Addy Walker

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Overview

First released by the Pleasant Company in 1993, Addy Walker made history as the first African-American American Girl doll. Like all other dolls created by the company, the Addy doll was sold in conjunction with several accessories and outfits, as well as a six-book series that detailed the girl’s life and gave the doll a developed character to portray. Also like each American Girl doll, Addy’s story is related to a specific period in American history; in her case, the Civil War. As a slave, the young girl is separated from her family before escaping to Philadelphia, where she discovers that discrimination is present throughout the United States.

The original Addy Walker doll was developed with the help of an advisory board made up of black scholars, including film producers, historians, experts on African-American literature, librarians, and Smithsonian curators (Harris). The board decided to set Addy’s story during the Civil War rather than other historical periods like, for example, the Harlem Renaissance, due to their belief that “slavery… must be tackled first in order for children to understand more recent history.” (Harris) The yearlong effort of the board ensured that every element of the Addy Walker collection from her clothing to her jewelry to the illustrations in her books, was historically accurate and representative of young African-American girls (Harris). This attention to detail resulted in a doll made from an entirely new mold in order to portray typically African-American facial features and a book series that detailed Addy’s life in slavery, her escape, her struggles and lessons learned in school, a Christmas story, a birthday story, and the eventual reuniting of her family. Her hair was thick and wavy, she had a gap between her two front teeth, and she wore a pink calico dress, straw bonnet, and cowrie shell necklace. Though Addy has drawn a fair share of criticism, mostly for her association with slavery, she is one of the brand’s most popular dolls and has remained in production, with only minor changes being made, since her original debut.

Historical and Cultural Context

According to the Chapel Hill Herald, Addy Walker’s story is based loosely on the real-life escape of adult slave Mary Walker from the Horton Grove Plantation in North Carolina. The historical Walker, like the fictional one, escaped to Philadelphia to start a new life (“Her Own Doll”). Addy’s narrative, however, begins in 1864, which is chronologically later than Mary Walker’s. In 1864, the Civil War still raged on, but the Union began to display clear strength through victories such as the Atlanta Campaign as well as the reelection of President Lincoln. The decision to alter the timeline of the story on which Addy’s is based was made by the advisory board to ensure that the end of the Civil War would occur during their series of books.

The Pleasant Company first unveiled Addy Walker to the public in 1993 amid high racial tensions in the United States. One of the main incidents that contributed to this national negative sentiment was the Rodney King beating. Two years prior to Addy’s release, an African-American man was pursued for speeding and eventually stopped by 21 police officers and brutally beaten by three members of the Los Angeles Police Department. A released video of the incident sparked outrage and created a divisive atmosphere in the city.

By comparing news coverage of the situation from the Los Angeles Times, a newspaper with a widespread and diverse reader population, and the Los Angeles Sentinel, an African-American owned and operated paper, Ronald Jacobs presents evidence to support his claim that while the majority of Americans saw the Rodney King beating as the start of a great American debate, the African-American community viewed it as yet another event in a long history of brutality and unfair treatment that began with slavery (Jacobs). The decision to develop the character of Addy Walker was made during these divisive years, and her release in 1993 is often seen as a response to racial discord in addition to an attempt to highlight the strength of the African-American community and its role in shaping the future of the United States.

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While Addy Walker was the first African-American doll in the American Girl collection, she was far from the first black doll to make a cultural impact in America. For several decades, dolls like golliwogs and pickaninnies, racist caricatures of African-Americans, were popular among white children as scapegoats for their play-punishment. In fact, black dolls were specifically created for this purpose and were advertised as being able to withstand racially-specific forms of punishment like whipping and hanging. As noted by Robin Bernstein in her article, "The Possibility of Children’s Literature," the historical dehumanization of African-Americans “found rich potential in doll play and doll literature, because all stories about sentient dolls reorganize the boundary between human and thing” (Bernstein). Bernstein further notes that literature that often accompanied these dolls had overt or underlying racist messages that would script the violence against the offensive dolls (Bernstein). Even after black dolls in America had lost their inherently racist nature, they still tended to be little more than white dolls essentially painted black, as many observed of the first black Barbies. Addy Walker’s creation, then, is historically significant due to the research and effort that went into the process of ensuring she was created authentically and in a manner that would positively and accurately represent young African-American girls.

**Themes and Style**

As historical characters whose stories are marketed toward young girls and designed to teach them about the customs and values of the past, all American Girl dolls encapsulate similar basic themes, and Addy Walker is no different (Elliot). Major themes present across American Girl literature include that perseverance and compassion are ways to overcome obstacles and that universal commonalities can be found in characters both throughout history and from many walks of life. Specifically, the Pleasant Company has marketed Addy Walker with the slogan “Today, I’ll keep my family strong.” Thus, throughout the six-book series, family and connection are strong forces in motivating the actions of individuals, including the original escape from slavery and the eventual reuniting of the Walker family in Philadelphia.

Based on the recommendation of the advisory board, it was important to the Pleasant Company that those involved in creating the book series could comment on the African-American experience that has arisen as a result of the historical institution of slavery. Thus, they selected author Connie Porter and painter Melodye Rosales, both recommended based on their previous work depicting African-American reality (Harris).

