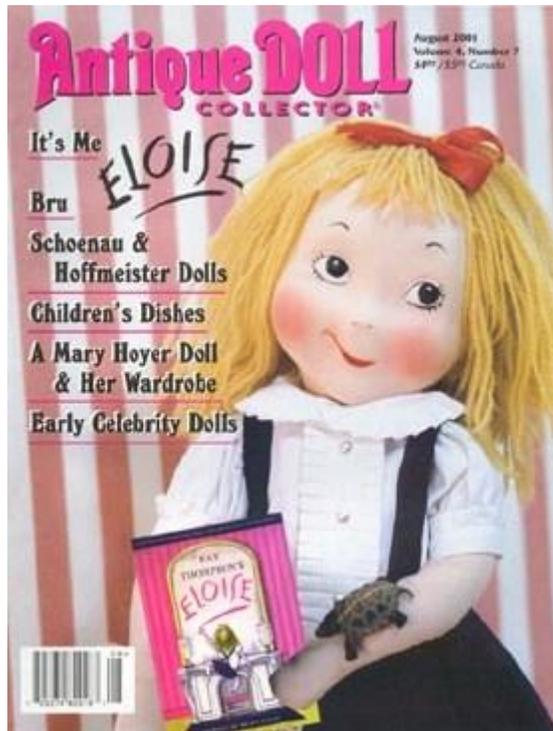


THE *RAWTHER* DEFINITIVE HISTORY OF THE ELOISE DOLL

by
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When four Eloise dolls adorned the cover of the December 1957 issue of *Good Housekeeping*, Santa Claus was not prepared. No one was.

Just before Thanksgiving '57, Simon & Schuster had published the highly anticipated sequel book, *Eloise in Paris*, but a brand new 21" Eloise rag doll was making quite a splash of its own. An ad campaign for Cannon Sheets featured the Eloise doll. Department stores across America were spotlighting the dolls. FAO Schwarz included the Eloise doll in its Christmas '57 mail order catalog. Even the most popular magazine in America, *Life*, weighed-in with a spread showing a little girl surrounded by Eloise dolls, clothes, merchandise, and, most spectacularly, two 43", larger-than-life-size dolls that Eloise illustrator Hilary Knight recently joked were "a little scary."

The folks in publicity had done their job just a little too well. The demand for Eloise dolls wildly exceeded expectations and inventory, leaving many young girls empty handed on Christmas morning. Was this hullabaloo an early case of Cabbage Patch fever or Tickle Me Elmo mania?

It all supposedly started in 1947 when the flamboyant nightclub entertainer, Kay Thompson, was late to a photo session. Instead of offering an apology, Thompson impishly said in the voice of a little girl, "I am Eloise and I am six." The put-on got laughs, so from then on, Thompson would improvise comic asides and conversations in the voice of Eloise.

In 1954, Thompson met a man named Hilary Knight, a 28-year-old up-and-coming artist who developed the look for Eloise. Ensnared in a room at The Plaza Hotel in New York City, Thompson and Knight collaborated on the first Eloise book, using the hotel as the home and playground for Eloise, her pug dog Weenie, her turtle Skipperdee, and of course her beloved Nanny. With her parents conspicuously absent, Eloise had the run of the place, much to the dismay of the beleaguered hotel staff.

At the risk of offending the readership of this magazine, it is only fair to disclose Eloise's impatient attitude about dolls. She considers them "an extremely lot of extra work." In her words, "I have two dolls which is enough." One is named Sabine, a rag doll from Jamaica "with absolutely no face at all, shoe-button eyes and two right legs. She is *rawther* unusual." The other doll is named Saylor, a mangled baby doll with no arms due to "the most terriblest accident."

Just whom exactly was Thompson thinking of when she invented Eloise? Some say she must have been inspired by her goddaughter, Liza Minnelli, who was born in 1946. Thompson had been Judy Garland's vocal coach at MGM and was enormously influential on Garland's development as an entertainer. When Garland gave birth to Liza, Thompson became the child's godmother. However, when asked about Liza's influence on the creation of Eloise, Thompson always insisted that she herself was Eloise.

