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**Say Hello to Kitty***Welcome to the Sanrio Universe*

By ANNA HANKS

**Hello, my name is** Anna, and I have a problem. And I am not alone. There are a lot of us who share the same addiction. There are few men in our world. And for the most part, we are in the closet. Few people know the depths of our obsession until they come into our homes. You can find us at online auctions and novelty stores, plunking down big cash to score elusive items to feed our need. Hello my name is Anna, and I have a Hello Kitty problem. And I am not alone.

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Photo By Heather Brand

Despite evidence to the contrary, I think of Kitty as, well, my friend, even though I realize that she is both a cartoon and a cat. To express this friendship, I inhabit a whole Hello Kitty universe based on my fixation. Like a trader in medieval relics, I have a fascination with items associated with the patron saint of catness. Oddly, I don't even own a cat. Yet I have a Hello Kitty backpack, a Hello Kitty mousepad, a Hello Kitty pen, and a Hello Kitty notebook. I tell time with Hello Kitty clocks -- plural. One of these clocks plays a song at the top of every hour, including "Are You Lonesome Tonight?" If you get a letter from me, it may have a Hello Kitty photo sticker in the corner, where I'm wearing Kitty's ears and whiskers -- my "play-at-home" Kitty costume. Grrr!

When I invite my Hello Kitty support group over, they drink out of Hello Kitty mugs, eat with Hello Kitty forks, and have ice cream in Hello Kitty bowls. They eat unlicensed Hello Kitty cookies from Dobie Mall. When things get too intense, they dry their eyes with Hello Kitty tissues. If they get overexcited at my decorating scheme, I turn on my tiny Hello Kitty fan to cool them down.

A sly witticism taken from *The Wicked Japanese Book*, "I love the Hello Kitty motif in the living room," is not too far off the mark. But as members of my support group like to explore, why this fascination with the big white cat? The feminist answer is that she's an important childhood female icon who doesn't depend on sex appeal. After all, look at the rest of them. Betty Boop was living large in skivvies and a garter. Or how about Wonder Woman in her gold lamé corset? The magic lasso she used to force people tell the truth lends the impression of a Vegas dominatrix hankering for a career change. Then there's Minnie Mouse -- that simpering handmaiden to a ratfink of a boyfriend who can't make an honest woman out of her after 50 years. With *his* fortune, Minnie should be able to settle out of court for even more than Jerry Hall -- even if they didn't reproduce. And what about Lois Lane, the archnemesis of girl reporters everywhere? Lois can go anywhere, interview anyone, and meet mobsters in dark alleys, because Superman always shows up to save her. Lois isn't brave for going into these situations, she's stupid.

Kitty isn't like the rest of these cartoon "heroines." Kitty doesn't resort to sex appeal. Flat shoes and a big red bow do not a come-hither look make. And although she's a cat, you won't find Kitty purring on anyone's lap. Call her "Furry Spice" and she'd tell you that what she "really, really want's" is for you to find yourself a new litter box.

In short, Kitty is a paradigm of the preadolescent female self, before young women are forced to internalize the images of what society promotes as necessary to become beautiful or appealing: uncomfortable shoes, control-top pantyhose, a cow-like Nancy Reagan gaze, and those twin demons -- silicone and StairMasters. Kitty is eternally uncorruptible. She doesn't want to please anyone except herself. She is girl power, not vamp power. (She's so non-vamp that an inconsiderate and badly done line drawing of Hello Kitty wearing fishnet stockings, brandishing a whip stopped me cold during a desperate dash down the Drag.) A fellow Kittyphile suggests that Kitty, with her immaculate whiteness, is the embodiment of pure innocence.

Yet for all of her fabulousness, Hello Kitty is thought by some to have a dark side. While Americans might see Kitty as a nonsexual cartoon ideal, one friend who spent years in Japan reflects on how this very type of cuteness is sexualized in Japan. So Kitty may not be so innocent after all. Furthermore a Korean friend, a Kitty fan herself, has problems with the way Hello Kitty products function in Korean culture. She sees the products being used to lure girls and young women in Korea to invest in the culture of consumerism -- where you are what you buy -- and having the newest

Hello Kitty stationary product is just a first baby step on the long consumer treadmill.

