

A MULTICULTURAL HOLIDAY

From Hispanic dolls to African-American puppets, color this year's Christmas gifts ethnically diverse

By BOB DEITEL
Staff Writer

Rita Heggie wasn't trying to make a social statement when she plucked Kenya, the Beautiful Hairstyling Doll off a shelf at the Toys "R" Us in Okolona. All she wanted was the gift that one of her granddaughters had been coveting.

"I have looked everywhere for this," Heggie said, recounting the trauma of finding empty shelves at four other stores.

Yet her triumph wasn't just another Christmas consumer story.

Heggie and her granddaughter are white. Kenya, which comes in three shades of brown, is a realistic ethnic doll that has been a hit among African-American kids.

"She is pretty, isn't she?" Heggie said, heading toward the cashier.

If you're still dreaming of a white Christmas, you must be thinking snow. In the world of dolls and an increasing number of other playthings, today's trend is to offer more ethnic variety.

And people are buying — both reflecting pride in their own ethnic identity and choosing toys that mirror a more diverse world.

You can see the results in this year's inventory arriving from the North Pole. The predominant pink and blond hues of holidays past are sharing ever more shelf space with dolls of different skin tones, facial features and culturally diverse hairstyles and fashions.

Duplo sets — popular snap-together building blocks and figures for preschoolers — now include human figures of varied ethnicity.

Fisher-Price doll houses now come with Asian, Hispanic and black characters, as well as white.

Mattel keeps expanding its line of African-American fashion dolls, à la Barbie. In 1991, Shani, Asha and Nichelle were introduced. Last year brought Shani's boyfriend, Jamal. This year, Mattel offers a line of Soul Train fashions for all, with ethnic prints and hip-hop influence.

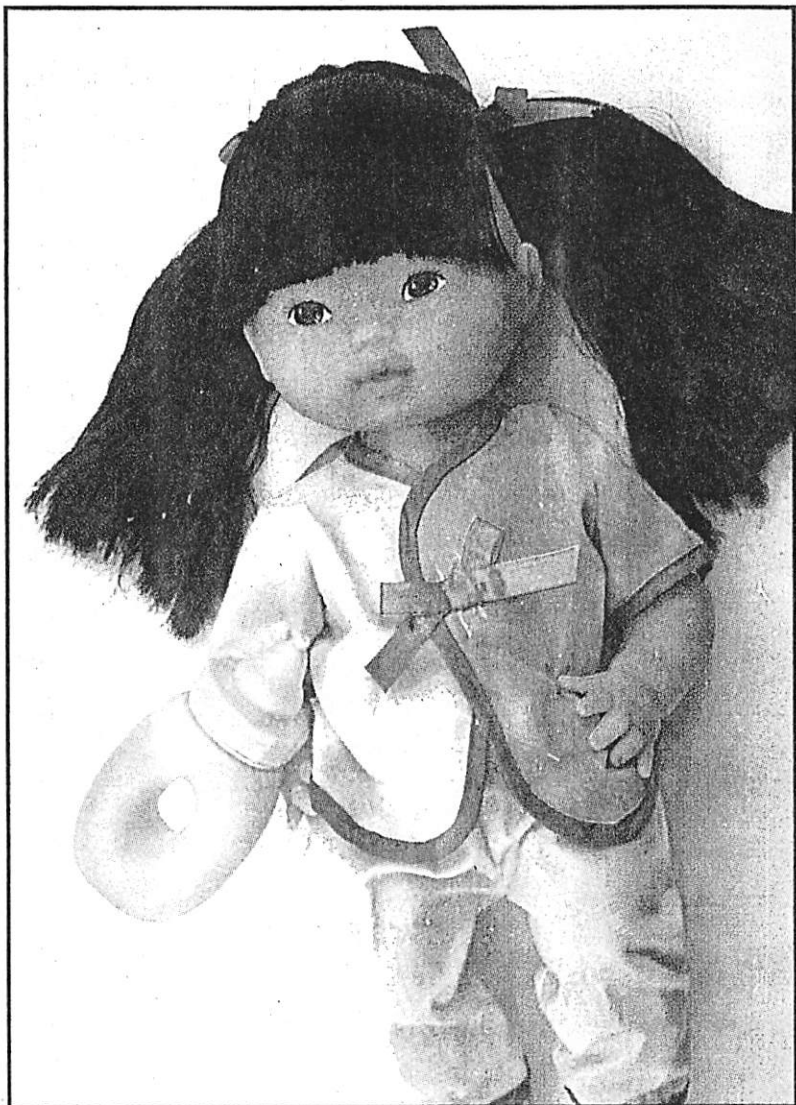
Barbie herself — long available in a black version but still with original facial features, hairstyle and pink fashions — now has friends of Hispanic, Asian and American Indian backgrounds and flair.

