

Rubber Ducks and Their Significance in Contemporary American Culture

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“Duck mania started in 1970 when Ernie sang ‘Rubber Duckie’ on *Sesame Street*.” This statement, part of a 2004 press release issued by the Ettore company on its Web site, <http://www.ettore.com>, for its new shower squeegee which featured a yellow handle shaped like a duck, provides useful historical information about the current popularity of a simple toy: the small, squeezable, yellow rubber duck. In the 35 years since the song “Rubber Duckie” was released, this toy has gained remarkable visibility and popularity in contemporary American culture. Primarily associated with children’s bathtime, rubber ducks have simultaneously emerged from the tub into a variety of new settings. The toy has assumed a number of specific functions: a symbol for infants, childhood, bathing, and bathrooms; a tool to teach developmental and cognitive skills to infants; a design on toddler’s clothing; a theme for baby showers and birthday parties; and a frequent image and character in children’s books. Adults have discovered many creative uses for rubber ducks including artwork, protest actions, parody, sports connections, retail business names, and fundraising with duck races. Plain yellow ducks have been joined by ones outfitted as cowboys, pirates and medieval knights, imprinted ones bearing a child’s name or message (e.g., I ♥ you) and ducks with celebrity or historical faces.

Why are rubber ducks so popular at this time in the lives of both children and adults? The prevalence of the toy on so many levels raises numerous important questions concerning its cultural significance. This article seeks to explore rubber duck popularity by examining its causes and dimensions and argues that the so-called “fun morality” child-rearing philosophy, which emerged in the 1960s, has contributed substantially to the duck’s popularity. The philosophy influenced not only parents, but also provoked educators and organizations, such as the Children’s Television Workshop which produced *Sesame Street*, to inject “fun” into learning. Linking the duck with fun eventually influenced many areas of adult culture, including retailing, sports, and the workplace. The article thus additionally argues that rubber ducks illuminate the interaction between children’s culture and the larger adult popular culture.¹

Description and History

In his book *Toys as Culture*, Brian Sutton-Smith points out that most toys share the characteristics of being miniaturized, highly stylized (and markedly unrealistic) versions of what they

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represent (Sutton-Smith 248–49), and rubber ducks are no exception. Overall bright yellow in color, the ducks are always posed in a swimming position, without legs or feet, with wings and tail feathers only slightly suggested. Facial features include blue or black eyes (with or without eyelashes) and orange open-or-closed beaks. A small hole on the underside allows air to enter so that when squeezed, a squeaking sound is produced. Different companies vary the tilt of the head, wing design, eyes, and beaks. To allay health concerns about mildew and bacteria buildup, models sold for infants often have watertight bottoms that are dishwasher safe.

Plain yellow ducks, now called classic or retro, are still the most common ones sold, although a new wave of occupationally costumed and colored ducks have appeared. Yellow ducks are gender neutral, a factor which may encourage their popularity. In addition to numerous outfitted ducks, holiday ducks (with appropriate costume) are sold for Valentines, Easter, Halloween, and Christmas. Since the 1990s, duck variety has increased dramatically, with colored, see-through, glow-in-the-dark, and horned red devil duckies appearing on store shelves. Squirter ducks, a subspecies of duck, have a hole in the beak to allow a stream of water to be squirted through. Not content to just float passively in the water, flossy duck stores and dispenses dental floss, disco duck lights up when tapped, and bath bug duck releases bath salts in the tub.

Several misconceptions have arisen about rubber ducks. Many assume they originated with Ernie's "Rubber Duckie" song, but hollow rubber toys date from the mid-nineteenth century; by the 1940s, the Rempel company of Akron, Ohio sold several hollow walking rubber ducks. In her recent history of the toy, *Rubber Duckie: It Floats*, Jodie Davis comments that the exact history of floating rubber ducks "is shrouded in mystery" (Davis 14). Their origins, nevertheless, are rooted sometime in the twentieth century after indoor plumbing and bathtubs became commonplace. In the 1950s, rubber duck manufacturers replaced rubber with poly-vinyl chloride plastic softened with the chemical diisonoyl phthalate, a poten-

tially toxic chemical recently removed from many models sold for infant use. No longer made of rubber, the name "rubber duck" has nevertheless endured, although other names are used as well, including floaty, squeaky, squeezey, yellow, bath, and tub duck. The toy has two variant spellings, "duckie" and "ducky," with the later being the most prevalent.

