

Women increasingly complain that men are unimaginative when it comes

Present



IT IS a truth universally acknowledged that a man is more likely to climb Kili-manjaro wearing flip-flops than choose a woman a present she wants.

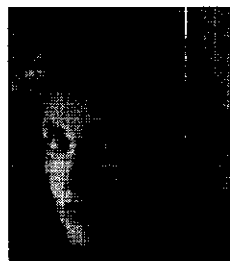
Last week socialite Mona Bauwens complained that men can be mean when it comes to giving presents. But they can be so unimaginative too.

My adolescence featured pre-packed roses and "fancy some necking?" cards on Valentine's Day. One boyfriend gave me jump-leads for a birthday.

Recently, a Japanese acquaintance wooed his sweetheart with — wait for it — an insurance policy. Could someone please explain why men invariably get it wrong when it comes to presents?

Anthropologist and present-watcher, Desmond Morris, traces the problem to when men first dragged home animal carcasses from the primeval gift shop.

"That was the original gift," explains Dr Morris. Later, present-giving developed into Christmas, as a necessary mid-winter food-sharing phenomenon. Chaps became sensitive selectors of cadeaux,



By Caroline Phillips

handing out bits of salted meat. But fast forward a few centuries. Gifts started to be given at different times of year and they didn't have to be food, although marketing consultant Liz Brewer was horrified to have once been given a gift of unplucked pheasants.

The change bewildered oafish man, who became peculiarly susceptible to campaigns telling him the lady loved Milk Tray.

"These days, men know that women are so diet-conscious that they don't want the primeval gift of food. So that leaves men slightly lost," says Dr Morris.

Psychologist Oliver James thinks

men get it wrong in the same curious way that they can't iron shirts or remember anniversaries. Is it genetic? No, it's childhood.

"Boys see their mothers getting in a lather about presents while their fathers aren't worrying. They're unlikely to identify with their mothers," says James.

For men, presents are utilitarian. "Historically, men have been in the world of work. The goal of the present is to win something. In primitive tribes, you use physical possessions to barter for wives.

"In modern life, men see the buying of a present as the price they must pay for the presence of their women."

Agony aunt Irma Kurtz counsels victims of clumsy present-givers. Sequinned temptresses who receive twinsets, Jilly Cooper fans who get tomes on Roman irrigation.

"Sometimes the gift has a hidden meaning. He is saying, 'This is who I want you to be,' reveals Kurtz.

"Mostly it's because men have trouble imagining the mind of the recipient because they have big egos. They tend to think that what a woman needs is what she wants."

Ah, "hose jump-leads..."

to giving presents. But they, it seems, are no better.

imperfect

CHRISTMAS was always a miserable time in the orphanage. It is not that Santa forgot us. It is just that he tended to reserve the really useful presents for us — the replacement knitted vest, the extra-strong pair of boots that would last all year, or the second-hand donated jigsaw with three pieces missing.

The disappointment with presents continued into adulthood. What I actually wanted in the orphanage was the radio-controlled model Spitfire, four channels with glo-plug engine; and the hankering has never totally gone away.

The best present I ever had was a toy yacht. Why do women who claim to love you give you hankies instead?

For the record: men do not like, want or appreciate aftershave, clothing or cufflinks. They will say "thank you" nicely, the letter will be written, the kiss exchanged; but it is not what they always wanted.

There is always, you may think, the Pringle sweater. Disabuse yourself of that thought. I have one in grey with pink diamonds on the front. I never have and never will wear it. Who exactly do these people think we are?

Some lover once gave Dorothy Parker a single, perfect, rose.

"One perfect rose. Why is it no one ever sent me yet! one perfect limousine, do you suppose? Ah no, it's always just my luck to get! One perfect rose."

I know how she felt. A limousine would do me too, though an MGB



By Julian Champkin

convertible, the sort with chrome bumpers and a blonde in the bucket-seat would do better.

Women present-buyers fail to appreciate the sheer childishness of men. What we want are toys. Give a man a socket set with 17 interchangeable heads in metric and Standard Whitworth plus the universal-joint fitting for restricted access and he will be your slave for life.

Not a terribly useful slave, since he will thereafter be lying in an oil-stained overalls (if you are lucky; in his second-best just-washed jeans if you are not) under the aforesaid MGB, trying to fix the rather dodgy rattle in the sump; but it is all only a Meccano set writ large.

Beware though: do not confuse such toys with useful items for do-it-yourself about the house. A shelving kit, wallpaper tools — pasting-board, brush and enough rolls of the Sanderson just to cover the spare room — these will not fill him with delight.

He will know he is being done and it is just a ploy to keep him in at the weekend.

A blow-torch might just be

acceptable, since it involves a child's fascination with matches, blown bigger and still more dangerous. Things that make a loud noise are appreciated, especially if they are destructive: chainsaws, brush-cutters, anything with an internal combustion engine.

Lawnmowers? No. Not unless it's a ride-on, in which case men will be queuing up to mow your lawns, and your flowerbeds, too.

Women have, in the past, given me alcohol. It does get drunk. But then, if there was no booze in the house, the man would probably go out and buy some anyway. You might as well just give him the money.

Similarly with chocolates. Women have a thing about chocs. Men don't. There is a distinct biological reason for this.

Chocolate contains a hormone that does strange things to some women, rather as catmint does to some cats. Men do not actually object to chocolate; but they are not slaves to it.

Socks. Socks? Come on. Ditto hankies, slippers and pipe-racks. There is a whole world of gadgets out there. Explore it.

When it comes to prezzies, your man is neither practical nor adult. He likes things that get him messy, dirty and wet.

Christmas is not coming, but birthdays may be. A general guide: forget good taste, romance, wit, elegance. Just go to the toyshop. Toys are what men want. And the bigger the better.

You could still give me that toy yacht. There's a nice one I saw advertised the other day. It is lying off the Hamble.



ILLUSTRATIONS: DAVE BROWN

SOME OF THE WORST GIFTS WE'VE EVER HAD...



TERRY MAJOR-BALL, John Major's brother: "I don't remember whether it was a sweater or some other item, but the receipt was with it. The date on it was two years old."

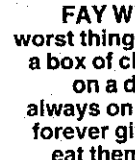
THELMA HOLT, theatrical producer: "It was a ghastly carpet from the mayor of Azerbaijan who was trying to bribe me to take his show to the National Theatre."



DEREK NIMMO, actor: "I was once given a peanut dispenser. It came without the peanuts. As I hate peanuts with a passion, I have never used it. We have a drawer for such unwanted gifts. They tend to get raffled at fetes."



LIZ BREWER, marketing consultant: "The most horrible present I have received was a pair of glittery Wellingtons from an ex-boyfriend. I wore them out of defiance. Another gave me a brace of unplucked pheasant."



FAY WELDON, author: "The worst thing I was ever given was a box of chocolates when I was on a diet. But the fact is I'm always on a diet and people are forever giving me chocolates. I eat them because I'm polite."



BERNARD MANNING, comedian: "It was years ago. My wife gave me a pair of blue swimming trunks. They were 20 times too small for me. I was 20 stone — I am 18 now — and I couldn't even get them up my thighs."



BILL TIDY, cartoonist: "It was a tie. It really was. I have at least 2½ million ties already, and I only ever wear one — the Lords Taverners' tie. This particular tie was so ghastly I designed my own in retaliation."



BIENVENIDA BUCK, socialite: "The nastiest present I ever had was fake pearl earrings from a famous potentate in Bahrain. I always return unsatisfactory presents to men and tell them to give them to their wives."