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# Reading the BDSM romance: Reader responses to *Fifty Shades*

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## Abstract

This article presents the results of survey data from readers of the *Fifty Shades* novel series. It is almost 30 years since Janice Radway's (1984) *Reading the Romance* was published and audience studies have burgeoned. However, public discourse about E L James's trilogy was couched in assumptions about 'formulaic' genre fiction, alongside debates about its 'mainstreaming' of BDSM, and little of this discussion drew upon the voices of readers. Our research reveals readers' complex, often contradictory, responses to the novels. For these readers, the acts of reading and discussing the novels offer a range of (dis)pleasures, from erotic enjoyment to the amusements of critique; from self-gratification to participation in cultural dialogue.

## Keywords

Audiences, erotica, popular fiction, romance, social networking

## Introduction

As this special issue attests, the *Fifty Shades* trilogy was, and still is, a media sensation. Originally published as a *Twilight* fan-fiction serial 'Master of the Universe', the novels were then self-published in ebook and print-on-demand formats before being picked up by Vintage and mass-released in paperback and ebook formats. The circulation of the books via networked 'word-of-mouth' is particularly interesting – these books transcended their generic boundaries (fan-fic,<sup>1</sup> romance, erotica) to speak to broader audiences. Online, via blogs, social

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networking sites, forums and their comment sections, readers took myriad opportunities to air their interests in *Fifty Shades*.

Shadowing the digital dialogues, reams of newsprint were devoted to the phenomenon and the contours of their audiences, although readers of the books were rarely asked for their commentary – as if nothing worthwhile could be learned from those who had enjoyed the stories – and where readers did feature, they presented in the usual media fashion of ‘for and against’ opinions. We were surprised to find that, even within academic circles, readers’ voices were ignored and that conference speakers could confidently claim to have uncovered what *Fifty Shades* really is, what it means and what its effects on women would be. Indeed one such presentation spurred our decision to research readers’ responses to the trilogy – as we remarked to each other during the speaker’s conclusions, ‘you’d think Radway had never happened!’

This article presents a discussion of the media reception of the novels alongside readers’ responses. During summer 2012, Sheffield Hallam University’s LimeSurvey server hosted a questionnaire that was completed by 83 readers. We used social media – Twitter and Facebook – to advertise the survey, reflecting the importance of SNS to the initial circulation of *Fifty Shades* – as the most popular responses to our question ‘How did you first hear about the books?’ demonstrate:<sup>2</sup>

- Facebook (23%)
- TV, newspapers and radio (21%)
- Friends (19%)
- Twitter (10%)
- Colleagues (9%)
- Other web platforms, (blogs, forums and Tumblr) (9%).

Almost half of our respondents (42%) had read it in ebook format: often on a specialized device, such as a Kindle (21%), by mobile phone and tablet apps (13%) and computers/laptops (8%). For some commentators, *Fifty Shades* has redefined the Kindle – the ability to read sexually explicit stories on the train, unbeknownst to fellow travellers, is something of a game-changer. By using an online questionnaire, advertised via SNS, we were researching in the spaces and places where *Fifty Shades* was consumed by many readers.

The project underwent checking and approval by the research ethics committee of Sheffield Hallam University to ensure it met the fundamental requirements of guaranteeing anonymity and security for participants and their personal information. We also wanted to ensure that participants understood we were not conducting the research with some concealed moral agenda, that we were not making assumptions about the rights or wrongs of *Fifty Shades* or whether or not it was ‘quality’ literature – indeed, a motive for the project was to try to test a number of the widely circulating assumptions about the ‘harm’ and ‘dangers’ of sexually explicit writing and attendant assumptions about quality. The questionnaire sought quantitative data on modes of accessing and reading the books alongside

qualitative information about readers' opinions of the books, characters, James's writing and their own experiences of the erotic nature of the trilogy.

All respondents had read *Fifty Shades of Grey*, whilst 60% had also read *Fifty Shades Darker* and just over 50% had read all three books. Two readers identified as male, the rest female; 84% identified as heterosexual, 4% as bisexual and 8% preferred not to disclose their orientation. None identified as gay, lesbian or queer. One identified as asexual and another said 'I masturbate, but I feel no desire to have sex with other people.' Data also revealed that 75% were in a relationship – 55% were married. One reader was 'dating' and the rest were single. The youngest respondent was 21, the oldest 53. McCracken observes 'the social groups that make up the audience for popular fiction are diverse and overlapping' (1998: 5), and our respondents worked in a range of occupations, although the majority were in professional roles, including schoolteachers, nurses, academics and clinical staff. Five readers identified either as 'housewife' or 'stay at home mum', the more 'traditional' type of reader represented by many of Radway's (1984) respondents. Most lived in the UK, one in Eire, three in the USA, one in New Zealand and one Australia. Our results are not intended to speak for the 'natural' readership of either romances or erotica – indeed, as will become clear, the readers who responded to our survey mostly comprised women who read *Fifty Shades* to 'see what the fuss was about'.