Bathtime Fears and Fun

What sets rubber ducks apart from other toys is their specific purpose: to be used in a water setting. This restricts their use, for the most part, to just one room of the house, the bathroom where the bathtub is located (but also to backyard spas, swimming and wading pools). Instead of being stored in toy chests, rubber ducks sit on bathroom shelves, a bathtub ledge or in mesh bags nearby. For sale at toy, drug, discount, supermarkets, and speciality gift and bath stores (as well as at thrift stores and garage sales), and at a relatively low cost (\$1.99–\$3.99), the toy is widely accessible.

Many children experience bath fears between birth and 2 years. Anxieties arise over the possibility of being sucked down the drain or drowning, water temperature, being in an enclosed space, shampoo in the eyes, and the loud noise of water gushing out the faucet. In their classic book *Children's Fears*, published in 1935, Arthur Jersild and Frances Holmes suggested that to alleviate fears, crying, and statements like "I won't take a bath," parents lure children "into contact with a feared event by means of a strong counter-stimuli" (Jersild 345), while a 1993 work on the same topic, Stephen Garber's *Monsters under the Bed and Other Childhood Fears*, suggests using books (both fictional and informational) to "introduce children to a scary world" (Garber 43).

One counter-stimuli recommended by pediatricians and parents at the Web site <http://www.babycenter.com> is colorful bath toys. As therapeutic toys, rubber ducks distract children from their fears by making bathtime a playful and fun experience, while coaxing fearful or reluctant

bathers to complete an important daily ritual. At the same time, the toys illustrate how play has become a significant aspect part of children's everyday activities, such as bathing. The essay "Fun Morality," collected in Henry Jenkins' anthology *The Children's Culture Reader*, describes how child-rearing literature since the 1960s has stressed the important psychological benefits of play. Marking a turn away from previous, more puritanical beliefs that play was inherently bad, new thinking stressed that the "... mingling of play with necessary routines is consonant with the view that the good and pleasant coincide ..." (Jenkins 203). Jeffrey Moss's famous 1970 *Sesame Street* song, "Rubber Duckie" popularized and spread the message that ducks, bath and fun go together with the line "you make bathtime lots of fun" (Moss 121). By the 1990s, manufacturers such as Toysmith produced ducks that carried the phrase "bathtime fun" on their package labels, while other companies used phrases such as "great squirting fun," "great family fun," and "tubtime is funtime." Along with bubble bath, bath paints, and animal washcloth puppets, tub toys like rubber ducks have become standard bathtime accessories for many children. As they squeeze the ducks, swim them through bubble bath, and pour water over them, their play and adventure lessen their fears, making the bathing process more enjoyable.

To help children overcome fears and solve problems, parents, librarians, and teachers often recommend bibliotherapy, reading about a fictional or real fear (or problem) to understand how others deal with and solve problems. Over the last 35 years, dozens of children's picture and board books have been published about bathing which fall into three categories—realistic fiction (an imaginary child bathing), fantasy (personified animals bathing), and informational (photographs or drawings of actual bath procedures). Appearing on book covers and inside illustrations, rubber ducks are most frequently used to create a realistic bathtub setting that children can relate to, and to emphasize "bathtime fun." In Simon Puttock's *Squeaky Clean*, when mama pig drops thee rubber ducks into the bath with her three piglets

(who did not want to take a bath), one piglet says "ducks are fun." In Elizabeth Vogel's informational book, *Taking My Bath*, a young boy points to the things he'll need for the bath, including "my rubber ducky, just for fun."

