

What Dolls Do

by Tangren Alexander

For me, long before there was George Berkeley, there was Raggedy Ann. One could never be sure how matter acted when no one was watching. When the family left for a few hours, or at night when they were all asleep, the dolls jumped up and had adventures, so the stories said.¹¹

They raided the pantry, had taffy pulls, freed Fido from the dog-catcher's, had truck with fairies. But before dawn, or when the front gate clicked as the family returned, they managed to scramble back to their room and fall into place in the poses they'd been left in. Generally.

Once in a while they'd slip up: they wouldn't have time to clean the jam off their faces or something. And that was how Marcella, the little girl they lived with, knew they were really alive.

Berkeley's God never slipped up, never materialized a table a second too late, while the watching eye was already watching.²

And neither, really, did the world I lived in where dolls were alive; and yet I lived with that double vision of things.

My grandmother, Pearl, believed in dolls, there's no doubt about it, simply experienced a world where dolls are real. She could never bear to see them left cold and naked, or jumbled in a toy chest any-which-way.

When I was very young, there were even proofs. Pearl and I would set the dolls around a small table, with tiny cookies on the plates and cocoa in the cups, and steal away.

The dolls couldn't let you see them being alive. But either they were given to rationalizing about our powers of deduction, or they half wanted us to guess, for when we returned in great suspense, often the cups would be empty!

There were crumbs on the plates and near the doll's mouths.

I still remember the sunlight filling those small cups with their rings of cocoa in the bottom, the magic emptiness they held. I remember a sense of deep peace, and rightness in the world.

The day I turned six, I came home from school to find Pearl and my mother saying in low voices, "We just got home too. As we came in we heard a noise in your bedroom! Do you suppose the dolls are up to something? Maybe you'd better go look!" When I opened the door, there sat all the dolls around the table. Beloved Belinda was just cutting the last ribbon on the bow of a present, the scissors were in her hand. Raggedy Ann hadn't quite finished the card she was making, a red crayon rested in her hand mid-word.

Did I think it was all real? When I was young enough, I did.

Later, it was more a matter of its being so much fun to suspend disbelief.

Later than that, when I began asking too many questions, these goings-on simply stopped happening.

But my dolls were still real to me. Of all my belongings, I knew I would save them first in a fire. I was careful not to say anything in front of them that might hurt their feelings.

And Raggedy Ann understood and comforted me when nobody else did.

Once in a while, I'd try on the thought that she was only an inert assemblage of cotton and cloth, no more a person than is a coat, or a pillow.

But nothing in my heart believed it. Whether she ever came alive at night or not, I would live the world as if there were someone there behind her smile.

I passed this belief system on to my own daughter: I remember the day I first played dolls with her. Marcella stood beside me on uncertain legs as I held the rag doll I'd made for her, wiggling its head with my fingers and talking for it.

At first she was puzzled, interested, watching my mouth make the words

that I seemed to believe were coming from the doll. Then — I could just see her make a sort of epistemological shrug. She turned to the doll, and began a conversation.

She grew to love dolls as much as I, believed in them as fiercely. She was, maybe, eight the day she came downstairs with a stricken look. It seems she and Claire had been quarreling over who was better, Marcella's Skipper doll or Claire's toy alligator. "And Claire said, 'Well, anyway, your Skipper's just an old piece of rubber!'" Marcella burst into tears.

According to Descartes, God could have created a world just like this one, but inhabited instead by machines. There could have been a world made only of matter obeying the laws of physics which would be indistinguishable from our own. People would speak and move exactly as they do in ours, but would have no inner lives, no consciousness, no souls. The mere workings-out of atoms would account for it all.³ Luckily, God, being good, did not make this sort of world, but one where certain complex arrangements of matter have souls.

Mind-in-matter is, I think, a true philosophical mystery. After all I have read, it still seems to me that the existence of an inner life, of consciousness, is a puzzle for someone who believes, as any sensible person does, that our brains and bodies are made of atoms and molecules following the laws of physics.

Once I heard a puppeteer explain why he thought puppets had such charm. A puppet, he said, presents us with the basic mystery of our incarnation, the unfathomable, improbable miracle that matter can become alive.

Yes, and.

You could look at dolls as an allegory for the secret hidden in all matter, the presence of a Presence.

The coming of Raggedy Ann is perhaps the first thing I still remember, "from the inside." By the time I turned two, I already knew the stories about the dolls that were secretly alive, and their wise, benevolent leader, Raggedy Ann. For my birthday, my grandmother, Pearl, was making this doll, and sending her in the mail. But there was some delay. Every day for many days I held my mother's finger and walked the half mile down the hill to the mailbox, in case she had come.

One day she came. She was soft, a good size for hugging, with a wide grin, and a happy, tender expression embroidered in her black eyes. She was Pearl's love for me, wrought into a tangible, magical companion.