However, even with their previous experience and the guidance of the advisory board, Porter and Rosales found it difficult to balance historical accuracy with a level of detail appropriate for children. Author Porter, for example, clashed with the advisory board over whether or not the word “nigger” belonged in the books. Porter argued for its inclusion as an example of the reality of slavery and the disrespect and dehumanization slaves endured. “Children can hear truth better than we think,” she posits. “They don’t want to be patronized or lied to” (Elliot). The advisory board, however, felt that children were already being asked to process the horrors of slavery by reading the books, and the word was left out to avoid calls for censorship, as they knew many elementary schools would likely want to use the series as a teaching tool (Harris). Similarly, in Rosales’ original artwork, certain characters, such as Addy’s African-American teacher and well-to-do classmates, were depicted as lighter skinned to portray the color caste system that existed for black people at the time. The Pleasant Company initially rejected these illustrations, not wanting to address these complexities, but was convinced to keep them in the final version, even having Porter describe characters as light-skin and dark-skin. This way, they concluded, a range of physical appearances would be represented, and not only dark-skin blacks would be portrayed as suffering from the repercussions of slavery (Harris).

Due to the nature of the American Girl brand, the themes addressed by Porter and Rosales are outwardly apparent in the actual Addy Walker doll. Robin Bernstein argues that children’s literature and material culture cannot be analyzed separately and that children, through play, work in conjunction with authors to give literature meaning. She specifically discusses dolls and the ways in which children use their dolls to act out scenes they have read. She cites examples of this occurring throughout history, but one of the most relevant is the modern American Girl Collection, which, of course, Addy is a part of. By Bernstein’s logic, the Addy Walker doll is a direct extension of the books that tell her story, and is thus a representation of the themes presented in these books (Bernstein). And by making this interactive model such an integral part of their product, the Pleasant Company reimagines the phenomenon described by Bernstein, in which children are as complicit in the continuation of a racist society as are adults, in part because of early influences like racist dolls (Bernstein). Thus, the company, by producing Addy Walker, makes the argument that the issues addressed in the series are still relevant in modern times, and that children can learn from Addy’s positive themes to “coproduce” a society combating racial injustice.

**Critical Conversation**

The Addy Walker doll, books, and accessories have performed very well, with sales numbering in the millions since her debut. Despite this commercial success and apparent popularity among consumers, the Addy Walker doll has been met with a fair share of criticism. For example, countering the Pleasant Company’s claim that Addy was an important milestone for the American Girl brand’s goal of increasing diversity and representation, many, such as Cheryl Hudson, co-owner of Just Us Books, an independent African-American publishing company, viewed the release of the Addy doll as a
money-making venture that took advantage of the slavery narrative by trivializing and merchandizing it (Mena). Even those close to the project, such as artist Melodye Rosales, acknowledge the ultimate financial motivation behind the creation of doll (Harris).

While there are many people who feel the complaints of Hudson and Rosales are valid, the most common criticism of Addy Walker is the fact that she is a slave.

Many have questioned whether slavery is an appropriate topic for child’s play and wonder how African-American children will perceive their own self-worth when they recognize that the only black American Girl is a slave. This issue of self-worth was studied by Kenneth and Mamie Clark in the 1940s. According to the Clarks’ psychological experiments commonly referred to as “The Doll Tests,” African-American children already show a preference for white dolls over black dolls, and repeatedly select the white doll when asked to identify the doll with which they wanted to play, the “nice” doll, and the doll with the “nice color” (Bergner). How would this self-esteem issue identified by the Clarks and propagated by the societal factors at play in the creation of children’s dolls be heightened by Addy’s role as a slave? This question has been debated and discussed by many scholars and writers since Addy Walker first became available.

In her article for Slate, Aisha Harris describes the main problem with Addy Walker being a slave as a lack of choice for African-American girls. While white girls could choose from a variety of dolls and imagine themselves in a variety of historical situations, she argues that black girls had no option to imagine themselves as anything but a slave (Harris). Cheryl Hudson elaborates, expressing her concerns about the Addy Walker doll by asking, “What is the Addy slave doll going to do with the other white dolls? Wait on them?” (Mena). Brit Bennet, a notable contemporary African-American author also acknowledges these issues with Addy, and though she admits that she does not find the doll insensitive, as many do, she is troubled by the character, especially when her harrowing story is framed against a backdrop of the pink walls and tea parties that are part of the American Girl brand (Bennett). Such a juxtaposition, she argues, may give young girls the wrong implications regarding the seriousness of slavery and the history that continues to affect America today.

Recently, the release of two more African-American American Girl dolls, Cécile Ray, a girl from a highly regarded New Orleans family in the 1850s, and Melody Ellison, who fights for equality in 1960s era Detroit, has led many to compare these new stories to Addy’s, drawing harsh criticism of the brand’s first African-American doll (Mena). Despite these opinions about Addy Walker in comparison to these newer dolls, she continues to be one of the brand’s most popular characters, due in large part to the fact that, in the words of Connie Porter, she “takes readers past whatever negative connotations they may put on the word slave” (Elliot).

Even after recognizing the doll’s flaws and acknowledging the validity of the aforementioned criticisms, Britt Bennett argues that having a way to communicate the tough truths of the past to the next generation is crucial, and thus, the Addy Walker doll is as well (Bennett). She is one of the few historical American Girl dolls that remains due to the importance of her message, and she continues to play an important role in the lives of many young girls today.

Works Cited

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Addy Walker was the fifth Historical Character of the American Girls, representing the Civil War Era. Addy was released in Fall 1993 and is part of the BeForever collection. Addy is a very brave, loving, thoughtful, and kind child, who often risks her safety for the safety of others. She is very close-knit with her family and is devastated that they are separated early in the series; when they get back together, she is still tied closely to them. Her friends say she has strong “family pride”. 