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# THE GLOBE AND MAIL

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## PRIVATE LIVES

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# Good vibrations

## TOY STORY

*As sex play enters the mainstream, a new breed of store aimed at women is making shopping for French ticklers as easy as picking out gardening implements.*

STEPHANIE NOLEN  
Lifestyles Reporter, Toronto

A grinning green dolphin, a curvy purple goddess figure, a cob of corn: The store shelves bristled with dildos and vibrators like some fantastic flower garden. Maria Martinez was intrigued: She hefted a sleek beige vibrator, checked out the high speed, turned to her pal. "I like this one," she said with a wicked grin.

Martinez was shopping in a new breed of toy store in downtown Toronto. No more poorly lit shops with sticky floors and papered-over windows, sex stores today target women like Martinez, luring them in with comfy chairs, sunny windows and cheery staff unfazed by any question. Products are out in the open, plugged in or packed with batteries, and patrons are encouraged to try them on or try them out.

"We love sex," Martinez said, sharing a laugh with her fellow shoppers. "And so why not find things that make sex better?" Martinez, a 38-year-old flight attendant, said she was always curious about sex toys, but was put off by the murky shops where they were sold. "It used to be that you couldn't talk about it; you couldn't ask questions," she said. But now, Martinez is one of a growing number of women comfortably exploring the world of sexual accessory.

As sex play becomes more mainstream, the new stores are making shopping for sex toys as commonplace as picking out gardening implements. There are now four women-focused stores in Canada: Womyn's Ware in Vancouver, the Canadian pioneer, which opened in 1995; brand new Venus Envy in Halifax, and two more in Toronto. "Sex toy stores were not responsive to the needs of women," said Sandra Haar, co-owner of Come As You Are, in operation on Toronto's trendy Queen Street West for the past year. "We wanted an environment which did not bank on people's shame or

fear about sexuality, [but] one which was friendly and non-judgmental."

The clientele in these stores is about 75 per cent women, of two distinct age groups: women between 20 and 35, and women over 50. Janna Sylvest, co-owner of Womyn's Ware, said the older ones are women whose children are raised, and who have their personal freedom again. They want reliability: "It's the old Sears catalogue approach to shopping," Sylvest said. "Give me a brand that will last."

While the shops sell an array of weird and wacky products for select interest groups, the catalogue ladies also have a wide range of sturdy vibrators from which to choose. And most of the women-oriented sex stores offer seminars and workshops, such as "Sex Toys 101" to teach customers what to do with their new acquisitions. It's a sign of how far sex toys, once largely the realm of the gay community, have come off the closet shelf. "Three years ago I would never have set foot in a sex shop," said Liz Phillips, 30. "But I heard more and more about toys from my friends, and I heard there were relaxed stores, and it's all become totally demystified. There are no negative associations any more. It's very empowering."

Today, Phillips said, every one of her friends owns a vibrator and has likely experimented with some other toys as well. On a recent Saturday afternoon she accompanied a friend to buy a dildo and a harness, offering her opinion on leather versus sparkly vinyl. "It's not some clandestine sexuality any more. It's something a lot of people do."

For Carlyle Jansen, owner of Toronto's Good For Her, it began with a wedding. In 1995, she bought a selection of gadgets at a shop called Toys in Babeland in Seattle and brought them back to Toronto for her sister's bridal shower. When the bride-to-be opened the box, there were intrigued squeals from the other guests.

"They were so fascinated, and they kept saying they thought it was so great that I was comfortable talking about things like this," recalled Jansen. "And someone said I should do seminars." Frustrated by the lack of available information on sex, Jansen, 32, started lecturing about women's sexual response and the products available. A year

later, she opened her store in Toronto, with the goal of creating a warm environment where women would feel comfortable exploring new aspects of their sexuality. A large selection of gift items, such as choco-



#### Batteries not included

The classic toy is the Hitachi Magic Wand. The box it comes in shows happy athletic people innocuously giving tired shoulder muscles a vibrating massage. The wand has an eight-inch handle, a round end the size of a tennis ball and a variety of speeds, the most powerful of which is akin to sitting on a washing machine at the height of the spin cycle. It retails for about \$100. Vibrators run the gamut, starting as cheap as \$9; the \$20 Rocket, sleek and white, is a popular introductory model. At the high end is the Rabbit Pearl, which sells for about \$110. Pink, battery-pack powered and about six inches long, it features a rotating head, a bulge packed with pearls which spins in the opposite direction, and a rabbit perched on the bottom; its perked-up ears also vibrate.

The stores also offer bondage gear, blindfolds, straps, paddles, and penis rings. There is safe-sex paraphernalia like rubber gloves, and a wide variety of lubricants.

New vibrating panties are popular; deluxe models feature a remote control the wearer can give a partner before a night on the town (about \$120). At Venus Envy in Halifax, Pocket Rocket (\$30), a jalapeno-pepper-sized vibrator designed for clitoral stimulation is a big seller.

— *Stephanie Nolen*



late body paint, books of erotica, how-to videos and aphrodisiac cookbooks help take the edge off.

"A year ago our average customer contact was an hour," said Sylvest. "Now it's down to 30 minutes. People come in with sticky notes all through the catalogue and they have a good idea of what they are looking for."

But in Toronto, Jansen remains frustrated by the lingering stigma associated with toys. "People use cars to get from A to B; they use a food processor or a microwave to make dinner; technology is a part of all aspects of our lives, but in sex there is this idea that it's not natural." And while some couples wander in and out of the stores, not all women feel comfortable going in. "We get lots of men who come in

and say they have been sent by a female partner. And when they come in, they say, 'Oh, it's not so bad, I'm going to go get my wife; she's in the car,'" said Sylvest.

The attitude change cannot come soon enough, as far as she's concerned: "You should be able to accessorize your sex life the same way you go to Mountain Equipment Co-op and accessorize your mountain climbing gear."