

HOW DISNEY PRINCESS CULTURE HELPED ME BE A STRONG, SMART GIRL

Belle, Mulan, and Cinderella proved that a girl can be brainy, brave, and beautiful.
By: FARAN KRENTCIL (Elle Magazine, May 1, 2014)

If I saw a GoldieBlox commercial as a kid, I would probably cry. The ads feature girls just like me—smart, strong, mischievous—with one big difference: The GoldieBlox crew hates princess dolls so much they launch them into space on a rocket. And although Barbie may include "astronaut" on her résumé, Rainbow Brite would hate floating around the Milky Way. (No colors! No clouds! And where would Pegasus land?!)

GoldieBlox's website takes a similar "get out of town" stand on tiaras: "I believe girls can be more than just princesses!" proclaims their blog in big, bright letters. "GoldieBlox are an alternative to toys more concerned with looks than brains," blares a proud press quote. And there's some inherent hypocrisy here, since these toys are obsessed with appearances: They're basically Legos that are painted pastel to entice little girls!

Irony aside, I do wish I'd had them as a kid. After all, I was the girl transforming my wood blocks with glitter glue and Care Bear stickers. Plus, I think GoldieBlox's goal of encouraging female engineers (while making piles of money) is phenomenal.

What seems misguided—in these ads, in this article from *Slate*, and in best-selling books like Peggy Orenstein's *Cinderella Ate My Daughter*—is the idea that Aurora, etc. should be banished from the kingdom of girlhood. Some say "Princess Culture" promotes materialism, patriarchy, and a sadistic need for long, shiny hair. Many moms worry a Snow White doll will turn their pre-K Amazons into simpering ninnies more concerned with looks than grades and goals. But they're wrong—and I speak from personal experience. The truth is, Princess Culture helped me become more confident, more adventurous, and more okay with being different. It also helped me understand and embrace the concept of feminism at a very early age. Seriously.

It started with Ariel, the first Disney Princess to debut during my childhood. Seashell bra aside, the aquatic redhead was the ultimate rebel: Sensing she was somehow different from the rest of her family, she dreamed of leaving home and finding a place where she finally belonged—and she was willing to do it at any cost. In the Hans Christian Andersen story, *The Little Mermaid* is a creepy tale of pedophilia where a young girl surrenders her voice for a man...then dies of unrequited love. In Disney's version, things

are different: The heroine is a backwater misfit who fights against the current to literally stand on her own. Sure, she marries Prince Eric, too, but that's not the crux of her journey—especially to most little girls. (Remember, the "ew, cooties" stage lasts through many birthday sleepovers.)

Of course, Ariel isn't the only princess dreaming of a place where "fathers don't reprimand their daughters." Fellow "bright young women" who take up the tiara include Belle, a voracious reader who ditches the town heartthrob to find "adventure in the great wide somewhere." And though Belle ends up with a rich dude, too, it's not because he saves her—actually, she rescues him, a pattern repeated by Mulan, Rapunzel, and *The Frog Prince's* Tiana. As for Pocahontas, she saves John Smith's animated ass *twice* in 90 minutes—surely there's an MVP award for that in the Disney vault?

Then there's Cinderella, an animé Grace Kelly who might be every feminist's worst nightmare. A beautiful damsel in distress, she's rescued from "real" work by social climbing her way to the palace ballroom and marrying up, up, and away. All that is true. But Cinderella is also gutsy enough to flee her abusive family, brave enough to believe she deserves better than indentured servitude, and—despite her vicious upbringing—kind enough to be gentle to animals. (Don't even get me started on the *Frozen* sisters, who have enough strength, feist, and smarts to run the United Nations with their eyes closed.)

"But why do all Disney Princesses have to be so *pretty*?" some may ask—and they're right... partly. But for '80s and '90s children like me, their sprightly faces were part of their power. When I was a kid, "airheads" and "book worms" (not butterflies—worms!) ruled weekly shows like *Beverly Hills, 90210* and *Saved by the Bell*. Frizzy Andrea Zuckerman ran the school newspaper and got accepted to Yale; bombshell Kelly Taylor skipped class and kissed Dylan. When both challenged the brains vs. beauty rules, they fell *hard*: Kelly dared to excel in psychology, and her star professor lured her into a cult. Andrea finally became a sexual being, and boom! She got pregnant. And then there was *Saved by the Bell's* Jessie Spano, who was top of her class and top of the cheerleading pyramid... until she got addicted to speed. Watching that infamous episode, my thoughts went something like this: "*I'm so excited! I'm so excited! I'm so scared this is going to happen to me if I'm an A-student AND a dance captain!*"

Disney princesses defy this trap. They're all smart. They're all brave. And just like women everywhere, they all have a different relationship to beauty: Mulan and Merida would rather wear armor than Armani. Princess Jasmine growls, "I am not a prize to be

won!" to suitors, but still appreciates liquid liner. And for girls exploring every facet of their identity—aesthetics included—that little detail can be a big comfort.

Perhaps that's the crux of why I hate the GoldieBlox commercials so much. Their pastel products may merge substance with style, but the ads still promote a damaging either/or school of girlhood, with constraints like "the pretty one" or "the smart one." And it's those labels—not Princess Culture—that are really wrecking our young women's confidence.

So let's call a truce, shall we? It goes something like this: You might win a Nobel Prize. That doesn't mean you can't wear heels. I might love pink sparkles. That doesn't make me bad at math. Sexy isn't a dirty word. Smart isn't a witch's curse. And princesses aren't a patriarchal noose—they're examples of young women who fight for their goals, listen to their hearts, and embrace adventure, even when it's scary. You can be your own kind of girl without blowing Princess Aurora to bits or exiling Princess Jasmine into space... unless, of course, you're dying to visit the moon, in which case, try another royal babe: Princess Leia. She can help you build a rocket with your GoldieBlox and save the galaxy, too... just give her a second to finish doing her hair.