

Classic Toys of the National Toy Hall of Fame: A Celebration of the Greatest Toys of All Time!

Scott G. Eberle and Strong National Museum of Play

Philadelphia: Running Press, 2009. Contents, photographs. 264 pp. \$29.95 cloth. ISBN: 9780762435654

Scott Eberle has used a brilliant idea and enhanced it with a delightful and enlightening book that celebrates “the greatest toys of all time.” The Strong in Rochester, New York, is the home of the National Toy Hall of Fame. Similar to the Baseball Hall of Fame, the toy hall of fame installs new nominees each year. Through 2008, there were forty-two inductees, and Eberle, the Strong’s vice president for interpretation, has written a chapter on the origin, history, and effects of each one of them. Ever the historian rather than chronicler, Eberle says something about the cultural context in which each toy arose, pointing out, for example, how Barbie (inducted in 1998) and G.I. Joe (inducted in 2004) changed as gender politics changed over time and how Monopoly (in the hall since 1998) arose out of and in some ways as a relief from the Great Depression. Written in an engaging style—check out the clever subtitles for each chapter—*Classic Toys* also presents gems of historical analysis that will absorb serious scholars as well as general readers.

Some readers may muse about why a favorite toy of theirs has not been included. Why exclude the whoopee cushion or a Kenner tea set or the Betsy Wetsy doll? Such rumination is idiosyncratic; the hall of fame has selected the list carefully, and Eberle provides ample justification for each entry’s inclusion. (The ball, Big

Wheel tricycle, the Game of Life, Nintendo Game Boy, and playing cards have been inducted since the book’s publication.) Eberle does not, however, offer an explicit definition of what makes a toy “classic.” If one stops to think a minute, however, the definition is implicit. Virtually every toy in the National Toy Hall of Fame is one that a child (or adult) can play with or without supervision or instruction. Whether it be an Erector Set (“100 toys in one”), LEGO bricks (six of which, says Eberle, can be combined in 102,981,500 ways), a Radio Flyer wagon, or a cardboard box (it is so wonderful that the museum recognized how important this toy has been to children’s play and creativity), most of the hall of fame toys inspire kids to craft their own play. The only truly passive toy in the group is the View-Master. Several of the classics also were important because continued play with them included destruction, a guilty pleasure of childhood. Consider how one has to start over with Tinkertoys, Etch A Sketch, Lincoln Logs, Play-Doh, alphabet blocks, and even marbles. And Eberle overlooks the possibility for some of the toys to be used in ways not intended by their makers. Think, for example, of how Monopoly money can be used for countless amusing purposes outside of the game or how jacks can be proxies for miniature animals.

Regrettably, our risk-obsessed society has undermined the viability of some toys. Marbles—do kids really put them in their mouths?—have been relegated to the past, and the recently inducted Easy-Bake oven has fallen prey to recall by the Consumer Products Safety Commission; twenty-nine children got their hands caught in the oven’s opening, and five youngsters

were burned. Even the old standby, the stick, which was inducted in 2008, evokes warnings: “Don’t play with that! You’ll hurt yourself.” If playthings like these fade into history, at least this charming yet serious book can keep the memories alive.

—Howard P. Chudacoff, *Brown University, Providence, RI*

Little Big World: Collecting Louis Marx and the American Fifties

Jeffrey Hammond

Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2010. 118 pp. \$22.95 paper. ISBN: 978158729910

English professor Jeffrey Hammond is a brave man to share with us his reveries on his 1950s childhood memories of playing with play sets made by Louis Marx & Company. He is braver still for revealing his thoughts and feelings about collecting and playing with them again fifty years later. The confessional character of this short book adds a charm and personal meaning to toy play in the cold war era. It also says much about the dynamics of the modern collector and even what it may mean to “return” and transform that play in the fullness of maturity. Hammond has an unusual knack for weaving bits of toy histories, 1950s culture and politics, and the sociology and theory of collecting into a series of imaginative tales about him and his desktop collection of plastic figures. He recognizes the modern quest for arresting time with childhood memories and understands the therapeutics of reviving such memories.

Much of his story is personal. He weaves his recollection of Roy Rogers and Dale Evans with his memory of his father. He recalls his boyhood enchantment with dinosaur figures that compensated for his childish fear of animals. He retells his journey into the admittedly arcane world of eBay when he bid on Marx play sets and figures and tells us what attracted him and what did not. He amuses us by making up stories using disparate Marx figures when he can not sleep at night. And he concludes with a discussion about how this playful interlude in his life as a sixty-year-old scholar has helped him understand and grow emotionally. With neither bravado nor embarrassment, Hammond explains his need to return to his six-year-old self and ultimately his need to transcend the play worlds constructed by Marx’s 1950s vision of the child’s future set in the victory culture of that decade with its themes of the tamed West, of the triumph of American soldiers, and of hero worship of presidents and of famous Roman and medieval figures. Hammond has a gift for describing the look and the feel of toy figures and for personifying them much like that displayed by Disney’s *Toy Story* and other recent animations. Hammond understands the meaning of the miniature for children seeking empowerment, security, and future role models. And he shares insights into the often lonely world of the collector, who looks for order and closure in the completed collection and is driven by the quest for the “missing” piece. He recognizes older people’s need to collect the past as mortality becomes a real consideration for them.

All of this makes *Little Big World* a good read. Yes, Hammond is certainly too gentle with Louis Marx’s promotion