

Tis the season to be shopping, and for most parents in the country it's an opportunity to curry favour with the offspring. You just have to get the *right* toy. So for those desperately seeking a little guidance let me offer some advice. It's Robo Sapiens for the boys and an achingly hip Bratz doll or the 2004 model Barbie for the girls. While Bratz are the new wunderkinds of urban cool in Toyland, this Christmas Barbie appears as the fairytale Princess Anneliese, a vision in bubble gum pink fake taffeta, cradling a plastic cat and singing winningly from her box. However, despite the saccharine rainbow of estate pinks, faced with the Barbie/Bratz axis of evil the fantasy-fuelled Anneliese appears the less threatening of the two. After all, Barbie's a respectable girl, squeaky clean and, dare we say it, almost boring. Yes, she's been accused of being the bimbo responsible for setting unrealistic expectations on female beauty but generations of women have grown up with her no damage done. She's become a failsafe, held up as the epitome of All-American beauty, success and wholesomeness. Or so we thought.

But it appears we've all been duped. Barbie has been keeping a shocking secret. Like many a squeaky-clean celebrity icon she nurses a darker, and altogether more salacious past. Her PR gurus have spun a cover story for over forty years but now she is about to be outed. Barbie was, in a former life, an outrageous sex doll. Sold in sex shops and bars she was a icon of sexual abandon for a generation of Germans. The sales posters from the period leave little to the imagination: a glamorous doll, named Lilli, with curvaceous hips and bust, sits astride a donkey in a slinky negligee and a scarlet sex-goddess pout, promising "Lilli will please you with a beautiful animal". Make no mistake. With her widows peak, heavily painted face and pull-off wardrobe of sexy suspenders, micro skirts and tight sweaters, this doll was the original gold

digging tease, created with one intention, to inspire desire in German men.

The official line, of course, is that Barbie Millicent Roberts was launched, sorry born, on March 9th 1959. She grew up in Willows, Wisconsin and attended High School before leaving home to become a teenage fashion model. But, in reality, this child-friendly icon's origins are a very long way from the cosy apple pie world of Middle America.

Ruth Handler, co-founder of Mattel, happened upon the Lilli doll while on holiday in Lucerne, Switzerland. The moment she saw the dolls' arched back, rounded hips and tiny hand-painted feet, screwed into a stand in a sex-shop window she knew she had struck retail gold.

Lilli was a brassy little thing, with an advertising strapline that stated simply "Gentlemen Prefer Lilli". And they certainly did. It's hard to know whether she was actually meant to be a hooker but the cartoon depictions of her that regularly appeared in the tabloid newspaper Bild Zeitung made it clear that she never saw the same man twice. Whether flirting on the phone at home (usually dressed in the skimpiest bra and panties) preparing to receive one of her frequent visitors or out 'pulling' in a bar, Lilli was always on the lookout for rich men and sexual adventure, and more than capable of using her assets to get them. It was this doll, with her seemingly universal physical appeal to men that Ruth Handler selected as the ideal role model for Barbie.

Neither Lilli's lifestyle nor the reluctance of the Mattel board – who believed a doll with breasts would bomb - mattered to Ruth. She bought the rights to Lilli and after a little re-working and a carefully constructed biography launched the No 1 Barbie at the New York Toy Fair in 1959.

This replica vamp hit America looking every inch the cousin of her German counterpart . She wore a slutty black and white animal print style swimsuit, sunglasses, and a hard yet provocative stare. Eyebrows arched, crimson nails and lips done to perfection, and, for good measure, a pair of flamboyant gold-coloured hoop earrings set the agenda for Barbie as the very first ‘It’ girl about town. Buyers shunned the doll, and her inviting vital statistics – which on a human scale measure 39 – 20 – 33, proportions now known scientifically as those most likely to induce a sexual response in men. They, of course, reasoned that Barbie was far too adult for 4 to 12 year old girls. Girls, it seems, didn’t care. Early research took 100 mothers and their daughters to the toyshop, showed them Barbie and asked them if they wanted to own her. 100 percent of the girls said they wanted one, while every mother thought she should be melted down.

Indeed there was such outrage and protest among American mothers at the introduction of this overtly sexual doll it took a marketing masterstroke to save Barbie. They advertised on the Mickey Mouse Club show, a popular kids TV show, and bypassed parents appealing directly to the children. Within weeks little girls had gone Barbie crazy for this statuesque version of womanhood and 351,000 were sold in Barbie’s first year of life alone.

Of course, Lilli had never been intended as a toy for little girls but Barbie, effectively the same figurine but with a different ‘legend’, was being sold as the ideal role model for pre-teen girls. According to Ruth Handler it was the doll that would help them define their futures. To our 21st century sensibilities, this may seem tame, but in the 1950’s wholesome, innocent, white, Christian American values were still held dear and the arrival of this suggestive doll felt, to many, like a slide into moral depravity.

