to receive an *American Girls Collection Catalogue* and the *Newsletter of the American Girls Collection.* Newbery would have approved of this clever marketing device. The numerous accessories that are sold only through the catalogue are the very items that appear highlighted in the illustrations of the books, so that the readers of the books constantly refer back to the catalogues. (Shades of Newbery's promoting of Dr. James's Powder in the text of *The History of Little Goody Two-Shoes*). More than 24 million books have been purchased since 1996 (Lombardi 23). This effective cross-merchandising has made the Pleasant Company a highly successful toy company, with the books functioning as a series of catalogues that highlight the more expensive items that a reader might purchase and even suggest how a child might play with them. Rowland is an astute marketer of children's books, and the Pleasant Company has appeared twice on *Inc.* magazine's list of the 500 fastest-growing private companies in the US since 1990.

The name American Girls *Collection* is telling. One of the key lessons learned from the series is the introduction of consumerism. Each doll has six different outfits, which are prominently featured on the covers of the books in the series. The accessories include items such as Felicity's Noah's Ark ($22), Addy's cowrie necklace ($16), or Samantha's Victorian Lemonade Set ($60), which all play important roles in the stories. The Felicity Starter Collection costs $295, and the Felicity Complete Collection costs $995. The other four characters have similarly priced sets. Besides purchasing accessories for her doll, a girl can also purchase matching outfits for herself, ranging from $38 to $138, so that she can resemble the doll. Or she can purchase one of the many *Portfolios of Pastimes* ($5.95), companion sets of activity and craft kits intended to supplement the books and dolls. Additional stories concerning the characters appear in *American Girl*, the companion magazine started in 1992; by 1996 it had a subscription base of 450,000 subscribers (Lombardi 23).

Rowland has developed what Kinder has called a children's commercial supersystem (122), a network of intertextuality constructed around an individual or group of figures from popular culture. In order to create a successful supersystem, the network must cut across several modes of image production, in this case books, dolls, video, magazine, trading cards, and clothing. Such an ambitious children's supersystem needs to appeal to diverse classes, which accounts for the introduction in 1993 of the African-American character, Addy Walker, and in 1997, Josefina Montoya, a Hispanic-American character, the most recent addition to the American Girls Collection. While the American Girls Collection may indeed embody Rowland's pro-girl intent, the American Girl Trading Cards that can be purchased at ten for $1, or all 300 in a box for $35, are simply a way to expand the product line. Because finally, a children's supersystem must foster collectability through a proliferation of related products. Kinder argues that with Barbie, Mattel introduced the razor marketing theory to the toy industry. The initial object is modestly priced, but the profits are made in the more costly accessories that are compatible only with the initial object (91). The American Girls Collection, with its attention to historical authenticity and celebration of girlhood, is in many ways the very antithesis of Barbie, but the marketing strategy of the low-cost books leading directly to the more costly dolls and accessories is very similar. While Barbie is a mass-market doll that embraces pop culture and the American Girls Collection is advertised as progressive educational toys, both are examples of commodity fetishism.

This similarity, however, may be lost on many purchasers. Seiter, for example, notes the distinction that some educated, middle-class shoppers make between the purchase of quality toys in educational toy stores vs. mass-market toys found in Toys R Us (213). Eleanor Blair Hilty has observed

a similar double standard that some parents have toward educational television programs, such as *Barney and Friends* and *Sesame Street*, which aggressively promote children's products in a manner that is strikingly similar to that done by network children's programs (80). It makes a difference to these parents that a girl playing with Barbies may be socializing herself for the world of *Cosmopolitan*, while the girl playing with Felicity or Samantha could be preparing herself for the world of *Martha Stewart's Living*. The muted and natural colors favored by the American Girl Collection publications suggest a much more cultured and tasteful world than the hot pink used to package Barbie. The difference between Barbie and the American Girls Collection may not be so much one of marketing as it is of social class, which in the U.S. is more often than not another way to talk about money. Given the number of outfits that can be purchased for the American Girls, it is difficult not to consider them fashion dolls. Simply because their costumes are historically accurate does not exempt them. And the natural fibers and attention to detail make the clothing for the American Girls Collection much more expensive on a per item basis than Barbie's bright colors and high heels. While Barbie may be the universal doll of girlhood, the costs associated with the American Girls Collection make it accessible to those children whose parents are willing to make a substantial investment in order to combat the negative influences of popular culture.