In future publications we intend to examine the particular pleasures/displeasures the trilogy offered to women who would identify as primarily readers of romance and/or erotica but here we pay particular attention to those who came to *Fifty Shades* as more 'casual' readers spurred by the 'hype'. Only two respondents claimed to have read *Fifty Shades* because they would usually read erotica. We do not mean to suggest that somewhere there is the 'ideal' reader but that what is revealed in the questionnaire responses here cannot be understood to illuminate essential characteristics of romance – or erotic-reading cultures (or indeed if there are particular sets of values or identities which pertain within such groupings), rather the responses enable us to explore some of the assumptions, interpretive tendencies, and desires of readers who came to the trilogy as a 'must-read'.

### **'A nice girl's nasty book': The media construction of *Fifty Shades***

Since their publication, the *Fifty Shades* novels (*Fifty Shades of Grey*, *Fifty Shades Darker* and *Fifty Shades Freed*) have been a constant presence across all media platforms. In the British mainstream press, summer 2012 saw more than 1000 stories about the books and their effects where they were variously derided as 'abominably written trash' (Kilpatrick, 2012), 'demeaning' (Arthurs, 2012) and 'dangerous' (Casey, 2012). The books were credited with spurring a rise in sales of furry handcuffs and wooden paddles (Berrill, 2012) as readers apparently 'try to escape into fantasy' (Winter, 2012) to incorporate 'kinky fuckery' into their own sexual repertoires. Headlines suggested a *Fifty Shades* 'baby boom' was on the way (*Daily Mail*, 2012), and that the book had changed women's attitudes to porn

(Wilkinson, 2012), so much so, that even the over-60s wanted to get in on the erotica act (Watkins, 2012). While one pastor pleaded with women to ‘forget *Fifty Shades of Grey* [and] try reading the Bible instead’ (Kilpatrick, 2012), other commentators hoped the success of the trilogy would fuel a renaissance in local libraries (Wainwright, 2012).

Articles stressed the ‘ordinariness’ of E L James: ‘[In] real life [she] drives a mini, drinks reasonably priced white wine and spends her spare time doing her son’s laundry... Instead of a leopard skin-clad dominatrix, she resembles a suburban school dinner-lady’ (Brennan, 2012). Interviewed on television and radio, James agreed she was just an ordinary mother who got lucky (*Newsnight*, BBC: 19 April 2012; *Lorraine*, ITV: 18 April 2012) and husband ‘Mr *Fifty Shades*’ also got to explain why he wasn’t the inspiration for his wife’s fantasies. (*Lorraine*, ITV: 5 September 2012). In keeping with the respectable but ‘frumpy’ persona of its author, the book was described as:

a nice girl’s nasty book; imagine a low-budget porn film involving a plumber – well, at the end the bog gets fixed and the plumber stops fiddling his tax. So despite the continual filth hum – “his long finger presses the button summoning the elevator...” – the effect is strangely innocent, like Bambi wandering into de Sade’s *120 Days of Sodom*, begging for an engagement ring. (Gold, 2012)

For most media commentators, *Fifty Shades* fell squarely in the category of ‘genre fiction for women’ and many could barely conceal their contempt for the formula romance. This should not be a surprise, given the similar derisory response in mainstream media to the *Twilight* series and its audiences (Bode, 2010). Some accounts traced *Fifty Shades*’ links to the ‘shopping and fucking’ novels of the 1980s and 1990s from the erotic imprint Black Lace. Parker (2012) described *Fifty Shades* as ‘Like Shirley Conran’s *Lace* rewritten by a smartphone.’ In the *London Review of Books*, Andrew O’Hagan suggested ‘*Fifty Shades of Grey* deploys every bonkbuster cliché in existence – powerful men, private planes and multiple orgasms’ (2012: 29) – effectively dismissing the potential of explicit writing (whether pulp or more literary) to offer anything more than a well-worn formula:

When it comes to erotic writing, the more explicit it gets – the more heaving, the more panting – the more I want to laugh. Erotic writing is said to have a noble pedigree: the goings-on in Ovid, the whipping in Sade, the bare-arsed wrestling in Lawrence, the garter-snapping in Anaïs Nin, the wife-swapping in Updike, the arcs of semen hither and yon. But it’s so much sexier when people don’t have sex on the page. (O’Hagan, 2012)