Educational Tool and Book Theme

Bathtime can be an important opportunity for a variety of educational experiences, as numerous authors have suggested, and in this context rubber ducks become useful tools. In her book, *Infancy: A Guide to Research and Resources*, Hannah Nuba-Scheffler points out that bathing also provides parents with "a valuable opportunity for sensory stimulation and the storage of information into a growing body" (Nuba-Scheffler 56). As child-rearing guides encouraged parents to see the importance of play, rubber ducks gradually become tools, "associated with harmless and healthful motor and exploratory activities ..." (Jenkins 203) that teach a variety of developmental and cognitive skills to infants ages 1–2 years. As a tool, a toy provides a child with "a means to self assertion and autonomy or mastery" (Sutton-Smith 144–45). Parenting guides, such as Jackie Silberg's *Games to Play with Babies*, often suggest duck-related activities, such as playing peekaboo with a duck hidden under a washcloth to stimulate cause and effect, squeezing ducks to strengthen hand muscles, and wrapping ducks in a washcloth to develop hand-eye coordination (Silberg 189–91). The box label around Peek-a-Babe's toy, The Happy Ducky Family (a mother with two small rubber ducks), assures parents that the toy has been "designed to allow your child to develop step by step ... from birth to preschool," and provides a list of developmental steps for ages 0–18 months that the toy promotes.

The words "In the bath and on the stair, we can read 'most anywhere'" appear in Judi Moreillon's book *Read to Me* (and are illustrated with a drawing of a rubber duck sitting on top of a wet plastic book). The quotation addresses the importance educators place on introducing books

into children's lives whenever and wherever possible. In *Great Books for Babies and Toddlers*, Kathleen Odean suggests that parents extend "books into everyday life [experiences]" (Odean 24) by reading aloud to children while they bathe, in order to foster literacy, first words object identification, and an early love of reading. Colorful squishy plastic books, designed to be used and dropped in the tub, use rubber ducks in many ways. In Allia Nolan's *Sailor Duck*, Quackers, a rubber duck who sails the tub high seas, says, "I have so much fun, I just call myself lucky." While never mentioned by name, the rubber duck in the bath with Mimi monkey in Julie Aiger-Clark's *Mimi's Toes* allows parents to point to it (and other objects) and say, "What's that?"

Because bathtime is such a universal experience in childhood, and usually occurs after the dinner hour in a special room, illustrations of rubber ducks appear frequently in a number of books not specifically focused on bathing, such as those that deal with telling time (what time is bath time?), bedtime routines, new babies arriving in the home, and the purpose of each room in a house. Occasionally they also are used to promote the importance of sharing. In the Veggie Tales story by Cindy Kenney, *King George and His Duckies*, a king gives away his closet full collection of rubber ducks to the children in his kingdom who don't have any ducks.

During the first two years, children master language and simple math. Research shows "they focus on objects that do something, such as make noise or move" (Nuba-Scheffler 66). Rubber ducks (that move and make noise) are used in variety of concept books to teach color, first words, and counting. Parents can point to objects and ask children to identify pictures and see and say the words for the object. Many color concept books use the duck's yellow color to illustrate that color: Neil Ricklen's *Baby's Colors*, for example, shows a child dressed in a yellow rain slicker sitting next to three yellow rubber ducks. In Roger Priddy's *Happy Baby Words*, a rubber duck with the word "duck" underneath is shown below the heading "bathtime." The counting book, *One Little Duck* uses rubber ducks in a bubble-bath-

filled tub to illustrate the popular counting rhyme, "Five Little Ducks Went Swimming One Day." In Adria Wang's *My Playtime Toys*, next to the words "rubber duck," children touch and feel the yellow plastic that forms part of the duck's body. Aimed at preschoolers, the Lakeshore Learning company sells sets of twenty-six-letter alphabet ducks or ducks numbered one to ten, which, according to their Web site, <http://www.lakeshorelearning.com>, "give kids a fun, hands-on way" to learn math and verbal skills.

