

Fifty Shades of a phenomenon

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BACKGROUND

Only if you have had no access to any media over the past 12 months will you be unaware of the erotic phenomenon that is *Fifty Shades of Grey*. So I wasn't altogether surprised when the Journal Editor issued me a brief, which roughly translated meant: "Find out what on earth all this *Fifty* stuff is about!".

Let me begin with some background. The books – for it is a trilogy (*Fifty Shades of Grey*, *Fifty Shades Darker* and *Fifty Shades Freed*) – began as a female fan homage, written by British author E L James, to the teen-vampire *Twilight* novels.

The heroine of those novels, schoolgirl Bella, was recast as 21-year-old student, Anastasia Steele, while vampire hero, Edward Cullen, became handsome, rich, dominant-sadist Christian Grey. To grossly generalise, the underlying plot is the same in both series: girl meets dangerous boy, boy attempts to win girl into his world, girl – after much resistance – begins to enjoy boy's lifestyle but also wins him to her world of loving commitment. E L James added a significant layer of adult sexual content with a BDSM (bondage, discipline, sadism, masochism) focus and the result was *Fifty Shades*.

So far, so unremarkable. Women's erotica is neither a new thing nor – at least in my opinion – a bad thing, and imprints such as Black Lace have been catering to the contemporary market for decades. But what happened next was new, good and remarkable. For the trilogy went viral. The first volume became the biggest selling e-book of all time and was number one on *USA Today's* bestseller list for a record-breaking 20 weeks. The author has just been named by *Time* magazine as one of the 100 most influential people in the world. And the casting of the Hollywood movie is currently under discussion.

REASONS

But why has this particular series of women's erotica succeeded so dramatically? One clear reason is peer and societal permission; *Fifty's* very public success

means that it is acceptable to read it without fearing that others will think you mad, bad or (worst of all) sadly lacking a sex life. Everyone knows someone who has bought at least the first book in the trilogy and even if that friend/relative/colleague disliked the tome once bought, they have admitted interest, and therefore you can do the same without social censure or personal shame.

It's also been suggested that the advent of e-readers has made a difference. It's clearly much less embarrassing to download heavy sex scenes in the privacy of one's own home than pitch up at a cash till clutching the damning evidence of one's lust. And it's clearly much less embarrassing to sit on the Tube reading heavy sex scenes on a Kindle than to do so with a book whose cover shows what one's erotic interests are.

But are the books themselves a reason for its success? Here we hit debate. One cannot argue with 40 million sales worldwide, though Amazon's claim that through them the books have outsold the entire Harry Potter series combined is possibly a miscalculation. One cannot argue, either, with the way the book has become almost instantly embedded in popular culture: refer to the single word '*Fifty*' nowadays and very few people will miss the reference. As to media coverage, the broadsheets as well as the red-top tabloids are devoting serious column inches. (More locally, but intriguingly, my own local branch of Relate recently held an evening discussion on the trilogy, as a fundraiser for their sex therapy service.)

Perhaps most importantly, the fans – whom it seems are by no means typically '50-somethings' or 'non-book reading' as suggested by some critics – speak glowingly of the way it arouses them, the boost it has given to their love lives, the fun they have had enacting its sex scenes (using, of course, the hugely popular E L James-approved range of erotic toys that have recently hit the market). And that's not counting the number of men who have commented positively to me on the

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difference in their female partners. There is even talk of an upcoming *Fifty Shades* baby boom.

LITERARY CRITIQUE

It is not, however, all good news. As well as being arguably the most purchased erotica of all time, *Fifty* has garnered much vitriol.

Let me be clear; I am not speaking personally here either as a fan or a critic. Instead, for this feature, I took a 20-strong straw poll among friends and colleagues, then trawled a wide selection of reviews, blogs and forum postings from different lobbyists.

To begin with, it seems that even the fans have their doubts about the literary merits of the book. The plot line in the first volume – where Anastasia meets, falls for but eventually flees from Christian – is generally seen as strong. But the second and third volumes, where she returns and eventually marries him, are sometimes criticised as repetitious. Anastasia is ecstatic with Christian, a few minutes later something happens to annoy her, she pulls away, he woos her back, they have multi-orgasmic sex, and she's ecstatic again ... for 60 seconds.

The characterisation too has been questioned. Aged 21 years, can Anastasia really be so innocent as to have never explored her sexuality, never climaxed, never even been kissed. Can she really be so vulnerable, so filled with self-doubt, jealousy and angst that “she has the emotional maturity of a fruit fly”? Is Christian not too idealised – handsome, charming and rich beyond anyone's wildest dreams – whilst at the same time seeming to do very little to earn his living?

E L James's style in particular has come under fire: the prose has been called “clunky”, the dialogue and internal dialogue “tortuous” and the erotic passages “good comedy”. One blogger was driven by irritation to actually counting the number of times Anastasia repeats phrases such as “Oh my” (47), “Jeez” (84) and “Holy expletive” (124).

VALUE CRITIQUE

But enough of the surface critique. The real objections to *Fifty Shades* are not to its literary merit; as one fan comments: “the book is not high literature and no one expects it to be”. The heavyweight objections here are about the values that *Fifty* espouses and the messages they give about contemporary relationships.

Let's start with the feminist objections to a book which suggests that a woman can be aroused and seduced – both sexually and emotionally – by a heavily branded, high-end-luxury lifestyle where men have the money, women play at having a career, and it's fine to agree to be whipped if in return you get to travel everywhere by helicopter. Surely, goes the argument, modern women want equality not financial dependence? Surely it's harmful to both genders to suggest that money is the root of all commitment?

