

Part One

THE BARBIE WAR AND THE HANDLER-RYAN ERA

Chapter 1

Barbie's Untold Heritage

After consummating yet another evening of compulsive sex—this night with the tall redhead who is Mattel's top-secret voice of the first talking Barbie doll—Jack Ryan, the “Father of Barbie,” looks up at the oak ceiling of the boudoir in his Hefneresque Bel-Air Tudor mansion known as “The Castle,” turns to voluptuous, brown-eyed, breast-enhanced Gwen Florea, who, besides thrilling millions of little girls by having their favorite doll speak, helps run Mattel's high-tech recording studio and acoustics lab, and says, “You know something, Kid, I should cut a hole in the ceiling so when I make love I can look up and see the stars and the moon. Wouldn't that be just delightful?”

Even in bed, where he spends many evenings with one or more real-life beautiful dolls, most possessing the attributes of his fantasy doll, Barbie—the long-legged, slim-waisted, pointy-breasted, 11½ inch plastic one that is making him a fortune—the Father of Barbie can always conjure up new ideas; the corny romantic bedroom sunroof is just one. He usually talks his ideas into a tape recorder he carries, or jots them down on a pad he keeps next to his toilet.

While Barbie and other iconic Mattel playthings he's developed—Chatty Cathy, Ken, Hot Wheels, not to mention the Optigan music-maker, among others—are earning him millions in royalties, his very favorite toy is The Castle. This private kingdom, on more than four acres of expensive turf, underscores the Father of Barbie's hyperactive narcissism and singular quirkiness and eccentricity.

Literally following the old adage that “a man's home is his castle,” Ryan transformed what had once been Bel-Air's second oldest stately home, the staid (by Hollywood standards) 16,000-square-foot manse and grounds of silent-to-talkies Oscar winner Warner Baxter (who underwent a lobotomy to “cure” his arthritis and died not long after), into the Father of Barbie's own private “once-upon-a-time” theme park.

There's the high Greek Revival Moorish archway. There's the wood bridge over the moat that protects the entrance. There are battlements. There are the massive arches guarded by knights in armor. There are the giant stone fireplaces, the leaded glass windows, and the rich wood paneling. There is the massive ballroom with marble floors. There's the scallop-edged swimming pool with cabanas, and the open dance pavilion with a gazebo top. There's the tennis court and tennis house (which often is home to one or more ladies of the moment). There's the circular staircase leading to the tree house, which can serve eight under a chandelier, where the likes of CBS chairman William Paley often enjoys a repast.

The Tom Jones Room, in the lower level of the main house, is reserved for intimate Thursday-night no-utensils dinner bacchanals at which the Father of Barbie presides from an enormous throne that once belonged to the Prince of Parma. (Ryan had originally bought the throne to cover the toilet where he jots his ideas, but it was disappointingly too big for the loo.) His Queen, a different beauty chosen each week, wears the crown used in commercials for Imperial Margarine.

Curiously, many of the adornments in the immense house are fake, like a movie set, because Ryan tends to not finish many of the numerous renovation projects he starts. The pillars supporting the temporary roof of the dance pavilion are made of plywood and are hollow and house playful gofers; the drapes in the main house are made of inexpensive canvas, but painted with ornate gold trimming to give the appearance of being costly; at the end of one room is a big faux fireplace that

is skillfully dummied up to look authentic; and some of the asphalt driveway is painted in such a way as to give the look of stone. On some projects, he had the assistance of a Disneyland designer. "The idea that something was finished would mean that he wouldn't be able to do anything more with it," observes a close friend Annie Constantinesco. "So many things were a mockup, and if it went further than that, it stopped being interesting to him because he could always improve on a mockup."

At one point during the never-ending renovation, the Father of Barbie had ordered expensive oak paneling from the estate of William Randolph Hearst, and had delivered to The Castle spectacular limestone blocks imported from a 15th-century French abbey, but never got around to installing any of it.