When Simon & Schuster published *Eloise* in November 1955, it was very well received and sales were brisk. But then *Life* magazine printed an excerpt in December 1955 that catapulted the book to best-seller status, selling over 150,000 copies.

Wildly inventive and witty, Thompson wrote the book for adults. The cover makes no bones about that fact with copy that reads, "A book for precocious grownups." As an example of her Eloise-like behavior, Thompson was known to storm bookstores that dared to display the book in the children's section. She would grab the books and physically move them to the adult area. Despite her commando raids, the book delighted young and old readers in equal measure.

Eloise Gorski, the webmaster of the marvelous Eloise Website (www.eloisewebsite.com), notes, "In April 1956, a display of Eloise books at Kroch's & Brentano's in Chicago included a life-size, custom-made Eloise doll. I believe this was the *first* Eloise doll and perhaps the catalyst for Kay to consider marketing a doll." There is no doubt that Kay was actively finding ways of broadening Eloise to other mediums.

Thompson wrote and recorded a song called "Eloise" featuring her own voice as Eloise and Nanny, with backup vocals by Andy Williams and others. The song became a Top 40 *Billboard* hit in March 1956. On Thanksgiving night 1956, CBS presented the *Playhouse 90* production of "Eloise" starring Kay Thompson as herself and 7-year-old

Evelyn Rudie who, for her performance as Eloise, became the youngest person ever nominated for an Emmy Award. The broadcast garnered huge ratings.

Earlier that same year, Thompson had been cast opposite Audrey Hepburn and Fred Astaire in *Funny Face*. When the production traveled to France in June for location shooting, Thompson was inspired to write *Eloise in Paris*, again illustrated by Knight. Simon & Schuster announced a November '57 publication date which Thompson decided to target as a launching pad for an entire cottage industry built around Eloise.

Thompson recruited Simon & Schuster's sales manager, Bob Bernstein, to join Eloise Limited, the company she formed to exploit the merchandising rights of the character. Bernstein was a very savvy marketer, instrumental in the development of the phenomenally successful Golden Books. He persuaded The Plaza Hotel to give Eloise Limited free office space on the first floor. Although Thompson maintained her conviction that Eloise was for adults, Bernstein helped convince her that Eloise's appeal to children was not something to be ignored. They agreed that an Eloise doll would be a natural.

Thompson and Bernstein shopped the idea of the doll to all the major toy companies, including Mattel and Madame Alexander. Bernstein recalls, "We had a very hard time getting anybody interested. Most people regarded Eloise as much too small a market. She wasn't Mickey Mouse." Finally, a small Manhattan firm stepped up to the plate, Hol-Le (pronounced "holly") Toys, a partnership between Inez Holland House (the "Hol" part of the name) and Morris Levitch (the "Le" part of the name).

Vilma Kurzer, who was working as a designer at Hol-Le, remembers, "Mr. Levitch called me down to the showroom in Manhattan at 200 Fifth Avenue where I met Kay Thompson and Hilary Knight. They showed me the Eloise book and when I saw the pictures of this little girl, I said, 'Oh boy, let me get my hands onto this.'"

Kurzer was born in 1912 in Vienna, Austria. When Hitler's Third Reich began to spread over Europe in the 1930s, it was a dangerous place for this young Jewish woman. Kurzer recalls, "I became an undesirable citizen. Half of my family got killed in the Holocaust. Fortunately, I had an uncle in America who gave me the immigration papers that saved my life. When I arrived in the U.S., I began making collector dolls and later attended New York's Fashion Institute of Technology." In the 1950s, Kurzer worked for Inez Holland House where she designed crib liners and baby-bottle cushions in the shape of animals. Then at Hol-Le, her creations included the L'il Abner Daisy Mae doll, the Miss Lolly by Golly Telephone doll and a plush train set for babies.

For the cloth Eloise doll, Kurzer would employ all her skills as a designer. "I call it sculpting in seams. I started with the potbelly, then the rest of the torso. Then I went to the arms and the legs, which are narrow and skinny. I didn't give her fingers because that would not have been possible. When the material is cut in the proper shapes, it is sewn together, then turned inside out so you cannot see the seams. The turning alone is a pain in the neck if it is too thin. Everything had to be sewn, turned and stuffed by hand. The cutest parts of the doll are that potbelly and those scrawny legs."

