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.

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 unsourcable, the ultimate effect, with its sometimes infuriatingly jaunty tone, is unsatisfying — amusing, though, as something for the weekend.

Chris McManus is professor of psychology and medical education, University College London.