Because of the immense size of The Castle, the Father of Barbie has the help of about a dozen bright, handsome students from the nearby campus of UCLA. These unpaid interns, known as "Ryan's Boys," receive free room and board in exchange for sundry services, such as keeping the grounds and house in tip-top shape and offering security and valet services for the huge parties the Father of Barbie throws. *Look* magazine wrote a feature about the intriguing setup, headlined, "The Butler Goes to College."

Since Ryan is in constant and often-frenzied communication with colleagues and friends, he installed 144 telephones throughout The Castle and grounds. Some of the phones are even in trees, and for those he changed the ring tones to sound like the chirping of birds. The entire phone system is switched through a highly sophisticated communications system that he bought as surplus from a U.S. Navy destroyer and reengineered.

A car buff, he has some 18 autos in various states of customization, and even owns a mint-condition 1935 Reo fire engine. It's not unheard of for Ryan to invite a group of revelers to jump aboard and, with siren wailing, race from The Castle through the gold-paved streets of Beverly Hills to party at the latest "in" disco.

For first-time guests, awe-inspired by the mind-boggling layout, Ryan put together a guidebook of his playground, appropriately entitled, *It's a Party*.



During his lifetime, the Father of Barbie had his name on more than a thousand patents, and was a man of seemingly as many personas—inventor, designer, and serial Casanova, to name just a few. The *Los Angeles Times* once characterized him as “a strange mixture of the new technologist and the old playboy.” Zsa Zsa Gabor, the second of his five wives (he was the sixth of her nine husbands), had a somewhat different view. She described the Father of Barbie this way: “[M]y knight in shining armor, the inhabitant of a fairy-tale castle, Jack my new husband . . . was a full-blown seventies-style swinger into wife-swapping and sundry sexual pursuits as a way of life.” Most of her assessment was accurate, except for the wife-swapping part, unless she meant he swapped one old wife for one new one with rings and weddings, like she did with her mates.

Except for a small circle of confidantes, few knew that the Father of Barbie was a mass of treatable and untreatable emotional problems and addictions, including what later became known as *hypersexuality*, a manic need for sexual gratification, which was one of the symptoms of his bipolar disorder—a well-kept secret and an illness that explained his compulsive womanizing.

Barbie has quite an untold heritage.



As Barbie’s 50th anniversary on March 9, 2009 loomed, the first Voice of Barbie reminisces nostalgically about her relationship with the Father of Barbie—one she says “was just a brief fling as far as bed was concerned.”

Observes Gwen Florea: “Jack was fun-crazy. That night when he wanted to cut a hole in the ceiling so that he could see the starlight, I had to talk him out of it, or he would have done it. He’d do things like that on the spur of the moment.”

They were an oddly matched twosome, but so was the Father of Barbie with all of his other women—the ones he knew biblically, and those he courted and charmed socially.

While most playboys used their proverbial Little Black Books to list the vital statistics and other intimate details about their women, the Father of Barbie’s method was far more advanced. He adopted the

McBee Keysort System, used by librarians before the advent of small computers, to list the Barbie-like physical attributes and sometimes sexual interests and appetites of the women he knew. Most of that data was gathered at Hollywood parties and Beverly Hills society and charity functions. It was entered into the system by his coterie of beautiful social secretaries, such as statuesque Gun Sundberg, a former Miss Scandinavia, and Swedish Tanning Secrets TV commercial knockout.

Along with gathering all the details, his secretaries photographed certain guests and attached the prints to the data cards. The information in Ryan's eight address books was also added to the mix. If the Father of Barbie required a statuesque Barbie doll lookalike with certain kinks for one of the Castle revels, or if he needed 60 chic couples for one of his enormous celebrity parties, his beautiful assistants had no problem gathering the precise card sort.



Whereas the Voice of Barbie was six-foot-one in heels, the Father of Barbie was a diminutive five-foot-eight—and that was in his custom-made elevator shoes imported from Church's of London, which gave him at least three more inches. "My being taller than him was always something that he loved, like a real-life Barbie doll," relates the Voice of Barbie. "He once said to me he loved me being tall so he could stick his nose in my boobs when he hugged me."