There also are black versions of California Roller Baby, Cabbage Patch Teeny Tiny Preemies, Mommy's Having a Baby and, yes, Magic Feeding Baby, who can burp and say "yummy" and "yucky." Multicultural progress marches on.

Besides the mass-marketed toys, educational playthings increasingly reflect diversity. As a result, they're snapped up by teachers, schools and parents who have a growing commitment to multicultural education. The choices include:

African arts-and-crafts projects. Folk-music instruments from India, Mexico, Chile, Swaziland, Japan and Nepal. Dolls and puppets depicting kids from Turkey to Canada. Paints in authentic human-skin tones. Puzzles showing minorities in occupations ranging from car mechanic to judge. Vinyl models of tacos, pita bread, sashimi and other foods found from Ethiopia to India.

One fledgling minority-owned company, Cultural Exchange Inc. of Minneapolis, recently introduced a line of plush toys, books and preschool playthings that have characters, landscapes and story lines



STAFF PHOTOS BY PAM SPAULDING

Eugene Doll & Novelty Co. imports this My Best Friend Asian doll from China.

representing minority children.

The preschool toys include plastic "instrument panels" of an airplane and a tractor. The plane panel shows the image of a black pilot. The tractor has a black farmer. Each has controls that change "scenery" showing other black people. The plane flies over an urban landscape.

The plush toys are dog and cat characters — Spike, Cuz, Shaneequa and Rosie, among them — whose clothes, hobbies, homes and owners represent various cultural bents. Its first products now are stocked in select Target, Toys "R" Us and

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noteworthy, but don't put them on display

they often drop by without notice.

I have asked my husband to say something, since it is his family, but though he feels that I may have a point, he is not confident about making this an issue.

Gentle Reader: You and your husband use love notes to each other as household decorations? And now you are complaining that they attract people's attention?

Miss Manners doesn't want to seem to side with people who read other people's mail, and she would be the first to condemn anyone caught idling in someone else's desk. Even marriage to the owner of the desk doesn't excuse that, much less in-lawship.

But posting your sweet thoughts

on the mantelpiece is unduly provocative. You didn't object when your visitors examined your snapshots that were prettily framed and arranged on the side table, or scream when they complimented you on the sofa cushion you had worked so hard to embroider. A certain amount of looking around is even slightly polite on the part of intimate guests.

That's why we don't leave our diaries, love letters or medical bills lying around. The proper place for happy couples to leave each other mushy notes is on their pillows.

Dear Miss Manners: How do I deal with a boss who insists that I eat out on Christmas and my birthday?

He sets the time and place for me to eat out, and he usually appears on the scene as I am finishing the meal, whereupon he asks the waitress for my bill, pays and promptly departs. The first time, I felt strange and very awkward. After several such experiences, I have come to dread those occasions that remind him that I need to be sent out for a meal.

How can I tell this man, without hurting his feelings, that I am not enjoying this attention?

Gentle Reader: That your boss is devoid of gracefulness is as obvious to Miss Manners as it is to you. But she hopes that your desire to avoid hurting his feelings comes not only of the natural hope of protecting your employment, but also of a recognition that he is clumsily trying to be nice.

Someone told him that employees like to be taken out to lunch. The way to get you both derailed from this tedious routine is to offer him an alternative.

Next time he offers, thank him profusely, but firmly add: "You know, I really don't feel much like lunch — I'm watching what I eat these days. What would really be a treat for me is to be able to work through lunch and then take off early today. That would be a lovely Christmas present from you."

Dear Miss Manners: At our

wedding, my fiancé will have both his biological father, with his new wife, and his adoptive father, with his new wife. (His biological mother is unable to attend.)

He is not close to his biological father, having seen him once in the past four years and never having heard from him at birthdays or holidays, but he wants both fathers, with their wives, at the head table with my parents. Do both fathers get boutonnières?

Gentle Reader: Sure, why not? It's only a flower, not a badge of merit in advanced fatherhood. And if you have a parents' table, you don't really want to put him in public exile.

But it is easy for Miss Manners to be glib, on the assumption that your fiancé has already dealt with the one good answer to the question of why not: that it might hurt the feelings of his adoptive father.

If that gentleman, secure in his son's love, can enjoy sharing his position symbolically, Miss Manners will know who it is who has brought up your fiancé to be emotionally generous.

Address your etiquette questions to "Miss Manners," The Courier-Journal, 525 W. Broadway, P.O. Box 740031, Louisville, Ky. 40201-7431. Questions of general interest are published; Judith Martin regrets that she can't make individual replies.

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