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Issue 6 Spring 2022

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*batteries not included

Editor-in-Chief:

Preston Burt

Art Director:

Mark Dowd

Contributors:

Justin Broderway

Mahnaz Dar

Kevin Decent

Shannon DeWitt

Jennifer Dines

Anthony Karcz

Marc Paterson

Claire Sewell

Nelson Sims

J.T. Trigonis

Keith Valcourt

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info@RetrofiedMag.com

LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

By
Preston Burt

You know the drill. Whether it was your birthday or Christmas morning or some other special occasion, you patiently waited for the big day to arrive but could hardly contain yourself when it was finally time to open your presents which hopefully contained the latest electronic doo-dad of the day. Tearing off the paper, you were so ecstatic to see just what had pined over for so long was finally yours. In many cases, the wait to play with your long-desired toy was finally over, and you were off to the races. Other times, you opened the present only to find out the wait would be a little longer because of a little asterisk that went unnoticed on the packaging: “batteries not included.”

That extra delay we experienced as kids felt like an eternity. Even today, we’re exceedingly inconvenienced by the smallest delay in getting what we want, when we want it. With the ability to access so much of our culture instantly or “on demand,” we’re living out our childhood dreams of instant gratification: movies, games, food delivery—you name it! But now that we have it, how many of us feel that something was lost along the way?

Not only that, but how much of what we enjoy today is reliant not only on batteries or an electrical connection, but also wi-fi or a 5G connection? We’re glued to our screens, always in arm’s reach of a slew of electronic gadgetry, and always hustling to stay busy. Maybe some of what we’re so nostalgic for as adults is what we desperately wanted to eschew as children: simplicity.

This issue we’re not frustrated by the phrase “batteries not included,” but celebrating it. Even without a power source, we found plenty of ways to have fun and pass the time as kids. Whether it was battling with gimmicky action figures alone in your bedroom, breathing life into your doll with an incredible backstory, reading books where you could impact the story, or going on an epic quest with your friends with nothing but pencils, paper, dice, and an incredible imagination, we had power in our connections to our inner child and each other. We hope these recollections of those times help you remember that the ability to ignite creativity and carefree play may still reside somewhere: inside us.

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Thanks to all our executive producers who helped make this issue possible!
See who they are on page 51.

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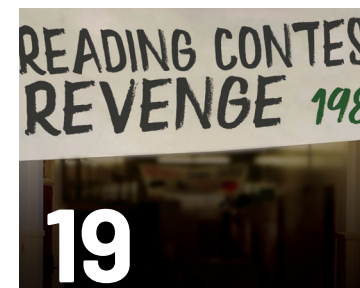
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Valley of the Dolls:

Why American Girl Still Resonates

By Mahnaz Dar

The '80s and '90s were an era rife with battery-powered, high-tech toys, from Teddy Ruxpin to the TalkBoy to PowerWheels. But one of the most fondly-remembered toys of the time was decidedly lo-fi: the American Girl dolls. Created in 1986 by writer and educator Pleasant T. Rowland, American Girl was a collection of dolls from various periods in American history. A series of six books for each doll gave them elaborate backstories, and kids could buy many of the clothes and items featured in the books.

The dolls were a runaway success. In 1998, Rowland sold her Pleasant Company, which manufactured the dolls, to Mattel for \$700 million, and since then, dozens of different dolls, both historical and contemporary, have been created. But for most '80s and '90s fans, the original five-doll lineup are where it's at: Felicity Merriman, who lives in colonial Virginia on the eve of the impending Revolution; Samantha Parkington, a wealthy orphan being raised by her grandmother in early-20th-century New York as the burgeoning women's rights movement took off; Kirsten Larson, a Swedish immigrant adjusting to life in 19th-century Minnesota; Molly McIntire, dealing with life on the home front during World War II while her father serves as a doctor in the U.S. Army; and Addy Walker, an enslaved girl who flees with her mother to Philadelphia.

For many kids, they were the ultimate status symbol, in part due to the high prices; each doll went for \$75 (with a hardcover book) in 1986. And for many millennial adults, the dolls still command the kind of passion Furby and ZhuZhu Pets can only dream of. It might not initially be clear why; the dolls didn't walk, talk, or do anything. And, glancing at a '90s-era American Girl catalog, a newcomer would be forgiven for thinking that the dolls are just a far more expensive, old-school version of Barbie, mired both in ideas of traditional femininity and capitalism. A double-page spread devoted to Samantha's birthday featured a teddy bear (\$18), a stuffed dog (\$18), a doll stroller (\$25), and a replica of Samantha's party, including a wicker table and chairs (\$75), a lemonade set (\$60), and party treats (\$26).

But kids loved that these characters grappled with constricting gender roles. As a child, Rebecca King, a journalist, adored headstrong Felicity, "because she wasn't perfect. She's in this pre-Revolution world where she's expected to pour tea properly and have perfect stitches in her sewing. Meanwhile, she loves stomping around in the mud and riding her horse. She's constantly striving to be what was considered a 'proper girl,' and constantly falling short."

Faith Eichhorst, a school librarian who owned the Molly and Addy dolls as a child, felt that the stories offered a more vivid and relatable depiction of history. "Most history books for that age range were aimed at boys, starred boys, and mostly focused on adventures and daring escapes. The girls were affected by and responded to major historical events, but they were mostly living lives that seemed fairly ordinary for that time period. Cultural attitudes were expressed by people's personalities, not dry lectures in a nonfiction text."

And some fans found American Girl a welcome alternative to the ultra-feminine Barbie. "I loved the variety and that they were more realistic, they weren't perfect—I could see myself in those characters in various ways," said Rachel Thudium, a veterinary medical librarian. "I had Barbie, but I thought they all looked the same. Plus, I was never a pink, cutesy girl, and loved history and adventure. Barbie wasn't that."