Derek Gable, a star designer and executive at Mattel for 16 years who was part of the company's "brain drain" from the United Kingdom, says Ryan fancied himself a sort of funny-looking Hugh Hefner. Hefner had his own Barbie doll-like Barbi (no *e* on the end). Benton, the Playboy founder's longtime playmate who, with a singing career in mind, once recorded a dud called "Barbi Doll."

Recalls Gable: "The first time I ever heard of Jack Ryan was in a newspaper back in England, one of the scandal ones, probably, and the headline said, "Jack and His Dolly Birds," with a picture of him having dinner under a chandelier in his tree house on his estate, and the story was about this whacked-out guy who has all these dolly birds."

Despite his success in bedding a chorus line of beauties, the Father of Barbie was no handsome Ken (the boy doll developed by Ryan and

his crack team of Mattel designers and engineers that was brilliantly promoted as Barbie's main squeeze). Besides Jack Ryan's height, or lack thereof, his hair was cut and dyed an odd orange-red by famed "stylist to the stars" Jay Sebring (who, along with actress Sharon Tate, was one of cult leader Charles Manson's victims); his speaking voice sounded as if he had inhaled laughing gas; his forehead was overly large and alien-like; he had a Humpty Dumpty build—his chest puffed out like a rooster in heat and he had skinny arms and spindly legs; and his complexion was a Bela Lugosi-like pale because of his genetic Irish-American pallor as well as the fact that he rarely ventured into the southern California sun.

A dandy of sorts, he sported custom-tailored suits from Mr. Guy in Beverly Hills, wore safari jackets with a silk ascot, and often arrived at a party wearing a full-length fur coat. Many considered him a blast, while others thought he was Napoleonic—in size and demeanor. His IQ was in the genius range.

The Father of Barbie was also considered a sensuous lover.

"Jack was very good in bed," Gwen Florea attests years later. "He was very, very considerate. But it was the whole aura of his personality that was so attractive."

As with so many others in Jack Ryan's orbit, ranging from the creative geniuses at Mattel to Hollywood's celebrity A-list, she was referring to his charm, brilliance, inventiveness, eccentricity, and lifestyle. However, those are some of the same characteristics that have relegated Ryan to virtual anonymity in the long and storied history of Mattel and the mythology surrounding the Barbie doll as she entered her second half-century.

The press courted the Father of Barbie and praised his intellect and talent. "Under his supervision, the Barbie Doll and all her friends and wardrobe demands were born," declared the *Los Angeles Times*. "He is an inventor who has already patented . . . the most successful toys ever sold."



While the media extolled Ryan's intellectual and creative virtues, a far more powerful figure in the Father of Barbie's life criticized,

begrudged, and denied them—especially when it came to who actually conceived, or invented, or devised the biggest-selling, most-iconic doll in the universe.

Her name is Ruth Handler, Mattel's driven, ambitious, and cut-throat co-founder. After Ryan's death in 1991, and before her own passing in 2002, she publicly waged what many in Ryan's circle believe was a deliberate campaign to diminish, if not altogether erase, his role as the Father of Barbie, and take full credit as the billion-dollar doll's inventor and as "Mother of Barbie."

Privately, within the hallowed halls of Mattel, the two had been at each other's throats for almost two decades. It was a backroom and boardroom drama that eventually exploded into what one high-powered Beverly Hills lawyer describes as "a scorched-earth legal battle," as in *Ryan v. Mattel*.

"Ruth Handler came in after Jack died and started a whole PR campaign about her being the creator of Barbie," maintains Stephen Gnass, founder of a serious, prestigious seminar program for inventors called Invention Convention, and a close friend of Ryan's. "Enough propaganda, enough promotion and you can make anybody believe anything. Ruth Handler really marginalized anything that Jack had to do with Mattel. She was making her case after he was dead and he was in no position to defend his legacy."

To Gnass, Ryan seemed possessed by Barbie.

"When Jack talked about creating Barbie, or improving Barbie, he would light up and describe the breasts and the legs and how tall she needed to be. He was intrigued by that," recalls Gnass. "When he talked about Barbie it was like listening to somebody talk about a sexual episode, almost like listening to a sexual pervert talk about creating this doll. He got a little glow, was animated, had a twinkle in his eye. Barbie was the number-one toy at Mattel that he would talk about creating. I often think about the expression on his face when he described the doll's voluptuousness."

