
G. Wayne Miller. *Toy Wars: The Epic Struggle between G.I. Joe, Barbie, and the Companies That Make Them*. New York: Times Books, 1998.

Anyone interested in contemporary children's culture—and by that I simply mean children's toys and media—ought to read this compelling study of the toy industry. Focusing primarily on Hasbro, the largest toy company in the world with corporate headquarters in Providence, Rhode Island, G. Wayne Miller traces the economic evolution of the American toy industry from small, family-run businesses to Fortune 500 corporations. Miller's detailed case study quickly puts to rest all those warm-hearted versions of toy companies that have appeared in family films such as *Big* or *Toys*; the world of G.I. Joe and Barbie is a place of profit margins, strategic planning, corporate restructuring, and hostile takeovers. Just as John Newbery realized that he could sell a ball or pincushion with copies of *A Little Pretty Pocket Book* (1774), children's publishing became an intersection of art and commerce; so the world of contemporary toys combines the world of play and the realm of corporate profit.

Given the growing importance of children's culture, those working in the area of children's literature need to be aware of the growing influence of children's toys and media on the sort of books that are being marketed for children. Children's books compete with toys, television,

films, and videos for children's time and dollars, and these narratives are increasingly affecting children's publishing. Significant critical texts such as Marsha Kinder's **Playing with Power in Movies, Television, and Video Games from Muppet Babies to Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles (1991)**, Ellen Seiter's **Sold Separately: Parents and Children in Consumer Culture (1993)**, and **Stephen Kline's Out of the Garden: Toys and Children's Culture in the Age of TV Marketing (1993)** have brilliantly mapped out this aspect of children's culture. Far less successful is the poorly researched *Kinderculture: The Corporate Construction of Childhood*, edited by Shirley R. Steinberg and Joe L. Kincheloe (1997).

In *Playing with Power*, Kinder introduces the concept of the children's commercial supersystem as a network of intertextuality that is constructed around a figure or group of figures from pop culture that cut across several modes of image production, appealing to diverse markets, which are targeted by different strategies and foster collectability through a proliferation of related products (122–23). Think Teletubbies or Rugrats. **[End Page 300]** Miller's book-length study provides a fairly comprehensive examination of a children's supersystem with the rise and fall of G.I. Joe, the first and best known action figure, which Kinder's chapter on Teenage Ninja Turtles or Seiter's on Little Pretty Pony can only touch on. While Miller lacks the theoretical grounding of Kinder or Seiter, his access to Hasbro archives and interviews with the key executives of the company make his study an important case study, revealing the practices of the highly secretive and intensely competitive world of toy companies.

Like M. G. Lord's carefully researched **Forever Barbie: The Unauthorized Biography of a Real Doll (1994)**, which makes an appropriate companion volume to *Toy Wars*, Miller concentrates on a single toy company and its signature toy whose personality has come to be identified with the company that produces it. Hasbro is the main focus of Miller's book and the signature toy is G.I. Joe, while for its rival, Mattel, it is Barbie. These two toy figures have crossed paths more than once. One of Hasbro's attempts to compete against Barbie in the fashion doll category was with Cindy, a strikingly similar-looking doll. So similar that in 1988 there was an injunction against Hasbro to stop sales of Cindy in England due to patent infringement, which resulted in the two dolls being undressed in court and measurements of their respective busts, waists, hips, and legs taken and compared by the judge. With more than \$11.4 billion in annual sales from their flagship product, Mattel does not take clones lightly, and forced Hasbro to stop manufacturing Cindy. But unlike Mattel, which produces Barbie, the most successful toy in the world and the source of nearly half of Mattel's profits, Hasbro has been more successful in diversifying its toys. One of Hasbro's first major successes was Mr. Potato Head, which was introduced in 1951. Through vigorous acquisitions of smaller toy companies, Hasbro has become the home for such classic toys as Monopoly, Scrabble, Play-Doh, Tonka trucks, Tinker Toys, and Lincoln Logs.