Many were put off by the high price points. Eichhorst "mourned how much they were a status symbol and out of reach for so many girls." She added, "The irony that a doll based on a character that escaped slavery and struggled to make ends meet was unaffordable was not lost on me, even as a child."

But fans found creative ways of dealing with the expense. King still has the Felicity doll she was given as a child, but because the accessories were so expensive, her parents bought her off-brand items. Hannah Campbell, a production editor, loved American Girls, but her mother thought they were too expensive and instead bought her a generic doll that resembled Felicity. She said, "My mom sewed a few matching outfits for us. One was a calico dress and little colonial bonnet that I wore on a field trip to Greenfield Village, a history museum in the town where I grew up."

And though Campbell didn't have much official merchandise, she bought a couple of American Girl cookbooks and immersed herself in the culinary worlds of 18th-century Virginia and early 20th-century New York.

Some kids took just as much pleasure in poring over the catalogs as in buying the items. "My mom was a doll collector,





Quints

Created by Tyco in the early '90s, Quints were tiny baby quintuplets with accessories such as bottles, cribs, and a stroller. While the idea of taking care of multiple newborns would send most adults into a panic, for kids, there was nothing cuter than Quints.

Magic Nursery Dolls

Before gender reveal parties took off, there were Magic Nursery Dolls, from Mattel. To find out if the doll was a boy or a girl, kids dipped the doll's nightie into water and waited for the words "It's a boy" or "It's a girl" to appear.



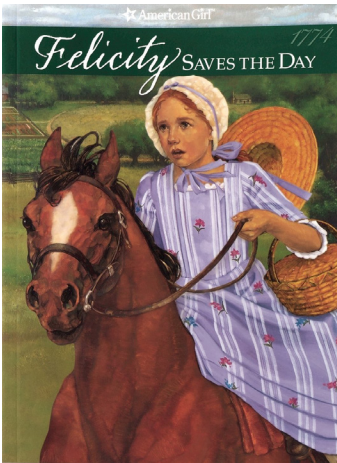
Polly Pocket

Designed by Chris Wiggs in 1983 and licensed by Bluebird Toys from 1989 until 1998, Polly Pocket demonstrated that good things do indeed come in small packages. Polly was a plastic figure less than one inch tall; each doll came with a circular case, like a makeup compact, that opened to reveal a miniature dollhouse.

so we'd look through the catalog together admiring the staged photos of each doll with her various accessory sets," said Emma Carbone, a librarian. And for Thudium, who had trouble deciding which doll to buy, looking at the catalog was "a way to 'have it all' but not have to make a decision."

Though in the late '90s, American Girl dolls became far more diverse—adding Josefina, a girl from 1824 New Mexico, and Kaya, an 18th-century Nimiipuu girl—initially the lineup was overwhelmingly white, and fans acknowledge that the original books at times offered a problematic portrayal of American history. King notes that Felicity's beloved grandfather owned a plantation. "We never grapple with the fact that he owns slaves. In *Felicity Saves the Day*, there are a few mentions of how dangerous it is to be Black in Virginia, but otherwise, the stories are whitewashed, and slavery is glanced over."

Eichhorst "wished there was far more diversity with the American Girl dolls, and far sooner. I still wish that for the more recent releases as well. The four years between the introductions of Addy and Josefina seemed utterly baffling at the time, and then it was five more years before Kaya was introduced."



Said Carbone, "At the peak of American Girl popularity, it also wasn't as easy to find stories about other experiences. We were still years away from the 'We Need Diverse Books' movement and the changes that have come to make children's literature more inclusive (with room for more improvement, of course)." She added, "The books and the dolls weren't perfect, but they were a good start."

While the American Girl empire has expanded its reach, for many fans, those original dolls—and accessories—still resonate most strongly. "There's something about the floral pattern in Felicity's dress that unlocks some deep core memory in me," said King. "It's such a comforting pattern, and when I see it, I'm reminded of my childhood."

She added, "The stories are often about how they fail and learn and grow from that failure. What kid can't relate to that? The magic was in creating these characters set in worlds so different from our own and yet making them so relatable."

Mahnaz Dar is a writer and editor. You can find her on social media @DibblyFresh, where she shares adorable animal videos and tweets about children's literature, The Sopranos, and her favorite Nineties TV shows.



Preferred Reader: A Brief History & Recollection of Mall Bookstores

By Claire Sewell

Growing up in Houston, Texas in the 1980s and '90s was to live in the shadow of skyscrapers. Built with wildcatting oil and banking money, the gleaming buildings were symbols of the previous decades of rapid economic growth and expansion throughout the city. I grew up in the suburban southeast area of the city, near Pasadena. It was, in many ways, a lot like the scenes in *Urban Cowboy* of endless refineries where men worked by day and let off steam after hours at the local honky tonk. Maybe we lacked a little of the so-called sophistication of our neighbors a few miles up the freeway who shopped at the Galleria, but we had three malls of our own all within a 10-mile radius.

Countless weekends were spent wandering these air conditioned paradises and, though some of the stores varied,

each mall had Waldenbooks and B. Dalton bookstores in common. We wouldn't get a Barnes & Noble in the area until 2001, so mall bookstores were the go-to for browsing current bestsellers and more. Yes, we had libraries as well. There was one in the parking lot, just a few feet away from the Waldenbooks inside the mall closest to my childhood home. I loved going there, too, but my parents had enough disposable income to fuel their reading habits with new books so it was to the bookstores in the mall that we went. Shopping, then, was as much a family pastime for us as it was for other suburbanites. And so, buoyed by a sense of nostalgia brought on by the early days of the pandemic, I found myself thinking quite often about the story of mall bookstores and what those spaces meant to me.