Much as we enjoyed O’Hagan’s essay, it is not analysis, it is disapproval: requiring an erotic novel to dispense with the sex is like demanding a jam doughnut without the jam. That is not to say that we view *Fifty Shades* and their sexual content as beyond criticism, or parody. It is, however, important to recognize the various

distinctions being offered in the different critiques, few of which acknowledged any defensible pleasures in reading James's works. The books were judged against formulaic fictions, pornography and, à la O'Hagan, against the 'masterpieces' of erotic writing (themselves accused of a form of ridiculous over-egging) and found wanting.<sup>3</sup>

Alongside the literary critiques ran stories of potential harms. Journalist Samantha Brick gave an astonishing performance of concern on ITV's *Good Morning* as she suggested the novels were a major health risk:

Sex games do go wrong. Hospitals are full of people who have been injured this way. Deaths have occurred. (Arthurs, 2012)

These worries also entered mainstream news media when Claire Philipson, the director of Wearside Women in Need (a charity aiding victims of domestic abuse), launched a campaign against *Fifty Shades*, calling it 'an instruction manual for an abusive individual to sexually torture a vulnerable young woman' (Philipson, cited in Flood, 2012).

Philipson had been waiting for 'a feminist icon to savage this misogynistic crap, but nobody did' (in Flood, 2012). Despite the publicity, her campaign failed to launch: even fellow detractors were concerned about her intention to burn copies of *Fifty Shades* – reflecting the special sacralization around books which still exists in our digital age.<sup>4</sup>

These critiques reflect a denigration of 'women's genres' and the 'chat' they produce: denigration taken further in the description of *Fifty Shades* as 'mommy porn'<sup>5</sup> which understands the novels as so tame and vanilla that *even* mothers indulge in it. The *Daily Mirror*'s Flic Everett commented: 'Yet all over the country, groups of mums are discussing Christian's sexual motivations over a slice of Battenburg. So what's going on?' (Everett, 2012). In Everett's conjuring of chats over a specific kind of cake she managed to encapsulate the particular effeminophobia of the public debate on *Fifty Shades*. For those not steeped in the nuances of British cake symbolism, the Battenburg is extremely sweet, soft, neatly divided into quadrants of pastel pink and yellow sponge, associated with an old-fashioned, middle-class, pre-metropolitan Englishness. Here was a book causing a storm amongst the teacups of suburban Britain but its meaningfulness for any readers was reduced to 'Female bonding over the compelling story – and giggling at the sexy bits . . . in the same way that blockbuster novel *Lace* captured the imagination of every female teenager in the 80s' (Everett, 2012), likening adult women's interests to the immature pursuits of teenagers (Bode, 2010). Thus the sexual elements of the trilogy were denuded of any potential radicalism by being associated with giggling.

These proliferating stories contributed to the 'hype' surrounding the novels. Jonathan Gray suggests that 'hype and surrounding texts . . . establish the frames and filters through which we look at, listen to, and interpret the texts they hype' (Gray, 2010: 3. See also Harman and Jones, this issue). His analysis reminds us that, while 'hype' is often used pejoratively to suggest the 'hypercommercialized'

imposition of inauthentic media goods on duped consumers, ‘hype creates meaning’ (Gray, 2010: 4). For many readers these ‘paratexts’ were their ‘first and formative encounters’ (Gray, 2010: 3) with *Fifty Shades*. The trilogy was positioned as a bit of fun, a means of spicing up one’s sex life, a little bit saucy, a bit naughty, a means of bonding between women; but, as our brief foray through the media responses indicates, also potentially dangerous.

### **‘It has brought erotica into the mainstream’: The public nature of *Fifty Shades***

In the dichotomous assessments highlighted in the previous section, we see the echoes of Janice Radway’s observation that depending upon the focus of one’s investigations – the act of reading or the narrative that is being read – one can find *Fifty Shades* an oppositional activity as women ‘momentarily refuse their self-abnegating role’ or ‘a simple recapitulation and recommendation of patriarchy and its constituent social practices and ideologies’ (Radway, 1984: 210). Thus, for us, it is important to think about how readers engage with the texts because it enables thinking about the distinctions ‘between the significance of the *event* of reading and the meaning of the *text* constructed as its consequence’ (Radway, 1984: 7).

Drawing on Radway,<sup>6</sup> our analysis here is ‘less an account of the way [the trilogy] as texts were interpreted than of the way... reading as a form of behaviour operated as a complex intervention in the ongoing social life of actual social subjects...’ (Radway, 1984: 7–8). For Radway’s readers, reading the romance functioned as a ‘declaration of independence’ (Radway, 1984: 11), for ours, it becomes clear that reading *Fifty Shades* is, in part, a declaration of participation – participation in the phenomenon itself but one which also brings particular pleasures through the taking up of a position on the quality, sexiness or importance of the texts. More particularly, they were positioned as *for* women. Written by a woman, from a woman’s point of view and for a female audience, the books were discursively fabricated as potentially revelatory so that to read them was to engage in public debate about female sexuality.

