



If a Kenny G CD and a cuddly panda soft toy is your idea of playing a blinder on Valentine's Day, read on

BY KATIE LESLIE
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Guys, say it with ...



Fellas, we know coming off the holidays that you're tired and you're poor — but we still expect a little something on Valentine's Day. Well, maybe not that little, and not just something. It needs to be special, to show you picked it out with our feelings and likes in mind. If you succeed, you win our hearts and we win water-cooler comparison discussions.

If it fails, you risk us thinking you don't care.

Worse, you might end up a Lame Gift Legend, like Sara Markway's college boyfriend, who gave her a Kenny G CD and a pillow.

"I think he was trying to be romantic, but it was so cheesy," recalls the 30-year-old advertising executive, who, by the way, wasn't even a Kenny G fan. "We may have even tried to listen to it and make out, but it didn't work. I was like, 'Are you serious?'"

So, guys, feeling the pressure? Try this advice:



BAD IDEAS

Lingerie: Just because you love seeing us in some frilly, lacy and inordinately revealing number doesn't mean we do. Unless we hand select an item from dear ol' Victoria's or clearly have a lingerie obsession, save us the embarrassment of having to try it on for you just to prove it doesn't work.

If you choose to ignore this advice, choose the size carefully. If we wear a 36B, don't assume a 34B will work just as well.

Chocolate: Great, something we'll eat and regret as we worry about our waistlines. That said, there are those among us who will always go ga-ga for Godiva. (Heck, many of us get down with Hershey's.) Best advice? Try a test run to see if she bites with a couple pieces of chocolate before the big day. Still sure chocolate is the way go to? Then definitely pair it with any of the gift suggestions below.

Stuffed animals: These are cute for children but are mere dust collectors for most women.

Balloons: Really? They're hard to transport, clutter our ceilings, and we know you're just waiting for a chance to inhale the helium and sing Chipmunks-style. Unless you are 7 years old and need an idea for your schoolyard crush, stay away.



GOOD IDEAS

Hand-written love letter: Not a text. Not an e-mail. An actual piece of paper with words we'll (hopefully) cherish forever. This, above all, is a must.

Elegant dinner: This is a no-brainer — what woman wouldn't love a "white tablecloth" experience? If fine dining isn't in your budget, prepare a candlelit meal at home with tablecloth, wine and dessert included.

Anything in the little blue box: If you don't know of which box we speak, ask someone.

Monograms: One initial shows you had us in mind. Three initials means you planned ahead.

Cashmere: From a sweater to scarf to a throw, 'tis one of life's sweetest luxuries.

Cupcakes: Especially if they're prettily decorated and a bit whimsical. Just make sure to know our preferred flavor and ask the bakery for an attractive presentation box.

Flowers: Roses aren't a must; find out what blooms we like, instead. And don't show up with three roses (in that plastic sheath) you clearly just picked up at the mini-mart. Best bet? If you buy flowers at the grocery store, have them rewrapped in attractive tissue. Better bet? Call a florist and schedule a delivery for the days leading up to Valentine's, which falls this year on Saturday. Because while we hate to admit it, we love getting them at work.

Valentine's Day, it's a minefield for men: Chocolates or frilly knickers? Posh nosh or romantic picnic? Over the top or too little? B cup or C cup? Get it right, and you're a knight in shining armor who can do no wrong. Get it wrong, and your name will be mud, or worse.

PHOTOS: AGENCIES

[BOOKS]

'Pet Dragon' explains Chinese with character(s)

German illustrator Christoph Niemann's unique take on the written Chinese language has caught on with children — and adults — worldwide

BY DAN BLOOM
CONTRIBUTING REPORTER

With Asian culture, music and fashion popular in the West now, many expat parents in Taiwan have wondered how best to introduce their young children to the "mysterious" Chinese characters used here. For artist Christoph Niemann, a transatlantic creative spirit with feet firmly planted in Berlin and New York, the answer was easy, and illuminating: a colorful children's book.

He titled it *Pet Dragon*, found a publisher in New York, and before he knew it, the unusually formatted and illustrated book had caught on with children — and adults — worldwide. A native of Germany, Niemann is a prolific illustrator with style all his own. In a recent e-mail interview with the *Taipei Times*, the 38-year-old writer/illustrator talked about the book's genesis and what drew him to such a unique concept.

When asked how the book took shape, Niemann said: "On a recent trip to Asia, and it was in Japan where the idea first came to me,



Christoph Niemann's *Pet Dragon* aims to spark preliminary interest in Chinese characters for Western children.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF CHRISTOPH NIEMANN

I was introduced to the meaning and a little bit of the history of Chinese characters by Chinese designers I met in Tokyo. Their explanations made me feel a bit like a five-year-old boy who has his eyes suddenly opened wide to a whole new world. And since Chinese characters have such a beautiful visual and metaphoric meaning, I felt it would make a nice illustrated children's book."

Niemann added that he wasn't trying to create a book to teach Chinese to children, or to adults by extension. What he wanted to do was create some preliminary interest in Chinese characters for Western children. "All I really wanted to achieve was to spark some interest in this wonderful written language, which then might inspire readers in the West later on to try to learn more in

a real language class or on their own, whether the readers were 4 or 40."

Niemann, whose earlier children's books and newspaper illustrations are playful and colorful, said that he hoped the "playfulness" of the format and illustrations of *Pet Dragon* would spark Western children's imaginations in a novel way.

The book was published in

English in New York, and there is now a German edition, Niemann said. Some French publishers are looking at the possibility of putting out a French translation as well, he said.

When asked what kind of reactions he has received about the book, he said: "You know, it's funny, but some of the most touching responses by e-mail have been from parents who purchased

the book for their children but ended up enjoying themselves as well. I love that response."

Niemann said he was about 10 years old when he first became aware of Chinese characters, and he said he while he was "intrigued by the graphic beauty of the characters, I was utterly confused by their complexity."

When asked about his background, the artist told the

Taipei Times: "I was born in Germany and majored in graphic design at the State Academy of Fine Arts in Stuttgart in the late 1990s. After graduation, I went to New York where my career blossomed, but after a few years in the States my wife Lisa and I decided we wanted to try Berlin, so that's where we are now. I still do most of my work for US magazines and newspapers, as well as for book publishers in New York."

Niemann currently has a legion of new adult fans around the world who follow a visual blog he runs for the *New York Times* Web site.

"I love to visit New York every few months to catch up on things and be inspired, but thanks to the Internet, it virtually doesn't matter where I work from now," he added.

Christoph Niemann's *The Pet Dragon: A Story About Adventure, Friendship, and Chinese Characters* is published by Greenwillow Books.