

Before You Read

Yona Zeldis McDonough, author of *The Barbie Chronicles: A Living Doll Turns Forty*, included only one of her own essays in her collection—the essay you are about to read. As you read “Sex and the Single Doll,” think about how McDonough’s opinion of Barbie differs from Quindlen’s, and about which opinion is closer to your own.

Sex and the Single Doll

Yona Zeldis McDonough

Yona Zeldis McDonough was born in Chadera, Israel, and grew up in Brooklyn, New York. Her novels include *The Four Temperaments* (Doubleday, 2002) and *In Dahlia’s Wake* (Doubleday, 2005). Her collections of essays include *The Barbie Chronicles* (Touchstone, 1999) and *All the Available Light: A Marilyn Monroe Reader* (Touchstone, 2003). She is also the author of children’s books designed to help young people learn about important historical figures, including Louis Armstrong, Anne Frank, John F. Kennedy, Nelson Mandela, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, and Harriet Tubman.

1 Now that my son is six and inextricably linked to the grade-school social circuit, he gets invited to birthday parties. Lots of them. Whenever I telephone to say he’s coming, I always ask for hints on what might be a particularly coveted gift for the birthday child. And whenever that child is a girl, I secretly hope the answer will be the dirty little word I am longing to hear: *Barbie*.

2 No such luck. In the liberal Brooklyn neighborhood where we live, there is a definite bias against the poor doll, a veritable Barbie backlash. “My daughter loves her, but I can’t stand her,” laments one mother, “I won’t let her in the house,” asserts another. “Oh, please!” sniffs a third.

3 But I love Barbie. I loved her in 1963, when she made her entrance into my life. She was blond, with a Jackie Kennedy bouffant hairdo. Her thickly painted lids (carved out of plastic) and pouty, unsmiling mouth gave her a look both knowing and sullen. She belonged to a grown-up world of cocktail dresses, cigarette smoke, and perfume. I loved her in the years that followed, too, when she developed bendable joints; a twist-and-turn waist; long, silky ash-blond hair; and feathery, lifelike eyelashes. I never stopped loving her. I never will.

4 I’ve heard all of the arguments against her: She’s a bimbo and an air-head; she’s an insatiable consumer—for fancy clothes, a dream house filled with garish pink furniture, a pink Barbie-mobile—who teaches little girls that there is nothing in life quite so exciting as shopping. Her body, with its buoyant breasts, wasplike waist, and endless legs defies all human proportion. But at six, I inchoately understood Barbie’s appeal: pure sex. My other dolls were either babies or little girls, with flat chests and chubby legs. Even the other so-called fashion dolls—Tammie, in her aqua-and-white playsuit, and Tressy, with that useless hank of hair, couldn’t compete. Barbie was clearly a woman doll, and a woman was what I longed to be.

5 When I was eight, and had just learned about menstruation, I fashioned a small sanitary napkin for her out of neatly folded tissues. Rubber bands held it in place. “Oh, look,” said my bemused mother, “Barbie’s got her little period. Now she can have a baby.” I was disappointed, but my girlfriends all snickered in a much more satisfying way. You see, I wanted Barbie to be, well, dirty. We all did.

6 Our Barbies had sex, at least our childish version of it. They hugged and kissed the few available boy dolls we had—clean-cut and oh-so-square Ken, the more relaxed and sexy Allan. They also danced, pranced, and strutted, but mostly they stripped, showing off their amazing, no-way-in-the-world human bodies. An adult friend tells me how she used to put her Barbie’s low-backed bathing suit on backwards so the doll’s breasts were exposed. I liked dressing mine in her pink-and-white candy-stripped babysitter’s apron—and nothing else.

7 I’ve also heard that Barbie is a poor role model for little girls. Is there such widespread contempt for the intelligence of children that we really imagine they are stupid enough to be shaped by a doll? Girls learn how to be women from the women around them. Most often this means Mom. My own was a march-to-a-different-drummer bohemian in the early sixties. She eschewed the beauty parlor, cards, and mah-jongg that the other moms in the neighborhood favored. Instead, she wore her long, black hair loose, her earrings big and dangling, and her lipstick dark. She made me a Paris bistro birthday party, with candles stuck in old wine bottles, red-and-white-checked tablecloths for decorations; she read the poetry of T.S. Eliot to the assembled group of enchanted ten-year-olds. She was, in those years, an aspiring painter, and her work graced not only the walls of our apartment, but also the shower curtain, bathroom mirror, and a chest of drawers in my room. She—not an eleven-and-a-half-inch doll—was the most powerful female role model in my life. What she thought of Barbie I really don’t know, but she had the good sense to back off and let me use the doll my own way.

Barbie has become more politically correct over the years. She no longer looks so vixenish, and has traded the sultry expression I remember for one that is more wholesome and less covert. She now exists in a variety of "serious" incarnations: teacher, Olympic athlete, dentist. And Mattel recently introduced the Really Real Barbie, a doll whose breasts and hips are smaller and whose waist is thicker, thus reflecting a more real (as if children wanted their toys to be real) female body. None of this matters one iota. Girls will still know the reason they love her, a reason that has nothing to do with new professions or a subtly amended figure.

Fortunately, my Barbie love will no longer have to content itself with buying gifts for my son's friends and the daughters of my own. I have a daughter now, and although she is just two, she already has half a dozen Barbies.

They are, along with various articles of clothing, furniture, and other essential accouterments, packed away like so many sleeping princesses in translucent pink plastic boxes that line my basement shelves. But the magic for which they wait is no longer the prince's gentle kiss. Instead, it is the heart and mind of my little girl as she picks them up and begins to play. I can hardly wait.

Literacy Connections



1. Based on the article you've read by McDonough, how do you think she would explain Barbie's role in our popular culture?
2. How does McDonough explain Barbie's appeal?
3. Do you agree with McDonough's explanation regarding Barbie's appeal? Why or why not?
4. McDonough asks: "Is there such widespread contempt for the intelligence of children that we really imagine they are stupid enough to be shaped by a doll?" Write a paragraph in which you respond to McDonough's question.
5. McDonough is as adamant in her praise of Barbie as Quindlen (the author of the preceding article, "Barbie Turns 35") is in her disdain of the little plastic figure. Their opinions are polar opposites, and yet, both are intelligent, respected, successful women. Consider both of their arguments and give your position.