Thus we want to highlight a further dimension – the particular form of domestication of the sexually explicit pleasures of *Fifty Shades*. As Jane Juffer has argued, certain forms of sexually-explicit writing are made available to women through the delineation of tastes and styles of consumption that are specifically gendered – if *Fifty Shades* was porn, it was distinctively feminized porn. The ebook format and the paperback book’s understated cover designs (a simple, greyscale, photograph: a tie for... *of Grey*, a mask for... *Darker* and a key for... *Freed*<sup>7</sup>) were cited by several of our readers as a key appeal of the novels, either for themselves or others, because they ‘disguised’ the books’ content:

You can read it on your kindle and nobody knows that you’re reading it! The classy covers also help because they don’t look like genre fiction, more like literary fiction.  
(Reader 5)

[The covers are] Genius. If you know what the images represent, then it's very cheeky, a subtle reminder of all their 'kinky fuckery'. But if you don't, it's completely innocuous, and not cheesy. (Reader 10)

They are anonymous, fit quite well with books but not too embarrassing on [the] train! (Reader 47)

The contradiction that lies at the heart of the 'anonymizing' covers and their recognizability such that 'everybody knows' what they are, is surely a perfect example of what Juffer has termed the 'domestication of pornography', the taming of a genre traditionally understood to be male (Juffer, 1998). And alongside this taming goes the authenticating discourse of bringing women's subjugated sexual interests out into the light:

Because it has allowed women's sexuality to be brought into the mainstream. It allows for women to be more sexually curious or adventurous and lets them be more sexually expressive. (Reader 87)

women got to read erotica in public and it made talking about sex at the water cooler acceptable at work. (Reader 38)

The points made here about both erotica and BDSM practices being 'OK' to read and talk about, for *women*, were repeated by several of our readers, who saw this as a positive aspect of the novels' success:

Because it made a lot of people feel that their sexual preferences were justified and gave them a chance to discuss these in an open arena whilst hiding behind the premise of discussing the book. (Reader 18)

I think it has brought erotica in to the mainstream and shown that it can be done tastefully. (Reader 23)

It provides a relationship for women to fantasise about having and some escapism from the familiarity of their own relationship. It's a simple love story which women can read about and is one of the first mainstream examples of women's erotica. (Reader 52)

How then do readers talk about the narrative of *Fifty Shades*, its sexual scenes, its central relationship and their reasons for reading? How might the popularity of the trilogy connect with individual readers' interests in being part of a 'media sensation' and what orientations, identities, and readings did the books appeal to? What role have social media such as Facebook and Twitter played in readers' experiences of these novels? In the next sections, we present some initial findings, which reveal a highly complex, and often contradictory,

range of pleasures (and indeed, displeasures) that accompany reading the *Fifty Shades* series.

### **‘I was so sick of hearing about this book that I just had to find out for myself’: Reader motivations for reading *Fifty Shades***

As the previous sections indicate, *Fifty Shades* became the books you must have read and/or have an opinion on during the summer of 2012. Indeed, it didn't really matter whether or not you had read them, as one commentator put it, the books were 'culturally compulsory' (Parker, 2012), so having an opinion was seemingly enough. With almost every cultural intermediary in Britain weighing in with their versions of the blocking critiques – that it was 'badly written', 'derivative', 'silly' and 'ridiculous', all of which needed no further explanation – we would suggest it was quite difficult for many readers to form an alternative viewpoint. Drawing on that idea of being culturally compulsory, the majority of our respondents (69%) cited 'curiosity' or 'to see what all the fuss was about' as their key motivation for reading the books:

Resisted for a while then gave in to see what the fuss was about. (Reader 64)

I was so sick of hearing about this book that I just had to find out for myself what it was all about. (Reader 70)

Word-of-mouth publicity and its attendant forms of critique have been a key form of circulating literary works since print became widely available and, in more recent years, the 'book-club' formats of *The Oprah Winfrey Show* in the USA and the UK's *Richard and Judy Book Club* have become integral to the success of many novels (Farr, 2005). As Sedo observes:

The economic effects tell only part of the story. Another related, and as important, piece is the cultural taste hierarchies that are created, represented, reinforced and sometimes resisted by those ... who interact with the book programs. (2008: 188–189)

The desire to be 'part of the conversation' is evident when asking whether readers had discussed the books with others. It was the case that 67% of survey respondents had discussed the series either 'a little' or 'a lot' more than other books. Every respondent had discussed the books with other people via some means: 77% face-to-face with family or friends, 63% face to face with a partner, 62% with friends and family online, 48% with work colleagues, 43% with friends or family via telephone or text message, 12% at a book club, 12% via another hobby or activity, 6% with other parents at school and 2% with members of a religious community (see also Whitehead, this issue).