"Most other dolls at that time had plastic faces," Kurzer continues. "I was the one who wanted the Eloise face to be made of silk rather than plastic. But in order to do that, the face first had to be made in clay."

Hilary Knight remembers, "I sculpted the face in a clay that hardened. I put buckram over the mold, a cotton fabric impregnated with glue. After it dries, you peel it

off and it is hard. So then I painted it, which they used as the prototype.” Kurzer recalls sculpting and painting a model as well.

Whichever version was ultimately approved by Thompson, a mold was made from it that would be used to stamp out the faces. Kurzer recalls, “We used a factory that made hats for the pressing of the faces, but instead of hat felt, I made them use silk backed with buckram. Then, we would individually paint each face by hand.”

To recreate Eloise’s trademark flyaway mop top, Kurzer remembers, “I insisted on using genuine wool knitting yarn, not cotton yarn that would have been cheaper and more common. The wool had a different feel and look, more like Eloise. That is one of the reasons why she is so cute.”

Then came the clothes. “The blouse, I had fun with,” Kurzer fondly reminisces. It is very detailed with pleated trim, short puff sleeves and metal buttons down the middle. The lower part of the blouse becomes the panties, all in one piece.

The Eloise books were illustrated in black ink, so colors were not clearly defined. Knight says, “There was great debate on whether the skirt should be blue or black, and we finally decided it should be navy blue.” (Current Eloise dolls have black skirts.)

It was Kurzer’s job to construct the jumper skirt. “I decided to make it out of felt, which was a very big task because of all the pleats. Oh my God, what a headache.” Then the white knee socks and black patent leather shoes were added, along with a red satin bow for the hair. Kurzer recalls, “When I was finished with the first sample, Kay Thompson was really sick in the hospital having gall bladder surgery. But when she saw the doll, she jumped out of bed and started dancing with it.”

With a retail price set at \$6.00, Hol-Le introduced the Eloise doll to toy store buyers in the October 1957 trade journal, *Playthings*. Instantly, orders began flooding in.

Kurzer recalls, “It was an immediate success. Unfortunately, the Eloise doll was not an item that could be punched out like a plastic model. It needed a lot of detail, a lot of work. The factory was small, only about 45 people. So we stayed open, around the clock, three shifts. But the manager wasn’t capable of running a big production and we couldn’t make enough for all the deliveries that were demanded.”

Aside from high visibility at The Plaza Hotel and FAO Schwarz, no less than three of New York’s most prominent department stores positioned themselves as *the* place to get the Eloise doll: Bloomingdale’s, Lord & Taylor’s, and Best & Company. Then over 100 trend-setting department stores around the country jumped on the bandwagon.

When the Eloise doll received major spreads in the December issues of *Good Housekeeping* and *Life* magazine, there was a tidal wave of orders. Kurzer recalls, “I remember the chaos. It was unbelievable. We had such a success on our hands, but we couldn’t fulfill the demands for Christmas. It got so bad that Mr. Levitch had a nervous breakdown and disappeared. His wife, Betty Gould, tried to run the company and carry on, but it didn’t work. The whole company went out of business within six months. Betty and Mr. Levitch ended up divorced. It was catastrophic. It was such a tragedy.”

Two myths persist about Hol-Le Toys’ Eloise doll: First is the false claim in various books and articles that Betty Gould was the designer. Kurzer says, “Oh boy, my blood pressure is going up! Betty Gould was Mr. Levitch’s wife, that’s all.” Second is the erroneous assumption that life-size versions of the Eloise doll were available. Kurzer

says, “They were never produced. I made the two samples of the 43” Eloise doll which you see in *Life* magazine, but production was postponed and then the business collapsed.”

When the doll debuted in 1957, other Eloise merchandise was introduced including an Emergency Hotel Kit, French Post Cards, and girl’s clothes by Betti Terrell for Johnston of Dallas. Doll-size versions of the outfits were made in 1957 by Jane Miller of Lafayette, California, then in 1958 by The Toy Guild of N.Y. and The Playmakers.