How are rubber ducks treated in bathing books? Like props on a stage, they say nothing but contribute to the ambiance of bathtime. "Quack" or "squeak" may be written above their heads to signify the sound they make, and occasionally they are spoken to or about. Seldom are they main characters, or personified, but there are a few exceptions. In Frank Asch's *Baby Duck's New Friend* a real duckling has a series of adventures with a rubber duck that fell out of a truck and into a river. David Slonin's *Oh Ducky, A Chocolate Calamity* describes what happens to a rubber duck that accidentally falls into a vat of chocolate at a candy factory. A young boy in the bathtub, dressed as superman, rescues a kidnapped rubber duck from an evil pirate in Andrew Pelletier's *The Amazing Adventures of Bathman*.

An actual event prompted two writers to focus on rubber ducks. After a 1992 Pacific Ocean storm washed 29,000 tub toys overboard, oceanographers tracked (and heavily publicized) how tides, winds, and currents pushed the ducks to land on west coast beaches. Narrated by a rubber duck, Eve Bunting's *Ducky* chronicles his adventures on the high seas until a boy finds him on the beach and brings him home to the bathtub, where Ducky says, "Oh, I am so happy! I am a bathtub duck, fulfilling my destiny" (Bunting 30). Eric Carle's 2005 counting book, *10 Little Rubber Ducks*, describes what different things happen to ten ducks as they float across the Pacific Ocean, while a microchip embedded in the back cover allows children to create the signature squeaking sound of rubber ducks.

Some books refer to the sound a rubber duck makes as quack, such as the young girl in Kathi

Appelt's *Bubbles, Bubbles*. Holding a duck, she steps into her bath saying, "yellow ducky, quack, quack, quack." Others refer to the sound as "squeak." For example, the baby in a tub in Susan Hood's *Noisy Baby* is advised to "squeak your duckie in the bath." The title of Carol Nicklaus's *Sesame Street* plastic book *Squeaky Clean* alludes to the sound as well as the "very clean" meaning of squeaky. After Ernie gets dirty playing in the mud, finger paints, and sandbox, he "get[s] squeaky clean" in a sink or bathtub. Every illustration includes his rubber duckie and little hands can push the squeaker mechanism embedded in the book's cover.

Bathroom Theme

With the amazing amount of duck-themed bathroom merchandise available in stores such as Bed, Bath and Beyond and Wal-Mart, a case could be made for calling the bathroom the repository of rubber duck culture. While most of these items are not made from rubber ducks, they borrow the image and therefore promote the toy. From shower curtains to towels, consumers can find nearly everything that a modern bathroom needs emblazoned with a group of ducks in a tub, or a single duck. The sheer variety is testimony to what must be a fairly common bath decor.²

Advertisers promote their duck-themed merchandise through puns and phrases that highlight the product's ability to provide bathtime fun. Carter's duckie bath mitt, shaped like a duck, provides "good clean fun." The Ettore shower squeegee with the yellow duck handle is "practical and playful," shower curtains with an overall duck design "will give your bathroom a fun theme," and a duck-shaped hot water bottle will make you "quack a smile."

In addition to being a decorating trend, ducks have become a symbol for the bathtub and entire bathroom. Value Village thrift stores displays bathroom merchandise near a sign hanging from the ceiling that says "Bathroom"; on it, a photo of a rubber duck has been substituted for the letter

"a." In 2004, a bank in Copenhagen, Denmark hung a poster of a rubber duck in its front window: the poster promoted loans available for bathroom remodels. The cover of Holman Wang's popular history of bathroom items, *Bathroom Stuff*, features only a large photograph of a yellow rubber duck.

Water Play

Water is one of the key associations with rubber ducks. Outside of the bathroom, they can be found in backyard wading pools and hotel, camp and public swimming pools. Swimming classes for infants 6 months to 3 years often request that children bring rubber ducks (to ease fears) or call their beginning classes Rubber Duckies. At pool parties, children play rubber duck races in wading pools, using only their nose to nudge the toy from one end to another, and summer camps hold rubber duck pool events. For the spa and hot tub, there are rubber duck thermometers, ducks who dispense fragrance, and large floating ducks to hold tea candles. Businesses that have any water connection, such as car washes, soap companies, and pool cleaning services, have used rubber duck or ducky as their business name. The Squeaky Clean laundromat in Peoria, Illinois includes a duck logo and sells rubber ducks.