With eleven-thousand employees and nearly three billion in annual sales, Hasbro is run by Alan Hassenfeld, a former English major who reluctantly became the CEO of the family business after his brother, Stephen, who had earned a place in the Toy Industry Hall of Fame, died of AIDS in 1989. Even though Mr. Potato Head remains Hassenfeld's personal favorite Hasbro toy, its best known product was G.I. Joe, the American Moveable Fighting Man, designed by Larry Reiner. G.I. Joe was initially almost a foot tall, almost exactly the same height of Barbie, and had twenty-one moveable parts. Introduced in 1965, G.I. Joe brought in \$23 million in sales in its first year, and became the top-selling toy for children aged five to twelve. With G.I. Joe, Hasbro created a quintessential **[End Page 301]** American toy and the new market of action figures—dolls for boys. Despite the fact that G.I. Joe obviously promotes violence, Hasbro never allowed any depiction of its consequences—no figure gets killed or injured in any of its advertising. It was not until 1991 that G.I. Joe was allowed to have a weapon that actually shoots. Hasbro does not own factories in Asia and does not use child and prison labor in the manufacturing of its toys.

But by 1969 with the growing opposition to the Vietnam War and strong competition from other rival actions figures, G.I. Joe was diminished from nearly a foot tall to eight inches and finally, in the 1970s, to a mere three and three-quarters inches. Imagine what a Freudian critic would make of that reduction in size! Sales become so poor that despite additional characters introduced to the product line, Hasbro removed G.I. Joe from the market in 1978. Hassenfeld attempted to bring him back for the action figure's thirtieth anniversary in 1993 but with only limited success. G.I. Joe no longer had the sizzle of other more violent actions figures, such as X-Men, Mighty Morphin Power Rangers, or Star Wars figures.

With the lackluster sales from G.I. Joe, and a forty-million dollar investment in an ill-fated virtual reality game, Hasbro was forced to downsize. In 1992, Hasbro fought off a hostile takeover bid by Mattel, the second largest toy company in the world and the producer of Barbie. Miller reports that the AP News Service announced the event as, "Barbie proposed to G.I. Joe, and she won't take no for an answer" (292). As the most successful toy in the industry, Barbie generally gets what Barbie wants. However, Hassenfeld managed to fend off the takeover and forge licensing agreements with Dreamworks, Steven Spielberg's new film studio. Dreamworks produced last summer's film, *Small Soldiers*, whose action figures Hasbro aggressively markets, as well as Furby, the hot toy of the 1998 holiday season.

In *Toy Wars*, Miller shows how toys and their manufacturers have become increasingly linked to the television and film industry, as a result of the deregulation of children's television and advertising during the Reagan administration. Like Kinder and Seiter, he shows how children's television and film work hand-in-glove with top companies to create what some critics consider feature-length commercials. Miller examines how Hasbro has successfully made inroads with Hollywood, since the company sees the future of toy sales as intimately

connected with the film and television industry. The surprisingly cynical *Small Soldiers* is a children's film in which computerized action figures that resemble G.I. Joe on steroids wreck a neighborhood. The corporate toy maker remarks at the [End Page 302] conclusion of the film that it is a shame that the action figures must be recalled, since the footage of the battling toys would have made a great commercial.

The outlets for toys in the United States have been dramatically reduced to four major retailers—Toys R Us, Wal-Mart, K-Mart, and Target. The number of toy companies has dramatically declined; well-established smaller companies, such as Milton Bradley, Tonka Corporation, Kenner, and Parker Brothers, have all been combined into large corporations like Hasbro or Mattel. Curiously, most of these smaller toy companies have fallen to the lure of producing video games, which have high start-up costs. Miller shows how the more traditional toys—dolls and games—save companies, while video games lead to financial ruin and corporate takeovers.

The sale season for toys has expanded with the warehouse approach to toys in stores such as Toys R Us. As recently as the 1970s, seventy percent of the toys in the United States were sold during the six weeks prior to Christmas, but now, due to constant television marketing and movie tie-ins, toys are sold all year round. Not only has the season for toys been expanded, but the number of toys that American children own is increasing. One of the key lessons of contemporary toys—consider Beannie Babies or the American Girls Collection—is that they teach children to become active consumers. Miller cited Jill Barad, the CEO of Mattel and the second-highest paid woman in corporate America, who notes that the average girl in the United States now owns eight Barbies (215).

Miller warns that the concentration of power in the toy industry in the hands of a few companies may be good for corporate earnings, but it does little to improve imaginative play for children. If you have ever owned a toy or purchased a toy for a child, you will probably find G. Wayne Miller's *Toy Wars* fascinating, if not disturbing.

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Works Cited

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