

Top Doll

Karen McCarthy Woolf

(Andersen Press, 2023)

Review by Yvonne Singh

'If only poor Maman could have come, if only she was bisque / she would be hollow and happy like us.' So trills Dolly, the eponymous 'Top Doll' of this weird and wonderful verse novel.

Karen McCarthy Woolf has taken inspiration from the obituary of the reclusive heiress Huguette Clark, who died in 2011 at the age of 104 and left behind a fortune worth more than \$300m. Her home, before the Manhattan hospital in which she spent her final years, was a vast 42-room apartment on 907 Fifth Avenue, New York that she furnished with her lifelong companions and obsession: dolls. From Barbies and Smurfs to vintage French and Japanese porcelain dolls, Clark's infatuation with her diminutive charges was such that she would create bespoke

model castles to house them in and would attend Dior fashion shows to keep her miniatures in modish attire, which a maid was given the thankless task of ironing.

In this rich re-imagining, Clark's inanimate companions are given voice. And what a voice it is – a cacophonous riot of sound swells these pages. As well as Dolly, who speaks Franglais in sonnet coronas (series of linked sonnets), 'Mais poor Maman, this money / is a curse more terrible than the occult / of the gypsies', there is Japan Town's Lady Mamiko, who peppers her prose with endless haiku. Lilted Jamaican patois defines soothsayer Miss Ting, while the multitude of Barbies, 'those trash-trailer vinyls', prattle nonsense in effervescent abecedarian. Meanwhile, the 'faded ragdoll' General sits at his cherry wood bureau and recounts his memoirs in portentous prose, from the slave plantations of Virginia to the battlefields of General Custer, while occasionally being pleased by Miss Ting or a Barbie.

Hedonism typifies the lives of these cosseted poppets in direct contrast to the abstinence of their hermit-like owner: at the Barbieville discotheque, they snort lurid pink powder, 'cherry-blossom', or doll cocaine, through 'helter-skelter' straws, while indulging in mass orgies under giant glitter balls. Tip-toeing among them is Clark, a shadowy figure, 'few birds are thinner', Lady Mamiko muses, while Dolly frets about her owner's diet of 'sardine crackers and orange juice', as well as the 'carcinoma-nasty' (cancerous lesion) that blights Clark's face, convinced that cherry

blossom powder blended into thick shakes can save her owner if only Scientist Barbie would get a move on replenishing the dwindling supply.

This novel is crazy peculiar, to borrow Dolly's vernacular, leaving this reader occasionally flummoxed by the sum of its doll parts. Despite this, McCarthy Woolf has, through the stylish inventiveness of her prose, breathed new life into this well-worn trope (*Mannequin*, *Toy Story* ... erm *Chucky*), adding poignancy to the book's 'stranger than fiction' tale of a heiress who preferred dolls to people.

<https://www.dialoguebooks.co.uk/titles/karen-mccarthy-woolf/top-doll/9780349703459/>

Yvonne Singh

Yvonne Singh has been a journalist for three decades. Her work has been published in the *Guardian*, *Observer*, *The White Review*, *BBC History*, *The Mirror* and *The London Evening Standard*, among others. Her short stories have been shortlisted for the Seán Ó Faoláin prize, Black Spring Press prize and longlisted for the Brick Lane Bookshop Prize, and she was second runner-up for the SI Leeds Prize 2018. She was a London Library Emerging Writer 2022-23, and has contributed to various

anthologies, including *Unheard Voices* and *Know Your Place*. She lectures in narrative non-fiction, fiction and journalism at London's City Lit.

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