Then there are the sex education objections. With apparently no previous knowledge or experience, Anastasia climaxes during her very first sexual act, by the simple expedient of having her nipples stimulated. Thereafter she never fails to orgasm, easily, often multiply, and sometimes from the most unlikely stimulation. Yes, the book offers a whole slew of interesting variations that readers can try at home. But, say the objectors, what message does this give to the majority of women: typically we need to learn to climax and even then are unlikely to do so reliably, consistently and with only vaginal stimulation?

Further objections come from those supporting the cause of abused women, who are concerned that the relationship described in *Fifty* as being compelling is, in fact, utterly toxic. One blog describes 17 signs of emotional abuse – from “you feel isolated from other relationships with friends and family” to “you feel in the wrong ... because he goes to great lengths to show you he is right” – and then points out where just such dynamics are described, condoned and idealised in *Fifty Shades*. That said, another comment made by critics is that by the end of the third book in the trilogy, via a constant succession of emotional wobbles which bring him to heel, one could argue that it is Christian rather than Anastasia who is being emotionally abused.

BDSM CRITIQUE

And so we have come to the heart of the matter, the fact that *Fifty Shades* is an exploration of BDSM. Christian wants total control over Anastasia, including the right to dictate her eating patterns and her contraception choices, plus the right to inflict pain on her as a means of arousing himself. Anastasia, for her part, agrees. Yes, she expresses severe doubts about his preferences, to the point where at the end of Book 1, she leaves. But in Book 2 she returns, not only eventually agreeing to that side of the relationship but by the end of Book 3 learning to be aroused by it.

Is such dominance–submission – and sadomasochism – wrong, sick, perverted? Many commentators say it is. They argue that the inclusion of such activities in a supposedly caring relationship is the very opposite of affection and at the very end of the acceptable spectrum of love. “*Fifty Shades* perpetuates absurd, outdated and impossible psychosexual rituals.”

Fascinatingly, there is parallel complaint – often by absolutely mainstream ‘straight’ reviewers – that the sex described in the books is boringly normal. The spanking, the tying down, the controlling or being controlled in the bedroom – all these are seen as being utterly conventional; many commentators seem bemused that readers find these activities unusual and exciting.

And then we come to the reaction of the BDSM community itself. Surely they all adore *Fifty*? Surely they see it as making acceptable the behaviours and beliefs that they themselves have for decades espoused and recommended?

Well, yes, some find it “amusing”, “interesting”, “fun”. Many comment that the inclusion of ‘negotiated’ relationship agreements such as those Christian asks Anastasia to sign at the start of the trilogy is a sensible and respectful BDSM move that many straight relationships would do well to take on board.

But some of the most strident criticisms of *Fifty Shades* come from those who practise the lifestyle that Christian claims to be part of. Note the word ‘claims’. While the activities described in *Fifty* may bear some relation to the (widely variable) activities of the BDSM community, the reasons Christian has for such indulgence, the way both he and Anastasia behave, the way their relationship develops – all of this, say many, runs deeply counter to the BDSM culture. What Christian and Anastasia do is not what BDSM is about.

So Christian’s preferences are portrayed as a direct result of his childhood abuse – and this is not, adherents argue – a pattern typically found in competent and loving (yes, loving) dominants. Christian’s initiation and maintaining of the relationship with Anastasia is done via a brand of coercion that clearly breaches the consensuality and trust that is at the heart of BDSM practice. Anastasia meanwhile indulges in emotional blackmail in order to get what she wants in a way that would absolutely contravene the mutual respect essential in a successful dominant–submissive relationship.

As one forum poster commented: “The reality of BDSM is nothing like the one portrayed in the book!” (That said, the book has apparently triggered a debate within the community about the extent to which consensuality is abused by community members.)

AND YET...

But all these criticisms beg the question: “If there are so many objections to *Fifty Shades*, why are readers

drawn to it?” Why do the books appeal to so many, even those who (perhaps especially those who) wouldn’t dream of entering a BDSM relationship in real life?

Again I refer for my analysis to the wealth of blogs, forums and *Fifty* fan sites, from which there seem to be three main reasons. And none of them seem to be about wanting to be abused, violated or tortured.

First, readers are attracted to the idea of being wanted, desired and cared for by the perfect partner; perfect in looks, perfect in worldly success, perfect in riches – which is exactly who Christian Gray is.

Second, readers feel that while a woman may well want to be submissive in the bedroom, she also wants to be at least equally dominant outside it – which is exactly who Anastasia is.

Third, women of every age love imagining sex, love reading about sex, love sex in its entirety, and want to expand their boundaries, to explore and to experiment. That is, clearly, who most women are.

So I will end by saying this. If you hate *Fifty Shades* then good for you. If you love *Fifty Shades* then good for you. But most of all, good for E L James; in writing about her passion she has brought female erotica into the mainstream, making it more acceptable, more accessible. And for that, even her critics should raise a cheer.

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FACULTY AWARDS

The Faculty of Sexual and Reproductive Healthcare has available a number of annual awards for which applications are invited from Faculty members and non-members as listed below. Details of the individual awards, together with an application form and/or guidelines on how to apply and any eligibility criteria, may be found on the Faculty website at www.fsrh.org.

Margaret Jackson Prize Essay

Award: Three prizes awarded annually for the best essays on a topic related to contraceptive, reproductive and sexual health care. The first prize is £300, with £100 each for the two runners-up.

Eligibility: Individuals (undergraduate medical students)

Closing date: 24 March annually

The David Bromham Annual Memorial Award

Award: Prize awarded for a piece of work which, through inspiration, innovation or energy, has furthered the practice of sexual and reproductive health care in any way and any setting.

Eligibility: Individuals (Faculty members) or teams

Closing date: 7 April annually