

Women's Issues in Pop Culture: Writing Samples

Note: This article is taken from a series I wrote reviewing the Barbie: Life in the Dreamhouse TV show/web series.

Barbie and Unwelcomed Advances

Children, particularly girls, are told at an early age they are in charge of their bodies and they get to decide who is allowed to touch them. But then they are sent undermining messages from shows like this that people intruding on your personal space and repeatedly making unwanted advances are just funny and innocent and it's okay if they make you uncomfortable because they don't mean any harm. However, there's no comedy in people refusing to respect your bodily autonomy and your wishes.

Although this seems like a very sophisticated topic for a simple show, this is one of the issues that girls pick up on without even realizing it. It's easy enough to conceive of the people who want to disrespect your autonomy as cackling evildoers. Meanwhile, laughing friends who touch you inappropriately or hit on you, despite being asked to stop, are just innocent people who need you to lighten up. But it doesn't matter who does it or where it happens, when someone invades your space, refuses to stop coming onto you, or does something that makes you uncomfortable, they need to stop and your wishes need to be respected.

Barbie and Ken have been a couple for over 40 years. They seem perfectly happy together. But Raquelle is into Ken and Ryan is into Barbie and neither of them see their existing relationship or the couple's complete disinterest in them as any kind of discouragement. Throughout the show, the pair keep trying to "steal" their desired mate away to comedic effect, impressing upon young girls that there's an acceptable way to invade your space and make demands on you. But there isn't.

In this episode, Stuck with You, Barbie and friends are enjoying a night in playing board games at the Dreamhouse. Barbie wins the first game and hyper-competitive Summer, who sounds like she would be impossible to get along with in real life, turns over the entire table in frustration. The group suggests playing another game and Ryan tries to reserve his spot as Barbie's partner.

But Ken is there to tell him he has reserved the space as Barbie's partner not just for the next game, but for the rest of her life, apparently. Seemingly oblivious to the power struggle going on, Barbie says that she has one board game more upstairs that she wants to get. Ryan then volunteers to go upstairs with Barbie and retrieve the game as Ken hasn't reserved the spot as her "handsome game-getting chaperon."

Without agreeing to anything, Barbie gets into the elevator and Ryan forces his way through the closing doors. Barbie points out that they're exceeding the machine's one doll limit, but Ryan doesn't care. He says, "Then we better stand super close," invading more of Barbie's space in the already confined elevator. The elevator promptly gets stuck.

Back in the game room, Summer is hyperactively playing with a paddle ball while bouncing a beach ball on her knee. She says that she wants to play another game and Ken suggests Charades. Back in the elevator, Barbie is looking over some of the buttons, trying to figure out how to get them out of the elevator. Keep in mind that the room where her friends are playing Charades is within earshot of the elevator. All they would have to do would be to call out for help.

Barbie finds that the elevator is equip with music, snow cones, and emergency makeup, but no help button. Just then, the elevator shakes and it's revealed that the elevator is stuck about a foot and a half from the ground. All they would need to do is force the doors open, which Ryan already did to get in, and step down to free themselves. But Barbie is determined to wait for Ken to solve all of her problems. She figures that her friends will notice that they're gone and come and "rescue" them shortly.

In the game room, the group is playing Charades. Teresa guesses the incredibly long and bizarre statement, "Fall fashion sale at Malibu Mall but they're all sold out of the cool boots in your size". Amazed, it's now the other team's turn. Raquelle, who is clearly bored with all of this, selects a card and then reads "high heels". When Nikki points out that that's not how you play the game Raquelle retorts, "That's how I play." Midge then tries to play, but she doesn't have fully-articulated fingers and it leaves her at a disadvantage.

Back in the elevator, Blissa, the Dreamhouse's fluffy white cat, has come across Barbie and Ryan and starts rocking the elevator. As Barbie looks through a control panel stuffed with random objects, Ryan freaks out and says that he's going to die before he ever lived and confesses his love... to himself.

