

Making Babies the American Girl® Way

Terri Kapsalis

What catches my attention is the look in the girl's eyes, combined with the doll clutched to her 10-year-old belly. All in all, it is a normal enough sight: A suburban family out for a day of shopping on Chicago's Magnificent Mile. But the girl has the look of one possessed. She leads the parade and is clearly the focus of the day's outing. I pass them and turn a corner, only to come upon yet another girl, a few years younger, cradling a doll whose blonde locks seem clipped from her own. The girl and her doll wear identical blue

American Girl Photo Op

Claire Pentecost

jumpers. A camera dangles from her mother's wrist. They are headed in the same direction as the group I had passed, and this girl, like the other, has the dazed look of a pilgrim too long on the road. I cross the street: Another

girl, same scenario. She, too, carries a doll, not unlike the other two dolls, but with a different hair color to match her owner's.

Has some kind of odd convention come to town? Or are they all bound for a Jerry Springer shoot somewhere nearby: "Girls with doll disorders and the families who support them?" This girl's mother points to a store across the street, and her daughter's body seems to rise a foot off the sidewalk, her inflated smile giving her a helium-lift. There it is. Girl Xanadu. Taj McDoll, a.k.a. American Girl Place.

There had been American Girl dolls long before this singular boutique



opened in 1998. A coworker at a women's health clinic first showed me a catalog nearly a decade ago, bringing me up to speed on the latest rage among pre-pubescent girls. Another coworker chimed in, regarding her daughter's favorites. They complained about the steep prices and sheer number of collectibles, but as good liberals, they commended the dolls' diversity. Finally, a doll company was being responsive

to ethnic differences by offering Asian, Latina, and other dolls of color.

We discussed these new-fangled poppets in the staff room that doubles as the storage area for tanks of frozen sperm. (These tanks, bearing an unfortunate resemblance to two-foot tall circumcised Caucasian penises, arrive via Fed Ex from sperm banks around the country. The tanks stand in front of the copy machine, awaiting summonses from pre-ovulatory alternative insemination clients.) We often use the tanks as makeshift stools and did so that day while paging through the glossy American Girl catalog. A stack of sperm donor catalogs rested nearby.

Pleasant Rowland founded the Pleasant Company in 1986, announcing start-up with a catalog offering dolls and books. She sold the company to Mattel in 1998, for \$700,000,000. Earnings grow from year to year, with the American Girl catalog roping in more than two-thirds of the income. The first 60 or so pages of the American Girl catalog are dedicated to the American Girls Collection, a line of dolls who come complete with a name and a personal history, accessories and storybooks. There's the 1854 pioneer girl, Kirsten, whose family immigrated from Sweden. There's former slave girl Addy whose family escaped to the North. There's Samantha, a Victorian orphan of means, and Josefina, "an Hispanic girl of heart and hope." Their lives are further sketched in picture books, telling tales of school, summertime and birthdays. Each book, naturally,



is paid (by the consumer) advertising for the outfits and accessories featured within. You can buy them all, from Kirsten's summer dress with straw hat to Josefina's pet baby goat, Sombrita.

These American Girl dolls are a new breed. They're neither pudgy, round babies nor busty Barbies. They're post-potty trained, pre-adolescent girls, closer in proportion and size to a life-size infant than a foot-long Barbie. When you make a purchase from the American Girl collection, you're not just buying a doll, you're buying a plausible life history. Juan Garcia, a history professor at the University of Arizona, is quoted in the catalog as vouching for the authenticity of the "Hispanic" doll: "The books and products that accompany Josefina richly capture and recreate a significant time, place, and heritage in New Mexican history that young people seldom learn about." Such knowledge does not come cheaply. Josefina's New Mexican Table & Chairs are \$75, her Feast Day Finery is \$22, and her Heirloom Accessories are \$12. As Josefina's complete collection runs \$925, only a few youngsters will have the opportunity to get that whole story.

The catalog is extensive, with at least eight pages dedicated to each of the six dolls in the collection. Every outfit, piece of furniture, and accessory is described, complete with teasers about the school, summer, and birthday narratives found in the accompanying books. Rather than arriving as a blank slate,

each doll comes pre-endowed and packaged with *a la carte* personal milestones and memories.