Social media also played a key role in readers' communications with others. On Facebook, 41% had shared, commented on or liked others' posts relating to the

books, 39% had discussed them on a page or in a group, 34% had made a status update about them:

An entire FB group was created to discuss the book and share stories from around the internet. (Reader 31)

At the same time, 24% had discussed them on Twitter, and 12% had followed relevant hashtags, while 5% had blogged about them and another 5% had discussed them on internet forums. Four readers had blogged or shared about them on Tumblr and two had created *Fifty Shades* boards on Pinterest. Interestingly, the predominant mode of discussion appears to be antagonistic and taking enjoyment from that:

[I] upset niece with a sarky facebook status regarding the book. (Reader 35)

Despite every respondent having discussed the books with other people, either online, offline or both, and the majority citing 'the fuss' about the book or friends/colleagues/family as being the reason they read them, when we asked 'How important have other people been in your decision to read the books?', 30% of the respondents claimed others had been unimportant. Of these, two said this was because they'd read the books early on:

i started reading the books before the hype on facebook/twitter. (Reader 28)

For the majority, however, other people were crucial in their coming to the books:

Integral. It was listening to all the criticism and being pissed off by it that made me want to read them. (Reader 10)

What is unusual in the case of *Fifty Shades* is that the 'recommendations' were often incredibly negative about the object – here was a book you *must* read but weren't really supposed to like, in fact, the best response was to be superior, to recognize its failures as a novel, its inability to get the sex or BDSM relationship 'right' and particularly, its failure to be properly erotic. And we see this in our readers' comments where participation and understanding the proper reading protocols were important:

Because everyone else was reading them and I wanted to be part of the conversation. (Mostly to mock the books.) (Reader 5)

For some, that opened up a space in which it was vital to 'test' the arguments and assessments:

I figured it couldn't be as bad as everyone said when it had sold so many copies. Had to check for myself. (Reader 77)

Having to 'check for myself' didn't necessarily mean coming to alternative conclusions. For Reader 77, 'People said it was poorly written erotica' and, in response to the question 'In what ways did the books meet your expectations of them?' she replied 'It was poorly written erotica'. Similarly, Reader 17 found her expectations 'That they were saucy and ridiculously written' entirely confirmed.

Many readers said that their intrigue was, at least in part, due to the series' reputation as being badly written and 'trashy', echoing the kinds of criticisms often levelled at popular and genre fiction, particularly those formats aimed at women (see McCracken, 1998; Morey, 2012; Radway, 1984; Thurston, 1987; Whelehan, 1994). The notion of the books being 'trashy' means some readers justify the choice by positioning them as a holiday pleasure, something 'trashy' to aid relaxation:

Needed something trashy to read on my holiday and figured the fifty shades books were plenty trashy. (Reader 42)

This small but significant proportion of our respondents (10%) read them because of the criticisms of them being 'bad writing' – pointing to a number of possible orientations to popular culture in which it is important not to be wholly tainted by one's engagement with the object:

So I didn't feel left out of the discussion and because I was curious as to what all the hype was about. The fact I could borrow them for free also swayed me. (Reader 18)

'Making jokes' about a book this reader has borrowed rather than purchased is interesting in that it seemingly protects the speaker from an accusation of 'buying-into' the commercial hype whilst still allowing them to participate in discussion. Equally, claiming to read a book because it is 'bad' allows for a 'cult' response that can appreciate something for its kitsch or camp sensibilities<sup>8</sup> whilst also demonstrating one's participations in or possession of appropriate reading capitals (Bourdieu, 1986). Such a reading position may accord with 'middle-brow' or 'literary' readings, whereby being able to 'recognize' the inadequacies of the text enabled shared modes of 'interpretation' centred on ridiculing the clichéd writing and inadequacies of the heroine. Humour creates an apparent distance between our readers and the trilogy; they intend to laugh at *Fifty Shades*, not with it.

However, humour brings with it an aspect of 'bonding' with other readers. 'Mocking' the novels becomes a communal activity, much as Hobson (1990) found with women viewers of 'low-quality' television and as both Goletz (2012) and Gilbert (2012) found in their explorations of 'anti-fan' communities. Goletz observes that:

For such people, the point of reading the [*Twilight*] books is to enter the discourse of mockery, to use the energy provided by the giddiness to dislocate themselves from the shame through a jubilant abjection of the text... They are skilled close readers, and savvy enough about literature and the politics of ideology to be able to explain why

they do not like the series. However, the anti-fan, unlike the disinterested reader, finds she cannot help but continue reading (2012: 147).