Back in the game room, everyone is fighting and demanding that Ken solve all of their various problems (Raquelle isn't playing fair, Midge isn't fully articulated, etc.). Then Ken notices that Barbie's been gone for quite a while. Suddenly, Midge tells them to listen and they quiet down where they hear a high-pitched scream. They realize that it's Ryan.

Ken pulls the elevator doors open and "rescues" Barbie from a situation which she could have easily solved herself. She calls Ken her hero as he holds her into his arms. The game of Charades back on, Ken says that he has to go to the bathroom and exits the room, with Raquelle hot on his heels. He gets into the elevator and Raquelle squeezes through the already closed doors. Ken again points out the one-doll weight limit and when the elevator creaks to a stop, he exclaims, "Oh no! We're stuck!" Raquelle then throws her arms around his neck in delight and responds, "Yes, we are!" Ken screams and the episode ends.

In this episode both Barbie and Ken had people making advances toward them, fully knowing that they're in a long-term committed relationship, and not interested in their pursuers. They also had their personal space invaded when the doll makes it clear that the invasion of their space is unwanted and not even good for the elevator that they're riding in. The intrusion and unwanted advances are laughed off with humor and not taken for the serious invasion of privacy and personal space that they are.

Sadly, this pattern keeps up through the series as a "running gag". Raquelle and Ryan

both continue to pursue Ken and Barbie, respectively, despite Barbie and Ken's clear disinterest and maintained relationship with each other. While the show plays this off as innocent, unrequited love, it sends a dangerous, underlying message that your personal autonomy doesn't have to be respected as long as it's violated with a laugh and a joke. When it comes to being able to set boundaries about your body, girls need to be shown that someone making them uncomfortable with their invasive behavior, they need to stop. Not that the girl needs to laugh along with it and accept this trouble experience as not at all problematic.

Note: This is part of a multi-section review of The Saturdays' song "Gentleman". The Saturdays are a pop music group from the UK made up of four British women and one Irish woman. I love their music, but found this song to be so problematic, I wrote eight blogs on the messages contained in the song's lyrics and music video.

Gentleman: Milk & Cows

*You had his baby, so you might got him for now
He already had the milk, so why would he go buy the cow?
-The Saturdays, Gentleman*

I find the milk and cow argument incredibly sexist and insulting to everyone involved. It says that women are animals that provide a product to men and that product is sex. If you have sex from a woman, there is nothing more to want from her and therefore, why would you be interested in anything else from this woman other than sex? It is slut shaming, pointless, and treats women like cattle and men like opportunistic consumers.

Women, first and foremost, are not livestock. Sex is not something that women produce and bestow upon people. Sex is a mutual act between two consenting adults. It's not something that women give and men take.

There's an idea that when women have sex with men, the woman has given something up and the man has gained something. It leaves women at a loss. In the cow and milk comparison, the woman has given away her "milk", so her value as a partner/potential wife/person is diminished. Once a man has had sex with her, the impression is that she has given something away and no longer has the standing she once did in the relationship. And why?

Men don't worry about their female partner not respecting them the morning after. Why are we still dragging around antiquated ideas on sex and gender when we don't need them? Young women and pre-pubescent girls don't need their female role models to sing to them that their level of respect from men is always going to be tied to their sexual decisions. No one should be informed that having sex will jeopardize their dignity.

But this comparison not only tells women toxic things about their sexual choices, it makes men look like jerks. It tells impressionable girls that men want sex from them, take sex from them, and then don't respect them for it. Once a man has been inside of them, they're useless and someone who regards them as less of a person the morning after is not someone that they should even be giving the time of day.

This part of the song is just one tiny section of the larger problem with societal ideals that treat men and women's sexual choices as different to the point of guilt and shaming. Everyone deserves to make their own decisions about their own bodies without fear that doing so will inhibit their agency or self-worth. No one should be made to feel like their desirability rests on the use or non-use of their genitals.

There are no cows. There is no milk. There are only adults making choices about what they want to do with their bodies. And all of those choices need to be respected.