To those holding such frontier values dear there’s a further twist. It seems that the Lilli doll herself had a muse. Marlene Dietrich. As

Barb Dickey, a collector of Lilli rarities and a doll historian says, “all dolls are evolutionary and the Lilli Bild cartoon was born of this icon of the silver screen. You can see it in her style and attitude to love.” Dietrich defined glamour and sexuality during the inter war years living a life of excess, glamour and mystery. Sexually voracious she was reputed to have had affairs with, among others, Greta Garbo and Errol Flynn. How ironic that Princess Plastique, the wholesome All-American archetype should find her roots in the decadent pre-war Berlin and Europe’s most famous and sexually liberated temptress. Dietrich in the XXX is a long way from the ponytailed Malibu Barbie cruising the beach in her jeep with Ken Carson in his underfilled lifeguard trunks.

Many passionate collectors think Mattel have been slow to realise the value of Barbie’s past. “All those hip designer associations, from Yves Saint Laurent to Ray Ban are ripe for rediscovery”, says Marianne Consten, a collector in the Netherlands. But it is Lilli who is increasingly coveted. Barb Dickey, who’s built her collection over thirty years, starting out at garage sales held by weekending Mattel employees, has just auctioned an original Lilli doll for over three thousand pounds. “The appetite for Lilli is huge”, she says. “Sure, she’s naughty, but she’s just so beautiful.” And twas ever thus, for beauty, though you may not like it, always was a license to print money.

It may be time for Barbie to come clean, declare all and to make a virtue of her erotic past. Even Playboy is now producing ‘figurines’ of its favourite centrefolds, selling in astonishing quantities. There can be no doubt that we live in a highly sexualised and confessional society. We love Heat, Closer and Now with their warts-and-all snapshots of cellulite and pimples, infidelities, love children and trips to rehab. We don’t *want* our celebrities to be perfect. We love the skeletons in their cupboards. Living with Geri, Sadie, Liz and Sophie through their ‘downs’ makes us believe in them all the more. Arguably Barbie, as the

archetypal female icon, could once again become the most essential of female role models by simply admitting her past.

Hamish Pringle, the Director General of the IPA and author of the book *Celebrity Sells*, agrees that such an 'outing' could be the perfect sales boost. "Barbie's salacious past is a good thing. She needs a Beckham moment to remind people that she's one of them. A genuine role model rather than a sanitised and unattainable ideal."

Besides, in having a sexy past, isn't Barbie really acting in time honoured tradition of many of our female icons. When Gail Porters' bottom was beamed onto the Houses of Parliament the little Scot was immediately propelled into the big-time, Katie Price deliberately created Jordan as a fantasy sex doll figure, Britney Spears, Christina Aguilera... even Marilyn Monroe had a Playboy moment of her own that, it's arguable, sealed her fate as the ultimate blonde bombshell. Frankly, the list of those who use their sex to achieve their ambitions is endless. And hardly revolutionary.

Meanwhile, the collagen-enhanced Bratz are starting to clean up. Their success is a sign that girls now are ready to embrace something more truthful. Modern and 'now' they are based on our love of gang culture. What began with the Spice Girls and Girl Power has evolved; Bratz are real girlfriends, who love to shop, share secrets and offer the emotional support of a surrogate family. They don't wanna change the world, these girls just wanna have fun. Barbie, in her Dental greens and fixed smile, looks rather prim and lonely in comparison. Like a deb left out in the rain in an old dress while her friends are in the back of the limo on their way to the premiere.

And girls love them: while sales of Barbie have dropped (though to be fair the buyers at Hamley's, Sainsbury's et al aren't exactly stinting on the stock orders this Christmas), Bratz's sales are

shooting through the roof (130% at the last count). For the first time in her 45-year life Barbie is being seen as the Me Too doll. In explanation, Isaac Larian MGA's president has said, "Bratz is the truth and Barbie isn't".

Ultimately yes, Barbie is built on a lie; while purporting to be an icon of blossoming femininity she is, as it turns out, only one degree of separation from a fully-fledged latter day porn icon. But these days, with hooker chic all the rage, it might give her the authentic edge she needs.

My view is that as kids-get-older-younger (to coin the business buzz phrase) it's time to admit that every fashion doll out there on the shelves is about sex. We rail against Barbie and all the other contenders to the throne, from Cindy and Pippa to Jem, and now Bratz, precisely because she appeals to a primal, and politically incorrect, desire to be the Alpha female, the girl who gets the guy.

Besides, this is the 21st century. Society has changed. What would have been shocking in the starched collar era of the late fifties will, these more relaxed times, raise a wry smile and affirm what we've always secretly felt about Barbie. Behind all the tissue paper, the Pink Silhouette boxes and seasonal wardrobes the reality is waiting. We want Barbie with all her designer baggage and tawdry secrets. We can take it.