That's not the end of it. Girls can purchase their own outfits to match their dolls'. Under the caption "Dress Like Your Doll," a young, apparently Latina girl is pictured modeling the same *camisa*, petticoat, skirt, and *rebozo* that Josefina wears on the opposite page. A black girl stands beside doll Addy, in a matching striped pink dress. A light-skinned brunette girl in a white nightie is pictured holding light-skinned brunette Samantha in a white nightie. The catalog encourages girls to pick dolls that look like them, selecting skin, hair, and eye color as close as possible to their own. Choosing a true look-alike, the girl can then step into the doll's elaborate narrative, fully outfitted.

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When I started working in the alternative insemination program at a women's health center in Chicago nearly a decade ago, it was my job to make sure we had up-to-date sperm bank catalogs and donor profiles. Donor catalogs are composed of profiles that provide the information a consumer uses to choose a donor. All donors, who don't actually "donate" but are in fact paid for their semen, are anonymous, identified only by alpha-numeric codes.

Begun nearly 25 years ago—when "unmarried" women were often refused access to insemination, or made to undergo a battery of psychological tests to prove they'd make "fit mothers," our program was and is solely for lesbians and other women without male partners. In the early 1990s, donor profiles were mainly straightforward, focusing on what was termed "physical characteristics": blood type, height, weight, eye color, ethnicity, religion, and personal and family medical history. (I'd never thought of religion as a "physical characteristic," but it was always there on the list, as if fundamental to a consumer's decision.) You'd know, for example, that donor F645 was English and Portugese, an atheist with A-positive blood, brown hair, hazel eyes, a fair complexion, six-foot, one-inch tall and 160 pounds. Some banks included what was deemed "personal information" such as hobbies and talents. These items always struck me as funny, but I supposed the extra information that F645 was interested in "sports and game theory" was provided to whet a prospective consumer's



interest. I couldn't imagine that consumers might entertain the idea that such characteristics were genetic and therefore heritable.

Since the mid-1990s many banks have expanded these profiles. Some now include essays written by donors. Printed either in a script-like font, or handwritten, they present a donor's response to questions like: Why do you want to be a sperm donor? If we could pass on a message to the recipients of your semen, what would that message be? Where would you like to travel and why? What is your ultimate ambition or goal in life?

Some banks have expanded "personal information" to include math skills, mechanical ability, athletic ability, favorite sport, musical talent, foreign languages, artistic ability, and favorite foods, color, type of music, or pets. Some include SAT scores and GPAs.

Such information has a price. Xytex, a sperm bank based in Georgia, offers short profiles that include basic information and brief medical histories. The

first five are free; after that, each costs \$2. Long donor profiles that include personal essays and supplemental information cost \$10 each. Xytex was the first sperm bank to provide photographs of their donors. Introduced in 1994, PhotoFiles™ include short and long profiles as well as three 4x6-inch photos of the donor: \$35 each. In 1996, Xytex started offering BabyFiles™ which contain the same written information as PhotoFiles™ but in place of current photos of the donor, 8x10-inch reproductions of donors' baby pictures. Xytex explains that "BabyFiles™ are helpful for those who have concerns about how their baby might look."

In 1997, Xytex introduced VideoFiles™ which they claim to be "the most comprehensive donor information packages available anywhere! They are videotaped interviews of select donors, and not only provide you with a glimpse of the donor's appearance, but they reveal the donor's personality as well." A steal at \$100.

Xytex also keeps what may be considered the ultimate file on donors by permanently preserving "donor cells that can be used as a complete chemical record of genetics." The program is aptly titled Patriarch Genetic Tracking. According to Xytex, this genetic archive is maintained in case future progeny ever "need" such genetic information. What defines need is left open at this point and will certainly shift over time, as will, undoubtedly, the consumer cost of access to such information.

Some banks now have an assisted donor matching service. At Fairfax Cryobank in Virginia, a prospective consumer can send two photos (front and side views) of the person to be matched, along with a list of important characteristics to be met, and a staff member will suggest a donor match. Although none of the clients of the program where I work have used a formal matching service, many of our single clients self-select donors to "match" themselves, and clients with female partners often choose a donor that may resemble their partner.

For a fee, California Cryobank provides audiotaped interviews with many donors. Fairfax Cryobank, based in Virginia, hopes to lure customers with long profiles which include the donor's "personality type" as dictated by the Keirsey Temperament Sorter. Fairfax is the first bank I know of to start an



exclusive, higher-priced, sperm line, listed separately from other donors. Named “Fairfax Doctorate,” this line includes semen from donors who have completed or are completing doctoral degrees. This new sperm line follows in the footsteps of the famed Repository for Germinal Choice, a bank run by outspoken eugenicist Robert Graham, who claims to “improve humankind by gradually increasing the proportion of advantageous genes in the human gene pool,” by featuring

donors with genius-level IQs. Fairfax Cryobank supports Graham’s vision by asserting that sperm from men with doctorates is more valuable (and therefore more costly) than rank-and-file sperm.

