

REMEMBERING AMOSANDRA

They don't make nostalgia like they used to

By JOAN JAFFE

For the Valley News

Nostalgia isn't what it used to be. The luxury of slipping into a past — usually an idealized past that never was — is now fraught with guilt. Guilt at wanting to escape a present that demands attention, work and struggle; guilt at having the time, the wherewithal, the resources to be able to leave the moment, when so many others are denied this escape. Guilt.

The other day, between perusing the morning onslaught of headlines and consuming the evening news updates eight hours later, I fell into a reverie.

Spurred by the “Black Lives Matter” mantra, I remembered the only doll I had as a child: a Black baby doll named Amosandra. This doll went everywhere with me and I loved and protected her. It was only in my adult years that I considered the anomaly of a white Jewish child of immigrant parents (my parents escaped Austria in 1939) cossetting a Black baby doll.

Amosandra wedged open the door to memories of toys past.

There was the View-Master, first sold in 1939, a 4-inch by 5-inch box into which a multipictured reel was inserted. When you held it to your eyes, you gazed into a three-dimensional virtual reality whose images changed when you clicked a lever. There were multiple travelogues to purchase and you could explore the wonders of the world with them.

And then there were roller skates. The sidewalks of New York, where I grew up, were rough and uneven, but still, nothing beat slipping a few wheels onto each foot, tightening things up with a skate key and taking off.

And the yo-yo. I'm still not sure why this was so much fun, but I suppose mastering the yo-yo took some dexterity and skill, which made it challenging.

The Slinky, a compressed metal helix that could catapult itself down a flight of stairs, was an object of delight. And for quieter moments, sitting down with a needlework kit — a round frame to stretch a piece of fabric stamped with a pattern, to be cross stitched with embroidery threads — was a nice pastime.

My favorite toy was my kaleidoscope, a tube containing tiny mirrors and pieces of glass or colored paper, which produced a plethora of changing patterns when the tube was rotated. Just magical.

But back to Amosandra, a baby doll with a past.

Amos 'n' Andy began as a radio show 1928. Set first in Chicago, and then Harlem, it was written and voiced by two white actors, Freeman Gosden and Charles Correll, who played the Black characters Amos Jones and Andrew Hogg Brown. It was hugely popular. When two of the show's characters had a child, the baby was named Amosandra and a doll of the same name was created for purchase.

While *Amos 'n' Andy* began as a sitcom, eventually many of the program's plots became more dramatic. Notable was one script that detailed Amos' aggressive interrogation by the police after the murder of another character. When the National Association of Chiefs of Police objected, the writers changed the plot and turned the interrogation into a bad dream.

As I say, nostalgia isn't what it used to be.

What began as an escapist stroll down memory lane unearthed a darker reality. And so, the unfurling and uncurling of a pleasant childhood recollection has turned into a reflection of the best and worst of times, of a glimpse into the little-known fabric of our lives, then and now.

Joan Jaffe lives in Norwich.