When night came, I wanted to take her to bed with me, but for some reason, maybe fearing wear and tear, the grownups didn't think I should. But they made her a small bed from two chairs, put it right next to my crib, and tucked my bathrobe over her. That arrangement had its own charms, and I was satisfied. I was still filled with joy that Raggedy Ann had really come.

But after they turned out the light and left us alone, I thought, "What if someone should come in the night and steal her?" If I were a thief, stealing valuable things, I would certainly take her.

I reached through the bars of my crib to hold on to her, to make sure that didn't happen. My hand found her large cotton one, so comforting. I squeezed it tight. When they found us in the morning still hand in hand, and I explained why I'd kept hold of her all night, they decided Raggedy could sleep with me after all.

So, instead of being stolen, she has been my faithful companion for 55 years now. Most recently she went with me to a women's solstice circle in the mountains, was made most welcome, and had a lovely time.

Was I mistaken, as a child, to take comfort in her flannel hands wiping away my own tears? Her arms around my neck, even though I'd put them there myself, made me feel there was someone who loved and understood. Was I wrong?

A doll is like an idol, an icon, the statue of a saint: it can be the dwelling place of the Presence.

Even a Barbie. My daughter pointed out years ago that "Barbies cannot help it, how they're made!" And many of them have done things Mattel never dreamed of. Once, when Marcella was eight or so, I noticed her Skipper astride a dappled pony, in improvised medieval garb. With toothpick sword at her side, and for boots, bright yellow galoshes, she was off on an adventure. She wore a jaunty, tall hat of crisp, iridescent lavender. I looked more closely. It was the bell from a plastic orchid someone had pinned on me one Mother's Day. Doll magic, transformation.

Or there's the time Skipper went to ancient Crete and became a bull leaper; but that's another story. Even the Barbies can present the face of the Goddess. It all depends on the eye with which they are seen.

Once, in Marcella's doll house, we acted out a story she made up: when the people were asleep the toys of the household came alive. They celebrated the fact that they were alive with increasingly raucous exuberance. The horse rocked so hard and the toys sang so loudly that they woke the people up. But then the toys hushed, and the people never caught on: they always came up with some other explanation for why they had awakened.

I loved watching my daughter act out doll stories; they came streaming unselfconsciously up from the subconscious, and streamed back into it, leaving hardly more trace, sometimes, than would a dream.

In play, we suspend disbelief. We live in a world the rational mind does not believe in, but still we live in it, having many lives within our one. In play we suspend disbelief, as we do in drama, as we do in dreams.

Of course, there are many forms of play besides dolls. There is acting it out, when you get so deep into your game you forget that it is not real. You scream and grab your sister and jump right over the wood box with her, and then suddenly there is no mad dog chasing you at all, but only Pa laughing.⁴

And I don't mean to ignore teddy bears or invisible companions or guardian angels or all the other ways we live in the world as if we were not alone. For it looks more and more likely to me that we are not.

One logic textbook I taught from listed "wishful thinking" among the fallacies people commit. I agree it's appropriate to point out the large part this mistake can play in forming our beliefs and actions. But I would also point out that there is an opposite mistake: I call it the "Too-Good-To-Be-True Fallacy." Unable as we are sometimes to convince ourselves of our own worth, or of our own possibilities, or that we are loved, this fallacy may do at least as much harm as the other one.

And spiritually, too. For what I think now is that, in some way, magic is real. And that it's partly a matter of suspending disbelief. And I know that is as natural to me as breathing, when I bury my nose in the dry, wool smell of Raggedy Ann's hair, when I look into her happy, ancient eyes.

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So, Caroline, you may have read this before; it's the kind of thing I would send you. I always felt it had not gotten the kind of reading or recognition it deserved. In part due to the way it was written, in all-crammed-together prose. So I reworked it with lots of pauses, and for my 75th birthday invited 30 or so friends, and put on a program, a slide show of some of my doll-work, and displaying the 1/12 dollhouse lit by its lanterns on wee mantelpiece and table, with all the room lights turned off. And reading the Raggedy Ann paper.

It was one of those magical moments when I trusted my audience enough to truly mean the words as I said them. I had always before read it with a certain ironic distance from that two-year-old, but now I became her again, caring as much as she did. My friends that night gave me the gift of their loving hearing; the best gift they could give.* I said afterwards I felt like I'd been testifying for Raggedy Ann. Lots of women loved what it affirmed in their own lives, their secret beliefs. The magic of pretending” ... there's something in it.

*The theologian Nelle Morton in the '70s wrote of “hearing each other into speech”, and that's one of the things I've loved about the women's movement as I've known it.

1The series of Raggedy Ann books written by Johnny Gruelle, especially the first two or three.

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3This is a not very subtle version of Descartes' speculations. He actually believed that intelligent speech is a matter no machine could match.

4.This is a reference to an incident in Little House on the Prarie by Laura Ingalls Wilder.