In 1988, the first fundraising rubber duck race was held in Phoenix, Arizona, sponsored by Great American Merchandise and Events, which still organizes the over 200 races held annually in the United States. Called Ducky Derby (or Regatta, Quackfest, Duckathon, and Splash), numbered ducks wearing black sunglasses are put up for "adoption" (at \$5 or \$10), then dumped into a local waterway where they float to a finish line. Winners are awarded prizes and the adoption money usually benefits nonprofit groups that help children in some way, such as Boys and Girls Clubs, children's cancer research, or child abuse programs. Promoted as "fun filled family events," duck-themed parades and carnivals are often held in conjunction with the race.

Ernie and Rubber Duckie

When it debuted in Fall 1969, *Sesame Street*'s program objective was to introduce basic math and verbal skills to preschoolers aged 3–5, using a cast of Muppet and human characters. Muppet Ernie's favorite toy, a rubber duck named Rubber Duckie, was frequently used in skits about counting, the alphabet letters R and D, and lost and found toys. What catapulted the toy into instant fame in 1970 was the song, "Rubber Duckie," that Ernie sang to his duck while taking a bath. With music and words written by staff writer Jeffrey Moss, who squeaked his own bath duck while Jim Henson (playing Ernie) sang the lyrics, it introduced such now-classic lines as "Rubber Duckie You're the One! You make bathtime lots of fun . . . I'm awfully fond of you" (Moss 121–22). Immediately popular with children and parents, this was perhaps the first song devoted to a rubber duck. Several other songs promoted Duckie, such as "D-U-C-K-I-E, Put Down the Duckie, and Do De Rubber Duck," but it was the music and lyrics to "Rubber Duckie" that captured public attention. Its appearance in 1970 coincided with and perfectly illustrated the emerging child-rearing fun-centered philosophy that ". . . daily tasks can be done with a little play and singing thrown in . . ." (Jenkins 203).

Children still love to sing "Rubber Duckie," which is now available in CD and DVD format. They might encounter it at birthday parties where it is played for the musical chairs game or sung around a campfire. They might receive *Sesame Street* licensed merchandise that plays the melody through a hidden music box mechanism, such as a plush Ernie doll, a wall plaque of Ernie in the tub with duckie, or a toy horn, which shows Ernie and Duckie on the side. Both the lyrics and the melody appear on numerous Web sites. Song parodies, such as the 1978 song "Double Bucky," by Stanford University students about the shift key on early keyboards, used the melody but changed the words, e.g., "you make my keyboard lots of fun." It has been sung by choral groups, often accompanied by squeaking ducks, and performed at football games by many high school and college

marching bands. One of the bands, the Pennsylvania State Marching Blue Band, has for the past eighteen years carried on the tradition of touching the head of a rubber duck before the game for good luck, and then running to the field yelling loudly "Duck, Duck, Duck."

Ernie and Rubber Duckie are never far apart—he sleeps with it, talks to it, squeaks it, sings to it, and involves it in countless *Sesame Street* episodes that teach math and verbal skills. According to the "Rubber Duckie" song, ". . . You're my very best friend, it's true . . ." (Moss 122). This special, bonded relationship could be viewed as yet another way rubber duck toys serve children's needs by playing the role of consolation, an "antidote to loneliness" (Sutton-Smith 45). Like teddy bears and security blankets, rubber ducks may serve as loving imaginary companions, providing children with something to talk to and play with when they are alone. Almost inseparable, Ernie and his Duckie appear in plastic books (Michael Smollin's *Ernie's Bath Book*), picture books (Linda Hayward's *The Case of the Missing Duckie*), lift-the-flap books like Charles Hofer's *Bubbles Everywhere*, and Susan Hood's board book, *Rr: Ernie's Riddles*, as well as a wide variety of other licensed merchandise including men's ties and boxer shorts, number flashcards, numerous toys, jigsaw puzzles, and small figurines.

