



John Walsh: 'Barbie was based on a cartoon prostitute who'd do anything for money'

Tales of the City

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Next month should be fun for the people at Mattel Corp, the global toy-maker. They're about to inaugurate a year of jolly events to celebrate the 50th birthday of Barbie, the doll whose unfeasibly long legs are matched by the unfeasibility of her huge bosom. Now a writer called Jerry Oppenheimer is all set to pee on their fireworks by publishing *Toy Monster: The Big Bad World of Mattel*, in which the designer who came up with Barbie, one Jack Ryan, is revealed as a bit of a perve.

Much married (once to Zsa Zsa Gabor) and voraciously omnisexual, Ryan liked to hang out with busty prostitutes and high-class call girls who reminded him of his creation. He seems to have conducted real Seventies orgies (like the ones in *The Joy of Sex*) at his Bel-Air home with several Barbie-alikes, and took an unsavoury interest in the woman who provided the voice of Barbie in a series of talking dolls. He didn't have the doll's voice-box adjusted to say, "Give it to me right now, big boy," but he seems to have had trouble distinguishing extruded plastic women from ones made of flesh.

Are we surprised by Ryan's obsession? Mattel has for years stressed the healthy, clean-living, elegant, professional-career-woman side of their most lucrative toy, her importance as a role-model for girls, her function as a dream of successful womanhood (Engineer Barbie, Consultant Surgeon Barbie, but not Washed-Up Single Mother On Council Estate Barbie) and her utter lack of sexual identity. Despite the vast bosom, she never possessed nipples or genitalia; despite her boyfriend Ken (based on the son of the founder of Mattel, who turned out to be gay), she was never likely to become Pregnant Barbie or Hackney Slapper Barbie. But when we read Ryan's former friend Stephen Gnass explaining how, "when Jack talked about creating Barbie, it was like listening to somebody talking about a sexual episode... It was almost like listening to a sexual pervert," we could be forgiven for wondering: what's been going on in the nursery all

these years? Can it be that Barbie, instead of being for 50 years a limber, apple-cheeked, sporty tomboy with a big future in the boardroom, had always been an emblem of the female playthings Ryan so casually enjoyed for cash? And have their little-girl owners always realised?

A trawl of the internet brings the alarming news that Barbie was modelled on a German doll, a three-dimensional representation of a fictional prostitute called Lilli in the comic-strip of a German newspaper, Bild Zeitung. She serviced German businessmen and was cheeky to the cops. Platinum-haired and tarty, she would do anything with sweaty clients, provided the money was right. This was the doll Ryan encountered in 1955, and he adjusted it for the consumption of American children, by tidying up her lips and filing off her nipples. You can just see the thin smile on his leery face as he turned her into his kinda girl. Yeesh.

In the new Harlot magazine (I get it for the agony column), Tracy Quan, the author of Confessions of a Manhattan Call-Girl, claims Barbie as a role-model for her generation of prostitutes, because of the way she concealed her murky past beneath Attorney Barbie respectability. "Marketed as a harmless plaything, the all-American prom queen turns out to have been a foreign whore on the run," Quan writes. "Somehow, the kind of girl your brother couldn't take home to Mom became a role model for millions of young girls." Elsewhere in the magazine, a San Franciscan writer called Cintra Wilson shockingly recalls how she used to arrange for her Barbie doll to have sex with a gruff and violent GI Joe. "Barbie is no unconscious sexual icon to children," she writes. "Even at seven, we knew she was a wanton, submissive bimbo."

OhMiGod. What have I allowed into the children's innocent lives over the years? Has the presence of 15 or 20 Barbies in the nursery been an unconscious replaying of one of Ryan's orgies? Have the dolls been transmitting messages of sexual compliance into the children's cerebral cortices? I think, guiltily, of the party where I talked to an acquaintance who'd never been to my house before. "It's lovely," he said, "to meet your beautiful daughter." I pointed out that I have two – which did he mean? "The one that's dressed like a hooker," he replied. I thought about it. "Sorry," I said. "Could be either."

<http://www.independent.co.uk/opinion/columnists/john-walsh-barbie-was-based-on-a-cartoon-prostitute-whod-do-anything-for-money-1331669.html>