

American Girl and the Historical Nostalgia Trap

While checking out Twitter the other day, I happened to notice that “American Girl” was trending. A fan of the pricy doll collection as a child, I clicked on the trend to see what was up.

To my surprise, American Girl was announcing a brand new pair of “historical” dolls, twins Isabel and Nicki hailing from ... the 1990s?!?

Twitter was full of smart comments along the lines of, “Thanks, American Girl, for making me feel old.” I could sympathize, given that I myself enjoyed the American Girl dolls in the 1990s, for a very special reason, as I have recounted before on [Intellectual Takeout](#):

[In the 1960s] My mother was a little girl who had fallen in love with a new toy on the market: Barbie. She was a bit young for the doll, but after much pleading, she finally convinced her father to take her out to buy one.

However, Barbie was so popular that by the time they made it to the store, the only doll left in sight was the one on display. It had been sitting there for a year or so, but as it was the only one, my grandfather convinced the store clerk to let him have it.

My mother enjoyed playing with that doll for many years. There was only one thing that bothered her. All the other little girls had Barbie dolls with stands that went under the arms. Her Barbie had a stand with two prongs that went up into the feet.

Fast forward several decades. I was in early grade school and had been introduced to the fledgling American Girl

company through the Kirsten books, which, incidentally, started me on my reading career. We requested a catalog and drooled over the dolls and clothes in it but were aghast at the prices. I knew there was no way I'd ever own one of the dolls, let alone see one in real life!

Then my father was laid off from his job. To provide a little extra income, my parents dug through the attic and pulled out some old treasures, namely, baseball cards and the Barbie doll. My mother had loved that doll, but as an adult, she began to question if she really wanted to pass it on to her daughters, particularly with the ideals it suggested. In the end, she made a phone call to a local Barbie collector and asked if she would be interested in buying it.

At first the collector wasn't that interested. But then my mom mentioned the holes in the feet and immediately the collector's tone changed. In fact, she was ready to drop everything and COME GET THAT DOLL.

As it turned out, the Barbie my grandfather coaxed out of the display case 30 years before was a first edition doll. The five-dollar investment he made that day fetched a tidy sum of \$600 the day my mother sold it.

My mom decided she wanted to do something special with a portion of this windfall. Having loved the history and appreciated the encouragement of wholesome girlhood that the American Girl Company promoted, she secretly ordered a special Christmas present.

On Christmas morning, I was passed a large package. Ripping off a corner of the wrapping paper, I saw a maroon colored box and read the letters A-M-E-R. I stared at it in disbelief as a shocked screech of delight rose within me. I didn't know it then, but I had just received the most astounding Christmas surprise I have experienced to date.

Reading this story, you can understand why I've always had a special connection with the American Girl doll collection. Truly, my nostalgia runs deep for the company's products!

Unfortunately, the company has changed in recent decades—even more so in the last few years, I realized as I clicked through to the page featuring the '90s twins. There I found that the historical American Girl doll collection [had expanded considerably](#). There was "Courtney," hailing from 1986, "Melody," from 1964, "Maryellen," from 1954.

The list went on, diversity and the 20th century featuring prominently in the featured options. Gone were the classic historical dolls such as Felicity—representing the Revolutionary War era and the guts of the colonists fighting against tyranny—and Kirsten—representing the pioneer spirit of self-reliance which settled our nation, a spirit which author Rose Wilder Lane [found to be in direct opposition to communism](#). Such developments indicated that, like much of American culture today, the American Girl doll company is more interested in focusing on the history that makes us feel good or politically correct.

Those who have followed my writing for years will know that I am fond of pointing to history and exploring times past for the truths that it offers. Such a practice is often misunderstood, however, and gets one accused of nostalgia, a longing for the way things used to be, or being stuck in the past.

But in looking at the new and improved American Girl doll collection, I realized that this is the type of history that the company appears to be capitalizing on these days. They go after nostalgia, the happy memories of our childhoods, or today's politically correct initiatives, seeking to make people feel good about themselves rather than teaching important lessons and learning from the hard truths of the past.

A genuine look at history, however, is not necessarily supposed to overcome us with good feelings. Instead, we should be looking to the past to sift through the good and the bad and learn lessons for today. And that is exactly why its rather tragic that American Girl is overlooking the lessons of the 1600s, when the first Pilgrims came to America, the 1700s, when the colonists fought for freedom and wrestled with the thinkers of the past to determine the best form of government for our country, and the many other periods in time in which real-life individuals experienced the ups and downs of life and wrestled with ideas and issues at odds with established thinking.

We ourselves are wrestling with ideas and issues and often find ourselves at odds with one another today. But instead of immersing ourselves only in our recent past, trying to bathe ourselves in the warm-fuzzies of nostalgia, we would do well to examine history as a whole, digging for the lessons that it can show us, even when those lessons are at odds with today's penchant for diversity and politically correct agendas.

Only then can we hope to move forward in progress, avoiding history's same mistakes over and over and over again.

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