

This copy is for your personal, noncommercial use only. You can order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers, please [click here](#) or use the "Reprints" tool that appears next to any article. Visit [www.nytreprints.com](http://www.nytreprints.com) for samples and additional information. [Order a reprint of this article now.](#) »

---

September 10, 1994

## **Public & Private; Barbie At 35**

By ANNA QUINDLEN

My theory is that to get rid of Barbie you'd have to drive a silver stake through her plastic heart. Or a silver lame stake, the sort of thing that might accompany Barbie's Dream Tent.

This is not simply because the original Barbie, launched lo these 35 years ago, was more than a little vampiric in appearance, more Natasha of "Rocky and Bullwinkle" than the "ultimate girl next door" Mattel describes in her press kit.

It's not only that Barbie, like Dracula, can appear in guises that mask her essential nature: Surgeon, Astronaut, Unicef Ambassador. Or that she is untouched by time, still the same parody of the female form she's been since 1959. She's said by her manufacturers to be "eleven and one-half stylish inches" tall. If she were a real live woman she would not have enough body fat to menstruate regularly. Which may be why there's no PMS Barbie.

The silver stake is necessary because Barbie -- the issue, not the doll -- simply will not be put to rest.

"Mama, why can't I have Barbie?"

"Because I hate Barbie. She gives little girls the message that the only thing that's important is being tall and thin and having a big chest and lots of clothes. She's a terrible role model."

"Oh, Mama, don't be silly. She's just a toy."

It's an excellent comeback; if only it were accurate. But consider the recent study at the University of Arizona investigating the attitudes of white and black teen-age girls toward body image.

The attitudes of the white girls were a nightmare. Ninety percent expressed dissatisfaction with their own bodies and many said they saw dieting as a kind of all-purpose panacea. "I think the reason I would diet would be to gain self-confidence," said one. "I'd feel like it was a way of getting control," said another.

And they were curiously united in their description of the perfect girl. She's 5 feet 7 inches, weighs just over 100 pounds, has long legs and flowing hair. The researchers concluded, "The ideal girl

was a living manifestation of the Barbie doll."

While the white girls described an impossible ideal, black teen-agers talked about appearance in terms of style, attitude, pride and personality. White respondents talked "thin," black ones "shapely." Seventy percent of the black teen-agers said they were satisfied with their weight, and there was little emphasis on dieting. "We're all brought up and taught to be realistic about life," said one, "and we don't look at things the way you want them to be. You look at them the way they are."

There's a quiet irony in that. While black women correctly complain that they are not sufficiently represented in advertisements, commercials, movies, even dolls, perhaps the scarcity of those idealized and unrealistic models may help in some fashion to liberate black teen-agers from ridiculous standards of appearance. When the black teen-agers were asked about the ideal woman, many asked: Whose ideal? The perfect girl projected by the white world simply didn't apply to them or their community, which set beauty standards from within. "White girls," one black participant in the Arizona study wrote, "have to look like Barbie dolls."

There are lots of reasons teen-age girls have such a distorted fun-house mirror image of their own bodies, so distorted that one study found that 83 percent wanted to lose weight, although 62 percent were in the normal range. Fashion designers still showcase anorexia chic; last year the supermodel Kate Moss was reduced to insisting that, yes, she did eat.

But long before Kate and Ultra Slimfast came along, hanging over the lives of every little girl born in the second half of the 20th century was the impossibly curvy shadow (40-18-32 in life-size terms) of Barbie. That preposterous physique, we learn as kids, is what a woman looks like with her clothes off. "Two Barbie dolls are sold every second," says Barbie's resume, which is more extensive than that of Hillary Rodham Clinton. "Barbie doll has had more than a billion pairs of shoes . . . has had over 500 professional makeovers . . . has become the most popular toy ever created."

Has been single-handedly responsible for the popularity of the silicone implant?

Maybe, as my daughter suggests while she whines in her Barbie-free zone, that's too much weight to put on something that's just a toy. Maybe not. Happy birthday, Babs. Have a piece of cake. Have two.