

Toys 'R' (For) Us Grown-ups!

Sales of toys are down – except to adults, who love to collect the toys that were popular when they were younger

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THE CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR
LOS ANGELES – Toy sales in the U.S. have steadily dropped for the past few years. But for more than a decade, the bright spot in an otherwise gloomy market has been toys aimed at grown-ups. In 2007, retail sales of playthings geared to the over-18 set were up nearly 10 percent.

"This is definitely one of the industry's biggest trends," says Gareb Shamus, New York publisher of the industry magazine Toy Wishes. "And it's only going to increase as this demographic gets older."

Whether it's the Los Angeles rock musician who owns thousands of dollars of "Star Wars" action figures and costumes, a Dutch physiology professor with a basement full of LEGOS, or a Washington State chef with storage units and glass bookcases jammed with Muppet toys, this is a trend that grew from the era of mass-market tie-ins.

"These companies got accustomed to reaping the profits from film and TV tie-ins," says Shamus. "And they regrouped and retooled their products to hold onto their customers as the fans began to get older."

Even as adults are holding onto their toys longer, children are setting them aside at an ever-earlier age. Toy industry expert Richard Gottlieb calls this "age compression." Increasingly, he says, both ends of the spectrum aspire to the "sweet spot of our time, which is teen culture. Everyone wants to

be that eternal youth."

Icons of baby boomers' childhood years have crafted sophisticated campaigns targeting their nostalgia and pocketbooks. LEGO celebrated the 50th anniversary of the famous plastic brick this year, Barbie rings in her golden anniversary next year, and even the Cabbage Patch Kids marked a quarter century with a birthday bash in New York's Times Square this year.

These companies have gone to great lengths to hold onto their fans and have been rewarded with a deep, abiding loyalty.

The Adult Fans of LEGO (AFOL), which grew 22 percent this past year, is a sophisticated international network that could rival any teen fan club in Hollywood. "Manufacturers have retooled to produce more sophisticated versions of the products the kids were buying in their first encounter with films such as 'Star Wars,'" says Reyne Rice, a trend tracker for the Toy Industry Association. As examples, she points to such items as a Spiderman collectible action figure with more than 50 moveable joints and a Star Wars sculpture with the fine detailing of an adult work of art.

"This is workmanship that a child wouldn't care about. It's clearly targeted at adults."

Earlier generations regarded adults who played with children's toys as "creepy," says Christopher Noxon, author of the book "Rejuvenile: Kickball, Cartoons, Cupcakes, and the Reinvention of the American Grown-Up."

But attitudes have changed with the times. "Clearly, there are some adults who use an obsession with childish things to avoid adulthood responsibility," Noxon adds, "but these days, it's much more complex."

The model of putting away childish things when moving into

adulthood is an artifact of the industrial, urban world. That image has been replaced by a more flexible, adaptable age-resistant worker, one for whom the childlike qualities of curiosity and openness are now as important as a "serious, adultlike attitude," he says.

Montana Miller teaches a graduate seminar that focuses on the scholars of play, child development, and education, and that examines childhood as a social construction. "I think the whole world would be a better place if everyone were able to embrace a love of play," says Dr. Miller, assistant professor of popular culture at Bowling Green State University in Ohio.

Longtime teddy bear collector Yvette Jessen, who lives near Frankfurt, says that her extensive stuffed ursine cadre brings out the "internal child" in everyone who comes to visit her. If more people would allow that playful side to emerge, "then perhaps we could find a means in which to coexist with one another in a peaceful way," she says.

"That is where creativity and imagination thrive," says Miller. "And as long as these individuals aren't becoming a burden to society or doing something terribly criminal, I see nothing wrong with continuing to play with toys throughout adulthood."

With a basement full of LEGO constructions, Ohio State University assistant professor Paul Janssen is an enthusiastic and unapologetic member of AFOL. A father of three, Dr. Janssen says he is no longer embarrassed to admit that he loves to play with the little bricks.

AFOL members even have a name for the years spent away from the beloved building toys. "We call them the Dark Ages," says Janssen with a laugh.

"For most, it's roughly the years

between 15 and mid- to late 20s."

For him, beginning to collect LEGOS in his 20s came about after he got a job and was able to buy the products on his own. And, of course, finding like-minded aficionados along the way.

While adults have long collected children's toys, musician Richard Patrick says that for most of the people he knows who have children's playthings (and he knows many, he says), the toys are just a cover for doing what they really want. He has hundreds of "Star Wars" figures and memorabilia all over his house, "except for the bedroom where my wife and I sleep," he says. He figures the trove is worth thousands of dollars by now, "but I wouldn't ever sell it. I just love having the stuff around."

For this trio of toy lovers, as with many other adults, the toys are as much a symbol of another time as they are playthings. "I love what the 'Star Wars' movie meant to me," says Mr. Patrick.

That's a sentiment echoed by Hemstead. "The Muppets aren't just toys," he says, adding that he deeply admires Muppet creator Jim Henson. "He wanted to show a world where all these different characters could get along, and I love that vision of peace."

This deep, emotional connection is what toymaker Jason Feinberg tries to tap with his line of "dolls" for adults. He sculpts famous figures from history and modern life and mass-produces them. The Barack Obama figure has been a bestseller for the company he founded, Jailbreak Toys.