Doll expert Kathy Reilly says, “There were at least a dozen Eloise doll clothing items. Miller’s line included a car coat with corduroy coveralls, striped sailor shirt, two nightgown and robe sets, hotel porter’s smock embroidered “Je Suis Me”, “Allo Cherie” apron, and a print dress. Toy Guild made a terry robe with Skipperdee mitt, striped pj’s, white raincoat, pink dress with long-stemmed rose belt, and the Christmas tree dress.”

Unfortunately, the Eloise juggernaut was being spearheaded by a doll that was scarcely available. The supporting products were not popular enough to make up for the absence of the star of the show. From the ashes of the Hol-Le Toys debacle, the rights to produce the Eloise doll were up for grabs. A trade brochure from 1958 announced, “It’s me Eloise. Here’s the thing of it. I’m off to...American Character Doll.” American Character was a high quality manufacturer of dolls from 1918 to 1968, best remembered for Little Ricky Jr., Betsy McCall, and Tressy, the doll with “the hair that grows.”

In comparing Eloise dolls from the two companies, it is apparent that the same face molds and body design patterns were used, as they are virtually identical. American Character sometimes used a slightly thicker yellow yarn for the hair and also offered a rarely seen alternate version with somewhat darker auburn-colored yarn. Although most of the blouses sport pleated trim, there are some American Character examples with lace trim instead. The American Character jumper featured more pleats on the skirt.

Identification markings include a white satin tag that reads “ELOISE LTD.,” with either “HOL-LE TOY CO., N.Y. 10, N.Y.” or “AMERICAN CHAR. DOLL CORP., BROOKLYN, N.Y.” Paper hangtags feature a drawing of Eloise with alternate company names, otherwise identical. The dolls were packed in no-frills corrugated shipping boxes, 22½” long x 5¼” deep x 6¾” wide. The Hol-Le box has an identification sticker affixed to one end whereas the American Character box has its information stamped in ink. The transition to American Character affected the retail price, raising it from \$6.00 to \$6.98.

Thompson was left a bit in the lurch when Bernstein quit Eloise Limited to join Random House as sales manager (he became president in 1966). But, not long after arriving at Random House, Bernstein lured Thompson away from Simon & Schuster for the third book, *Eloise at Christmastime*, published September 1958. In support of the new publication, Neiman-Marcus featured a full-page of Eloise merchandise in its holiday catalog including the Eloise Doll and the Eloise Christmas Tree Doll Dress.

Sales of Eloise items dropped significantly after December, due no doubt to the seasonal nature of the *Christmastime* book and holiday-themed merchandise. Thompson decided to return to Simon & Schuster for the fourth (and last) book, *Eloise in Moscow*, published in November 1959 to moderate sales. There was no denying that the demand for Eloise merchandise seemed to be losing steam. FAO Schwarz dropped the doll after featuring it in their 1957 and 1958 catalog.

Plagued with doubts, Thompson wrestled with the conflict that her “book for precocious grownups” was being merchandised for children and she worried that the character had become overexposed. As a result, Eloise Limited ground to a halt, no

merchandising contracts were renewed or sought, and Thompson all but pulled Eloise from the marketplace, only allowing the first book to remain in print. The Eloise doll made its last appearance in the 1959 American Character trade catalog, but is far from forgotten: an original Hol-Le Toys Eloise doll is now on permanent display at the Museum of the City of New York, donated in 1957 by Morris Levitch.

In 1969, Simon & Schuster launched a very successful re-issue of the first *Eloise* book, which renewed Thompson's faith in her original creation. Writer Mart Crowley, a friend of Thompson and Knight, remembers that period well: "Kay embarked on a campaign to bring Eloise back in a big way. She wanted a better doll than the one from the 1950s, new and improved, more extravagant, more expensive. Kay tried to persuade Louis Vuitton to create a miniature steamer trunk and luggage for the Eloise doll. And she only wanted the dolls to be sold in very high-end stores like Bergdorf's and Bendel's. She wanted all the top fashion designers to create Eloise doll clothes."