Much like the *Twilight* anti-fans who ‘cannot help’ reading, we found that several of the harshest critics of the series had nonetheless read all three books. Although many respondents found the shared mockery a very positive aspect, others seemingly resented ‘Peer pressure to mock it with a group’ (Reader 85). This pressure to accord with the group understanding of the trilogy is something we will explore in later stages of our research: being able to join in the mocking orientation to the novels does not necessarily preclude more positive responses or ambivalent pleasures in, for example, the sexually explicit elements of the narrative. Using terms like ‘preposterous’ to describe the narrative situation, ‘flat and clichéd’ to critique the characterization, Reader 17 nevertheless found plenty to say about the ‘preposterous’ story and its unfolding across the three titles. For her, the ‘nightmare in real life’ had some interesting possibilities as a work of fiction: ‘Pace, hilarity, fantast [sic]. She actually tames him, despite his attempts to dominate her – isn’t that women’s real fantasy?’

#### **‘4 dates away from going psycho’: Reading the romance**

Among the readers, 24% identified as being regular romance readers and 14% as regular erotica readers; 59% had read romance before and 39% erotica – although, as we have mentioned, our focus in this article is on those who would not describe themselves as regular readers of either genre. When asked what they thought about the romance elements of the novels, several readers criticized these, comparing the novels unfavourably to other romantic literature or genre fiction:

Umm...predictable. I hated it when she got pregnant that made me really angry. But it’s a traditional Mills and Boon, really, it’s just working how all those books always work – crazy sex, stable relationship, marriage, baby, crazy sex while married. (Reader 10)

Not really any different to any other romance genre novel and its clearly trying to be Jane Eyre (and failing). (Reader 5)

It was just another love story in which the woman was weak and needed to be saved by a man. Boring... (Reader 88)

We note a number of significances here, first those assessments of the predictability of *Fifty Shades* as a *romance* – the centrality of the dyadic relationship and the characters’ journey on the road to marriage. Here, respondents seem to be working with an understanding of the romance as an essentially one-dimensional narrative. For them, *Fifty Shades* fails to move beyond the essential properties of the genre

because it remains within the generic boundaries and does not create its own ‘authenticity’ – at times this is judged as simply a pandering to reader expectations:

Far fetched and very unlikely but that’s what romance readers want isn’t it?  
(Reader 64)

For others, their response seems to depend upon the psychology of the characters and an evaluation of their credibility in relation to ‘real life’. Many of the criticisms levelled at the romance aspect were expressed when asked about the two central characters and their relationship:

If someone bought me a new car after the first date I’d assume they were 4 dates away from going psycho. (Reader 42)

The most vitriolic criticisms were aimed at Anastasia, for being wet, or bad at her job, and some readers felt she was abusive towards Christian. Others deemed Christian abusive, ‘obsessive’ or ‘predatory’:

I hate her intensely. She is so moronic and wet. And I hate her internal monologue. If I hear about her salsa-ing internal goddess one more time I shall scream! I also hate the way that all of her limits are hard limits but she will not acknowledge Christian’s hard limits and feels that she must demolish them. (Reader 5)

She was pathetic, petulant and self-obsessed. She seemed to keep trying to convince us (and CG) that she was independent when in fact she was a foolish little girl. I imagine they’d be divorced in 10 years as Grey could do better. Ana was too demanding, self-obsessed and insecure. (Reader 18)

I’m not sure what they see in each other. And I find it worrying that Ana thinks she can save him. (I’m not convinced that he needs saving.) Their relationship seems almost purely physical, although Ana clearly wants it to be more than that. [Christian] seemed like an odd mix between abusive and harmless. His stalking tendencies were genuinely disturbing, but his dark secret (the Red Room of Pain) was rather vanilla compared to what I was expecting. (Reader 11)

Christian comes across as a sexual predator with unresolved psychological issues, who preys on [an] innocent/easily malleable young woman. (Reader 51)

Just over half of the readers were critical of the romantic element of the novels in some way, but there were many who enjoyed these aspects, and whose comments echoed those of Dot, the bookshop owner interviewed by Janice Radway who:

believes a good romance focuses on an intelligent and able heroine who finds a man who recognizes her special qualities and is capable of loving and caring for her as she

wants to be loved . . . The romances she most values and recommends for her readers are those with 'strong', 'fiery' heroines who are capable of 'defying the hero', softening him, and showing him the value of loving and caring for another<sup>9</sup> (1984: 54–55).