This trend among banks to provide more and more information is part of a marketing strategy which assumes that more information about donors leads to increased sales. But it is also a kind of false advertising that leads consumers to believe that they get what they pay for. Nowhere in the catalog are there warnings stating: “Your child may not turn out the way you think.” The consumer shops not just for an exponential number of DNA dollops with flagellae, but for a personal history, personal interests, wishes and dreams. A post-graduate degree, a “personality type,” a cute baby picture and a personal essay are just some of the new spermatic accessories.

This seductive marketing strategy, combined with a social climate rife with bio-deterministic ideas that genes are the basis for future behavior, can cause the sperm consumer to forget that she is purchasing a spot of DNA which can combine with her own in myriad configurations and that a future baby will be subject to any number of transformational environmental and social factors. Instead, she may believe—traveling backward in centuries, ideologically—that she is purchasing a homunculus, a mini-human to be implanted



PHOTO: CLAIRE PENTECOST

into her uterus and emerge fully accessorized, and who, once grown, will play the guitar, like dogs, and be an intuitive, thoughtful extrovert with a Ph.D. in math.

Sperm banks that pursue such marketing strategies do not discourage consumers from believing that they are purchasing completely transmittable traits, and that they can, therefore, style their future child to their liking. To the contrary, designer babies are just what new reproductive pioneers promise. Genetic testing already allows the consumer to determine whether individual embryos created using egg and sperm prior to *in vitro* fertilization have a predisposition for genetic conditions such as Down's syndrome. Simply eliminate the ones that do and implant the ones that don't. With this kind of pre-implantation testing, any genetic trait could theoretically be selected for or against before birth. With the claim that genes have been identified that cause such traits as obesity and homosexuality, how long will it be before you can order up a thin, heterosexual baby with good spatial skills, eliminating the risk of a fat, dyslexic lesbian? This is reproduction reminiscent of Starbucks, where the consumer designs a baby as she might a beverage, selecting from a long list of specifications. Making a baby the old way will be as outmoded as ordering coffee with cream and sugar, instead of a "grande, skinny latte with a double shot."

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Many of the clients I see in the insemination program become thoroughly exhausted by the arduous and stressful process of choosing sperm. Some become almost obsessed with choosing the right donor. They may feel they're not provided enough information. One client couldn't understand why she knew that a donor had a tenor voice, but not whether he'd ever been to jail. Another joked that what she really wanted to know was if her donor was good at Scrabble. As one said, "It's a lot different than choosing a new car."

But American Girl customers, soon to be of reproductive age, will be just the kind of shoppers ready to meet the challenge. They're already familiar with the basic process, as matching doll traits isn't so different from matching donor traits. The consumer pays for a narrative—whether Xytex's VideoFile™ or Addy's birthday storybook—which in turn advertises and sells more product. American Girl aficionados are primed for the kind of expensive, detail-oriented shopping necessary to buy a baby in an age of reproductive technologies.

After all, what are dolls but instruments for simulating mothering? Traditionally, fussing over dolls is practice for future motherhood. You can care for, burp and diaper them, and truck them around. And the selection process has grown ever more complex. Long gone are the days when all baby dolls looked pretty much the same. At most, you could choose one with eyes that could shut, or one with a little pee hole. Otherwise they were almost entirely white and fair.

Back then, having babies was fairly straightforward as well, at least if you were married and heterosexual. Either you could, or you couldn't. Now, if you can't due to infertility or lack of access to gametes, as long as you have the money to pay for it, there are options, namely a variety of expensive reproductive technologies.

And so it goes with shopping for dolls in the age of the American Girl. Choosing the right doll, with her attendant characteristics, history, and accessories, is the first part of the mothering simulation, a pre-echo of the experience of shopping for a sperm or egg, and of designing a real baby. The American Girl line provides girls with the skills to be good future consumers in the reproductive technologies market.

As that market grows and changes, American Girl appears to be ahead of the curve. Consider the American Girl Today line of 20 dolls without distinguishing dress or accompanying stories. They have variegated skin tones, hair and eye colors. Not unlike sperm donors, these dolls are identified by ordering codes rather than given names. “GT 20D” has light skin, blonde hair, and gray eyes. “GT 18A” has dark skin, textured black hair, and light brown eyes. “GT 4D” appears to have almond-shaped—or generic Asian—eyes.