The use of well-designed texts as a part of the American Girl Collection to teach American history and promote positive role models for girls seems to elevate it above the level of Barbie's crass consumerism and limited notions of femininity. However, Miriam Formanek-Brunell suggests in *Made to Play House: Dolls and the Commercialization of American Girlhood* (1993) that too often feminist scholars have accepted the arguments of the Frankfurt School, which have seen dolls simply as "agents of a hegemonic patriarchal culture in which girls were passive consumers" (1). Kathleen McDonnell in *Kid Culture* notes adults and critics often underestimate the complexity of fantasy play and assume that dolls such as Barbie promote a single message that is unquestionably accepted by the user. McDonnell observes that "girls are constantly subverting the script" (58) that is associated with Barbie. Unlike Felicity or Samantha with their companion six-book series, McDonnell notes that Barbie is surprisingly free of preexisting narratives, so that she can be used in a variety of ways that were unintended by her creators (58). While the books help promote the American Girls Collection as quality children's entertainment to adults, the fixed narratives associated with the dolls may actually limit the amount of imaginative play by girls. In both cases, girls are being socialized into consumer culture and commodity consumption at a young age.

There have been several developments in the recent marketing of the American Girl Collection that seem to support this assumption. In addition to the books and accessories that the Pleasant Company sells, it is now creating "historical residence museums" (Lombardi 23) for each of its six fictional characters. As noted, Rowland's original inspiration for the American Girls Collection was her visit to Williamsburg; the concept of combining the pleasure of American history with the pleasures of theme parks has been made real. But these residence museums resemble Disneyland more than Williamsburg, which is an historical recreation based on an actual historic location. Young vacationers can now visit life-size models of the home where Felicity Merriman lived in Williamsburg, Virginia, or the log cabin of Kirsten Larson in Scandia, Minnesota, as part of the American Girls Living History Programs.

Still less historical and more consumerist in its focus is the opening in 1998 of the American Girl Place in downtown Chicago, just across the street from Water Tower Place, a major shopping destination. Located a few blocks from Niketown, that other contemporary temple to American consumerism, the American Girl Place is as much a celebration of all things produced by the Pleasant Company as it is a celebration of girlhood. In addition to having life-size recreations of rooms from each of the character's homes, the American Girl Place also includes a bookstore, a series of boutiques that sell clothing for girls as well as the items once only available in the American Girls Collection catalogue, and a theater that features the American Girls Musical Revue, based on the characters from the six series, at $25 a ticket. A restaurant offers lunch, tea, and dinner menus that feature items linked to the series, such as Felicity's Tea Sandwiches or Josefina's Calico Corn Muffins; however, the fixed bill of $16 per person for lunch or tea, and $18 for dinner—no special children's menu here—suggests that this dining experience might be beyond the range of every American girl. The wealthy Samantha, born to the upper class of New York society, might feel quite comfortable in the American Girl Place, but thrifty Molly McIntire, whose family had a Victory Garden in the backyard and collected tin for the war effort during World War II, would be shocked by the prices. While the American Girl Place is being promoted as a place for mothers and daughters to bond, much of this bonding seems to be based on shopping and socializing young girls into becoming ladies who lunch.

So perhaps it should be no great surprise that Mattel, the toy company that produces Barbie, announced that it had acquired the Pleasant Company for $700 million dollars while retaining Rowland as the vice-chair of the company she created (Canedy C1). Despite their marked difference in fashion sense, the difference between Barbie and the

American Girls Collection in terms of marketing and socializing girls to the world of consumerism is not great. Indeed the American Girls Collection can, in some sense, be considered simply Barbies with a sense of history.

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