

Barbie Sparks a Trans-Atlantic Doll Feud: 'A Bit of a Tacky Lady'

Nuha Dolby

LONDON—In England, [Barbie](#) has been a touchy issue between Julee Gray and her daughter.

Gray had spent her own childhood collecting Sindy, a doll sometimes called the British Barbie, with a more reserved profile than its brasher American rival.

While Barbie ripped it up in fuchsia pageant dresses and high heels, Sindy strolled through a parallel universe of floral dresses and afternoon tea. Barbie had a pool with a slide and sun deck. Sindy's was shallow and inflatable.

When Gray's daughter hit 6, she rejected Sindy's more modest world for Barbie.

"I was devastated, absolutely devastated," said Gray, a 50-year-old accountant who still collects Sindy dolls in the English cathedral city of Lincoln. She spent many hours trying to change her daughter's mind.

"I said, 'You don't want a Barbie, you want a Sindy,' and she said, 'Oh, no I don't,'" Gray recalled.

The mother-daughter relationship recovered, but the arrival of the new [Barbie blockbuster](#) has brought back Gray's old antagonism—and left other Sindy fans having a go at Barbie.

The "special relationship" between the U.K. and U.S. has survived wars, sports rivalries and Prince Harry, the rebellious royal who [quit Britain for California](#). But for some Brits, Barbie has always crashed the trans-Atlantic friendship, in a rivalry that plays to old stereotypes of British reserve versus a more extroverted and materialistic America.

Barbie hit shops first, in 1959. Sindy arrived four years later, though the British doll more closely resembles Tammy, Barbie's U.S. girl-next-door doll rival at the time.

While Tammy soon faded, Sindy became one of Britain's bestselling toys by the late 1960s, according to Pedigree, the doll's current maker. In 1986, Pedigree put out a royal wedding-themed Sindy to capitalize on royal marriages then captivating the world. Barbie had Ken—but Sindy had a real prince. It was a particularly big seller, according to Pedigree.

"Sindy felt like a genuine friend you could tell secrets to and know she wouldn't tell anyone else," said Martina Söderström, who runs a Sindy museum out of her home in central Sweden, filled with dolls and memorabilia. "Barbie felt plastic and fake, like a girl that says she's your friend but back trashes you as soon as you're not there."

Melanie Quint, who runs an online doll hair supply shop, considers Barbie "a bit of a tacky lady. She wore a lot of pink. She wore very low-cut dresses and was a bit cheap," she said. "Sindy was quite demure, not flashy. She didn't have a big bust."

Sindy survived one attempt at Americanization in the 1990s, when U.S.-based licensed the doll's rights and turned her into what fans said was a Barbie knockoff. A more glamorous Sindy developed a tighter jawline, slimmer waist, blonder hair and big blue eyes.

filed and won a lawsuit against Hasbro over the doll's new look. Sindy went back to being Sindy.

Emma Chapple grew up in Canada in the 1990s knowing both dolls, but sided with Barbie after discovering that ballerina Sindy's ballet slippers were actually molded on. Her ballerina Barbie boasted changeable slippers.

"Ballerina Barbie cleared her," she said.

In 2003, Sindy was given her own movie, an animated tale called "Sindy: The Fairy Princess" in which she, aided by three fairies and a unicorn, battles an evil wizard to save her handsome prince.

Sindy had been beaten to screens five weeks earlier, with "Barbie of Swan Lake." In a further slight to her British competitor, the soundtrack was performed by the London Symphony Orchestra.

Sindy has fallen further on hard times. Sales have plummeted and its maker, Pedigree, says it is currently looking for a new partner to manufacture and market the toy. Matthew Reynolds, the owner of Pedigree, said he's relying on Sindy's "achievable yet aspirational" and "iconically British" image to capture a new generation of children and their parents.

Pedigree has some work to do to cultivate Sindy's name recognition abroad.

"Who? No, I have no idea who that is," said Anna Gould, a New York Barbie fan who saw the movie over the weekend and even questioned Sindy's name. "With an S? Come on."

The original makers chose Sindy over Cindy to stand out, Pedigree said.

Fans including Söderström, Gray and Quint said they planned to watch the Barbie movie—if they hadn't seen it already.

"Since I have The Little Sindy Museum, I feel I should know the 'enemy,'" Söderström said. The museum, where showings must be booked in advance, sees around 20 visitors a year. Most are Brits.

Gray saw the movie on its opening night, Friday. She brought her teenage granddaughter, who donned a pink shirt and threatened to cancel the trip if Gray brought Sindy.

Gray's daughter still mocks her mother's devotion to Sindy, though the granddaughter finds it endearing, Gray said.

Gray won't back down. The Barbie movie's acting, outfits and sets were "fabulous," she said, but on returning home, she looked again through her mint condition Sindy dolls in their glass cabinets and thought how she could adapt some of the best movie outfits to suit Sindy's style.

"Sindy will always be my true love," she said.

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