Beneath this adult attraction to a "toy" is something deeper, Feinberg says. Other cultures have long respected the desire to have a physical, outward symbol of people or things that are close to the heart. "We've lost something by reducing this need to merely being a child's toy."

Ore. Mom Won't Return 'Bunny Suicide' Book

HALSEY, Ore. (AP) – One way or another, a Halsey woman promises to keep a popular cartoon book out of the Central Linn High School library.

Taffey Anderson says "The Book of Bunny Suicides" is not appropriate for anyone, but especially children. She inspected the book her 13-year-old son checked out of the library, and what she saw convinced her to never return it.

The 2003 book by British author Andy Riley is a collection of cartoons showing a rabbit attempting to end his life in bizarre ways. Anderson's son told her he checked it out because his friends said it was funny.

It is a comic book, but that's not funny. Not at all," Anderson told the Albany Democrat-Herald newspaper. "I don't care if your kid is 16, 17, 18. It's wrong."

Anderson contacted Principal Julie Knoedler, who told her about the district's book-challenge policy.

Anderson plans to fill out the forms, but she's not taking any chances. Once the review is over, regardless of the outcome, she plans to burn it.

"They're not getting this book back," she said, adding that if the library replaces it: "I'll have somebody else check it out and I'll keep that one. I'm just disgusted by the whole ordeal."

Knoedler said Anderson must bring the book back for the committee to review it. If she refuses, the committee will have to buy another, at \$13, and charge it to the family. If Anderson doesn't pay, her son will be banned from taking out any more books.

"That's really unfortunate, because he's obviously a kid who's interested in checking things out from the library," Knoedler said. "We won't put it back on the shelf. We'll put it out of circulation until the review is done."

Jean Townes, library consultant for the school district, said library books are ordered in batches, usually based on recommendations

from established academic sites.

The book was on a young-adult reader list recommended by the American Library Association, she said, and she knows other school libraries in Oregon have purchased it.

The book, however, has been turned away by some school libraries. And in Shanghai, China, a bookseller pulled it last month after reports that several children had attempted suicide, with at least one boy dying.

Scott Keeney, the children's librarian for the Albany Public Library, said he doesn't think the book is appropriate for the children's section, but thinks it's OK on the adult shelf.

"I looked at a few of the cartoons and they were funny. Kind of mature, a little twisted and black. Some youth love that, some don't, he said.

Keeney compared Riley's drawings to the 1988 Simon Bond cartoon book, "101 Uses for a Dead Cat."

"Every family is different, and the range of community values in fiction, in movies, nonfiction, is so broad it's astonishing," he said. "Some families, you'd be astonished at what they allow or disallow on all sides of the open-information-for-children spectrum."

Great Dane Gives Birth to Great Litter: 16 Puppies

FRUITVALE, Colo. (AP) – Stephanie Pino was expecting her Great Dane to give birth to about a dozen puppies, but instead she got 16.

Pino's dog, named Kyla, had the doggy baby boom in 20 hours of labor on Sept. 11. She had 19 in all but three died.

The frisky survivors now weigh 12 to 15 pounds each. Pino plans to offer them for sale when they reach 10 weeks.

Pino says even her vet was surprised at the size of the litter.

"They just kept coming and coming and coming, and we were like, 'Oh my gosh,'" Pino said.

Pino lives in Fruitvale, outside to Grand Junction, about 190 miles west of Denver.

Missing Climber Found Alive On U.S. Mountain

YAKIMA, Washington (AP) – A 27-year-old climber who survived five days on with a broken ankle on a U.S. mountain told rescuers he ate centipedes and drank water from creeks as he tried to crawl to safety.

A dog from a search and rescue team located Derek Mamoyac of Philomath, Oregon, just below the 6,000-foot (1,830-meter) level on the west side of Mount Adams in southern Washington Friday afternoon.

He was taken by helicopter to a hospital in Portland, Oregon, where he was listed in fair condition. In addition to his ankle injury, he was dehydrated and had swollen legs.

Family members who spoke with him briefly by phone said he sounded well.

"It's like waking up from a horrible dream," said his sister, Sophia Mamoyac.

Mamoyac started up the 12,277-foot (3,740-meter) mountain Sunday for a one-day climb. Family members reported him missing Monday when he failed to show up for work.

Jill Bartlett and other rescuers spoke glowingly of Mamoyac after he was found alive after five frigid days and nights on the mountain.

"He was in very good shape for what he went through," she told The Oregonian.

As she and several other rescuers waited with him before he was flown from the mountain, he told them he ate centipedes and other bugs after running out of food early in the week. He drank water from creeks.

He was wearing water-resistant pants, insulated boots and gloves but was still very cold.

"We put all our coats on him, and he was still shivering," Bartlett said. "We asked him, 'Are you warm?' and he said 'yeah.'"

Mamoyac was found by the team of Greg Varney with his search dog, Trulee, a golden retriever, and navigator, Ron Buermann, who kept them on course.

Mamoyac told rescuers that his climbing trip turned bad as he was descending after reaching Piker's Peak at 11,657 feet (3,550 meters), below the mountain's summit. He stepped in some snow he thought was solid, but it gave way.

Bartlett said the climber broke his right ankle tumbling down the mountain.

He spent nearly four days crawling and dragging his feet through the snow, trying to drag himself off the mountain.

When his knees hurt too much to crawl, he said he would turn around and scoot backward.

"We get happy endings, but not at the end of a five-day search," rescuer Varney said.

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