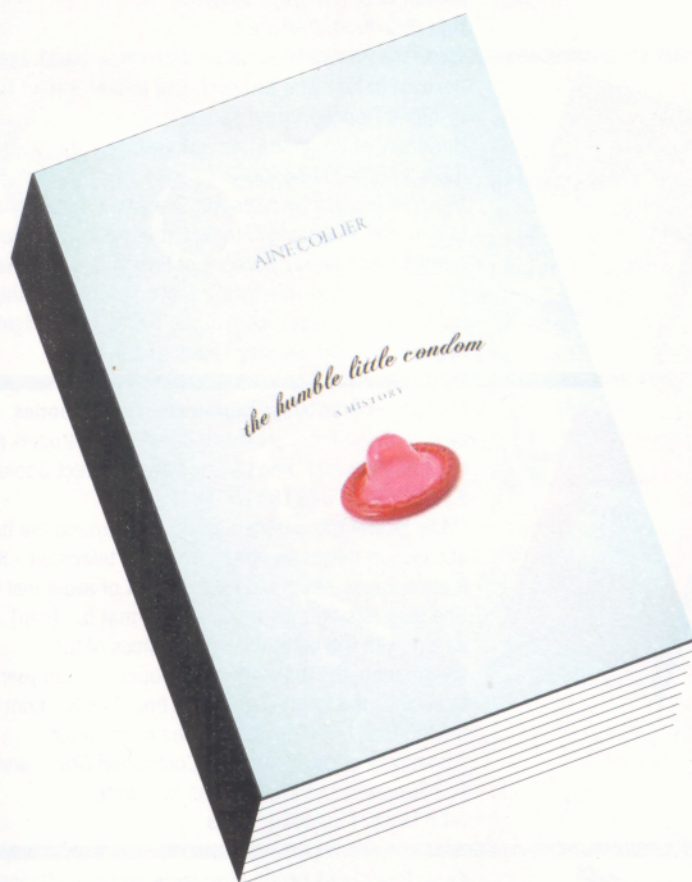


Something for the weekend?

Diverting as this large pack of prophylactic-related data and anecdotes may be, the lack of references is a barrier to Chris McManus's full enjoyment



The Humble Little Condom: A History
By Aine Collier
Prometheus Books, 371pp, £8.99
ISBN 9781591025566
Published 30 September 2007

Condomology has not yet entered the academic mainstream. Not that there is a shortage of books on the topic: Amazon UK lists 130 titles, with *The Condom Bible* the bestseller, for which Amazon helpfully adds that "Customers Who Bought Items Like This" also purchased five different Durex products (and, before you ask, condom products, including a "Condom Fancy Dress Costume", are in Amazon's Kitchen and Home section). Nor are scholarship and industry absent, largely thanks to Philip M. Parker, whose books include *The 2007 Import and Export Market for Rubber Sheath Contraceptives (Condoms) in Russia*, and its

companion volumes on China, France, Germany, India, Italy, Malaysia, the Netherlands, Poland, Thailand, South Korea, Spain, the UK and the US. And ultra-specialists will appreciate Parker's *The 2007-2012 Outlook for Lambskin Condoms in Japan*. Lest one is misled here, note that "lambskin condoms", despite the cuddly imagery, are made from sheep intestines.

Aine Collier's historical overview of the device first properly described by the 16th-century physician Gabriele Falloppio, and which shares only a name with the French town of Condom, contains much of potential interest. Single-topic books can be very good — think only of Henry Petroski's wonderful *The Pencil* — but as well as having a serious interest in ideas, objects and cultural history, they need to be well written. An excess of exclamation marks

apart, this book reads nicely in small doses, but becomes tedious and repetitive en masse.

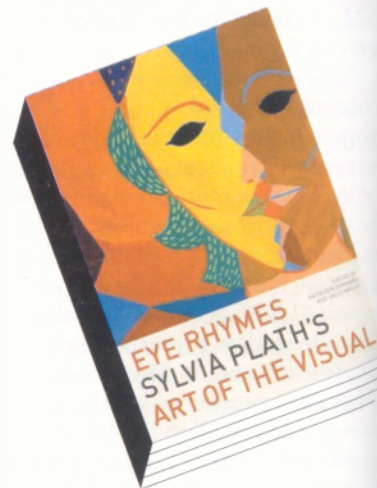
An absence of references and picture credits makes it far from scholarly, and while many of its claims may be true, one simply has no way of knowing. Provenance is everything in history, but here even the author remains mysterious. The jacket says that "Aine Collier, EdD, is assistant professor of English at the University of Maryland", but the name is a pseudonym, as, rather sadly, the author states that "for professional reasons... I feel it prudent to protect my identity".

The problems of textual provenance begin at the first sentence, which describes a 12,000-year-old painting in the Grotte des Combarelles in the Dordogne showing "a man and a woman having sex — with his penis covered". Perhaps indeed "archaeologists and historians have debated [whether the couple] were actually practising safe sex", but the debate has yet to emerge anywhere that I can find on the internet. *The Rough Guide* doesn't usually miss a trick, but neither it nor any other travel guide mentions this remarkable painting, and there is no photo in the present book.

On some occasions, Collier is clearly wrong, as when she asserts that "by the end of the 18th century... Captain Cook had made his historic journey to the South Pole". Likewise, the picture supposedly showing a mid-18th-century London street has what look suspiciously like gas lamps. Other claims are also contentious, as with "by the mid-1980s, more than 80 per cent of the world's sexually active women under 50 years of age had taken birth control pills". The world?

The liminal status of condoms, despite their vital public health role, raises fascinating historical, psychological and sociological questions that deserve proper scholarly analysis. Although this book contains much intriguing primary material, albeit unsourced and unsourceable, the ultimate effect, with its sometimes infuriatingly jaunty tone, is unsatisfying — amusing, though, as something for the weekend.

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Eye Rhymes:
Sylvia Plath's Art of the Visual
Edited by Kathleen Connors
and Sally Bayley
Oxford University Press
288pp, £25.00
ISBN 9780199233878
Published 18 October 2007

Drawing on hitherto unpublished visual material housed in the University of Indiana's Lilly Library and Smith College's Mortimer Rare Book Room, and published to coincide with the 75th anniversary of Sylvia Plath's birth, this handsomely illustrated volume is dedicated to "readers of Sylvia Plath" and claims to be written for a general audience, while maintaining "a scholarly focus".

For the most part (although the general reader might appreciate an explanation of literary terms such as the New Criticism), it succeeds in this aim. Only one of the contributors, co-editor Kathleen Connors, is neither a mainstream academic nor a literature specialist. As visiting scholar at Indiana University, Bloomington, however, she has immersed herself in its Plath holdings and was responsible for the 2002 exhibition of Plath's art and manuscripts held there, on which much of the material contained in the current volume is based.

Connors's essay, though useful in establishing the little-known — and clearly significant — fact that between the ages of eight and 20 Plath took her art as seriously as her poetry, takes up a disproportionately large part of the volume, while its essentially chronological and descriptive approach smacks a little too much of the dutiful, if not outright devotional. The other, much shorter, chapters are more tightly focused on specific aspects of the