Readers expressed pleasure in the escapist nature of this fantasy:

It was my favourite element of the books and the thing that kept me reading. Any story that advocates a man being so in love with any ordinary, although quite physically attractive, girl is quite appealing! (Reader 2)

I liked the romance side and liked the fact that Ana managed to win Christian round to a relationship . . . After a while the sexual parts became just a small part of the story for me (a bit like an added extra) because I was just so engrossed in the storyline and their blossoming romance. (Reader 67)

A relationship I fantasise about having! The sweeping off one's feet and falling so in love that that person completely changes your life and becomes your everything. (Reader 52)

For our readers, then, there is not one unified reading of the romance. Several deride this aspect, replicating common discourses about genre fiction being formulaic, predictable or traditional (McCracken, 1998; Radway, 1984). Others find in the novels' romantic narratives a sense of escapism, fantasy and pleasure. However, these readers may still maintain a level of critical distance from aspects of the books. For example, Reader 2 enjoyed the romance yet called James's writing 'appallingly terrible in some places' and Reader 67 complains about the repetitive nature of the writing but even though 'I didn't find the book to be particularly well written in the literary sense, it didn't detract from my enjoyment of the book'. Even when readers are aware of (or identify for themselves) the series' supposed lack of literary credentials, this does not preclude them from partaking in the pleasures of reading the romantic narrative.

### **'I was surprised how quickly this sex became boring': Responses to sexual content**

Although the romantic aspect of the books may have been criticized for being formulaic and predictable, the sexual content gave the novels a 'twist' for some:

The idea of the tortured anti hero and the innocent virgin who shows him the path to true love is well worn to say the least. Adding a (well researched) BDSM plot makes it fresher. (Reader 9)

The erotic charge was more than just fodder for bonding for a number of readers. In addition to questions asked in our survey about the sexual content of the novels,

51 survey respondents chose to answer an optional section about their sex lives and the role of the books and other erotic material in them. Of these, 86% said the books had influenced their attitudes to sex in some way, with 67% finding them a turn-on.<sup>10</sup> This optional section also showed that 87% had heard of BDSM before reading the books (echoing the assertions made by Barker et al. (2007) that BDSM is becoming much more visible within the 'mainstream'<sup>11</sup>) and 38% had previously engaged in BDSM practices. Meanwhile, 22% said the books had encouraged them to try (further) BDSM practices and 24% had used the books in their personal masturbation or fantasy. One woman said she had used them with her partner, but despite the way sex shops have made use of the books in marketing (see Martin, this issue), only two had bought new sex toys since reading them.

Readers who agreed the books turned them on, also stressed the importance of the imagination to sexual pleasure:

Words more erotic than pictures, the acts being described were appealing. (Reader 17)

Those who found pleasure in reading the sexual scenes included both those who engaged in BDSM practices and those who did not; those who regularly read erotica and those who did not. The non-erotica readers we focus on in this article tended to comment in more general terms about the 'excitement' of the books rather than specifying particular acts or passages:

Some of it was good. Some was fantastic. I don't go for all the extreme stuff, but it definitely held my interest. (Reader 80)

It was really enjoyable. I think it was hyped up to be [more] 'full-on' that [sic] it really was. When you first read the sex part of the contract you are lead [sic] to believe you would read sex scenes of that nature but it really was more about the teasing and dominating nature of Christian. (Reader 23)

In contrast to the ideas in the press that women were giggling over the content as if they were indulging in some form of proscribed yet silly activity, many of our respondents' criticisms were levelled at the sexual content regarding its 'tame' nature or its feeling of being repetitive, suggesting a strong appetite amongst the readers for diverse representations of sexual practices:

When the descriptions were reasonably fresh, it was intriguing. And Ana's excitement and fear was genuine. I was surprised how quickly this sex became boring. And MOST OFFENSIVE?? No woman comes every time, and no woman comes on demand. That part actually made me angry pretty quickly. Big turn off. (Reader 30)

The ideas were fine but again – she orgasmed far too easily. Also it was a bit tame at first!... I did admit to liking the bit in the treehouse though! (Reader 66)

At the start it was hot as I like to be dominated so they tapped into my preferences but the sex scenes quickly became repetitive and vanilla in their lack of originality. The attempts to link them to Grey's childhood frustrated me as I don't think there needs to be justification for someone to have dominating tendencies. (Reader 18)

It was okay but got increasingly more boring. When you start praying for some anal sex (Chekov's Gun! He mentioned anal and then never did it), you know a book has turned you into a cold monster. (Reader 30)

Despite the 'tameness' of the books for some readers, one reader noted that their friends took the opposite view and for this reason, warned her off reading them:

Most friends told me not to read the books because they thought I might be shocked/upset (I'm quite 'innocent', as it were). (Reader 51)

