

## The Then and Now of Sex Shops

Written by Eva Sless, Writer of Stuff  
Thursday, 11 August 2011 14:39

---

One of the most embarrassing moments of my life (apart from that time I wet my pants at Suzanne Bs 8th birthday party) was the first time I ever went to buy a vibrator. Back in those days - you know, the good ol' days of the early 90s - there were very few options. You could mail order from the back of a magazine or do the sneaky venture past the dirty curtain into the seedy sex shop.

Being about seventeen I had two problems. One, I didn't have a credit card to buy out of a magazine (and was too scared to get something delivered to my house where I might have to explain the package to my parents) and two, I was under eighteen so, even though I was legally able to have sex, it was illegal for me to go into a sex shop and buy a toy. Talk about frustrating!

It also didn't help that this was, as I said, the early 90s and sex shops were hidden away in bleak industrial areas, usually unable to reach by bus. In my case it was Fyshwick in Canberra, home of brothels, fireworks and porn, so you'd think it would be easy. No such luck. If you're familiar with Canberra in the early 90s, you'll know that the public transport system was (and from what I hear still is) lacking in many things. Like buses taking you anywhere you needed to go on a direct route.

Finally, about a week after my eighteenth birthday and after months of thinking about it I decided to bite the bullet and go. So, under the guise of spending Saturday with a friend, I left the house early and began my adventure.

First there was a bus to my local interchange, then a bus to the city and then a bus out to Fyshwick. It took almost two hours, but I was finally there.

I got off the bus but all I could see were furniture shops, carpet shops and hardware shops. Nothing that looked like a sex shop at all. Great. I wandered around aimlessly, not wanting to go too far and wind up lost and unable to get home.

I was about to give up when, in a small cluster of shops I saw a "XXX" sign. Sucking up every ounce of courage I had I pushed open the door and went inside.

## The Then and Now of Sex Shops

Written by Eva Sless, Writer of Stuff  
Thursday, 11 August 2011 14:39

---

It took me all of about 30 seconds to realise this wasn't the shop for me. Leather masks hung from the walls, huge dildos in the shape of fists and arms sat on the shelves, and the videos all had titles like "There's a Bear in There" and "Bob's Big Balls". There wasn't a single picture of a woman and everything had the words "Hard" and "Strong" and "Man" written on it.

"Um, can I help you?" A big guy in a leather vest had come out from the back and was looking at me curiously.

"I think I'm in the wrong shop," I said, turning bright red and wishing the floor would open up and swallow me.

The guy smiled kindly. "Go round the corner, about three shops up. I think that one will work better for you."

Muttering my thanks and hurrying out the door, I followed his directions and ended up outside a small shop that proclaimed it sold porn and fireworks. Again, I breathed in all my insecurities and walked through the door.

It was very similar to the first shop, although instead of leather masks hanging from the walls there were blow-up dolls, the fist and arm dildos were replaced with vibrators shaped like penises and all the posters were of fake-boobed women in the throes of passion.

A fat guy (think Comic Book Guy from The Simpsons) looked up from behind the counter and silently eyed me up and down, making me feel even more uncomfortable than I had in the gay shop. After he'd sufficiently checked me out he went back to his book and ignored me.

I stood awkwardly in the middle of the shop looking around me at all the things on the shelves. I had no idea where to start. Porn-shop-guy did nothing to help and, to be honest, I really didn't want to talk to him. The thought of asking him his advice on which toy would be best made me feel a bit creepy and so, empty-handed and feeling like my day had been a total waste, I left the

## The Then and Now of Sex Shops

Written by Eva Sless, Writer of Stuff  
Thursday, 11 August 2011 14:39

---

shop and headed back to the bus stop.

As I passed back by the gay shop the guy was sitting outside having a cigarette.

“How'd you go, love?” he asked?

I shook my head. “Crap.” I said.

He looked at me sympathetically. “What exactly are you after?”

“I don't know,” I said. “That's the problem. Probably just a vibrator.” The fact that this guy was speaking to me kindly, and was obviously gay, made me feel a lot more comfortable talking to him.

“Come on,” he said, stubbing out his smoke. “Let's see if I can help you.”

And so I went into the gay porn shop with its “Devastator Butt Plugs” and its “Piss In Boots” videos and started looking at vibrators with a Bear named Brent.

He showed me how to test the buzz against my nose to see how strong it was, he talked to me about the differences between all the toys and even gave me safe sex advice about condoms and dams. When I finally left I had a brand new buzzy toy (a bright blue penis-shaped thing) and a bag of free batteries, condoms and lube. The best part was that I'd felt comfortable buying it. I hadn't felt sleazed on or treated like some sort of deviant freak. Just real advice and great service. If only all the sex shops had this kind of thing!

In the following years I went into quite a few different places and pretty much always encountered the same thing as that second shop. Sleazy and/or uninterested men working

## The Then and Now of Sex Shops

Written by Eva Sless, Writer of Stuff  
Thursday, 11 August 2011 14:39

---

behind the counter, no real advice and everything set up to look like the inside of a porn set. Great if you're a bloke, sure, but not so great for females, especially for the timid or inexperienced. And, with the toys always looking like big penises it wasn't much fun for lesbians or women who didn't want to have a big plastic cock rubbing against them!

But fast forward almost twenty years and I am pleased to say that things have definitely changed! Finally sex shops are being set up in a much more female-friendly way. Nearly every single one I've gone into in the last five or so years (and trust me, that's a lot) is tastefully designed. There are no half naked orgasmic women on the walls, there are nearly always women working behind the counter and no longer are all vibrators shaped like cocks! There are dolphins and penguins and worms and seals in a myriad of different colours, as well as hundreds of non-creature female-centric designs, made especially to cater for a woman's body. There are costumes in packages showing women of all shapes and sizes wearing them, porn made specifically for women, and there is always someone friendly and non-confronting to give advice.

In fact, even with the invent of the internet and the availability of millions of websites selling toys, I will always recommend to a first-time buyer to go into a shop first (which are also now in way more accessible areas) and talk to the girl behind the counter. That one-on-one advice really is invaluable to get you on your way to buzzing bliss! These shops are doing wonderful things for women's self esteem (and not to mention their sex lives) by making them feel comfortable about their desires to masturbate, watch pornography, explore their sexuality and enjoy sex. So, ladies, if you haven't stepped inside a shop because you're worried about having a similar experience to my first time, don't panic! You'll be pleasantly surprised and I guarantee your body will thank you for it!

On a little side note I would like to say that I went back and saw Brent many times after that day and, in a funny twist of events, I even ended up working in the gay shop with him... But that's another story...