Barbara Matera, an award-winning New York costume maker for such Broadway shows as *Sunset Blvd.*, recalls, "We made her a schoolgirl's outfit, more formal than her standard attire, but that's as far as it got. I don't think anyone was interested in manufacturing it because they thought it wasn't like Eloise." Later, Matera had a falling out with Thompson. "Kay borrowed my original Eloise doll and then it disappeared. I was furious." Looking back on the incident today, Matera laughs, "That doll ruined our relationship. We didn't have much contact afterwards."

In escapades worthy of an Eloise book, Crowley was witness to Thompson's Eloise-like whimsy. "Kay would repeatedly pick me up in a limousine and drag me to all sorts of out-of-the-way warehouses in Manhattan, where sculptors would be furiously working on prototypes for the Eloise doll head. She never found a mold she liked. One or two came close. She would take these heads back to The Plaza, grab a knife from the room service cart and begin to carve away at the faces, desperately trying to get them just right, but of course ruining them in the process. Then, she'd get mad and stab them. I just remember Kay always being fraught with anxiety, but we always had a hilarious time. The quest went on for probably five or six years until she gave up around 1975."

In the early 1990s, another Eloise doll almost happened. Hilary Knight recalls, "About 10 years ago, a custom-made Eloise doll was sent to Simon & Schuster that was charming. It was turned over to Determined Productions that did some of Maurice Sendak's dolls based on *Where the Wild Things Are*. Determined took theirs to China where they made a prototype and it was brought back and shown to FAO Schwarz who wanted to do it. The head of the department at FAO took it up to Kay to show it to her on Christmas Eve. She thought he was the deliveryman. He said, 'I have this for you,' handed her the doll and she instantly rejected it, probably because she had had nothing to do with it."

When Thompson passed away in 1998, her estate granted permission for all four Eloise books to be reissued through Simon & Schuster. The merchandising, film and television rights were acquired by The itsy bitsy Entertainment Company. An impressive array of high-end Eloise products from numerous A-list manufacturers are now being sold through FAO Schwarz, Neiman Marcus and other upscale stores.

In 1999, Madame Alexander licensed the rights to produce a whole line of Eloise dolls. For the first time in decades, Alexander created a custom-designed face for their Eloise dolls, with prototypes supervised and painted by Hilary Knight. So far they have

made an 8” vinyl doll as well as cloth rag dolls measuring 12”, 16” and a life-size 36” Eloise holding her own doll, Sabine. For Christmas 2001, Neiman Marcus is offering an exclusive 18” Eloise doll in her Christian Dior Tea Dress from *Eloise in Paris*.

Brad Fazzari, senior licensing manager for itsy bitsy, muses about the fortuitous side effect of Eloise being unavailable for so long: “Strategically all the Eloise merchandise was pulled off the market and now we have 40 years of pent-up demand.”

Like déjà vu, FAO Schwarz sold out all stock of the new Eloise dolls when they were first introduced in the fall of 1999. Madame Alexander’s New York factory has not been able to keep up with the demand, so now a facility in China has been called into service. And, if that weren’t enough, another licensee, Crocodile Creek, has created an 8” Eloise beanbag doll now sold exclusively through Barnes & Noble bookstores.

On November 28, 2000, itsy bitsy hosted an Eloise doll charity auction at The Plaza Hotel. Fazzari says, “We got Madame Alexander and famous designers to collaborate on five 36” one-of-a-kind Eloise dolls that raised \$200,000 for childrens’ charities. We had Eloise in her classic outfit, Eloise in Moscow with her fur coat, Christmastime Eloise in a Santa costume, Eloise at The Plaza in a bathrobe with bunny slippers, and Eloise in Paris wearing her famous Christian Dior dress. Harry Winston did diamond jewelry, Katherine Baumann made accessories, and the furs were created by Oscar de la Renta for Alixandre Furs. It was an amazing coming together of designers. Hammer prices ranged from \$30,000 to \$60,000 each.”

Clearly, the Eloise doll craze is back and bigger than ever! As Eloise would say, “Charge it please and thank-you very much.”



Little girl surrounded by Eloise dolls and merchandise, 1957.

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Three Eloise dolls on the cover of *Good Housekeeping*, December 1957.



Author Sam Irvin pictured in 2001 with vintage Eloise dolls made by Hol-Le Toys in 1957. The life-size Eloise doll is a rare prototype of which only a handful were produced.