An expert at media spin and self-promotion, and once described in the *New York Times* as a "one-woman sales-merchandising-promotion-administrative force, a sort of industrial Orson Welles," Ruth Handler was enormously successful at getting her story across—and her rendition of Barbie's birth became an integral part of the Barbie myth and phenomenon.

As she once stated bluntly, “One of my strengths is that I do have the courage of my convictions and the guts to take a position, stand up for it, and make it happen. I can be very persuasive in getting others to see the light.”

Hints of the Handler-Ryan feud became public on rare occasions, such as when the *New York Times*, in a profile of the toy company in 1968, described Ryan as “Mattel’s real secret weapon,” and noted that Ruth and her husband and Mattel co-founder, Elliot Handler, were “reluctant to credit any single person with the invention of new toy ‘principles.’” The story pointed out that early publicity about Mattel that had credited Ryan with the development of Barbie had “caused a top-level chasm” between him and the Handlers, especially Ruth, whose vendetta only intensified.

When the *Times* ran a caption-sized feature item in 1994 about Barbie’s 35th anniversary, and named the then-deceased Jack Ryan as “Barbie’s creator,” Ruth Handler went as ballistic as the realistic toy missiles that were designed for Mattel by Ryan, which sold in the millions, and were even featured in *Life* magazine. Ryan had helped design real missiles for use by the military before he joined Mattel. In a letter to the *Times*, Handler stated that the story “contained an inaccuracy. The late Jack Ryan was not Barbie’s creator. My husband Elliot, and I were the founders of Mattel Toys, and I was the creator of the Barbie doll. Jack Ryan, in his role as head of the research-and-development department, managed some of the design work relating to the doll and her accessories.”

Mattel was Ruth’s show, they were her toys, and no one else was going to get credit. Those in the creative end were thought of as “technicians,” literally and figuratively.

Ruth was considered “ruthless, a real hatchet man who was completely oblivious to design,” asserts Fred Adickes, who came from designing tailfins at General Motors to serve as chief industrial designer at Mattel under Ryan. Adickes helped spearhead the development of Hot Wheels and worked on the “World of Barbie,” which included the doll’s first car, a Corvette, and her home and furnishings. The project was Ryan and the Handlers’ way of expanding Barbie beyond just clothing and fashion accessories.

“Ruth and Elliot’s word was law,” says Adickes, years later. “They were exalted. They were Mattel’s God and Holy Spirit—and they had a competitive, adversarial relationship with Jack Ryan. In the end, Ruth was designated as the inventor of Barbie. This was done not only for ego, but probably for good business reasons. It wouldn’t be good business to identify anyone else who contributed.”

Adickes notes that after he left Mattel, unhappy with the politics and culture, Elliot Handler began taking credit for Hot Wheels. As Adickes observes, “It wouldn’t be good business for the Handlers to say, ‘Well, the man who actually came up with the idea for Hot Wheels was an automotive designer who left the company.’”

Salaried Mattel designers such as Adickes who were big producers sometimes received bonuses and stock options, but were barely compensated for their lucrative ideas. After signing a mandatory document turning over all patent rights to a toy that might generate hundreds of millions of dollars in revenue for Mattel, he says they received in return a crisp one-dollar bill. “Sometimes I got it,” notes Adickes, “sometimes not.”

Because the world-famous Barbie brand has been the most significant product in Mattel’s extraordinary lifetime, the unvarnished story of the doll’s conception and implementation offers a candid snapshot of Mattel’s founders and their complex relationship with their employees, and of the company’s curious corporate culture. It underscores how Mattel became an international juggernaut—the biggest, baddest toy company in the world.

Placing Barbie’s plastic DNA under a microscope, one finds contradictions in Ruth Handler’s story of Barbie’s conception. It also reveals the very private war the Handlers were waging against Jack Ryan, which subsequently so debilitated him emotionally and physically that at the age of 64 he had a tragic end. His manner of death has long been kept secret.