Enlarging their initial target audience of children aged 3–5, in the 1990s *Sesame Street* launched a new line of products aimed at children from 0 to 3 called *Sesame Street Babies* and *Sesame New Beginning*. Baby Ernie and his Rubber Duckie appear together in John Barrett's photographic book on toilet training book, *Too Big for Diapers*, and in Abigail Tabby's morning/evening routines book *Hello! Good-bye!* The "Rubber Duckie" melody can be heard when small fingers push a lever to see Ernie (holding Duckie) pop out of his tub singing "Rubbie Duckie," in the 2002 Mattel pop-up *Sesame Street* toy or push the yellow duckie held by pyjama-clad Ernie, in the 2001 Fisher-Price Light-up Pet Pal.

Millions of children and their parents have seen Ernie and Rubber Duckie on *Sesame Street*, after 35 years on the air, not only in the United States

but also in nearly 150 other countries. They still appear together in such skits as “Journey to Ernie,” where Big Bird sings “the squeaking of your Duckie tells us you’re the one.” The impact of the program on rubber duck popularity, together with the wide-ranging nature of its licensed character merchandise, has affected at least two generations: children who grew up with *Sesame Street* who are now parents themselves of small children.

Symbol of Infancy and Childhood

Because of its association with children (especially infants), the rubber duck has gradually become a symbol for babies, and for early childhood in general. A few examples illustrate how pervasive the connection has become. At a 2004 Baby Show in Salem, Oregon, a local hospital birthing center distributed ducks imprinted with its name. Birth announcement and baby shower cards, wrapping paper, and congratulatory balloons often show a rubber duck image. Guests at duck-themed baby showers and infant birthday parties eat duck-shaped cakes and receive rubber duck favors. Numerous companies sell specially designed duck-themed gift baskets for newborns with names like “Duckie Delight” and “Just Duckie.” At the Web site <http://www.birthday-express.com>, readers share comments about the “great fun” children ages 1–3 have had at ducky parties. Day care facilities for infants and toddlers have been named Rubber Ducky. A neon rubber ducky with the word “baby” hangs in Old Navy store windows to alert shoppers to their infant section. Parenting and new baby guidebooks often show a rubber duck on the cover. Fodor’s travel guides now include a rubber duckie symbol next to places suitable for children, such as amusement parks. And in cemeteries, ducks’ symbolic role can be seen when they are placed on infant’s graves, alongside kneeling angels and other favorite toys such as Pooh teddy bears.

The reasons behind the symbolic association may lie in how we view innocence. As Gary Cross points out in *The Cute and the Cool*,

“newborns symbolize the purity of innocence . . . they are more than pure, today they are also cute and spunky” (Cross 7). “Cute” is the word most often heard about rubber ducks. Swimming in water, a cleansing and purifying agent, and being played with by cute, innocent infants, and toddlers, they have no negative associations. Perhaps the qualities our culture values in childhood rub off on the rubber duck, or the cute yellow duck epitomizes those values.

Gender plays a subtle role in rubber duck toys. While yellow ducks may be gender neutral, gender has been suggested by costuming ducks with occupational outfits and hats such as baseball caps, helmets, hard hats, and tool belts for male ducks, and bonnets, ribbons, and flowered hats for female ducks, as well as creating gender-coded blue and pink ducks. Shower, birth cards, and balloons for boy and girl babies show them equally, often suggesting gender with pink or blue backgrounds. Carter’s line of “L’il Duckie” clothing for infants, features yellow ducks on a white or lighter yellow background with no gender differentiation. Illustrations in bath books show both boys and girls playing with them. But gender is indicated in other ways. In Janice Lobb’s book, *Splish! Splosh! Why Do We Wash?*, Bob (the Rubber Duck), “who is just a young scientist like you” (Lobb 4), explains the scientific background to what causes waves, floating, and soap scum. Girls sizes 2–5 could purchase the pink Rubber Duckie flannel pajamas by Nick & Nora at Target stores in Summer 2005, but there was no corresponding blue version for boys.