Note: This article is taken from a series of reviews I wrote of Real Housewife of New Jersey's Melissa Gorga's book, Love Italian Style.

Love Italian Style: Puttana in the Bedroom, Chapters 15 & 16

Chapter 15 is hilariously titled "Full-Body Gorgasm". Did I say hilariously? I meant, ridiculously. Seriously, between "Joements", "Gorganize" and now "Gorgasm" it just makes me want to put my head through my desk. Melissa starts off this chapter by assuring us that it will not get too lurid at any point.

She writes, "I'm not going to get too graphic here. I'm a lover but I'm also a mother. If you want to read about the real down and dirty, you'll have to go somewhere else." Melissa, we've read about your pooping habits, I think we're beyond coy right now. But without wasting any time, Melissa launches right back into the ideology that is what is keeping her relationship so unequal. She states,

I did a survey of my friends and looked around online, and my theory turns out to be true. For the most part, men fantasize about doing things to women. Women fantasize about men doing things to them, in different settings and in different outfits. So it works out perfectly. Men have that instinctual urge to dominate, and women, whether they realize it or not, want to submit. The point is: Men want to be men; women want to be women. Husbands want their wives to submit; wives want their husbands to dominate.

Her ideas about sex are so flimsily put together that I still find it staggering. She conducts a survey of a few of her friends and Googles, not even for reputable sources which she could cite, and decides that she knows it all. But really, what were we expecting at this point?

She has made it quite clear that she ascribes to the 1950s gender roles that should have died out with black and white TVs. Melissa still wants to hammer home that women are submissive, men are dominant, and anything that deviates from that is going against nature itself. Melissa then drones on about mini-makeout sessions and sexy talk and a ton of other topics that add nothing to male-female relationships.

Her husband, Joe, then pops in to inform the readers that if Melissa asked him to walk around the bedroom with a g-string up his ass, that he would. Because it would remind him of his stripper days. Okay. Great. Melissa then starts in on one of the more controversial sections of her book. She writes,

Even when I'm exhausted and not really in the mood, it means a lot to Joe that we connect physically, I'll say, "I'm not so into it tonight, but let's go." This goes back to the tenet of honesty. He wants to go, I could take it or leave it. But for ten minutes, it's fine. I tell him the truth. Of course, Joe wants me to be 100 percent into it. But let's get real, that doesn't happen all the time.

Then Joe interjects and writes the most dangerous and worrisome passage in the entire

book. He states,

Ladies, read this part to your husbands. Men, I know you think your woman isn't the type who wants to be taken. But trust me, she is. Every girl wants to get her hair pulled once in a while. If your wife says, "no," turn her around and rip her clothes off. She wants to be dominated. Even if your wife is a tough, strong business woman who breaks balls all day long – especially in that case – when it's just the two of you, she wants to be dominated.

Melissa writes that she will have sex with her husband even when she doesn't feel like it because it will "mean a lot" to him. Joe writes that you should rape your wife, because all women want to be dominated and abused. Melissa tried to backtrack over this section in later interviews, claiming that the passages aren't supposed to be literal. Because so much of this book is figurative and symbolic, right?

His encouragement of ripping a woman's clothes off after she has said "no" is not "racy" as he claimed in later interviews. It's rape. Consent is not a difficult concept, but men like Joe make it sound as if it's something women say to make things more interesting, when nothing could be further than the truth.

Just as in the rest of the book, Joe proves he has no concern for his wife, her wishes, or her bodily autonomy. He "knows" what she wants and needs, and on top of that, "knows" what all women want and need. Which, in his tiny world, is to be sexually assaulted.

Beyond the passage itself, it bothers me how no one caught this horrific paragraph and stopped it from being published. How did all of the proofreaders, editors, and publishers read this passage and say to themselves, "Yep, this is fine. On to printing!" How did no one realize how violent and violating it is?

It makes me wonder if people did realize how terrible all of this sounded, but decided that this book was never going to be praised for being good, but they still wanted to get headlines. So why not make the book so backwards and unacceptable that it couldn't possibly go unnoticed? All press is good press, right?