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The folks at Sanrio, the corporation behind Kitty and friends, would probably not put it so bluntly, but surely have a clue as to the influence of their products. As an illicitly acquired trainee handout for Sanrio points out, "Unlike other animated characters that spin off from the media, television shows and cartoons, our characters begin their own existence as retail products. Because they are not tied to a definitive story line or movie plot, children can, and do, project their own feelings and emotions onto the characters." The company mission further states, "Each and every Sanrio product brings a message of friendship and happiness! ... Everyone who steps into a Sanrio boutique to select a gift has that special feeling that they are shopping in a world designed with just them in mind." Pardon me, but isn't this one of the indicators mental health workers use to diagnose schizophrenia? If you feel like you are shopping in your own little world, it's time to see a professional.

**Poké Who?**  
BY ANNA HANKS

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  - Ahiro No Pekkle
  - Pekkle the Duck
  - Momoko

**Whatever Kitty may represent**, she's now making a big splash in the mainstream U.S. market. While once Hello Kitty was only found in specialty stores (such as Toy Joy and Terra Toys here in Austin), mass retailer Target now carries their own Hello Kitty line, including everything from party invitations to tiny inflatable Hello Kitty chairs. For Halloween, Target even carried a Hello Kitty princess costume, complete with a Hello Kitty princess wand and Hello Kitty princess ballet slippers. If only it came in my size.

The University of Texas campus-area tea shop Momoko started carrying Kitty items because so many customers asked for them. Owner Welinning Ko also tells me that many of her customers have made the pilgrimage to Sanrioland. She also tells of her bad luck in trying to import a Hello Kitty car, as the steering wheel is on the incorrect side. Another customer wanted to order a Hello Kitty Vespa, but she discouraged that idea, as the scooter is small enough to be stolen. As she points out, "It is a really unusual item."

At the Sanrio Surprises store in Highland Mall, Kitty is the most popular of all the characters they sell. Here the Kitty items are laid out like tempting produce at the gourmet grocery. Apparently they are so tempting that the manager, Gary, has a hard time keeping eight- to 14-year-old girls from lifting his pencils and pens.

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 November 9, 2001  
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**Seabiscuit: An American Legend**  
 June 1, 2001  
 Seabiscuit: An American Legend by Laura Hillenbrand Random House, 300

Sanrio is already a billion-dollar enterprise, and they are only getting bigger. If all this keeps up, pretty soon my support group will outgrow my supply of Hello Kitty tissues. A friend of mine tells me that at the Sanrio headquarters in Silicon Valley, a giant statue of Hello Kitty in the lobby greets guests as soon as they walk in. My friend reports that it has the air of a Greek temple -- only minus the specifically Greek parts.

Like a goddess, or a cat-muse, Kitty can appear in a number of different guises. In past seasons she has been an angel. She has been a bumblebee. She has been a mermaid. But unlike that similarly chameleonic girl-dom icon Barbie, Kitty just assumes different forms. There is, for example, no "Mermaid Kitty" on the market -- she just metamorphoses from one form into many forms. The philosophical ramifications are endless.

The Internet has been a good thing for Miss Kitty. At Usenet sites devoted to the fixation, people in the UK write fervently looking for someone in the States to send them Kitty merchandise. Rumor has it there are Hello Kitty Tarot cards -- and that someone else even started a Sanrio psychics hotline. Another victim of the mania, a friend of mine, proposed a nine-hour drive to the Oklahoma City Sanrio store and called to find out if I thought it was worth it. Hellooo? As if you have to ask ...

**It appears that many people** are entranced by Hello Kitty. But, as strange as it may seem to outsiders, I'm not the most obsessed member of this group. A girl who was working the cash register a while back at the Eckerd Drugs on Guadalupe had a Hello Kitty tattoo prominently located on an upper limb. We bonded; me admiring her tattoo, and she admiring my Liberacean stack of Hello Kitty rings. Then she rang up the Prozac, and I put the little pills in my little Hello Kitty pillbox and said, "You can never have too many friends!" ■

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