Adults and Rubber Ducks

If “children’s culture is shaped by adult agendas and expectations” (Jenkins 26), much credit for the popularity of the toy must be given to adults who plan, design, purchase, organize, write about, and create rubber duck merchandise and events for children. There is substantial evidence that adults derive as much, if not more, pleasure from the toy after their childhood is over. Adult

interest picked up in the late 1990s, with the 1998 founding of Celebriducks, which placed famous faces, such as Shakespeare and prominent sports figures, on rubber duck bodies. In 1999, Devil Duckies, red ducks with arched eyebrows and horns, were introduced, and in 2001, RubbaDucks began creating gendered ducks, such as Duckerina the ballerina, and support ducks, like D. Cure, the pink-breast cancer awareness duck. A vibrating rubber duck, “I Rub My Duckie,” won the Best Sex Toy of 2002 award. Duck-themed novelty clothing appeared after 2000 such as men’s boxer shorts with devil and angel ducks below the waistband message “naughty or nice.” Women’s duckwear (pajamas, robes, socks, flipflop sandals) show rubber ducks alone or in a bathtub, without any message.

Just as other toys have become collectibles, rubber ducks are attracting a growing number of both male and female collectors, as Kevin Glew’s article, “Life is ‘Just Ducky’ for this Bunch,” documents. The toy appeals to people because “it’s so cute . . . everyone who buys one has a smile on their face” explained one retailer (Glew 45). Even *Sesame Street* has licensed a “Collectible Cutie” Baby Ernie doll sitting in his bassinet wearing a T-shirt with a rubber duckie design. Collections vary from a few hundred to over a 1,000, and many are shown on Web sites, such as Duck Planet, <http://www.duckplanet.com>, owned by Charlotte Lee, the current Guinness Book record holder with nearly 1,500 ducks. Other collections are linked on other duck-themed Web sites, including Rubber Duck Land, <http://www.getodd.com>; Captain Quack, <http://www.captainquack.com>; and What a Ducky Day!, <http://www.duckyday.com>.

Adults never tire of new ways to use rubber ducks. Widener University’s Information Technology Services gives out the Rubber Duck Award to an outstanding staff member. In 2004, the satirical Internet Weekly, <http://www.internetweekly.com>, ran a story about the Homeland Security Office issuing a yellow ducky alert because New England was under threat from a group of rogue rubber ducks that had escaped from a duck race. Ducks have been used to protest “lame duck” legislation in Ohio and floated sym-

bolically as “sitting ducks” in the Hudson River to protest the Indian River Nuclear Power Plant. Football fans of the University of Oregon Ducks display rubber ducks in their cars and watch televised games surrounded by rubber ducks. At the office, employees adorn cubicles with them, squeeze them to reduce stress, hide them in water coolers on April Fools Day, and use them in team-building exercises such as scavenger hunts and duck tosses into a pool.

“Having fun” and making people laugh, are one of the main reasons adults cite for using rubber ducks. Fun-loving principals hide them on school grounds for students to find and newlywed couples “have fun” placing bride and groom ducks atop wedding cakes. Artists and photographers who use rubber ducks in their work enjoy the humor and laughs their works bring. Deborah Pasternak’s Rub-a-Dub-Duckie paintings featured on her Web site, <http://www.deborahpasternak.com>, are meant to “quack you up.” Photographer Jon Wright, who documents his own duck’s travels around the world, claims on his Web site, <http://www.artbyjon.com>, that “rubber ducks are attitude adjusters of the highest magnitude . . . [they] soften up the biggest grouch.”

Fun Morality and Nostalgia

Just as rubbers ducks have symbolically promoted “fun” for children, adults have rediscovered their childhood toy for the same reason: to re-experience the innocent, silly fun of their childhood and fuse work and play. Fun, as the essay about “fun morality” points out, “. . . has tended to become obligatory . . . boundaries . . . between work and play [have broken] down. Amusements infiltrate into the sphere of work . . .” (Jenkins 199). The endless humorous ways adults use them (e.g., through parody, puns, practical jokes, and irony) indicates they serve an important role in contemporary culture as an icon of fun, a therapeutic stress reliever, and a creativity booster. Often displayed on book or magazine covers, such as Gahan Wilson’s cartoon “Rubber

Ducky,” on the *New Yorker* cover for October 4, 2004, rubber ducks attract attention. Wilson’s cartoon shows a mother rubber duck assisting her baby in the tub, behind which are monogrammed towels with the letters R D. Both are watching a miniature human being swimming in front of the excited baby rubber duck.