These American Girls don’t come with their own histories. The idea here is that the consumer makes this doll into whomever she pleases. The catalog reads, “She’s an American Girl like you! Her adventures are your adventures. Her dreams are your dreams. This is her moment in history, and your moment, too.” Whereas the original American Girl Collection asks the buyer to step into Addy’s nightie or Samantha’s tea dress—girl imitates doll—the American Girl Today line enacts a reversal: Doll imitates girl. Each customer is encouraged to pick her match from the 20-doll line-up. Including four blondes, one Asian, and two “dark skin” dolls, these dolls presumably mirror American Girl’s sales demographics rather than any other population of America’s real girls. In much the same way, sperm banks supply semen from some donors of color, but offer far more choices when it comes to white donors. Thus “consumer demand” is a reflection of the new eugenics where supply does not mirror actual world demographics.

As with the purchased genetic material, these coded American Girl Today dolls are the raw material onto which the consumer can then impose her own dreams and activities, thanks to accessories galore including a mini-Macintosh computer, soccer gear, or an American Girl horse and riding outfit. The doll is not endowed with some historical narrative, she is there to receive the consuming girl’s life story, whether actual or imagined.

The ordering code for each American Girl Today doll begins with GT. I assume this stands for “Girl Today,” but is it by uncanny coincidence that these two letters are also codes for two of the four chemical bases of DNA, guanine and thymine? Does American Girl take us from the phenotypic and the display of simple surfaces to the genotypic and the marketing of not altogether



decipherable codes? Girls are asked to pick a doll that looks like themselves and identify her based on an ordering code. Have we arrived at a time when ordering codes and genetic codes are one and the same?

The American Girl Today line forecasts the future, when cloning will be the new frontier of reproductive technologies. The My Twinn™ dolls, available by mail order, already take this leap forward. Mail in a girl's photo, a personal profile form, a hair sample, and \$128.95, and in four weeks you will receive a "poseable" doll with that girl's individual facial features, including matching eyes, skin, and hair. Not unlike American Girl, matching doll and girl outfits and accessories are available for purchase. The Twinn (note the doubling of the "n") label refers to an identical or near identical genetic make up. Here, the twinning occurs at the phenotypic level, but in an age of genetic obsession, will the genotypic be far behind? My Twinn™ undoubtedly uses the girl's hair sample in order to match texture and color, but this very hair sample could be used by scientists to extract DNA for a not altogether different purpose.

Although cloning is currently a risky process, some have proposed it as an

ideal option for consumers who have tried older sperm-and-egg reproductive processes to no avail. And with cloning, theoretically at least, there are no genetic surprises: You know exactly what code you're ordering. Ever since physicist and cattle breeder Richard Seed announced in 1998 that he would begin cloning humans within 90 days, a growing number of scientists and civilians seem to share his particular fantasy of eternal genetic life. There's a long line forming of potential clone consumers—those who want to duplicate a favorite pet, a dying child, Elvis, or themselves.

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Back on the Magnificent Mile, I follow the dazed girls, their dolls, and families into American Girl Place. Inside, consumers wander around, nearly hushed, as if at a museum. Girls stand transfixed in front of glass cases, eyeing the accessories they've seen in the catalogs. After passing display after display of the historical dolls, I happen upon the glass case containing all 20 American Girl Today dolls, with their GT ordering numbers, lined up like little soldiers ready for some kind of odd battle, dressed in identical red vinyl jumpers and plaid tights. Transfixed as any of my younger sisters, I realize that the new reproductive technology industry has a lot to learn from American Girl's marketing strategies. While the sperm and egg banks Internet and catalog sales soar, and fertility clinics haul in the big out-of-pocket medical bucks, perhaps they, too, should consider opening a boutique of their own.

As I step onto the escalator, I see that American Girl Place has a cafe where girls can have tea with their dolls. Why couldn't a fertility corporation—call it American Baby Place—have a cafe where a customer could take tea with an egg or sperm donor? I see a marquee advertising American Girl Place's \$25-a-ticket live musical, written and performed by real American girls. Perhaps an American Baby Place could offer the "American Clones Revue," a live musical written and performed by clones and their DNA doubles, where one could chat with the cast after the show, and where droves of dreamy-eyed consumers, having packed up their American Girl collections years before, could line up, money in hand, eager to order a clone of their very own. ★