

rearing as the competitive responsibility of parents and the Charybdis of market forces addressing children as consumers. But there is room for skepticism. Some of us doubt that the twentieth century's discourse of play could—or should—be revived to address the perils of the twenty-first. The future might require a different strategy and, maybe, a less technophobic conception of play, one that more befits a “posthuman” age.

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—Roy Kozlovsky, *Northeastern University, Boston, MA*

### **Toy Monster: The Big, Bad World of Mattel**

*Jerry Oppenheimer*

New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2009. Bibliography, photographs. xiii, 280 pp. \$24.95 cloth. ISBN: 9780470371268

The behind-the-scenes stories of toy makers have repeatedly inspired journalists and even those in the toy industry themselves to write highly accessible books for the general public. Jerry Oppenheimer's *Toy Monster* plants itself firmly in this tradition. Oppenheimer is the successful biographer of Martha Stewart, Barbara Walters, the Clintons, and the Kennedys. A mark of his standing in today's market for tell-all biography comes in the back-of-book endorsement from Kitty Kelley, famous—some would say infamous—writer of unauthorized biographies of the Bush family, British royalty, and media celebrities.

Given all this, it would be surprising if Oppenheimer's story turned out to be an

insightful account of the process of toy design and marketing. It would be shocking if it were a thoughtful consideration of the impact and meaning of commercialized playthings on children and their parents. No worry. Oppenheimer neither surprises nor shocks us on these scores. Instead, he gives us the inside dope on the big players at Mattel.

We meet founders Ruth and Elliot Handler, the early designer Jack Ryan, the Barbie-like CEO of the late 1990s Jill Barad, and the current chief Bob Eckert. Based on interviews with their children, their friends, and their former associates (some sympathetic, others not), Oppenheimer's book offers an endless string of colorful stories. He presents the money-minded figure of Ruth, the egoist whose manipulation of sales records to boost stock prices in the early 1970s led to her ouster. Then there is her husband Elliot, the quiet and artistic toy maker. We meet Ryan, the narcissistic engineer, who “really” was responsible for Barbie, not Ruth who stole the “look” from a German doll named Bild Lili. Barad comes off as the flamboyant fashionista whose excessive self-confidence and drive for power and wealth could not even save her own job amid all the failed acquisitions and questionable accounting. Oppenheimer includes stories, too, of Eckert, the quiet midwestern corporate official who strove to keep the brands profitable and out of the news despite scandals over lead paint and ingestible magnets in Mattel's toys and the legal battles with MCA Entertainment Inc. over its Bratz dolls, the first successful competitor to Barbie. The book includes a lot of discussion about the Handlers and their ultimate break with Ryan (whose lusty lifestyle they found objectionable)

and about the obscene amounts of money earned by Barad and Eckert especially. Despite its title, this book is hardly a critique of the “toy monster.” Rather, it is largely a string of celebrity biographies.

What does all this tell us about play and playthings? Not as much as we might like. Other journalistic accounts of the toy business—for instance, G. Wayne Miller’s *Toy Wars: The Epic Struggle between G. I. Joe, Barbie, and the Companies That Made Them* (1998); Sydney Stern and Ted Schoenhaus’s *Toyland: The High-Stakes Game of the Toy Industry* (1991); or even the autobiographical *Dream Doll: The Ruth Handler Story* (1995)—offer us insights into the corporate process of designing modern action figures and dolls and explanations of what has sold well among kids’ playthings. Oppenheimer’s relentless quest for the personal, even salacious, story mostly precludes any discussion of the toy industry itself. He rehearses the well-known story of the origins of Barbie without any discussion of the girls’ playthings the doll displaced or why it was able to do so. He sheds some light on the development of He-Man and the Masters of the Universe toys and the well-known razor-and-razor-blade strategy of marketing action figures and Barbies—selling the doll or figure to “hook” the child into purchasing ever more accessories and other figures in the toy line. He recognizes the role of the program-length commercial, the television cartoon series of the 1980s based solely on toy lines. But he offers no context or interpretation. He summarizes Mattel’s 2008 court victory over MCA in which Mattel claimed rights to the entire line of Bratz dolls because it was conceived by a toy designer who was, at the time, on Mattel’s payroll. He does offer an explana-

tion of Bratz’s threat to Mattel’s Barbie by pointing out that today’s girls actually do prefer the streetwise look of Britney Spears and her ilk over Barbie’s “conservative” style, but Oppenheimer’s analysis is brief and superficial.

Perhaps the most striking element of this book about Mattel is that it has so little to do with toys or their use by children. And that may say as much about the toy industry as about the author.

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—Gary Cross, *The Pennsylvania State University, State College, PA*

### **The Place of Play: Toys and Digital Cultures**

*Maaïke Lauwaert*

Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2009. Diagrams, photographs, notes, bibliography, index. 160 pp. \$29.95 paper. ISBN: 9789089640802

The concept of “participatory culture” has become increasingly associated with new forms of play made possible by digital media and the Internet. In our so-called participatory cultures, players do not simply play with toys and games designed by corporations, but become co-designers, modifying play practices as well as the objects themselves and sharing them with other players. Participatory culture has been lauded for its presumed shift of players from consumers to producers, the democratization of cultural production, and the increasing freedom from the dominance of corporations and industry in shaping and commodifying play. But a growing number of critics argue that such participation is not as open or liberatory