Nostalgia may be triggered by rubber ducks when adults “play” with them. Parents who use rubber ducks with their children (as tool or bath-tub toy), may be recovering “their lost worlds of wonder through the wondrous innocence of their children’s encounter with commercial novelty” (Cross 15). Children’s play may later be admired as adult playfulness. Adults may also desire to bring out a dimension of themselves hidden by adult maturation and societal norms: the inner self. A student choreographer at the 2002 Student Kent State University Dance festival designed a dance around the German version of the “Rubber Duckie” song, that “brings out the inner child of the dancers and hopes to bring out the inner child of the audience [as well].”³

Conclusion

Throughout this article, the rubber duck has been associated with the words “fun” and “play.” This combination is important in understanding the role rubber ducks serve in the lives of both children and adults. As play has become an important parenting philosophy, ducks have emerged as increasingly useful objects to promote it, whether as tub toys or book illustrations depicting bathtime fun, therapeutic devices to soothe bath fears, or educational tools making learning more fun. Even if children’s books do not mention the word rubber duck in the text, the toy’s appearance on a cover attracts attention and generates smiles. The importance of having a toy (and a song about it) repeatedly shown and publicized on television, as has been done on *Sesame Street* with Ernie and his Duckie, cannot be underestimated in making the toy well known and beloved. And just as critical to its being well known is the

large amount of licensed Ernie-with-Duckie character merchandise that *Sesame Street* has endorsed and promoted over the years. The increased use of ducks in so many different settings associated with children has also provided greater visibility to the toy, turning it into a symbol for innocence, bathing, infants, and fun.

Rubber ducks are popular with children primarily between the ages of birth and 5 years, as tub toys to subdue bath fears and provide tub fun, or as toys to stimulate developmental growth and cognitive skills. Infants wear Carter’s line of “L’il Duckie” clothing between the ages of 1–2, while preschoolers might have duck pajamas and slippers. Children may read about rubber ducks in a variety of board, plastic and picture books or see Ernie squeaking his duck on *Sesame Street*, or receive licensed toys with Ernie and Duckie. They may attend duck-themed birthday parties and swimming classes. But by the time children enter school, other toys and new expectations are entering their lives, and rubber ducks are set aside. The 5-year impact of rubber ducks in the lives of children may seem short, but evidence reveals that these toys remain in children’s psyche much longer. Although these toys are designed by adults for children’s use, the irony is that adult use may surpass that of children, albeit in different and more sophisticated ways. Shared by adults and children in a symbiotic relationship, the irrepressibly “cute” toy that fueled “Duck mania” brings pleasure and learning to children and leaves memories of childhood innocence and joy that are rekindled in adulthood, promising fun as the duck reaches out to the inner child in all of us.

Notes

1. This article is dedicated to my granddaughter, Julia Stalnaker, whose own rubber duck awakened my interest in the toy. The author is deeply grateful for the numerous ducks located by her husband, sister, and many friends. Certain ideas articulated in this article were first presented in preliminary fashion in a paper entitled “Rubber Duckie You’re the One!: The Making of a Toy Celebrity” at the 2004 Popular Culture Conference in San Antonio, Texas.

2. The author has personally seen rubber duck-themed floor mats, waste baskets, tub adhesives, sink stoppers, toilet seats and

covers, wallpaper, floating soap dishes, yellow liquid bath gel in a see-through duck-shaped container, little rubber ducks embedded in soap bars, and duck-shaped toothbrush holders, nail brushes, and ceramic talking soap dispensers (“Quack Quack. Don’t forget to wash your hands”).

3. Kent State Student Stephanie Rimstidt choreographed the dance “One Minute to Recess,” performed to the German version of the “Rubber Duckie” song. Additional information available at the Internet NEohioPAL listserv: 3 September 2005: <http://lists.fredsternfeld.com/pipermail/neohiop/Week-of-Mon-20020225/001284.html>

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