

Cruising the Obits:
adventures in a cultural iconography

- by Benjamin and Caroline Shepard, 2002

Introduction

Darby Crash [aka Bobby Pin], of the punk rock band the Germs, died of a barbituate eating contest on December 4th, 1980. Former Beatle John Lennon died 24 hours later. The leader of life on the fringe had died within a day of the leader of a cultural zeitgeist. I

San Francisco, CA. Cruising the Obits on a Friday Night
Cultural fascination with death.

If it happened to someone else it might not happen to me.

dead pop stars

Linda Lovelace

Wendy o Williams of the Plasmatics

Darby Crash of the Germs

Eve Segdewick or Jean Michelle Basquiat

dead before their time

River Pheonix of Drugs

Sam Who, of stress, undergraduate at university of chicago

Freddie Mercury of Queen

Vito Russo of ACT UP

David Wanarovich, of AIDS, East Village artist

Archduke Franz Ferdinand, of an assassins bullets before WWI

Virginia Wolf, of suicide

a person who died, of a lynching

(for whom there were very few obits)

dead politicians

Vincent Foster

Sun Pengyi, a dead cultural revolutionary from China

Ronald Reagan (close enough)

a dead socialist

Yitshak Rabin/ Menachem Began

Steven Biko, birth of the truth and reconciliation commission

Adolf Hitler - is there an obit?

dead icons

The Queen Mom

Princess Di

- Barbie creator, Ruth Handler

dead wingnuts

The Death of the Tree Man

Allen F. Lovejoy – a lawyer and expert collector of dimes

W. Elliot Brownlee, Biochemist Created Cheez-Its Flavor

dead literati

Alberto Moravia

Dianna Trilling

Alice James

Jerzi Kozinski

dead babies
The Baby Lindenberg
Eric Clapton's Baby
Jean Benet Ramsey
JFK and Jackie's miscarried baby

not dead yet (but close or might as well be) – solicited by authors
Henry Kissinger – solicited by fellow Verso author Christopher Hitchens
Idi Amin or other living tyrants

Barbie creator, Mattel
founder Handler dies

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Ruth Handler, who created Barbie, the world's most popular doll, died Saturday. She was 85.

Handler, who also co-founded the Mattel toy company, died at Century City Hospital, a hospital spokesperson said without releasing details. Her husband, Elliott, told the Los Angeles Times that his wife died of complications from colon surgery she underwent about three months ago.

Since Handler's creation, named for her daughter Barbara, was introduced in 1959, it has become an American icon and a touchstone of cultural politics.

The impossibly well-endowed doll -- her original figure would be about 39-18-33 if she were human -- has infuriated feminists, inspired artists and intrigued academics around the world. Barbie even was placed in the official "America's Time Capsule" buried in 1976.

The original blue-eyed, blond fashion model has morphed over the decades into a variety of ethnic looks and has had many careers, from astronaut to veterinarian.

More than 1 billion have been sold in 150 countries.

"My whole philosophy of Barbie was that through the doll, the little girl could be anything she wanted to be," Handler wrote in a 1994 autobiography. "Barbie always represented the fact that a woman has choices."

"Over and over I've had it said to me by women," Handler told The Associated Press in 1994. "She was much more than a doll for them. She was part of them."

Barbie's birth came at a time when the usual doll was a baby. Handler decided to create a more mature toy after noticing that

her daughter liked to play with paper cutout dolls of teen-agers and career women.

The male ad executives at Mattel were unimpressed with the idea, but several years later Handler got the doll into production.

The 11 1/2-inch-tall plastic toy was a fresh-faced Midwesterner with a ponytail and a black-and-white striped swimsuit. Barbie debuted at the American Toy Fair in New York City in 1959. It was an instant hit and in its first year 351,000 dolls were sold at \$3 each.

Barbie went on to make a fortune for Mattel, which sold not only versions of the doll but an expanding number of outfits and accessories, not to mention Barbie's boyfriend Ken, named for Handler's son; her little sister, Skipper, and pals Midge and Christie.

Later dolls were named for Handler's grandchildren.

Handler was born Ruth Mosko, the youngest of 10 children of Polish immigrants who settled in Denver. She moved to Southern California at 19, later marrying her high school boyfriend and studying industrial design.

Eventually the Handlers began making and selling plastic bowls, mirrors and other housewares. The garage business boomed and was followed in the 1940s by a picture frame company. Mattel grew out of a sideline business making dollhouse furniture from the frame scraps. The company had early successes with a child-sized ukulele and the Burp gun, cap pistol.

Things went downhill in the 1970s, however. Mattel began to diversify away from toys and the Handlers were forced out of the company. In 1978, Handler was indicted for mail fraud and false reporting to the Securities and Exchange Commission. She pleaded no contest, was fined \$57,000 and sentenced to 2,500 hours of community service.

Handler, who struggled with breast cancer and had a mastectomy in 1970, later blamed her illness, saying it made her unfocused about business concerns.

She began to campaign for cancer awareness. The disease also prompted her second career. Unable to find a decent prosthetic breast, Handler created her own, called Nearly Me, and formed a company to market it. She fitted Betty Ford for one after the former first lady had a mastectomy. The company got more than \$1 million in sales and was sold in 1991.