Others found that, far from being 'tame', the sex scenes were unpleasant and/or uncomfortable, sometimes because of practices they personally did not care for, but more particularly because they were uncomfortable with the nature of Christian and Ana's relationship:

Uncomfortable in terms of some of the acts appearing to be dubious [in terms of] consent. (Reader 82)

Too much and repetitive. It actually is not necessary. (Reader 44)

Some found the sexual aspect of the books educative, giving them an insight into aspects of BDSM they were perhaps less familiar with in their own lives:

I thought it was interesting to explore Christian's past and the aetiology of his sexual preferences and the subsequent change in his character on meeting and developing his relationship with Ana. The insight in to BDSM gave it a good edge without being too graphic. (Reader 2)

I had recently begun a relationship with a man who expressed an interest in BDSM. Parts of the books offered a fantasy element of what our relationship might look like. (Reader 11)

This last quotation is very interesting, offering the suggestion that the books can be put to work in one's 'real' life through fantasy.

As with responses to the romance, the responses to the sexual content did not necessarily indicate a universal 'approval' or 'disapproval' of the books. Readers often enjoyed the 'saucy' aspect whilst still considering them 'badly written'. Reader 53, for example, found them 'boring' and 'repetitive' and said she would not reread them, but had read all three books and considered them a turn-on.

## Conclusion

In exploring the responses of these readers, it is clear that ‘talk’ about *Fifty Shades* and its themes of kinky sex is a key factor in its appeal to female readers. Most respondents cited ‘hype’ or ‘word-of-mouth’ as the initial motivation for their reading them and all of ours had enjoyed discussion of the novels in multiple contexts. Our analysis shows that there is considerable pleasure in engaging in critical and/or humorous practices such as ‘mocking’ the books (see Gilbert, 2012; Goletz, 2012).

However, to claim that discussion of the book is the only pleasure would be misleading. Two-thirds of our readers found the books sexually arousing and several also appreciated the romance element of them, enjoying their fantastical dimension (other readers were highly critical of that aspect). Thus we sense that the trilogy’s importance lies partly in its ‘reconciliation of the everyday with the erotic’ (Juffer, 1998: 3), its blend of the familiar romance tropes of emotional intimacy with graphic scenes of kinky sex which appear to defy standard conceptions of ‘feminine’ sexual interests (Dixon, 1999; Smith, 2007; Snitow, 1979). In Radway’s work on romance reading, such contradictions are significant to the pleasures and politics of women’s reading:

romance reading addresses needs created in them but not met by patriarchal institutions... women use it to thwart common cultural expectations and to supply gratification ordinarily ruled out by the way the culture structures their lives... Romance reading supplements the avenues traditionally open to women for emotional gratification. (1984: 211–212)

Several readers identified *Fifty Shades* as making women’s pleasures a source of public discussion and making erotica ‘acceptable’ – although this acceptability is often contradictory. Worries about whether the novels are good for women perhaps miss a central issue regarding agency here. Drawing on Juffer, we suggest that reader agency has to do with ‘relations of participation and access, the possibilities of moving into particular sites of activity and power and of belonging to them in such a way as to be able to actually enact their powers’ (2004: 47). Reading erotic material in public can be seen as a somewhat subversive act. In being able to participate in public discussion about sexual practices portrayed as kinky, potentially pleasurable and ‘feminine’, further political possibilities arise.

## Notes

1. Fan-fiction can be understood as both a cross-genre form and as a genre in its own right (see Pugh, 2005).
2. We recognize that there are also problems with recruitment via SNS, and that this perhaps excludes a sector of the audience who do not use these platforms yet have still read the novels.
3. For more on *Fifty Shades* and erotic ‘masterpieces’, see Tsaros, this issue.

4. Philipson changed her destruction of the novels to pulping for toilet roll – staging a demonstration and collection of copies outside the Ann Summers shop in Sunderland town centre.
5. In the UK, the term ‘mummy porn’ has also been used regularly.
6. We are aware that Radway’s work has attracted some criticism. We do not have scope here to address this, but for a discussion of some of the key critical responses to the work, see Wood (2004).
7. We refer here to the book covers as published in the UK.
8. Although this position on ‘cult’ is often reserved for male, middle-class audiences and tastes (Hollows, 2003).
9. This description echoes the narrative of the *Fifty Shades* novels, where Ana repeatedly ‘defies’ Christian’s wishes and is shown to soften him, leading to a mutual understanding and marriage.
10. Although we focus on women’s responses in this article, both male readers (who had initially read the books because of their partners’ interest) found them a turn-on.
11. Albeit predominantly in heterosexual monogamous contexts – such as Ana and Christian’s relationship.

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